

"Listen to Mr. Thompson's report on the world crisis, November 22!"

It was the first acknowledgment of the unacknowledged. The announcements began to appear a week in advance and went ringing across the country. "Mr. Thompson will give the people a report on the world crisis! Listen to Mr. Thompson on every radio station and television channel at 8 P.M., on November 22!"

First, the front pages of the newspapers and the shouts of the radio voices had explained it: "To counteract the fears and rumors spread by the enemies of the people, Mr. Thompson will address the country on November 22 and will give us a full report on the state of the world in this solemn moment of global crisis. Mr. Thompson will put an end to those sinister forces whose purpose is to keep us in terror and despair. He will bring light into the darkness of the world and will show us the way out of our tragic problems—a stern way, as befits the gravity of this hour, but a way of glory, as granted by the rebirth of light. Mr. Thompson's address will be carried by every radio station in this country and in all countries throughout the world, wherever radio waves may still be heard."

Then the chorus broke loose and went growing day by day. "Listen to Mr. Thompson on November 22!" said daily headlines. "Don't forget Mr. Thompson on November 22!" cried radio stations at the end of every program. "Mr. Thompson will tell you the truth!" said placards in subways and buses—then posters on the walls of buildings—then billboards on deserted highways.

"Don't despair! Listen to Mr. Thompson!" said pennants on government cars. "Don't give up! Listen to Mr. Thompson!" said banners in offices and shops. "Have faith! Listen to Mr. Thompson!" said voices in churches. "Mr. Thompson will give you the answer!" wrote army airplanes across the sky, the letters dissolving in space, and only the last two words remaining by the time the sentence was completed.

Public loud-speakers were built in the squares of New York for the day of the speech, and came to rasping life once an hour, in time with the ringing of distant clocks, to send over the worn rattle of the traffic, over the heads of the shabby crowd, the sonorous, mechanical cry of an alarm-toned voice: "Listen to Mr. Thompson's report on the world crisis, November 22!"—a cry rolling through the frosted air and vanishing among the foggy roof tops, under the blank page of a calendar that bore no date.

On the afternoon of November 22, James Faggart told Dagny that Mr. Thompson wished to meet her for a conference before the broadcast.

"In Washington?" she asked incredulously, glancing at her watch.

"Well, I must say that you haven't been reading the newspapers or keeping track of important events. Don't you know that Mr. Thompson is to broadcast from New York? He has come here to confer with the leaders of industry, as well as of labor, science, the professions, and the best of the country's leadership in general. He has requested that I bring you to the conference."

"Where is it to be held?"

"At the broadcasting studio."

"They don't expect me to speak on the air in support of their policies, do they?"

"Don't worry, they wouldn't let *you* near a microphone! They just want to hear your opinion, and you can't refuse, not in a national emergency, not when it's an invitation from Mr. Thompson in person!" He spoke impatiently, avoiding her eyes.

"When is that conference to be held?"

"At seven-thirty."

"Not much time to give a conference about a national emergency, is it?"

"Mr. Thompson is a very busy man. Now please don't argue, don't start being difficult, I don't see what you're—"

"All right," she said indifferently, "I'll come," and added, prompted by the kind of feeling that would have made her reluctant to venture without a witness into a conference of gangsters, "but I'll bring Eddie Willers along with me."

He frowned, considering it for a moment, with a look of annoyance more than anxiety. "Oh, all right, if you wish," he snapped, shrugging.

She came to the broadcasting studio with James Taggart as a policeman at one side of her and Eddie Willers as a bodyguard at the other. Taggart's face was resentful and tense, Eddie's—resigned, yet wondering and curious. A stage set of pasteboard walls had been erected in a corner of the vast, dim space, representing a stiffly traditional suggestion of a cross between a stately drawing room and a modest study. A semicircle of empty armchairs filled the set, suggesting a grouping from a family album, with microphones dangling like bait at the end of long poles extended for fishing among the chairs.

The best leadership of the country, that stood about in nervous clusters, had the look of a remnant sale in a bankrupt store: she saw Wesley Mouch, Eugene Lawson, Chick Morrison, Tinky Holloway, Dr. Floyd Ferris, Dr. Simon Pritchett, Ma Chalmers, Fred Kinnan, and a seedy handful of businessmen among whom the half-scared, half-flattered figure of Mr. Mowen of the Amalgamated Switch and Signal Company was, incredibly, intended to represent an industrial tycoon.

But the figure that gave her an instant's shock was Dr. Robert Stadler. She had not known that a face could age so greatly within the brief space of one year: the look of timeless energy, of boyish eagerness, was gone, and nothing remained of the face except the lines of contemptuous bitterness. He stood alone, apart from the others, and she saw the moment when his eyes saw her enter; he looked like a man in a whorehouse who had accepted the nature of his surroundings until suddenly caught there by his wife: it was a look of guilt in the process of becoming hatred. Then she saw Robert Stadler, the scientist, turn away as if he had not seen her—as if his refusal to see could wipe a fact out of existence.

Mr. Thompson was pacing among the groups, snapping at random bystanders in the restless manner of a man of action who feels con-