

kind that was distributed each year, with a change of its picture, to every station along the Taggart track, the kind that had hung once in her first work place at Rockdale.

He got up. He said quietly, "Dagny, for your sake, and"—it was a barely perceptible hesitation—"and in the name of any pity you might feel for me, don't request what you're going to request. Don't. Let me go now."

This was not like him and like nothing she could ever have expected to hear from him. After a moment, she asked, "Why?"

"I can't answer you. I can't answer any questions. That is one of the reasons why it's best not to discuss it."

"You know what I am going to request?"

"Yes." The way she looked at him was such an eloquent, desperate question, that he had to add, "I know that I am going to refuse."

"Why?"

He smiled mirthlessly, spreading his hands out, as if to show her that this was what he had predicted and had wanted to avoid.

She said quietly, "I have to try, Francisco. I have to make the request. That's my part. What you'll do about it is yours. But I'll know that I've tried everything."

He remained standing, but he inclined his head a little, in assent, and said, "I will listen, if that will help you."

"I need fifteen million dollars to complete the Rio Norte Line. I have obtained seven million against the Taggart stock I own free and clear. I can raise nothing else. I will issue bonds in the name of my new company, in the amount of eight million dollars. I called you here to ask you to buy these bonds."

He did not answer.

"I am simply a beggar, Francisco, and I am begging you for money. I had always thought that one did not beg in business. I thought that one stood on the merit of what one had to offer, and gave value for value. This is not so any more, though I don't understand how we can act on any other rule and continue to exist. Judging by every objective fact, the Rio Norte Line is to be the best railroad in the country. Judging by every known standard, it is the best investment possible. And that is what damns me. I cannot raise money by offering people a good business venture: the fact that it's good, makes people reject it. There is no bank that would buy the bonds of my company. So I can't plead merit. I can only plead."

Her voice was pronouncing the words with impersonal precision. She stopped, waiting for his answer. He remained silent.

"I know that I have nothing to offer you," she said. "I can't speak to you in terms of investment. You don't care to make money. Industrial projects have ceased to concern you long ago. So I won't pretend that it's a fair exchange. It's just begging." She drew her breath and said, "Give me that money as alms, because it means nothing to you."

"Don't," he said, his voice low. She could not tell whether the strange sound of it was pain or anger, his eyes were lowered.

After a moment, she said, "I called you, not because I thought you would agree, but because you were the only one who could

understand what I am saying. So I had to try it." Her voice was dropping lower, as if she hoped it would make emotion harder to detect. "You see, I can't believe that you're really gone . . . because I know that you're still able to hear me. The way you live is depraved. But the way you act is not. Even the way you speak of it, is not. . . . I had to try . . . But I can't struggle to understand you any longer."

"I'll give you a hint. Contradictions do not exist. Whenever you think that you are facing a contradiction, check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong."

"Francisco," she whispered, "why don't you tell me what it was that happened to you?"

"Because, at this moment, the answer would hurt you more than the doubt."

"Is it as terrible as that?"

"It is an answer which you must reach by yourself."

She shook her head. "I don't know what to offer you. I don't know what is of value to you any longer. Don't you see that even a beggar has to give value in return, has to offer some reason why you might want to help him? . . . Well, I thought . . . at one time, it meant a great deal to you--success. Industrial success. Remember how we used to talk about it? You were very severe. You expected a lot from me. You told me I'd better live up to it, I have. You wondered how far I'd rise with Taggart Transcontinental." She moved her hand, pointing at the office. "This is how far I've risen. . . . So I thought . . . if the memory of what had been your values still has some meaning for you, if only as amusement, or a moment's sadness, or just like . . . like putting flowers on a grave . . . you might want to give me the money . . . in the name of that."

"No."

She said, with effort, "That money would mean nothing to you--you've wasted that much on senseless parties--you've wasted much more on the San Sebastián Mines--"

He glanced up. He looked straight at her and she saw the first spark of a living response in his eyes, a look that was bright, pitiless and, incredibly, proud: as if this were an accusation that gave him strength.

"Oh, yes," she said slowly, as if answering his thought, "I realize that. I've damned you for those mines, I've denounced you. I've thrown my contempt at you in every way possible, and now I come back to you--for money. Like Jim, like any moocher you've ever met. I know it's a triumph for you, I know that you can laugh at me and despise me with full justice. Well--perhaps I can offer you that. If it's amusement that you want, if you enjoyed seeing Jim and the Mexican planners crawl--wouldn't it amuse you to break me? Wouldn't it give you pleasure? Don't you want to hear me acknowledge that I'm beaten by you? Don't you want to see me crawling before you? Tell me what form of it you'd like and I'll submit."

He moved so swiftly that she could not notice how he started; it only seemed to her that his first movement was a shudder. He came around the desk, he took her hand and raised it to his lips. It began