

headlight. At first, stepping from tie to tie, with the violent light beating against them from behind, they still felt as if they were at home in the normal realm of a railroad. Then she found herself watching the light on the ties under her feet, watching it ebb slowly, trying to hold it, to keep seeing its fading glow, until she knew that the hint of a glow on the wood was no longer anything but moonlight. She could not prevent the shudder that made her turn to look back. The headlight still hung behind them, like the liquid silver globe of a planet, deceptively close, but belonging to another orbit and another system.

Owen Kellogg walked silently beside her, and she felt certain that they knew each other's thoughts.

"He couldn't have. Oh God, he couldn't!" she said suddenly, not realizing that she had switched to words.

"Who?"

"Nathaniel Taggart. He couldn't have worked with people like those passengers. He couldn't have run trains for them. He couldn't have employed them. He couldn't have used them at all, neither as customers nor as workers."

Kellogg smiled. "You mean that he couldn't have grown rich by exploiting them, Miss Taggart?"

She nodded. "They . . ." she said, and he heard the faint trembling of her voice, which was love and pain and indignation, "they've said for years that he rose by thwarting the ability of others, by leaving them no chance, and that . . . that human incompetence was to his selfish interest. . . . But he . . . it wasn't obedience that he required of people."

"Miss Taggart," he said, with an odd note of sternness in his voice, "just remember that he represented a code of existence which--for a brief span in all human history--drove slavery out of the civilized world. Remember it, when you feel baffled by the nature of his enemies."

"Have you ever heard of a woman named Ivy Starnes?"

"Oh yes."

"I keep thinking that this was what she would have enjoyed--the spectacle of those passengers tonight. This was what she's after. But we--we can't live with it, you and I, can we? No one can live with it. It's not possible to live with it."

"What makes you think that Ivy Starnes's purpose is life?"

Somewhere on the edge of her mind--like the wisps she saw floating on the edges of the prairie, neither quite rays nor fog nor cloud--she felt some shape which she could not grasp, half-suggested and demanding to be grasped.

She did not speak, and--like the links of a chain unrolling through their silence--the rhythm of their steps went on, spaced to the ties, scored by the dry, swift beat of heels on wood.

She had not had time to be aware of him, except as of a providential comrade-in-competence: now she glanced at him with conscious attention. His face had the clear, hard look she remembered having liked in the past. But the face had grown calmer, as if more serenely at peace. His clothes were threadbare. He wore an old leather jacket.

and even in the darkness she could distinguish the scuffed blotches streaking across the leather.

"What have you been doing since you left Taggart Transcontinental?" she asked.

"Oh, many things."

"Where are you working now?"

"On special assignments, more or less."

"Of what kind?"

"Of every kind."

"You're not working for a railroad?"

"No."

The sharp brevity of the sound seemed to expand it into an eloquent statement. She knew that he knew her motive. "Kellogg, if I told you that I don't have a single first-rate man left on the Taggart system, if I offered you any job, any terms, any money you cared to name--would you come back to us?"

"No."

"You were shocked by our loss of traffic. I don't think you have any idea of what our loss of men has done to us. I can't tell you the sort of agony I went through three days ago, trying to find somebody able to build five miles of temporary track. I have fifty miles to build through the Rockies. I see no way to do it. But it has to be done. I've combed the country for men. There aren't any. And then to run into you suddenly, to find you here, in a day coach, when I'd give half the system for one employee like you--do you understand why I can't let you go? Choose anything you wish. Want to be general manager of a region? Or assistant operating vice-president?"

"No."

"You're still working for a living, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem to be making very much."

"I'm making enough for my needs--and for nobody else's."

"Why are you willing to work for anyone but Taggart Transcontinental?"

"Because you wouldn't give me the kind of job I'd want."

"I?" She stopped still. "Good God, Kellogg!—haven't you understood? I'd give you any job you name!"

"All right. Track walker."

"What?"

"Section hand. Engine wiper." He smiled at the look on her face. "No? You see, I said you wouldn't."

"Do you mean that you'd take a day laborer's job?"

"Any time you offered it."

"But nothing better?"

"That's right, nothing better."

"Don't you understand that I have too many men who're able to do those jobs, but nothing better?"

"I understand it, Miss Taggart. Do you?"

"What I need is your—"

"—mind, Miss Taggart? My mind is not on the market any longer."

She stood looking at him, her face growing harder. "You're one of them, aren't you?" she said at last.

"Of whom?"

She did not answer, shrugged and went on.

"Miss Taggart," he asked, "how long will you remain willing to be a *common carrier*?"

"I won't surrender the world to the creature you're quoting."

"The answer you gave *her* was much more realistic."

The chain of their steps had stretched through many silent minutes before she asked. "Why did you stand by me tonight? Why were you willing to help me?"

He answered easily, almost gaily, "Because there isn't a passenger on that train who needs to get where he's going more urgently than I do. If the train can be started, none will profit more than I. But when I need something, I don't sit and expect transportation, like that creature of yours."

"You don't? And what if all trains stopped running?"

"Then I wouldn't count on making a crucial journey by train."

"Where are you going?"

"West."

"On a 'special assignment'?"

"No. For a month's vacation with some friends."

"A vacation? And it's that important to you?"

"More important than anything on earth."

They had walked two miles when they came to the small gray box on a post by the trackside, which was the emergency telephone. The box hung sidewise, beaten by storms. She jerked it open. The telephone was there, a familiar, reassuring object, glinting in the beam of Kellogg's flashlight. But she knew, the moment she pressed the receiver to her ear, and he knew, when he saw her finger tapping sharply against the hook, that the telephone was dead.

She handed the receiver to him without a word. She held the flashlight, while he went swiftly over the instrument, then tore it off the wall and studied the wires.

"The wire's okay," he said. "The current's on. It's this particular instrument that's out of order. There's a chance that the next one might be working." He added, "The next one is five miles away."

"Let's go," she said.

Far behind them, the engine's headlight was still visible, not a planet any longer, but a small star winking through mists of distance. Ahead of them, the rail went off into bluish space, with nothing to mark its end.

She realized how often she had glanced back at that headlight; so long as it remained in sight, she had felt as if a life-line were holding them anchored safely; now they had to break it and dive into . . . and dive off this planet, she thought. She noticed that Kellogg, too, stood looking back at the headlight.

They glanced at each other, but said nothing. The crunch of a pebble under her shoe sole burst like a firecracker in the silence. With a coldly intentional movement, he kicked the telephone instru-