"No, I—" He glanced at Rearden, understood, looked away and said woodenly, "Yeah . . . if that's what you mean."

"Listen, kid, I'd give you a job this minute and I'd trust you with more than a sweeper's job, if it were up to me. But have you forgotten the Unification Board? I'm not allowed to hire you and you're not allowed to quit. Sure, men are quitting all the time, and we're hiring others under phony names and fancy papers proving that they've worked here for years. You know it, and thanks for keeping your mouth shut. But do you think that if I hired you that way, your friends in Washington would miss it?"

The boy shook his head slowly.

"Do you think that if you quit their service to become a sweeper, they wouldn't understand your reason?"

The boy nodded.

"Would they let you go?"

The boy shook his head. After a moment, he said in a tone of forlorn astonishment, "I hadn't thought of that at all, Mr. Rearden. I forgot them. I kept thinking of whether you'd want me or not and that the only thing that counted was *your* decision."

"I know."

"And . . . it *is* the only thing that counts, in fact."

"Yes, Non-Absolute, *in fact*."

The boy's mouth jerked suddenly into the brief, mirthless twist of a smile. "I guess I'm tied worse than any sucker . . ."

"Yes. There's nothing you can do now, except apply to the Unification Board for permission to change your job. I'll support your application, if you want to try—only I don't think they'll grant it. I don't think they'll let you work for me."

"No. They won't."

"If you maneuver enough and lie enough, they might permit you to transfer to a private job—with some other steel company."

"No! I don't want to go anywhere else! I don't want to leave this place!" He stood looking off at the invisible vapor of rain over the flame of the furnaces. After a while, he said quietly, "I'd better stay put, I guess. I'd better go on being a deputy looter. Besides, if I left, God only knows what sort of bastard they'd saddle you with in my place!" He turned. "They're up to something, Mr. Rearden. I don't know what it is, but they're getting ready to spring something on you."

"What?"

"I don't know. But they've been watching every opening here, in the last few weeks, every desertion, and slipping their own gang in. A queer sort of gang, too—real goons, some of them, that I'd swear never stepped inside a steel plant before. I've had orders to get as many of 'our boys' in as possible. They wouldn't tell me why. I don't know what it is they're planning. I've tried to pump them, but they're acting pretty cagey about it. I don't think they trust me any more. I'm losing the right touch, I guess. All I know is they're getting set to pull something here."

"Thanks for warning me."

"I'll try to get the dope on it. I'll try my damndest to get it in

time." He turned brusquely and started off, but stopped. "Mr. Rearden, if it were up to you, you would have hired me?"

"I would have, gladly and at once."

"Thank you, Mr. Rearden," he said, his voice solemn and low, then walked away.

Rearden stood looking after him, seeing, with a tearing smile of pity, what it was that the ex-relativist, the ex-pragmatist, the ex-amoralist was carrying away with him for consolation.

* *

On the afternoon of September 11, a copper wire broke in Minnesota, stopping the belts of a grain elevator at a small country station of Taggart Transcontinental.

A flood of wheat was moving down the highways, the roads, the abandoned trails of the countryside, emptying thousands of acres of farmland upon the fragile dams of the railroad's stations. It was moving day and night, the first trickles growing into streams, then rivers, then torrents—moving on palsied trucks with coughing, tubercular motors—on wagons pulled by the rusty skeletons of starving horses—on carts pulled by oxen—on the nerves and last energy of men who had lived through two years of disaster for the triumphant reward of this autumn's giant harvest, men who had patched their trucks and carts with wire, blankets, ropes and sleepless nights, to make them hold together for this one more journey, to carry the grain and collapse at destination, but to give their owners a chance at survival.

Every year, at this season, another movement had gone clicking across the country, drawing freight cars from all corners of the continent to the Minnesota Division of Taggart Transcontinental, the beat of train wheels preceding the creak of the wagons, like an advance echo rigorously planned, ordered and timed to meet the flood. The Minnesota Division drowsed through the year, to come to violent life for the sounds of the harvest; fourteen thousand freight cars had jammed its yards each year; fifteen thousand were expected this time. The first of the wheat trains had started to channel the flood into the hungry flour mills, then bakeries, then stomachs of the nation—but every train, car and storage elevator counted, and there was no minute or inch of space to spare.

Eddie Willers watched Dagny's face as she went through the cards of her emergency file; he could tell the content of the cards by her expression. "The Terminal," she said quietly, closing the file. "Phone the Terminal downstairs and have them ship half their stock of wire to Minnesota." Eddie said nothing and obeyed.

He said nothing, the morning when he put on her desk a telegram from the Taggart office in Washington, informing them of the directive which, due to the critical shortage of copper, ordered government agents to seize all copper mines and operate them as a public utility. "Well," she said, dropping the telegram into the wastebasket, "that's the end of Montana."

She said nothing when James Taggart announced to her that he was issuing an order to discontinue all dining cars on Taggart trains. "We can't afford it any longer," he explained. "we've always lost