

fifty miles away from the nearest settlement. I was badly injured and remained unconscious for most of two weeks. The old couple had no telephone, no radio, no means of communication or transportation, except an old truck that broke down when they attempted to use it. I had to remain with them until I recovered sufficient strength to walk. I walked the fifty miles to the foothills, then hitch-hiked my way to a Taggart station in Nebraska."

"I see," said Taggart. "Well, that's fine. Now when you give the press interview—"

"I'm not going to give any press interviews."

"What? But they've been calling me all day! They're waiting! It's essential!" He had an air of panic. "It's most crucially essential!"

"Who's been calling you all day?"

"People in Washington and . . . and others . . . They're waiting for your statement."

She pointed at Eddie's notes. "There's my statement."

"But that's not enough! You must say that you haven't quit."

"That's obvious, isn't it? I'm back."

"You must say something about it."

"Such as what?"

"Something personal."

"To whom?"

"To the country. People were worried about you. You must reassure them."

"The story will reassure them, if anyone was worried about me."

"That's not what I mean!"

"Well, what do you mean?"

"I mean—" He stopped, his eyes avoiding hers. "I mean—" He sat, searching for words, cracking his knuckles.

Jim was going to pieces, she thought: the jerky impatience, the shrillness, the aura of panic were new; crude outbreaks of a tone of ineffectual menace had replaced his pose of cautious smoothness.

"I mean—" He was searching for words to name his meaning without naming it, she thought, to make her understand that which he did not want to be understood. "I mean, the public—"

"I know what you mean," she said. "No, Jim, I'm not going to reassure the public about the state of our industry."

"Now you're—"

"The public had better be as unreassured as it has the wits to be. Now proceed to business."

"I—"

"Proceed to business, Jim."

He glanced at Mr. Meigs. Mr. Meigs sat silently, his legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. He wore a jacket which was not, but looked like, a military uniform. The flesh of his neck bulged over the collar, and the flesh of his body strained against the narrow waistline intended to disguise it. He wore a ring with a large yellow diamond that flashed when he moved his stubby fingers.

"You've met Mr. Meigs," said Taggart. "I'm so glad that the two of you will get along well together." He made an expectant half-pause, but received no answer from either. "Mr. Meigs is the repre-

sentative of the Railroad Unification Plan. You'll have many opportunities to cooperate with him."

"What is the Railroad Unification Plan?"

"It is a . . . a new national setup that went into effect three weeks ago, which you will appreciate and approve of and find extremely practical." She marveled at the futility of his method: he was acting as if, by naming her opinion in advance, he would make her unable to alter it. "It is an emergency setup which has saved the country's transportation system."

"What is the plan?"

"You realize, of course, the insurmountable difficulties of any sort of construction job during this period of emergency. It is—temporarily—impossible to lay new track. Therefore, the country's top problem is to preserve the transportation industry *as a whole*, to preserve its existing plant and all of its existing facilities. The national survival requires—"

"What is the plan?"

"As a policy of national survival, the railroads of the country have been united into a single team, pooling their resources. All of their gross revenue is turned over to the Railroad Pool Board in Washington, which acts as trustee for the industry as a whole, and divides the total income among the various railroads, according to a . . . a more modern principle of distribution."

"What principle?"

"Now don't worry, property rights have been fully preserved and protected, they've merely been given a new form. Every railroad retains independent responsibility for its own operations, its train schedules and the maintenance of its track and equipment. As its contribution to the national pool, every railroad permits any other, when conditions so require, to use its track and facilities without charge. At the end of the year, the Pool Board distributes the total gross income, and every individual railroad is paid, not on the haphazard, old-fashioned basis of the number of trains run or the tonnage of freight carried, but on the basis of its need—that is, the preservation of its track being its main need, every individual railroad is paid according to the mileage of the track which it owns and maintains."

She heard the words; she understood the meaning; she was unable to make it real—to grant the respect of anger, concern, opposition to a nightmare piece of insanity that rested on nothing but people's willingness to pretend to believe that it was sane. She felt a numbed emptiness—and the sense of being thrown far below the realm where moral indignation is pertinent.

"Whose track are we using for our transcontinental traffic?" she asked, her voice flat and dry.

"Why, our own, of course," said Taggart nastily, "that is, from New York to Bedford, Illinois. We run our trains out of Bedford on the track of the Atlantic Southern."

"To San Francisco?"

"Well, it's much faster than that long detour you tried to establish."

"We run our trains without charge for the use of the track?"

"Besides, your detour couldn't have lasted, the Kansas Western rail was shot, and besides—"

"Without charge for the use of the Atlantic Southern track?"

"Well, we're not charging them for the use of our Mississippi bridge, either."

After a moment, she asked, "Have you looked at a map?"

"Sure," said Meigs unexpectedly. "You own the largest track mileage of any railroad in the country. So you've got nothing to worry about."

Eddie Willers burst out laughing.

Meigs glanced at him blankly. "What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Eddie wearily, "nothing."

"Mr. Meigs," she said, "if you look at a map, you will see that two-thirds of the cost of maintaining a track for our transcontinental traffic is given to us free and is paid by our competitor."

"Why, sure," he said, but his eyes narrowed, watching her suspiciously, as if he were wondering what motive prompted her to so explicit a statement.

"While we're paid for owning miles of useless track which carries no traffic," she said.

Meigs understood—and leaned back as if he had lost all further interest in the discussion.

"That's not true!" snapped Taggart. "We're running a great number of local trains to serve the region of our former transcontinental line—through Iowa, Nebraska and Colorado—and, on the other side of the tunnel, through California, Nevada and Utah."

"We're running two locals a day," said Eddie Willers, in the dry, blankly innocent tone of a business report. "Fewer, some places."

"What determines the number of trains which any given railroad is obligated to run?" she asked.

"The public welfare," said Taggart.

"The Pool Board," said Eddie.

"How many trains have been discontinued in the country in the past three weeks?"

"As a matter of fact," said Taggart eagerly, "the plan has helped to harmonize the industry and to eliminate cutthroat competition."

"It has eliminated thirty per cent of the trains run in the country," said Eddie. "The only competition left is in the applications to the Board for permission to cancel trains. The railroad to survive will be the one that manages to run no trains at all."

"Has anybody calculated how long the Atlantic Southern is expected to be able to remain in business?"

"That's no skin off your—" started Meigs.

"Please, Cuffy!" cried Taggart.

"The president of the Atlantic Southern," said Eddie impassively, "has committed suicide."

"That had nothing to do with this!" yelled Taggart. "It was over a personal matter!"

She remained silent. She sat, looking at their faces. There was still