

"Perhaps you'd better speak to the station agent, Mr. Chalmers. I have no authority to answer you as I'd like to," said the conductor, and walked out.

Chalmers leaped to his feet. "Say, Kip . . ." said Lester Tuck uneasily, "maybe it's true . . . maybe they can't do it."

"They can if they have to!" snapped Chalmers, marching resolutely to the door.

Years ago, in college, he had been taught that the only effective means to impel men to action was fear.

In the dilapidated office of Winston Station, he confronted a sleepy man with slack, worn features, and a frightened young boy who sat at the operator's desk. They listened, in silent stupor, to a stream of profanity such as they had never heard from any section gang.

"—and it's not *my* problem how you get the train through the tunnel, that's for *you* to figure out!" Chalmers concluded. "But if you don't get me an engine and don't start that train, you can kiss goodbye to your jobs, your work permits and this whole goddamn railroad!"

The station agent had never heard of Kip Chalmers and did not know the nature of his position. But he knew that this was the day when unknown men in undefined positions held unlimited power—the power of life or death.

"It's not up to us, Mr. Chalmers," he said pleadingly. "We don't issue the orders out here. The order came from Silver Springs. Suppose you telephone Mr. Mitchum and—"

"Who's Mr. Mitchum?"

"He's the division superintendent at Silver Springs. Suppose you send him a message to—"

"I should bother with a division superintendent! I'll send a message to Jim Taggart—that's what I'm going to do!"

Before the station agent had time to recover, Chalmers whirled to the boy, ordering, "You—take this down and send it at once!"

It was a message which, a month ago, the station agent would not have accepted from any passenger; the rules forbade it; but he was not certain about any rules any longer.

Mr. James Taggart, New York City. Am held up on the Comet at Winston, Colorado, by the incompetence of your men, who refuse to give me an engine. Have meeting in San Francisco in the evening of top-level national importance. If you don't move my train at once, I'll let you guess the consequences.

Kip Chalmers.

After the boy had transmitted the words onto the wires that stretched from pole to pole across a continent as guardians of the Taggart track—after Kip Chalmers had returned to his car to wait for an answer—the station agent telephoned Dave Mitchum, who was his friend, and read to him the text of the message. He heard Mitchum groan in answer.

"I thought I'd tell you, Dave. I never heard of the guy before, but maybe he's somebody important."

"I don't know!" moaned Mitchum. "Kip Chalmers? You see his name in the newspapers all the time, right in with all the top-level

boys. I don't know what he is, but if he's from Washington, we can't take any chances. Oh Christ, what are we going to do?"

We can't take any chances—thought the Taggart operator in New York, and transmitted the message by telephone to James Taggart's home. It was close to six A.M. in New York, and James Taggart was awakened out of the fitful sleep of a restless night. He listened to the telephone, his face sagging. He felt the same fear as the station agent of Winston, and for the same reason.

He called the home of Clifton Loey. All the rage which he could not pour upon Kip Chalmers, was poured over the telephone wire upon Clifton Loey. "Do something!" screamed Taggart. "I don't care what you do, it's *your* job, not mine, but see to it that that train gets through! What in hell is going on? I never heard of the Comet being held up! Is that how you run your department? It's a fine thing when important passengers have to start sending messages to me! At least, when my sister ran the place, I wasn't awakened in the middle of the night over every spike that broke in Iowa—Colorado, I mean!"

"I'm so sorry, Jim," said Clifton Loey smoothly, in a tone that balanced apology, reassurance and the right degree of patronizing confidence. "It's just a misunderstanding. It's somebody's stupid mistake. Don't worry, I'll take care of it. I was, as a matter of fact, in bed, but I'll attend to it at once."

Clifton Loey was not in bed; he had just returned from a round of night clubs, in the company of a young lady. He asked her to wait and hurried to the offices of Taggart Transcontinental. None of the night staff who saw him there could say why he chose to appear in person, but neither could they say that it had been unnecessary. He rushed in and out of several offices, was seen by many people and gave an impression of great activity. The only physical result of it was an order that went over the wires to Dave Mitchum, superintendent of the Colorado Division:

"Give an engine to Mr. Chalmers at once. Send the Comet through safely and without unnecessary delay. If you are unable to perform your duties, I shall hold you responsible before the Unification Board. Clifton Loey."

Then, calling his girl friend to join him, Clifton Loey drove to a country roadhouse—to make certain that no one would be able to find him in the next few hours.

The dispatcher at Silver Springs was baffled by the order that he handed to Dave Mitchum, but Dave Mitchum understood. He knew that no railroad order would ever speak in such terms as giving an engine to a passenger; he knew that the thing was a show piece, he guessed what sort of show was being staged, and he felt a cold sweat at the realization of who was being framed as the goat of the show.

"What's the matter, Dave?" asked the trainmaster.

Mitchum did not answer. He seized the telephone, his hands shaking as he begged for a connection to the Taggart operator in New York. He looked like an animal in a trap.

He begged the New York operator to get him Mr. Clifton Loey's home. The operator tried. There was no answer. He begged the