

was past his youth; he had been thirty-six when he had found the woman he wanted. He had been engaged to her for the last four years; he had had to wait, because he had a mother to support and a widowed sister with three children. He had never been afraid of burdens; because he had known his ability to carry them, and he had never assumed an obligation unless he was certain that he could fulfill it. He had waited, he had saved his money, and now he had reached the time when he felt himself free to be happy. He was to be married in a few weeks, this coming June. He thought of it, as he sat at his desk, looking at Dave Mitchum, but the thought aroused no hesitation, only regret and a distant sadness—distant, because he knew that he could not let it be part of this moment.

Bill Brent knew nothing about epistemology; but he knew that man must live by his own rational perception of reality, that he cannot act against it or escape it or find a substitute for it—and that there is no other way for him to live.

He rose to his feet. "It's true that so long as I hold this job, I cannot refuse to obey you," he said. "But I can, if I quit. So I'm quitting."

"You're *what*?"

"I'm quitting, as of this moment."

"But you have no right to quit, you goddamn bastard! Don't you know that? Don't you know that I'll have you thrown in jail for it?"

"If you want to send the sheriff for me in the morning, I'll be at home. I won't try to escape. There's no place to go."

Dave Mitchum was six-foot-two and had the build of a bruiser, but he stood shaking with fury and terror over the delicate figure of Bill Brent. "You can't quit! There's a law against it! I've got a law! You can't walk out on me! I won't let you out! I won't let you leave this building tonight!"

Brent walked to the door. "Will you repeat that order you gave me, in front of the others? No? Then I will."

As he pulled the door open, Mitchum's fist shot out, smashed into his face and knocked him down.

The trainmaster and the road foreman stood in the open doorway.

"He quit!" screamed Mitchum. "The yellow bastard quit at a time like this! He's a law-breaker and a coward!"

In the slow effort of rising from the floor, through the haze of blood running into his eyes, Bill Brent looked up at the two men. He saw that they understood, but he saw the closed faces of men who did not want to understand, did not want to interfere and hated him for putting them on the spot in the name of justice. He said nothing, rose to his feet and walked out of the building.

Mitchum avoided looking at the others. "Hey, you," he called, jerking his head at, the night dispatcher across the room. "Come here. You've got to take over at once."

With the door closed, he repeated to the boy the story of the Diesel at Fairmount, as he had given it to Brent, and the order to send the Comet through with Engine Number 306, if the boy did not hear from him in half an hour. The boy was in no condition to think, to speak or to understand anything; he kept seeing the blood

on the face of Bill Brent, who had been his idol. "Yes, sir," he answered numbly.

Dave Mitchum departed for Fairmount, announcing to every yardman, switchman and wiper in sight, as he boarded the track motor car, that he was going in search of a Diesel for the Comet.

The night dispatcher sat at his desk, watching the clock and the telephone, praying that the telephone would ring and let him hear from Mr. Mitchum. But the half-hour went by in silence, and when there were only three minutes left, the boy felt a terror he could not explain, except that he did not want to send that order.

He turned to the trainmaster and the road foreman, asking hesitantly, "Mr. Mitchum gave me an order before he left, but I wonder whether I ought to send it, because I . . . I don't think it's right. He said—"

The trainmaster turned away, he felt no pity: the boy was about the same age as his brother had been.

The road foreman snapped, "Do just as Mr. Mitchum told you. You're not supposed to think," and walked out of the room.

The responsibility that James Taggart and Clifton Locey had evaded now rested on the shoulders of a trembling, bewildered boy. He hesitated, then he buttressed his courage with the thought that one did not doubt the good faith and the competence of railroad executives. He did not know that his vision of a railroad and its executives was that of a century ago.

With the conscientious precision of a railroad man, in the moment when the hand of the clock ended the half-hour, he signed his name to the order instructing the Comet to proceed with Engine Number 306, and transmitted the order to Winston Station.

The station agent at Winston shuddered when he looked at the order, but he was not the man to defy authority. He told himself that the tunnel was not, perhaps, as dangerous as he thought. He told himself that the best policy, these days, was not to think.

When he handed their copies of the order to the conductor and the engineer of the Comet, the conductor glanced slowly about the room, from face to face, folded the slip of paper, put it into his pocket and walked out without a word.

The engineer stood looking at the paper for a moment, then threw it down and said, "I'm not going to do it. And if it's come to where this railroad hands out orders like this one, I'm not going to work for it, either. Just list me as having quit."

"But you can't quit!" cried the station agent. "They'll arrest you for it!"

"If they find me," said the engineer, and walked out of the station into the vast darkness of the mountain night.

The engineer from Silver Springs, who had brought in Number 306, was sitting in a corner of the room. He chuckled and said, "He's yellow."

The station agent turned to him. "Will you do it, Joe? Will you take the Comet?"

Joe Scott was drunk. There had been a time when a railroad man, reporting for duty with any sign of intoxication, would have been