

"But, good God, Clem!—I'd be open to court action for it, by the Alliance rules!"

Mr. Weatherby smiled. "What court? Let Wesley take care of that."

"But listen, Clem, you know—you know just as well as I do—that we can't afford it!"

Mr. Weatherby shrugged. "That's a problem for you to work out."

"How, for Christ's sake?"

"I don't know. That's your job, not ours. You wouldn't want the government to start telling you how to run your railroad, would you?"

"No, of course not! But—"

"Our job is only to see that the people get fair wages and decent transportation. It's up to you to deliver. But, of course, if you say that you can't do the job, why then—"

"I haven't said it!" Taggart cried hastily. "I haven't said it at all!"

"Good," said Mr. Weatherby pleasantly. "We know that you have the ability to find some way to do it."

He was looking at Taggart; Taggart was looking at Dagny.

"Well, it was just a thought," said Mr. Weatherby, leaning back in his chair in a manner of modest withdrawal. "Just a thought for you to mull over. I'm only a guest here. I don't want to interfere. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the situation of the . . . branch lines, I believe?"

"Yes," said the chairman and sighed. "Yes. Now if anyone has a constructive suggestion to offer—" He waited; no one answered; "I believe the picture is clear to all of us." He waited. "It seems to be established that we cannot continue to afford the operation of some of our branch lines . . . the Rio Norte Line in particular . . . and, therefore, some form of action seems to be indicated. . . ."

"I think," said the pallid man with the mustache, his voice unexpectedly confident, "that we should now hear from Miss Taggart." He leaned forward with a look of hopeful craftiness. As Dagny did not answer, but merely turned to him, he asked, "What do you have to say, Miss Taggart?"

"Nothing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"All I had to say was contained in the report which Jim has read to you." She spoke quietly, her voice clear and flat.

"But you did not make any recommendations."

"I have none to make."

"But, after all, as our Operating Vice-President, you have a vital interest in the policies of this railroad."

"I have no authority over the policies of this railroad."

"Oh, but we are anxious to consider your opinion."

"I have no opinions."

"Miss Taggart," he said, in the smoothly formal tone of an order, "you cannot fail to realize that our branch lines are running at a disastrous deficit—and that we expect you to make them pay."

"How?"

"I don't know. That is your job, not ours."

"I have stated in my report the reasons why that is now impossible. If there are facts which I have overlooked, please name them."

"Oh, I wouldn't know. We expect you to find some way to make it possible. Our job is only to see that the stockholders get a fair profit. It's up to you to deliver. You wouldn't want us to think that you're unable to do the job and—"

"I am unable to do it."

The man opened his mouth, but found nothing else to say; he looked at her in bewilderment, wondering why the formula had failed.

"Miss Taggart," asked the man with the green muffler, "did you imply in your report that the situation of the Rio Norte Line was critical?"

"I stated that it was hopeless."

"Then what action do you propose?"

"I propose nothing."

"Aren't you evading a responsibility?"

"What is it that you think you're doing?" She spoke evenly, addressing them all: "Are you counting on my not saying that the responsibility is yours, that it was your goddam policies that brought us where we are? Well, I'm saying it."

"Miss Taggart, Miss Taggart," said the chairman in a tone of pleading reproach, "there shouldn't be any hard feelings among us. Does it matter now who was to blame? We don't want to quarrel over past mistakes. We must all pull together as a team to carry our railroad through this desperate emergency."

A gray-haired man of patrician bearing, who had remained silent throughout the session, with a look of the quietly bitter knowledge that the entire performance was futile, glanced at Dagny in a way which would have been sympathy had he still felt a remnant of hope. He said, raising his voice just enough to betray a note of controlled indignation, "Mr. Chairman, if it is practical solutions that we are considering, I should like to suggest that we discuss the limitation placed upon the length and speed of our trains. Of any single practice, *that* is the most disastrous one. Its repeal would not solve all of our problems, but it would be an enormous relief. With the desperate shortage of motive power and the appalling shortage of fuel, it is criminal insanity to send an engine out on the road with sixty cars when it could pull a hundred and to take four days on a run which could be made in three. I suggest that we compute the number of shippers we have ruined and the districts we have destroyed through the failures, shortages and delays of transportation, and then we—"

"Don't think of it," Mr. Weatherby cut in snappily. "Don't try dreaming about any repeals. We wouldn't consider it. We wouldn't even consider listening to any talk on the subject."

"Mr. Chairman," the gray-haired man asked quietly, "shall I continue?"

The chairman spread out his hands, with a smooth smile, indicating helplessness. "It would be impractical," he answered.

"I think we'd better confine the discussion to the status of the Rio Norte Line," snapped James Taggart.

There was a long silence.

The man with the green muffler turned to Dagny. "Miss Taggart," he asked sadly and cautiously, "would you say that if—this is just a hypothetical question—if the equipment now in use on the Rio Norte Line were made available, it would fill the needs of our transcontinental main-line traffic?"

"It would help."

"The rail of the Rio Norte Line," said the pallid man with the mustache, "is unmatched anywhere in the country and could not now be purchased at any price. We have three hundred miles of track, which means well over four hundred miles of rail of pure Rearden Metal in that Line. Would you say, Miss Taggart, that we cannot afford to waste that superlative rail on a branch that carries no major traffic any longer?"

"That is for you to judge."

"Let me put it this way: would it be of value if that rail were made available for our main-line track, which is in such urgent need of repair?"

"It would help."

"Miss Taggart," asked the man with the quavering voice, "would you say that there are any shippers of consequence left on the Rio Norte Line?"

"There's Ted Nielsen of Nielsen Motors. No one else."

"Would you say that the operating costs of the Rio Norte Line could be used to relieve the financial strain on the rest of the system?"

"It would help."

"Then, as our Operating Vice-President . . ." He stopped: she waited, looking at him; he said, "Well?"

"What was your question?"

"I meant to say . . . that is, well, as our Operating Vice-President, don't you have certain conclusions to draw?"

She stood up. She looked at the faces around the table. "Gentlemen," she said, "I do not know by what sort of self-fraud you expect to feel that if it's I who name the decision you intend to make, it will be I who'll bear the responsibility for it. Perhaps you believe that if my voice delivers the final blow, it will make me the murderer involved—since you know that this is the last act of a long-drawn-out murder. I cannot conceive what it is you think you can accomplish by a pretense of this kind, and I will not help to stage it. The final blow will be delivered by you, as were all the others."

She turned to go. The chairman half-rose, asking helplessly, "But, Miss Taggart—"

"Please remain seated. Please continue the discussion—and take the vote in which I shall have no voice. I shall abstain from voting. I'll stand by, if you wish me to, but only as an employee. I will not pretend to be anything else."

She turned away once more, but it was the voice of the gray-haired man that stopped her. "Miss Taggart, this is not an official question, it is only my personal curiosity, but would you tell me your view of the future of the Taggart Transcontinental system?"