

the rate of two miles a month, across the scraggly fields of Mexican corn.

Dagny was thirty-two years old, when she told James Taggart that she would resign. She had run the Operating Department for the past three years, without title, credit or authority. She was defeated by loathing for the hours, the days, the nights she had to waste circumventing the interference of Jim's friend who bore the title of Vice-President in Charge of Operation. The man had no policy, and any decision he made was always hers, but he made it only after he had made every effort to make it impossible. What she delivered to her brother was an ultimatum. He gasped, "But, Dagny, you're a woman! A woman as Operating Vice President? It's unheard of! The Board won't consider it!"

"Then I'm through," she answered.

She did not think of what she would do with the rest of her life. To face leaving Taggart Transcontinental was like waiting to have her legs amputated; she thought she would let it happen, then take up the load of whatever was left.

She never understood why the Board of Directors voted unanimously to make her Vice-President in Charge of Operation.

It was she who finally gave them their San Sebastián Line. When she took over the construction had been under way for three years, one third of its track was laid; the cost to date was beyond the authorized total. She fired Jim's friends and found a contractor who completed the job in one year.

The San Sebastian Line was now in operation. No surge of trade had come across the border, nor any trains loaded with copper. A few carloads came clattering down the mountains from San Sebastián, at long intervals. The mines, said Francisco d'Anconia, were still in the process of development. The drain on Taggart Transcontinental had not stopped.

Now she sat at the desk in her office, as she had sat for many evenings, trying to work out the problem of what branches could save the system and in how many years.

The Rio Norte Line, when rebuilt, would redeem the rest. As she looked at the sheets of figures announcing losses and more losses, she did not think of the long, senseless agony of the Mexican venture. She thought of a telephone call. "Hank, can you save us? Can you give us rail on the shortest notice and the longest credit possible?" A quiet, steady voice had answered, "Sure."

The thought was a point of support. She leaned over the sheets of paper on her desk, finding it suddenly easier to concentrate. There was one thing, at least, that could be counted upon not to crumble when needed.

James Taggart crossed the anteroom of Dagny's office, still holding the kind of confidence he had felt among his companions at the barroom half an hour ago. When he opened her door, the confidence vanished. He crossed the room to her desk like a child being dragged to punishment, storing the resentment for all his future years.

He saw a head bent over sheets of paper, the light of the desk

lamp glistening on strands of disheveled hair, a white shirt clinging to her shoulders, its loose folds suggesting the thinness of her body

"What is it, Jim?"

"What are you trying to pull on the San Sebastian Line?"

She raised her head "Pull? Why?"

"What sort of schedule are we running down there and what kind of trains?"

She laughed, the sound was gay and a little weary "You really ought to read the reports sent to the president's office, Jim, once in a while."

'What do you mean?"

"We've been running that schedule and those trains on the San Sebastian for the last three months."

'One passenger train a day?"

"—in the morning. And one freight train every other night."

"Good God! On an important branch like that?"

"The important branch can't pay even for those two trains."

"But the Mexican people expect real service from us!"

'I'm sure they do'

'They need trains!"

"For what?"

'For To help them develop local industries. How do you expect them to develop if we don't give them transportation?"

'I don't expect them to develop'

'That's just your personal opinion. I don't see what right you had to take it upon yourself to cut our schedules. Why, the copper traffic alone will pay for everything."

"When?"

He looked at her his face assumed the satisfaction of a person about to utter something that has the power to hurt "You don't doubt the success of those copper mines, do you?" when it's Francisco d'Anconia who's running them? He stressed the name, watching her

She said, "He may be your friend, but

'My friend?' I thought he was yours.'

She said steadily, "Not for the last ten years."

"That's too bad, isn't it? Still, he's one of the smartest operators on earth. He's never failed in a venture—I mean, a business venture—and he's sunk millions of his own money into those mines, so we can rely on his judgment."

"When will you realize that Francisco d'Anconia has turned into a worthless bum?"

He chuckled "I always thought that that's what he was—as far as his personal character is concerned. But you didn't share my opinion. Yours was opposite. Oh my, how opposite! Surely you remember our quarrels on the subject? Shall I quote some of the things you said about him? I can only surmise as to some of the things you did"

"Do you wish to discuss Francisco d'Anconia? Is that what you came here for?"

His face showed the anger of failure—because hers showed noth-

ing. "You know damn well what I came here for!" he snapped. "I've heard some incredible things about our trains in Mexico."

"What things?"

"What sort of rolling stock are you using down there?"

"The worst I could find."

"You admit that?"

"I've stated it on paper in the reports I sent you."

"Is it true that you're using wood-burning locomotives?"

"Eddie found them for me in somebody's abandoned roundhouse down in Louisiana. He couldn't even learn the name of the railroad."

"And that's what you're running as Taggart trains?"

"Yes."

"What in hell's the big idea? What's going on? I want to know what's going on!"

She spoke evenly, looking straight at him. "If you want to know, I have left nothing but junk on the San Sebastián Line, and as little of that as possible. I have moved everything that could be moved—switch engines, shop tools, even typewriters and mirrors—out of Mexico."

"Why in blazes?"

"So that the looters won't have too much to loot when they nationalize the line."

He leaped to his feet. "You won't get away with that! This is one time you won't get away with it! To have the nerve to pull such a low, unspeakable . . . just because of some vicious rumors, when we have a contract for two hundred years and . . ."

"Jim," she said slowly, "there's not a car, engine or ton of coal that we can spare anywhere on the system."

"I won't permit it, I absolutely won't permit such an outrageous policy toward a friendly people who need our help. Material greed isn't everything. After all, there are non-material considerations, even though you wouldn't understand them!"

She pulled a pad forward and picked up a pencil. "All right, Jim. How many trains do you wish me to run on the San Sebastián Line?"

"Huh?"

"Which runs do you wish me to cut and on which of our lines—in order to get the Diesels and the steel coaches?"

"I don't want you to cut any runs!"

"Then where do I get the equipment for Mexico?"

"That's for you to figure out. It's your job."

"I am not able to do it. You will have to decide."

"That's your usual rotten trick—switching the responsibility to me!"

"I'm waiting for orders, Jim."

"I'm not going to let you trap me like that!"

She dropped the pencil. "Then the San Sebastian schedule will remain as it is."

"Just wait till the Board meeting next month. I'll demand a decision, once and for all, on how far the Operating Department is to be permitted to exceed its authority. You're going to have to answer for this."