the little fellow." Every oil operator in the country, who owned three wells and whined that Ellis Wyatt left him no chance of livelihood, had rushed to fill the hole which Wyatt had left wide open. They formed leagues, cooperatives, associations; they pooled their resources and their letterheads. "The little fellow's day in the sun," the columnist had said. Their sun had been the flames that twisted through the derricks of Wyatt Oil. In its glare, they made the kind of fortunes they had dreamed about, fortunes requiring no competence or effort. Then their biggest customers, such as power companies, who drank oil by the trainful and would make no allowances for human frailty, began to convert to coal—and the smaller customers, who were more tolerant, began to go out of business—the boys in Washington imposed rationing on oil and an emergency tax on employers to support the unemployed oil field workers—then a few of the big oil companies closed down—then the little fellows in the sun discovered that a drilling bit which had cost a hundred dollars, now cost them five hundred, there being no market for oil field equipment, and the suppliers having to earn on one drill what they had earned on five, or perish—then the pipe lines began to close, there being no one able to pay for their upkeep—then the railroads were granted permission to raise their freight rates, there being little oil to carry and the cost of running tank trains having crushed two small lines out of existence—and when the sun went down, they saw that the operating costs, which had once permitted them to exist on their sixty-acre fields, had been made possible by the miles of Wyatt's hillside and had gone in the same coils of smoke. Not until their fortunes had vanished and their pumps had stopped, did the little fellows realize that no business in the country could afford to buy oil at the price it would now take them to produce it. Then the boys in Washington granted subsidies to the oil operators, but not all of the oil operators had friends in Washington, and there followed a situation which no one cared to examine too closely or to discuss.

Andrew Stockton had been in the sort of position which most of the businessmen envied. The rush to convert to coal had descended upon his shoulders like a weight of gold: he had kept his plant working around the clock, running a race with next winter's blizzards, casting parts for coal-burning stoves and furnaces. There were not many dependable foundries left; he had become one of the main pillars supporting the cellars and kitchens of the country. The pillar collapsed without warning. Andrew Stockton announced that he was retiring, closed his plant and vanished. He left no word on what he wished to be done with the plant or whether his relatives had the right to reopen it.

There still were cars on the roads of the country, but they moved like travelers in the desert, who ride past the warning skeletons of horses bleached by the sun: they moved past the skeletons of cars that had collapsed on duty and had been left in the ditches by the side of the road. People were not buying cars any longer, and the automobile factories were closing. But there were men still able to get oil, by means of friendships that nobody cared to question. These men bought cars at any price demanded. Lights flooded the moun-

tains of Colorado from the great windows of the plant, where the assembly belts of Lawrence Hammond poured trucks and cars to the sidings of Taggart Transcontinental. The word that Lawrence Hammond had retired came when least expected, brief and sudden like the single stroke of a bell in a heavy stillness. A committee of local citizens was now broadcasting appeals on the radio, begging Lawrence Hammond, wherever he was, to give them permission to reopen his plant. There was no answer.

She had screamed when Ellis Wyatt went; she had gasped when Andrew Stockton retired; when she heard that Lawrence Hammond had quit, she asked impassively, "Who's next?"

"No, Miss Taggart, I can't explain it," the sister of Andrew Stockton had told her on her last trip to Colorado, two months ago. "He never said a word to me and I don't even know whether he's dead or living, same as Ellis Wyatt. No, nothing special had happened the day before he quit. I remember only that some man came to see him on that last evening. A stranger I'd never seen before. They talked late into the night—when I went to sleep, the light was still burning in Andrew's study."

People were silent in the towns of Colorado. Dagny had seen the way they walked in the streets, past their small drugstores, hardware stores and grocery markets: as if they hoped that the motions of their jobs would save them from looking ahead at the future. She, too, had walked through those streets, trying not to lift her head, not to see the ledges of sooted rock and twisted steel, which had been the Wyatt oil fields. They could be seen from many of the towns; when she had looked ahead, she had seen them in the distance.

One well, on the crest of the hill, was still burning. Nobody had been able to extinguish it. She had seen it from the streets: a spurt of fire twisting convulsively against the sky, as if trying to tear loose. She had seen it at night, across the distance of a hundred clear, black miles, from the window of a train: a small, violent flame, waving in the wind. People called it Wyatt's Torch.

The longest train on the John Galt Line had forty cars; the fastest ran at fifty miles an hour. The engines had to be spared: they were coal-burning engines, long past their age of retirement. Jim obtained the oil for the Diesels that pulled the Comet and a few of their transcontinental freights. The only source of fuel she could count on and deal with was Ken Danagger of Danagger Coal in Pennsylvania.

Empty trains clattered through the four states that were tied, as neighbors, to the throat of Colorado. They carried a few carloads of sheep, some corn, some melons and an occasional farmer with an overdressed family, who had friends in Washington. Jim had obtained a subsidy from Washington for every train that was run, not as a profit-making carrier, but as a service of "public equality."

It took every scrap of her energy to keep trains running through the sections where they were still needed, in the areas that were still producing. But on the balance sheets of Taggart Transcontinental, the checks of Jim's subsidies for empty trains bore larger figures