

"Don't bother me, don't bother me, don't bother me," said James Taggart.

Eddie Willers walked toward the desk.

"It's important, Jim," he said, not raising his voice.

"All right, all right, what is it?"

Eddie Willers looked at a map on the wall of the office. The map's colors had faded under the glass—he wondered dimly how many Taggart presidents had sat before it and for how many years. The Taggart Transcontinental Railroad, the network of red lines slashing the faded body of the country from New York to San Francisco, looked like a system of blood vessels. It looked as if once, long ago, the blood had shot down the main artery and, under the pressure of its own overabundance, had branched out at random points, running all over the country. One red streak twisted its way from Cheyenne, Wyoming, down to El Paso, Texas—the Rio Norte Line of Taggart Transcontinental. New tracing had been added recently and the red streak had been extended south beyond El Paso—but Eddie Willers turned away hastily when his eyes reached that point.

He looked at James Taggart and said, "It's the Rio Norte Line." He noticed Taggart's glance moving down to a corner of the desk. "We've had another wreck."

"Railroad accidents happen every day. Did you have to bother me about that?"

"You know what I'm saying, Jim. The Rio Norte is done for. That track is shot. Down the whole line."

"We are getting a new track."

Eddie Willers continued as if there had been no answer: "That track is shot. It's no use trying to run trains down there. People are giving up trying to use them."

"There is not a railroad in the country, it seems to me, that doesn't have a few branches running at a deficit. We're not the only ones. It's a national condition—a temporary national condition."

Eddie stood looking at him silently. What Taggart disliked about Eddie Willers was this habit of looking straight into people's eyes. Eddie's eyes were blue, wide and questioning; he had blond hair and a square face, unremarkable except for that look of scrupulous attentiveness and open, puzzled wonder.

"What do you want?" snapped Taggart.

"I just came to tell you something you had to know, because somebody had to tell you."

"That we've had another accident?"

"That we can't give up the Rio Norte Line."

James Taggart seldom raised his head; when he looked at people, he did so by lifting his heavy eyelids and staring upward from under the expanse of his bald forehead.

"Who's thinking of giving up the Rio Norte Line?" he asked. "There's never been any question of giving it up. I resent your saying it. I resent it very much."

"But we haven't met a schedule for the last six months. We haven't completed a run without some sort of breakdown, major or

minor. We're losing all our shippers, one after another. How long can we last?"

"You're a pessimist, Eddie. You lack faith. That's what undermines the morale of an organization."

"You mean that nothing's going to be done about the Rio Norte Line?"

"I haven't said that at all. Just as soon as we get the new track--"

"Jim, there isn't going to be any new track." He watched Taggart's eyelids move up slowly. "I've just come back from the office of Associated Steel. I've spoken to Orren Boyle."

"What did he say?"

"He spoke for an hour and a half and did not give me a single straight answer."

"What did you bother him for? I believe the first order of rail wasn't due for delivery until next month."

"And before that, it was due for delivery three months ago."

"Unforeseen circumstances. Absolutely beyond Orren's control."

"And before that, it was due six months earlier. Jim, we have waited for Associated Steel to deliver that rail for thirteen months."

"What do you want me to do? I can't run Orren Boyle's business."

"I want you to understand that we can't wait."

Taggart asked slowly, his voice half-mocking, half-cautious, "What did my sister say?"

"She won't be back until tomorrow."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"That's for you to decide."

"Well, whatever else you say, there's one thing you're not going to mention next—and that's Rearden Steel."

Eddie did not answer at once, then said quietly, "All right, Jim. I won't mention it."

"Orren is my friend." He heard no answer. "I resent your attitude. Orren Boyle will deliver that rail just as soon as it's humanly possible. So long as he can't deliver it, nobody can blame us."

"Jim! What are you talking about? Don't you understand that the Rio Norte Line is breaking up—whether anybody blames us or not?"

"People would put up with it—they'd have to—if it weren't for the Phoenix-Durango." He saw Eddie's face tighten. "Nobody ever complained about the Rio Norte Line, until the Phoenix-Durango came on the scene."

"The Phoenix-Durango is doing a brilliant job."

"Imagine a thing called the Phoenix-Durango competing with Taggart Transcontinental! It was nothing but a local milk line ten years ago."

"It's got most of the freight traffic of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado now." Taggart did not answer. "Jim, we can't lose Colorado. It's our last hope. It's everybody's last hope. If we don't pull ourselves together, we'll lose every big shipper in the state to the Phoenix-Durango. We've lost the Wyatt oil fields."

"I don't see why everybody keeps talking about the Wyatt oil fields."

"Because Ellis Wyatt is a prodigy who--"

"Damn Ellis Wyatt!"

Those oil wells, Eddie thought suddenly, didn't they have something in common with the blood vessels on the map? Wasn't that the way the red stream of Taggart Transcontinental had shot across the country, years ago, a feat that seemed incredible now? He thought of the oil wells spouting a black stream that ran over a continent almost faster than the trains of the Phoenix-Durango could carry it. That oil field had been only a rocky patch in the mountains of Colorado, given up as exhausted long ago. Ellis Wyatt's father had managed to squeeze an obscure living to the end of his days, out of the dying oil wells. Now it was as if somebody had given a shot of adrenaline to the heart of the mountain, the heart had started pumping, the black blood had burst through the rocks—of course it's blood, thought Eddie Willers, because blood is supposed to feed, to give life, and that is what Wyatt Oil had done. It had shocked empty slopes of ground into sudden existence, it had brought new towns, new power plants, new factories to a region nobody had ever noticed on any map. New factories, thought Eddie Willers, at a time when the freight revenues from all the great old industries were dropping slowly year by year; a rich new oil field, at a time when the pumps were stopping in one famous field after another; a new industrial state where nobody had expected anything but cattle and beets. One man had done it, and he had done it in eight years; this, thought Eddie Willers, was like the stories he had read in school books and never quite believed, the stories of men who had lived in the days of the country's youth. He wished he could meet Ellis Wyatt. There was a great deal of talk about him, but few had ever met him; he seldom came to New York. They said he was thirty-three years old and had a violent temper. He had discovered some way to revive exhausted oil wells and he had proceeded to revive them.

"Ellis Wyatt is a greedy bastard who's after nothing but money," said James Taggart. "It seems to me that there are more important things in life than making money."

"What are you talking about, Jim? What has that got to do with—"

"Besides, he's double-crossed us. We served the Wyatt oil fields for years, most adequately. In the days of old man Wyatt, we ran a tank train a week."

"These are not the days of old man Wyatt, Jim. The Phoenix-Durango runs two tank trains a day down there—and it runs them on schedule."

"If he had given us time to grow along with him—"

"He has no time to waste."

"What does he expect? That we drop all our other shippers, sacrifice the interests of the whole country and give him all our trains?"

"Why, no. He doesn't expect anything. He just deals with the Phoenix-Durango."

"I think he's a destructive, unscrupulous ruffian. I think he's an irresponsible upstart who's been grossly overrated." It was astonishing to hear a sudden emotion in James Taggart's lifeless voice.