

"I'll get him fired. He's given me nothing but a lot of alibis about all their messy technical troubles. I expect transportation, not alibis. They can't treat me like one of their day-coach passengers. I expect them to get me where I want to go when I want it. Don't they know that I'm on this train?"

"They know it by now," said Laura Bradford. "Shut up, Kip. You bore me."

Chalmers refilled his glass. The car was rocking and the glassware tinkled faintly on the shelves of the bar. The patches of starlit sky in the windows kept swaying jerkily, and it seemed as if the stars were tinkling against one another. They could see nothing beyond the glass bay of the observation window at the end of the car, except the small halos of red and green lanterns marking the rear of the train, and a brief stretch of rail running away from them into the darkness. A wall of rock was racing the train, and the stars dipped occasionally into a sudden break that outlined, high above them, the peaks of the mountains of Colorado.

"Mountains . . ." said Gilbert Keith-Worthing, with satisfaction. "It is a spectacle of this kind that makes one feel the insignificance of man. What is this presumptuous little bit of rail, which crude materialists are so proud of building—compared to that eternal grandeur? No more than the basting thread of a seamstress on the hem of the garment of nature. If a single one of those granite giants chose to crumble, it would annihilate this train."

"Why should it choose to crumble?" asked Laura Bradford, without any particular interest.

"I think this damn train is going slower," said Kip Chalmers. "Those bastards are slowing down, in spite of what I told them!"

"Well . . . it's the mountains, you know . . ." said Lester Tuck.

"Mountains be damned! Lester, what day is this? With all those damn changes of time, I can't tell which—"

"It's May twenty-seventh," sighed Lester Tuck.

"It's May twenty-eighth," said Gilbert Keith-Worthing, glancing at his watch. "It is now twelve minutes past midnight."

"Jesus!" cried Chalmers. "Then the rally is *today*?"

"Yep," said Lester Tuck.

"We won't make it! We—"

The train gave a sharper lurch, knocking the glass out of his hand. The thin sound of its crash against the floor mixed with the screech of the wheel-flanges tearing against the rail of a sharp curve.

"I say," asked Gilbert Keith-Worthing nervously, "are your railroads safe?"

"Hell, yes!" said Kip Chalmers. "We've got so many rules, regulations and controls that those bastards wouldn't dare not to be safe! . . . Lester, how far are we now? What's the next stop?"

"There won't be any stop till Salt Lake City."

"I mean, what's the next station?"

Lester Tuck produced a soiled map, which he had been consulting every few minutes since nightfall. "Winston," he said. "Winston, Colorado."

Kip Chalmers reached for another glass.

"Tinky Holloway said that Wesley said that if you don't win this election, you're through," said Laura Bradford. She sat sprawled in her chair, looking past Chalmers, studying her own face in a mirror on the wall of the lounge; she was bored and it amused her to needle his impotent anger.

"Oh, he did, did he?"

"Uh-huh. Wesley doesn't want what's-his-name--whoever's running against you—to get into the Legislature. If you don't win, Wesley will be sore as hell. Tinky said—"

"Damn that bastard! He'd better watch his own neck!"

"Oh, I don't know. Wesley likes him very much." She added. "Tinky Holloway wouldn't allow some miserable train to make him miss an important meeting. They wouldn't dare to hold *him* up."

Kip Chalmers sat staring at his glass. "I'm going to have the government seize all the railroads," he said, his voice low.

"Really," said Gilbert Keith-Worthing, "I don't see why you haven't done it long ago. This is the only country on earth backward enough to permit private ownership of railroads."

"Well, we're catching up with you," said Kip Chalmers.

"Your country is so incredibly naïve. It's such an anachronism. All that talk about liberty and human rights—I haven't heard it since the days of my great-grandfather. It's nothing but a verbal luxury of the rich. After all, it doesn't make any difference to the poor whether their livelihood is at the mercy of an industrialist or a bureaucrat."

"The day of the industrialists is over. This is the day of—"

The jolt felt as if the air within the car smashed them forward while the floor stopped under their feet. Kip Chalmers was flung down to the carpet. Gilbert Keith-Worthing was thrown across the tabletop, the lights were blasted out. Glasses crashed off the shelves, the steel of the walls screamed as if about to rip open while a long, distant thud went like a convulsion through the wheels of the train.

When he raised his head, Chalmers saw that the car stood intact and still; he heard the moans of his companions and the first shriek of Laura Bradford's hysterics. He crawled along the floor to the doorway, wrenched it open, and tumbled down the steps. Far ahead, on the side of a curve, he saw moving flashlights and a red glow at a spot where the engine had no place to be. He stumbled through the darkness, bumping into half-clothed figures that waved the futile little flares of matches. Somewhere along the line, he saw a man with a flashlight and seized his arm. It was the conductor.

"What happened?" gasped Chalmers.

"Split rail," the conductor answered impassively. "The engine went off the track."

"Off . . . ?"

"On its side."

"Anybody . . . killed?"

"No. The engineer's all right. The fireman is hurt."

"Split rail? What do you mean, split rail?"

The conductor's face had an odd look: it was grim, accusing and closed. "Rail wears out, Mr. Chalmers," he answered with a strange kind of emphasis. "Particularly on curves."

"Didn't you know that it was worn out?"

"We knew."

"Well, why didn't you have it replaced?"

"It was going to be replaced. But Mr. Locey cancelled that."

"Who is Mr. Locey?"

"The man who is now our Operating Vice-President."

Chalmers wondered why the conductor seemed to look at him as if something about the catastrophe were his fault. "Well . . . well, aren't you going to put the engine back on the track?"

"That engine's never going to be put back on any track, from the looks of it."

"But . . . it's got to move us!"

"It can't."

Beyond the few moving flares and the dulled sounds of screams; Chalmers sensed suddenly, not wanting to look at it, the black immensity of the mountains, the silence of hundreds of uninhabited miles, and the precarious strip of a ledge hanging between a wall of rock and an abyss. He gripped the conductor's arm tighter.

"But . . . but what are we going to do?"

"The engineer's gone to call Winston."

"Call? How?"

"There's a phone couple of miles down the track."

"Will they get us out of here?"

"They will."

"But . . ." Then his mind made a connection with the past and the future, and his voice rose to a scream for the first time: "How long will we have to wait?"

"I don't know," said the conductor. He threw Chalmers' hand off his arm, and walked away.

The night operator at Winston Station listened to the phone message, dropped the receiver and raced up the stairs to shake the station agent out of bed. The station agent was a husky, surly drifter who had been assigned to the job ten days ago, by order of the new division superintendent. He stumbled dazedly to his feet, but he was knocked awake when the operator's words reached his brain.

"What?" he gasped. "Jesus! The Comet? . . . Well, don't stand there shaking! Call Silver Springs!"

The night dispatcher of the Division Headquarters at Silver Springs listened to the message, then telephoned Dave Mitchum, the new superintendent of the Colorado Division.

"The Comet?" gasped Mitchum, his hand pressing the telephone receiver to his ear, his feet hitting the floor and throwing him upright, out of bed, "The engine done for? The *Diesel*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh God! Oh, God Almighty! What are we going to do?" Then, remembering his position, he added, "Well, send out the wrecking train."

"I have."

"Call the operator at Sherwood to hold all traffic."

"I have."

"What have you got on the sheet?"