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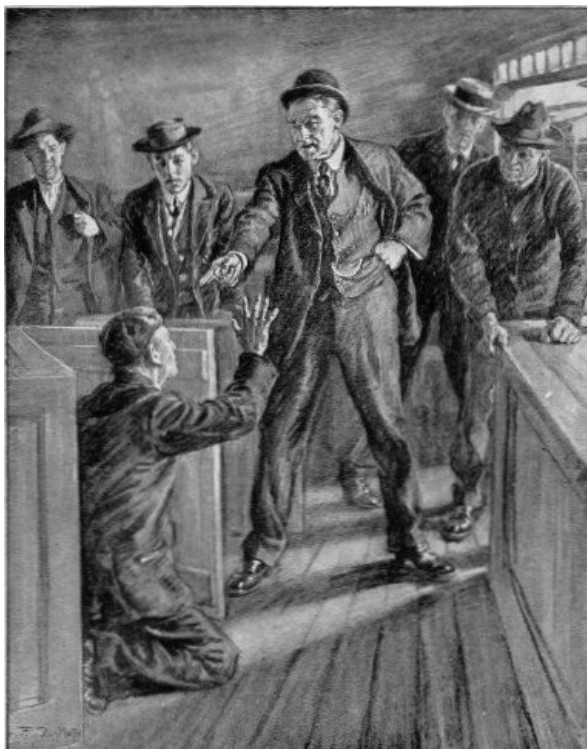
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## THE YOUNG RAILROADERS

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THE NEXT MOMENT THE MIDWAY JUNCTION GHOST STEPPED  
GRIMLY FROM HIS BOX.

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## THE YOUNG RAILROADERS

# TALES OF ADVENTURE AND INGENUITY

BY  
F. LOVELL COOMBS

With Illustrations  
by F. B. MASTERS



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To  
B. R. C. AND K. L. C.  
A REMEMBRANCE

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## THE YOUNG RAILROADERS

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## THE YOUNG RAILROADERS

## ONE KIND OF WIRELESS

When, after school that afternoon, Alex Ward waved a good-by to his father, the Bixton station agent for the Middle Western, and set off up the track on the spring's first fishing, he had little thought of exciting experiences ahead of him. Likewise, when two hours later a sudden heavy shower found him in the woods three miles from home, and with but three small fish, it was only with feelings of disappointment that he wound up his line and ran for the shelter of an old log-cabin a hundred yards back from the stream.

Scarcely had Alex reached the doorway of the deserted house when he was startled by a chorus of excited voices from the rear. He turned quickly to a window, and with a cry sprang back out of sight. Emerging from the woods, excitedly talking and gesticulating, was a party of foreigners who had been working on the track near Bixton, and in their midst, his hands bound behind him, was Hennessy, their foreman. 4

For a moment Alex stood rooted to the spot. What did it mean? Suddenly realizing his own possible danger, he caught up his rod and fish, and sprang for the door.

On the threshold he sharply halted. In the open he would be seen at once, and pursued! He turned and cast a quick glance round the room. The ladder to the loft! He darted for it, scrambled up, and drew himself through the opening just as the excited foreigners poured in through the door below. For some moments afraid to move, Alex lay on his back, listening to the hubbub beneath him, and wondering in terror what the trackmen intended doing with their prisoner. Then, gathering courage at their continued ignorance of his presence, he cautiously moved back to the opening and peered down.

The men were gathered in the center of the room, all talking at once. But he could not see the foreman. As he leaned farther forward heavy footfalls sounded about the end of the house, and Big Tony, a huge Italian who had recently been discharged from the gang, appeared in the doorway.

"We puta him in da barn," he announced in broken English; for the rest of the gang were Poles. "Tomaso, he watcha him."

"An' now listen," continued the big trackman fiercely, as the rest gathered about him. "I didn't tell everyt'ing. Besides disa man Hennessy he say cuta da wage, an' send for odders take your job, he tella da biga boss you no worka good, so da biga boss he no pay you for all da last mont'!" 5

The ignorantly credulous Poles uttered a shout of rage. Several cried: "Keel him! Keel him!" Alex, in the loft, drew back in terror.

"No! Dere bettera way dan dat," said Tony. "Da men to taka your job come to-night on da Nomber Twent'. I hava da plan.

"You alla know da old track dat turn off alonga da riv' to da old brick-yard? Well, hunerd yard from da main line da old track she washed away. We will turn da old switch, Nomber Twent' she run on da old track—an' swoosh! Into da riv'!"

Run No. 20 into the river! Alex almost cried aloud. And he knew the plan would succeed—that, as Big Tony said, a hundred yards from the main-line track the old brick-yard siding embankment was washed out so that the rails almost hung in the air.

"Dena we all say," went on Big Tony, "we alla say, Hennessy, he do it. We say we caughta him. See?"

Again Alex glanced down, and with hope he saw that some of the Poles were hesitating. But Tony quickly added: "An' no one else be kill buta da strike-break'. No odder peoples on da Nomber Twent' disa day at night. An' da trainmen dey alla have plent' time to jomp.

"Only da men wat steala your job," he repeated craftily. And with a sinking heart Alex saw that the rest of the easily excitable foreigners had been won. 6

Again he moved back out of sight. Something must be done! If he could only reach the barn and free the foreman!

But of course the first thing to do was to make his own escape from the house. He rose on his elbow and glanced about.

At the far end of the loft a glimmer of light through a crack seemed to indicate a door. Cautiously Alex rose to his knees, and began creeping forward to investigate. When half way a loud creak of the boards brought him to a halt with his heart in his mouth. But the loud conversation below continued, and heartily thanking the drumming rain on the roof overhead, Alex moved on, and finally reached his goal.

As he had hoped, it was a small door. Feeling cautiously about, he found it to be secured by a hook. When he sought to raise the catch, however, it resisted. Evidently it had not been lifted for many years, and had rusted to the staple. Carefully Alex threw his weight upward against it. It still refused to move. He pushed harder, and suddenly it gave with a piercing screech.

Instantly the talking below ceased, and Alex stood rigid, scarcely breathing. Then a voice exclaimed, "Up de stair!" quick footsteps crossed the floor towards the ladder, and in a panic of fear Alex threw himself bodily against the door, in a mad endeavor to force it. But it still held, and with a thrill of despair he dropped flat to the floor, and saw the foreigner's head come above the opening.



"NOW I AM GOING TO CUT YOUR CORDS," ALEX WENT ON SOFTLY.

There, however, the man paused, and turned to gaze about, listening. For a brief space, while only the rain on the roof broke the silence, the foreigner apparently looked directly at the boy on the floor, and Alex's heart seemed literally to stand still. But at last, after what appeared an interminable time, the man again turned, and withdrew, and with a sigh of relief Alex heard him say to those below, "Only de wind, dat's all."

Waiting until the buzz of conversation had been fully resumed, Alex rose once more to his knees, and began a cautious examination of the door. The cause of its refusal to open was soon apparent. The old hinges had given, allowing it to sag and catch against a raised nail-head in the sill.

Promptly Alex stood upright, grasped one of the cross-pieces, carefully lifted, and in another moment the door swung silently outward.

With a glance Alex saw that the way was clear, and quickly lowering himself by his hands, dropped. Here the rain once more helped him. On the wet, soggy ground he alighted with scarcely a sound. Momentarily, however, though he now breathed easily for the first time since he had entered the house, he stood, listening. The excited talking inside went on uninterruptedly, and moving to the corner, he peered about in the direction of the barn.

Leaning in the doorway, smoking, and most fortunately, with his back towards the house, was the Italian, Tomaso. Beyond doubt the foreman was inside!

At the rear of the barn, and some hundred feet from where Alex stood, was a small cow-stable. Alex determined to make an effort to reach it, and see if from there he could not get, unseen, into the barn itself.

The Italian continued to smoke peacefully, and with his eyes constantly on him Alex stepped forth, and set off across the clearing on tiptoe. The guard puffed on, and he neared the stable. Then suddenly the man moved, and made as though to turn. But with a bound Alex shot forward on the run, made the remaining distance, and was out of view.

The rear door of the stable was open. On tiptoe Alex made his way inside. The door leading into the barn also was ajar. With bated breath, pausing after each step, Alex went forward, reached it, and peered within.

Yes, the foreman was there, a dim figure sitting on the floor a few feet from him. But the outer doorway, in which stood the man on guard, also was only a few feet away, and at once Alex saw that the problem of reaching the foreman without being discovered was to be a difficult one. Trusting to the now gathering gloom of the twilight, however, Alex determined to make a try. Opening his knife and holding it in his teeth, he sank to the floor, and began slowly worming his way forward, flat on his stomach. It was a nerve-trying ordeal. A dozen times he was sure the

crackling straw had betrayed him. But pluckily he kept on, inch by inch, and finally was almost within touch of the unsuspecting prisoner.

Then very softly he hissed. Sharply, as he had feared, the foreman twisted about. But at the moment, by great good luck, the foreigner at the door turned to knock his pipe against the door-post, and hurriedly Alex whispered, "Don't move, Mr. Hennessy! It's Alex Ward! I was in the old house, and saw them bring you up."

"And, Mr. Hennessy, they plan to run Twenty into the river to-night. Tony told them there were strike-breakers aboard her to take their places."

In spite of himself the foreman uttered a low exclamation. At once the man in the door turned. But with quick presence of mind the prisoner changed the exclamation to a loud cough, and after a moment, while Alex lay holding his breath, the Italian turned his attention again to his pipe.

"Now I am going to cut your cords," Alex went on softly. "Be careful not to let your arms seem to be free."

The foreman nodded.

"There," announced Alex as the twine dropped from the prisoner's wrists.

"Now, what shall we do? There is a door behind you into the cow-stable—the one I came in by. Suppose you work back towards it as far as you dare, then make a dash for it?"

"Good," whispered the foreman over his shoulder. "But you get out first."

"All right," responded Alex, and immediately began moving backwards, feet first, as he had come.

Their escape was to be made more easy, however. At the moment from the house came a call. The man in the doorway stepped out to reply, and in an instant seeing the opportunity both Alex and the foreman were on their feet, and had darted out into the stable.

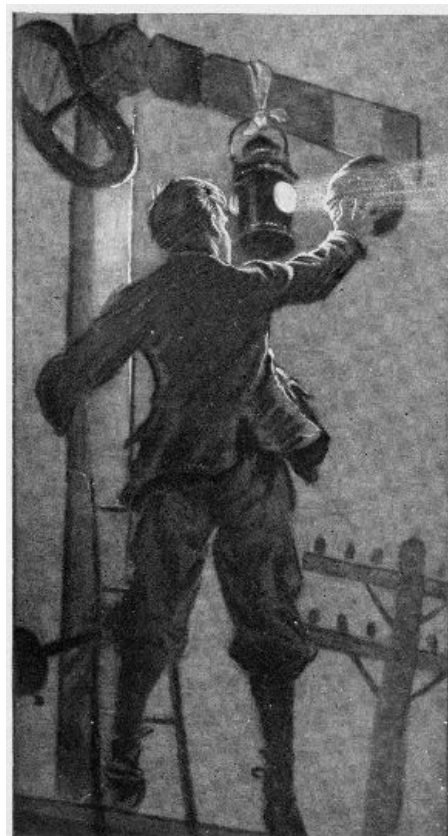
"Now for a sprint!" said the foreman.

"Or, say, suppose I hide here in the stable," suggested Alex. "They don't know of my being here. Then as soon as the way is clear I can get off in the opposite direction, and one of us would be sure to get away."

"Good idea," agreed the foreman. "All right, you—"

There came a loud cry from the barn, and instantly he was off, and Alex, darting back, crept low under a stall-box. As he did so the Italian dashed by and out, and uttered a second cry as he discovered the fleeing foreman. From the house came an answer, then a chorus of shouts that told the rest of the gang had joined in the chase.

Alex lay still until the last sound of pursuit had died away, then slipped forth, glanced sharply about, and dashed off for the woods in the direction of the river and the railroad bridge.



HELD IT OVER THE BULL'S-EYE, ALTERNATELY COVERING AND UNCOVERING THE STREAM OF LIGHT.

The adventure was not yet over, however. Alex had almost reached the shelter of the trees, and was already congratulating himself on his safety, when suddenly from the opposite side of the clearing rose a shout of "De boy! De boy!" Glancing back in alarm he saw several of the Poles cutting across in an endeavor to head him off.

Onward he dashed with redoubled speed. With a final rush he reached the trees ahead of them, and plunging into the friendly gloom, darted on recklessly, diving between trunks, and over logs and bushes like a young hare.

A quarter of a mile Alex ran desperately, then halted, panting, to listen. Not a sound save his own breathing broke the stillness. Surely, thought Alex, I haven't shaken them off that easily, unless they were already winded from their chase after—

Off to the right rose a shrill whistle. From immediately to the left came an answer. Then he understood. They were heading him off from the railroad and the river spur.

Alex's heart sank, and momentarily he stood, in despair. Then suddenly he thought of the old brick-yard. It lay less than a mile north, and was full of good hiding-places! If he could reach it ahead of them, what with the daylight now rapidly failing, he would almost certainly be safe. At once he turned, and was off with renewed vigor.

And finally, utterly exhausted, but cheered through not having heard a sound from his pursuers for the last quarter mile, Alex stumbled into the clearing of the abandoned brick-works, ran low for a distance under cover of a long drying-frame, and scrambling through the low doorway of an old tile oven, threw himself upon the floor, done out, but confident that at last he was safe.

As he lay panting and listening, Alex turned his thoughts again to the train. Had the foreman made his escape? With so many promptly after him, it seemed scarcely probable. Then the saving of Twenty was still upon his own shoulders!

And there was little time in which to do anything, for she was due at 7:50, and it must be after 7 already!

Could he not reach the switch itself, and throw it back just before the train was due? That would be surest. And in the rapidly growing darkness there should be at least a fair chance of getting by any of the foreigners who might be on the watch.

Determinedly Alex gathered himself together, and crawled back to the entrance. Near the doorway he stumbled over something. "Oh, our old switch lantern!" he exclaimed, holding it to the light, and momentarily paused to examine it. For it had been placed under cover there the previous fall by himself and some other boys, after being used in a game of "hold-up" on the brick-yard siding.

"Just as we left it," said Alex to himself, and was about to put it aside, when he paused with a start, studied it sharply a moment, then uttered a cry, shook it to see that it still contained oil, and scrambled hurriedly forth, taking it with him.

A moment he paused to listen, then set off on the run for the old yard semaphore, dimly discernible a hundred yards distant. Reaching it, he caught the lantern in his teeth, and ran up the ladder hand over hand, clambered onto the little platform, and turned toward the town.

Yes! Through the trees the station lamps were plainly visible! With a cry of delight Alex at once set about carrying out his inspiration. Quickly trimming the lantern wick, he lit it, with his handkerchief tied it to the semaphore arm, and turned it so that the bull's-eye pointed toward the station.

Then, catching off his cap, he held it over the bull's-eye, and alternately covering and uncovering the stream of light, began flashing across the darkness signals that corresponded with the telegraphic call of the Bixton station.

"BX," he flashed. "BX, BX, BX!"

"BX, BX—AW (his private sign)! BX, BX, AW!"

The station lights streamed on.

"Qk! Qk! BX, BX!" called Alex.

His right hand tired, and he changed to the left. "Surely they should be on the lookout for me, and see it," he told himself. "For when I go fishing I am always home at—"

One of the station lights disappeared. Breathlessly Alex repeated his call, and waited. Was it merely some one pulling down a blind, or—

The light appeared again, then disappeared, several times in quick succession, and Alex uttered a joyful "Hurrah!" and turning his whole attention to the lamp, that the signals might be perfect, began flashing across the night his thrilling message of warning:

"THE FOREIGN TRACK HANDS—"

From a short distance down the spur came a shout. Startled, Alex hesitated. Again came a cry, then the sound of swiftly running feet.

He had been discovered! In a panic Alex turned and began to scramble down the ladder. But sharply he pulled up. No! That would be playing the coward! He must complete the message! And bravely choking down his terror, he climbed back onto the platform, and while the running feet and threatening cries came nearer every moment, continued his message:

"HANDS ARE—"

"Stop dat! Queek! I shoot! I shoot!" cried the voice of Big Tony, immediately below him. Again for a moment Alex quailed, then again went bravely on, while the old semaphore rocked and swayed as the enraged Italian threw himself at it and scrambled up toward him.

"GOING TO RUN—"

With a plunge the big trackman reached up and caught him by the ankle, wrenched him back from the lantern, and clambered up beside him. Catching the light off the semaphore arm, he thrust it into the boy's face. "O ho!" he exclaimed. "So it you, da station-man boy, eh? An' you da one whata help Hennessy get away, eh?"

"An' whata now you do wid dis?" he demanded fiercely, indicating the lantern.

"If you can't guess, I'm not going to tell you," declared Alex stoutly, though his heart was in his throat.

"O ho! You wonta, eh? Alla right," said Tony softly through his teeth, and in a grim silence more terrifying than the threat of his words, he blew the lantern out, tossed it to the ground, and proceeding to clamber down, grasped Alex by the leg and dragged him down after.

But help was at hand. As they reached the ground a second tall figure loomed up suddenly out of the darkness. "Who dat?" demanded Big Tony. The answer was a rush, and a blow, and with a throttled cry of terror the big track worker went to the ground in a heap, the foreman on top of him.

Alex uttered a cry of joy, then with quick wit, while the two men engaged in a terrific struggle, he darted in search of the lantern, found it, fortunately unbroken, and in a trice was again running up the semaphore ladder.

As he once more reached his post on the platform the big Italian succeeded in breaking from the foreman, scrambled to his feet, and dashed off across the brick-yard. "Come down, Alex. It's all over," called Hennessy, gathering himself up. "And now we've got to hike right off, a mile a minute, for the main-line if we are to stop that train. They ran me so far I only just got back. Unless Twenty's late we—"

"I am trying to stop her from up here," interrupted Alex, relighting the lantern.

"Up there? What do you mean?" exclaimed the foreman.

"Signalling father at the station, with the telegraph code," said Alex as he replaced the lantern on the semaphore arm. "Come on up."

"Al," said the incredulous foreman as he reached the platform, "can you really do it?"

"I had it going when that Italian stopped me. Watch."

But Alex was doomed again to interruption. Scarcely had he begun once more flashing forth the telegraph call of the station when from the direction of the woods came a shout, several answers, then a rush of feet.

"Some of the Poles!" exclaimed the foreman. "But you go ahead, Al, and I'll see that they don't get up to interfere," he added, determinedly.

The running figures came dimly into view below. "If any of you idiots come up here I'll crack your heads!" shouted Hennessy, warningly.

"I've got the station again," announced Alex. "Now it will take only a few minutes."

One of the men below reached the ladder, and, looking up, shouted threateningly: "Stop dat! Stop dat, or I shoot!"

"Go ahead, Al," said the foreman, looking down. "He hasn't a gun." But even as he spoke there was a flash and a report, and a thud just over Alex's head.

"Yes, stop! Stop!" cried the foreman. "Stop. They've got us. No use being foolhardy."

Leaning over, he addressed the men below. "Look here," he said, persuasively, "can't you fellows see that Big Tony is only using you to make trouble for me, because I fired him for being drunk? As I told you at first, everything he has said is untrue. Why won't you believe it?"

The men were silent a moment, then one of them addressed Alex. "Boy, is dat true?"

"Every word of it," said Alex, earnestly. "And I would have heard all about it at the station if they had intended cutting your wages, or bringing others here to take your places."

"Den I believe it," said the Pole.

The man with the pistol returned it to his pocket. "I am sorry I shoot," he said.

"And now, what about the train?" inquired the foreman, quickly. "Did you touch the switch?"

In the look of guilt the foreigners turned on one another he saw the alarming answer. Whipping out his watch, he held it to the light.

"Alex," he said, sharply, "you have just ten minutes to catch that train at the Junction! If you don't get her she's gone! There's not time now to get down to the main line from here to flag her!"

Before he had ceased speaking Alex had his cap over the light and was once more flashing an urgent "BX! BX! BX!" while below the foreigners looked on, now with an anxiety equal to that of



the two on the tower.

"BX! Qk! Qk!" flashed the lantern.

The station light disappeared. "Got 'em!" cried Alex.

"Just tell them first to stop Twenty at the Junction," said the foreman.

"Right," responded Alex, and while the rest watched in profound silence, he signaled:

"STOP NUMBER 20 AT JUNCTION. SPUR SWITCH IS THROWN. GOT IT?"

As Alex read off the promptly flashed "OK," the foreman sprang to his feet and gave vent to a joyful hurrah of relief that echoed again in the clearing and woods. Then, as Alex recovered the lantern, he caught him under one arm, carried him down the ladder, and there, despite his objections, hoisted him to the shoulders of two of the now enthusiastic Poles, and all set off jubilantly down the spur for the switch, and home.

And an hour later Alex's father and mother, anxiously awaiting him at the station, discovered his approach carried at the head of a sort of triumphal procession of the entire gang of trackmen.

When Alex's father the following morning reported the occurrence to the chief despatcher, that official called Alex to the wire to congratulate him personally.

"That was a fine bit of work, my boy," he clicked. "I see you are cut out for the right kind of railroader. If fourteen wasn't a bit too young I would give you a job on the spot. But we will give you a start just as soon as we can, you may be sure."

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## II

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### AN ORIGINAL EMERGENCY BATTERY

One afternoon two weeks later Alex returned from school to find his father and mother hurriedly packing his suit-case.

"Why, what's up, Dad?" he exclaimed.

"You are off for Watson Siding in twenty minutes, to take charge of the station there nights," said his father. "The regular man is ill, the despatcher had no one else to send, and asked for you, and of course I told him you'd be delighted."

"Delighted? Well, rather!" cried Alex, gleefully, and throwing his school-books into a corner, he dashed up-stairs to change his clothes, hastily ate a lunch his mother had prepared, and fifteen minutes later was hurrying for the depot.

Needless to say Alex was a proud boy when shortly after seven o'clock he reached Watson Siding, and at once took over the station for the night. For it is not often a lad of fourteen is given such responsibility, even though brought up on the railroad.

Alex was soon to learn that the responsibility was a very real one. The first night passed pleasantly enough, but early the succeeding night, following a day of rain, a heavy spring fog set in, and shortly before ten o'clock Alex found, to his alarm, that he could not make himself heard on the wire by the despatcher. Evidently there was a heavy escape of current between them, because of the dampness.

25

Again the despatcher called, again Alex sought to interrupt him, failed, and gave it up. "Now I am in for trouble," he said in dismay. "If anything should—"

From apparently just without came a low, ominous rumble, then a crash. Alex started to his feet and ran to the window. He could see nothing but fog, and hastily securing a lantern, went out onto the station platform.

As he closed the door there was a second terrific crash, from the darkness immediately opposite, and a rain of stones rattling against iron.

"The bank above the siding!" cried Alex, and springing to the tracks, he dashed across, and with an exclamation brought up before a mound of earth six feet high over the siding rails.

As he gazed Alex felt his heart tighten. The westbound Sunset Express was due to take the siding in less than half an hour, to await the Eastern Mail, and at once he saw that if the engineer misjudged the distance in the fog, and ran onto the siding at full speed, there would be a terrible calamity.

And suppose the cars were thrown onto the main line track, and the Mail crashed into them! And, apparently, he could not reach the despatcher, to give warning of her danger!

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What could he do to stop them? Helplessly Alex looked at the lantern in his hand. Its light was smothered by the fog within ten feet of him.

Running back to the operating room he seized the key and once more sought to attract the attention of the despatcher. It was useless. The despatcher did not hear him. He sank back in his chair, sick with dread.

But he must attempt something! Determinedly he sprang to his feet. A lantern was useless. Then why not a fire? A big fire on the track? Hurrah! That was it! But—he gazed at the coal box, and thought of the rain soaked wood outside, and his heart sank. Then came remembrance of the big woodshed at the farm-house where he boarded, three hundred yards away, and in a moment he had recovered the lantern, and was out, and off through the darkness, running desperately.

On arriving at the house Alex found all in silence, and the family retired, but without a moment's hesitation he threw himself at the front door, pounding upon it with his fists.

It seemed an age before a window was raised. "Mr. Moore," he cried, "there has been a landslide in the cut at the station, and there is danger of the Sunset running into it. May I have wood from the shed to make a fire on the track to stop her?"

"Gracious! Certainly, certainly!" exclaimed the voice from the window. "And the boys and I will be down in a minute to help you. You run around and be pulling out some kindling."



THREW HIMSELF AT THE FRONT DOOR, POUNDING UPON IT WITH HIS FISTS.

Alex darted about to the woodshed, there the farmer and his two sons soon joined him, and each catching up an armful of wood, they were quickly off for the railroad, Alex leading with the lantern.

Reaching the tracks, they hurried east, and a quarter mile distant halted, and began hastily building a huge bonfire between the rails.

"There," said Alex, as the flames leaped up, "that ought to stop her."

"And now, Mr. Moore, suppose we leave Dick here to tend the fire, and you and Billy and I hurry back to the station, and tackle the earth on the track. We may get enough off to let the train plow through."

"All right, certainly," agreed the farmer; and retracing their steps, the three secured shovels and more lanterns at the depot, and soon were hard at work on the obstructed siding.

They had been digging some ten minutes when suddenly Billy paused. "Listen," he said. "There's a horse coming, on the run." His father and Alex also ceased shoveling, and a moment later the quick pounding of horse's hoofs was plainly discernible.

"It must be something urgent to make a man drive like that in the dark," said Mr. Moore.

The racing hoofs drew nearer, and placing his hands to his mouth he cried: "Hello! What's up?"

There was a sound of scrambling and plunging, and out of the darkness came a man's excited voice: "How near am I to the station?"

"Right here below you!"

"Thank God! Run quick and tell the operator there has been a landslip in the big cutting just beyond the river! My son discovered it when coming home by the track from a party! I thought I could get here quicker than do anything else!"

For a moment Alex stood speechless at this further calamity, then once more dashed for the station. To reach Zeisler, two miles west of the cut, was the only hope for the Mail.

Rushing in to the instruments, he in feverish haste began calling "Z. Z, Z," he whirled. "Qk! Z, Z, WS!"

There was no answer. Z heard him no more than did the despatcher.

A feeling of despair settled upon the boy. But again returned the old spirit of determination and contriving, and spinning about in his chair, he cast his eyes around the room for some suggestion. They halted at the big stoneware water-cooler. With a cry he was on his feet, thinking rapidly.

Only a few hours before, during an idle moment, the similarity of the big jar to a gravity cell had occurred to him, and the speculation as to whether it could not be turned into a battery if need be.

Could he really make a battery of it? If he could, undoubtedly it would be strong enough to so increase the current in the wire that both Zeisler and the despatcher could hear him.

He ran to a little storage closet at the rear of the room. Yes; there was enough bluestone! But no copper, or zinc! What could he do for that?

As though directed by Providence, his gaze fell on the floor-board of the office stove. It was covered with a sheet of zinc! And even as he uttered a glad "Good!" there came the remembrance that at the house that afternoon he had seen a fine new wash-boiler—with a thick copper bottom.

"That's it," cried Alex, again catching up the lantern and darting for the door.

A short distance from the depot Alex was halted by a long, muffled whistle from the east. "The Express," he exclaimed, and in keen anxiety awaited the next whistle. Would it be for the crossing this side of the bonfire, or—

It came, a series of quick, sharp toots. Yes; they had seen the fire!

"Thank Heaven! She's safe at any rate," said Alex, at once running on.

A few minutes later he burst into Mrs. Moore's kitchen. The farmer's wife was at the stove, preparing coffee for them.

"Mrs. Moore, where is your new copper-bottomed boiler? I must have it, quick," said Alex.

"What! My new wash-boiler?"

"Yes; the copper-bottomed one. It's a matter of life and death!"

The astonished woman hesitated, then, wonderingly, pointed toward the outer kitchen. Alex ran thither, and quickly reappeared with the fine new boiler on his shoulder.

"And I must have that kettle of boiling water," he added, on a thought. "I'll explain later." And catching it from the stove, he rushed away.

As he ran Alex further thought out his plans, and once more at the station, he placed the kettle on the office stove, emptied the bluestone into it, and poked up the fire.

Then, with a hammer and chisel, he attacked the copper bottom of the boiler.

He was still pounding and cutting when presently there was the sound of hurried footsteps without, the door flew open, and a voice exclaimed: "In Heaven's name, young man, what are you doing? Why are you not at your wire, trying to stop the other train?"

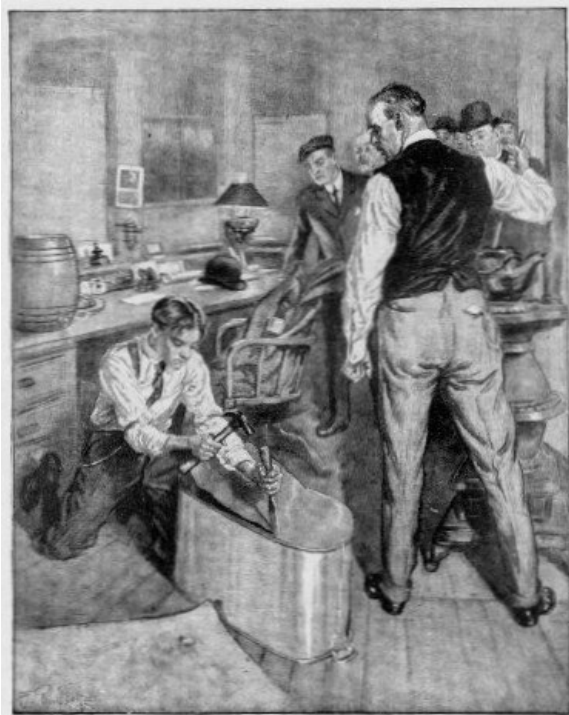
It was none other than the division superintendent of the road, who had been aboard the Sunset.

Only pausing a moment in his work, Alex replied: "I can't reach anybody, sir, the wire is so weak. I am making a battery of that water-cooler, to strengthen it. It's the only hope, sir."

The superintendent uttered a horrified exclamation, then quickly added: "Here, can't I help you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Alex, promptly. "Lift up the stove and slide out the floor-board. I must have the sheet of zinc off it."

And a few minutes later a group of passengers from the stalled train, seeking the cause of delay, paused in the doorway to gaze in blank astonishment at the spectacle of the division superintendent of the Middle Western, his coat off, energetically working under the direction of his youngest operator.



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLOOR, THE CENTER OF ALL EYES, HURRIEDLY WORKING WITH CHISEL AND HAMMER.

“There you are, my lad,” said the superintendent. “What next?”

35

“Get a stick, sir, and stir the bluestone in the kettle. We must have it dissolved if the battery is to work the moment we connect it to the wire.”

The copper bottom of the boiler was at last cut through, and hastily doubling it over several times, in order that it would lie flat in the crock, Alex turned his attention to the zinc on the stove-board.

The scene in the little station had now become dramatic—the crowd of passengers, increased until it half filled the room, looking on in strained silence, or talking in whispers; the tall figure of the superintendent at the stove, busily stirring the kettle, and in the middle of the floor, the center of all eyes, the fourteen-year-old boy hurriedly working with chisel and hammer, seemingly only conscious of the task before him and the necessity of making the most of every minute.

The zinc was cut, and hurriedly folding it as he had the copper, Alex sprang to his feet, and running to the cupboard, dragged out a bundle of wire, and began sorting out a number of short ends.

“How much longer?” said the superintendent in a tense voice. “The train should be at Zeisler now.”

“Just a minute. But she’s sure to be a little late, from the fog,” said Alex, hopefully, never pausing. “Has the bluestone dissolved, sir?”

“All but a few lumps.”

“Then that’ll do. Now please lift down the water-cooler, sir, and place it by the table.”

36

As the superintendent complied all conversation ceased, and the crowd, moving hurriedly out of the way, looked on breathlessly, then turned to Alex, on his knees, fastening two pieces of wire to the squares of copper and zinc.

This done, Alex dropped the square of copper to the bottom of the big jar, hung the zinc from the top, connected one wire end to the ground connection at the switchboard, and the other to the side of the key. And the task was complete.

“Now the kettle, sir,” he said, dropping into his chair. The superintendent seized the kettle, and emptied its blue-green liquid into the cooler. The moment the water had covered the zinc Alex opened his key.

It worked strongly and sharply.

“Thank God! Thank God!” said the superintendent, fervently. “Now, hurry, boy!”

Already Alex was whirring off a string of letters. “Z, Z, Z, WS!” he called. “Qk! Qk! Z, Z—”

The line opened, and at the quick sharp dots that came Alex could not restrain a cry of triumph. “It works! I’ve got him,” he exclaimed. Then rapidly he sent:

“Has Number 12 passed?”

The line again opened, and over the boy leaned a circle of white, anxious faces. Had the train passed? Had it gone on to destruction? Or—

The instruments clicked. "No! No! He says, no!" cried Alex.

And then, while the crowd about him relieved its pent-up feelings in wild shouts and hurrahs, Alex quickly sent the order to stop the train. 37

"And now three good cheers for the little operator," said one of the passengers as Alex closed his key. In confusion Alex drew back in his chair, then suddenly recollecting the others who had taken part in the night's work, he told the superintendent of the part played by Mr. Moore and his sons, and of the sacrifice of Mrs. Moore's new wash-boiler.

"And then there was the man on the horse, who told us of the slide in the cut across the river. He was the real one to save the Mail," said Alex, modestly.

"I see you are as fair as you are ingenious," said the superintendent, smiling. "We'll look after them all, you may be sure. By the first express Mrs. Moore shall have two, instead of one, of the finest boilers money can buy. And as for you, my boy, I'll see that you are given a permanent station within a year, if you wish to take it. We need resourceful operators like you."

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### III

## A TINKER WHO MADE GOOD

Most telegraph operators, young operators especially, have a number of over-the-wire friends. Alex Ward's particular telegraph chum was Jack Orr, or "OR," as he knew him on the wire, a lad of just his own age, son of the proprietor of the drug-store in which the town, or commercial, office was located at Haddowville, a small place at the end of the line. The two boys had become warm friends through "sending" for one another's improvement in "reading," in the evenings when the wire was idle; but also because of the similarities of taste they had discovered. Both were fond of experimenting, and learning the "why and wherefore" of things electrical. 38

And not infrequently they got themselves into trouble, as young investigators will.

One evening that summer, the instruments being silent, Jack, at Haddowville, bethought himself of taking the relay, the main receiving instrument, to pieces, to discover exactly how the wire connections in the base were arranged. To think with Jack was to act. Half an hour later his father, entering with an important message, found Jack with the instrument in a dozen pieces. 39

Mr. Orr viewed the muss with consternation. Then he spoke sharply. "Jack, if that relay is not together again, and working, in five minutes, I'll take you out to the woodshed!" Needless to say, Jack threw himself into the restoring of the instrument with ardor, while his father stood grimly by. And fortunately the relay was in its place again, and clicking, within the prescribed time.

"But don't let me ever catch you tinkering with the instruments again," said Jack's father warningly, as he gave Jack the message to send. "Another time it'll be the woodshed whether you get them together or no. Remember!"

Shortly after midnight the night following Jack suddenly found himself sitting up in bed, wondering what had awakened him. From the street below came the sound of running feet, simultaneously the window lighted with a yellow glare, and with a bound and an exclamation of "Fire!" Jack was across the room and peering out.

"Jones' coal sheds! Or the station!" he ejaculated, and in a moment was back at the bedside, dressing as only a boy can dress for a fire. Running to his parents' bedroom he told them of his going, and was down the stairs and out into the street in a trice.

Dim figures of men and other boys were hurrying by in the direction of the town fire-hall, a block distant, and on the run Jack also headed thither. For to help pull the fire-engine or hose-cart to a fire was the ardent hobby of every lad in town. 40

A half dozen members of the volunteer fire company and as many boys were at the doors when Jack arrived, and the fire chief, already equipped with helmet and speaking-trumpet, was fumbling at the lock.

"Where is it, Billy?" inquired Jack of a boy acquaintance.

"They say it's the station and freight shed, and Johnson's lumber yard, and the coal sheds—the whole shooting match," said Billy, hopefully.

"Bully!" responded Jack; who, never having seen his own home in flames, likewise regarded fires as the most thrilling sort of entertainment.

"Out of the way!" cried the chief. The big doors swung open, and with a rush the little crowd divided and went at the old-fashioned hand-engine and the hose-cart. Billy and Jack secured the particular prize, the head of the engine drag-rope, and like a pair of young colts pranced out with it to its full length. Others seized it, and with the cry of "Let 'er go!" they went rumbling

forth, and swung up the street.

The hose-cart, with its automatic gong, clanged out immediately after, and the race that always occurred was on. The engine of course had the start, but the hose-cart, a huge two-wheeled reel, about which the hose was wound, was much lighter, and speedily was clanging abreast of them. Here, however, Big Ed. Hicks, the blacksmith, and Nick White, a colored giant, rushed up, dodged beneath the rope, and took their accustomed places at the tongue, and with a burst of speed the engine began to draw ahead. Other firemen appeared from side streets and banging doorways, and took their places on the rope, and a shout from the juvenile contingent presently announced that the reel was falling to the rear.

41

Meanwhile the glare in the sky had brightened and spread; and when at last the rumbling engine swung into the station road the whole sky was ablaze. Overhead, before a stiff wind, large embers and sparks were beginning to fly.

With a dash the panting company swept into the station square. Before them the station and adjoining freight-shed were enveloped in flames from end to end. It was apparent at once that there was no possibility of saving either. But with a final rush the engine-squad made for the fire-well at the corner of the square, brought up all-standing, and in a jiffy the intake pipe was unstrapped and dropped into the water. The reel clanged up, two of its crew sprang for the engine with the hose-end and couplers, and the cart sped on, peeling the hose out behind it.

The speed with which they could get into action was a matter of pride with the Haddowville firemen. Almost before the coupling had been made at the engine the men and boys at the long pumping-bars were working them gently; within the minute a shout from the cart announced that the hose was being broken, the pumpers threw themselves into the work with zest, and the next moment from the distant nozzle shot a sputtering stream.

With the other boys, Jack, though now considerably winded, was throwing himself energetically up and down against one of the long handles. Before many minutes, however, the remainder of the regular enginemen appeared, and took their places, and presently Jack also was ousted.

42

At once he set off for a closer view of the fire. Half way he was halted by a call.

"Hi, Jack! Come and help push the freight cars!"

The shout came from a group of boys running for the rear of the burning freight-shed, and responding with alacrity, Jack joined them, and soon, just beyond the burning building, was pushing against the corner of a slowly moving box-car with all his might.

One car was rolled safely out of the danger zone, and Jack's party hastened back for another. The innermost of the remaining cars, and on a separate siding, was but a short distance from the flaming shed, and already was blazing on the roof. Jack and several other adventurous spirits determined to tackle this one on their own account. After much straining they got it in motion.

Suddenly a wildly excited figure appeared rushing through the smoke, and shouted at the top of his voice, "Get back! Get back! There's blasting powder in that car!"

In a twinkling there was a wild stampede. And but just in time. With a blinding flash and a roar like a thunderbolt, the car shot into the air in a million pieces. Many persons in the vicinity were thrown violently to the ground, including Jack. As he scrambled, thoroughly frightened, to his feet, someone shouted, "Look out overhead!" and glancing up, Jack saw a shower of burning fragments high in the air.

43

Then rose the cry, "The wind is taking them right over the town!" In alarm many people began leaving the square for their homes.

Jack's own home and the drug-store block were well on the other side of the town, however, and with no thought of anxiety Jack remained to watch the burning station, now a solid mass of flame from ground to roof.

Presently, glancing toward the opposite corner of the square, Jack noted a general, hurried movement of the crowd there into the street. He set out to investigate. As he neared the fire-engine, still clanking vigorously, a bareheaded man rushed up and asked excitedly for the fire chief. "The telephone building and a house on Essex Street, and one on the next street back, are burning!" he cried. "Quick, and do something, or the whole town will be afire!"

Looking in the direction indicated, Jack saw a wavering glare, and with a new thrill of excitement was immediately off on the run. The telephone exchange was one of the largest buildings in town.

As he came within sight of the new conflagration the flames already were leaping from the roof and roaring from the upper windows. Despite the heat, the crowd before the building was clustered close about the door of the telephone office, and Jack hastened to join them, to learn the cause. Making his way through the throng, he reached the front as a blanketed figure staggered, smoking, from the doorway. Someone sprang forward and caught the blanket from the stumbling man, at the same time crying, "Did you get them?"

44

"No," gasped the telephone operator, for Jack saw it was he; "the whole office is in flames. I couldn't get inside the door."

Mayor Davis, the first speaker, turned quickly about. "Then we'll run down to Orr's and telegraph."

At once Jack understood. The mayor wished to send for help from other towns. He sprang

forward. "I'm here, Mr. Davis—Jack Orr. I'll take a message!"

"Good!" said the mayor. "Run like the wind, my boy, and send a telegram to the mayors of Zeisler and Hammerton for help. As many steam engines as they can spare. And have the railroad people supply a special at once. Write the message yourself, and sign my name. Tell them four more fires have broken out, and that the whole town may be in danger."

Jack broke through the crowd, and was off like a deer.

Farther down the street he passed another building, a small dwelling, burning, with its frightened occupants and their neighbors hurrying furniture out, and fighting the flames with buckets.

Down the next cross-street he saw flames bursting from a second house.

Then it was that the real gravity of the situation began to come home to Jack. Till now it had all been only a thrilling drama—even the bearing of the mayor's urgent message had appeared rather a dramatically prominent stage-part he had had thrust upon him.

On he sped with redoubled speed, and turned into the main street. Then his alarm became genuine. Lurid flames were licking over the tree-tops directly ahead of him—in the direction of the store! A moment later a cry of horror broke from him. It was indeed the store block!

But his own personal alarm was quickly lost in a greater. Suppose the telegraph office also should be in flames, and he unable to reach it? He ran on madly.

He neared the store, and with hope saw that so far the flames were only in the second story. Men were hurrying in and out, and from the hardware-store adjoining. But as he rushed to the drug-store door a cloud of heavy smoke rolled forth, driving a group of men before it.

Among them he recognized his father.

"Dad," he cried, "can't I reach the instruments? I've a message for help to Hammerton and Zeisler from the mayor! The 'phone office and the station are burned. There is no other way of getting word out."

Mr. Orr had halted in consternation. "No; you couldn't get to them. The telegraph room is a furnace. The fire came in through the office windows from the outhouse, and I closed the door from the store."

Through the haze of smoke within burst a lurid fork of flame.

"There! The fire is out through the telegraph-room door," said the druggist. "You couldn't get near the table. And anyway, Jack, the instruments would be useless by this time."

It was this remark that aroused Jack. "If I could rip them from the table in any kind of shape, perhaps I could fix them up quickly so I could use them," he thought.

To his father he said with sudden determination, "Dad, I'm going to make a try for the key and relay."

"No. I won't permit it," declared Mr. Orr decisively.

"But father, if we don't get word out the whole town may be burned," cried Jack.

"I'll make a try myself," said Mr. Orr, and without further word lowered his head and dashed back into the smoke.

While Jack stood anxiously awaiting his father's reappearance the owner of the adjacent hardware-store stumbled from his doorway under a bundle of horse-blankets. With an immediate idea Jack ran toward him. "Mr. Wells, let me have some of those blankets," he said hurriedly. "We want to try and reach the telegraph instruments. They are the only hope for getting word out of town for help. Father is in after them, but I don't think he can reach them with nothing over him."

The merchant promptly threw the whole bundle to the ground. "Help yourself," he directed.

At the door again, he called back. "Can you use anything else?"

"No—Say, yes! A pair of leather gauntlets." The merchant disappeared, reappeared, and threw toward Jack a bundle of leather gloves. "Many as you want," he shouted.

Catching them up and two of the blankets, Jack sprang back for their own store as his father reappeared.

"They can't be reached," coughed Mr. Orr. "Couldn't even get to the door."

"I'll try with these blankets, then," said Jack decisively. "Throw them over my head, please."

His father hesitated. "But my boy—"

"There's little danger, Dad. The blankets are thick. And I know just where the instruments are. And see, I'll wear these gauntlets," he added, pulling a pair over his hands.

Somewhat reluctantly Mr. Orr took the blankets and threw them over Jack's head, and on the run Jack plunged into the wall of smoke.

With one gloved hand outstretched he found the telegraph-room door, and the knob. He pressed against it, and with a crash and then a roar the door collapsed before him. But without a moment's hesitation he darted on within, groped his way to the table, found the relay, and with a desperate wrench tore it from its place. The next moment he dashed blindly into his father's

arms at the outer door, and threw the smoking blankets and sizzling, burning relay to the sidewalk.

"Water on it quick," gasped Jack, pointing to the instrument. Catching it up in a corner of one of the blankets Mr. Orr ran with it to a horse-trough in front, and plunged it into the water.

As he returned Jack was drawing on a second pair of gauntlets.

"Jack, you're not going back!" said his father sharply.

"I want the key, Dad."

"Look there." Glancing within Jack saw that the whole rear of the store was now enveloped in flames.

"And it would be of no use in any case. Look at this," said Mr. Orr, holding up the smoking relay.

The instrument did indeed look a hopeless wreck as Jack took it. The base was cracked and charred, the rubber jacket about the magnet-coils was frizzled and warped, the fine wire connections beneath were gone, and the armature spring was missing.

But Jack was not one to give up while a single hope remained. "I could improvise a key," he said, and with decision hastily sought the hardware merchant.

"Mr. Wells, did you save any screw-drivers?" he asked.

"In a box down there. Help yourself."

Running thither Jack found the tool, and immediately began taking the relay apart.

An exclamation of disappointment greeted the discovery that the fine copper wire within one of the coil-jackets had been melted into a solid mass. On ripping open the sizzled jacket of the other, however, Jack found the silk covering the wire to be only scorched, and determined to do the best he could with the one magnet.

Removing the relay entirely from the burned base, he secured a thin piece of board from one of the boxes near him, from the miscellaneous tools in another box found a gimlet, and made the necessary perforations. And soon he had the brass coil-frame mounted.

Meantime Mr. Orr, not for a moment thinking Jack could do anything with the charred instrument, had joined the crowd of men and women watching the burning building from across the street.

"Father! Here, please!" called Jack.

In some wonder Mr. Orr responded, and with him the hardware merchant.

"Have you a rubber band in your pocket?" asked Jack. "I want it for the armature spring."

"Why you are really not doing anything with it, Jack!" exclaimed his father.

"Yes, sir. I think I can make it go," responded Jack with a little touch of elation. "And with only one magnet. But have you the rubber?"

"Here," said Mr. Wells, snapping a rubber band from his pocketbook. "This do?"

"Just the thing. Thanks." And while the two men looked on, Jack secured one end of the elastic to the little hook on the armature, and knotted the other about the tension thumb-screw.

That done, Jack caught up a hammer and smashed the useless coil to pieces, from the wreck, secured several intact ends of the fine wire, and with them quickly restored the burnt connections between the magnet and the binding-posts. And with a cry, half of jubilation and half of nervous excitement, he caught up the now roughly-restored instrument and ran toward an iron gas street-lamp. In the roadway a short distance from the lamp-post lay the burned-off end of the telegraph wire. Placing the instrument on the sidewalk, Jack ran for the wire, and dragged it also to the post.

Then, as the crowd, following his father and the hardware merchant, gathered about him, they saw him secure a piece of wire about the iron lamp-post, then to the instrument; and, dropping to a sitting position, place the instrument on his knees, catch up the telegraph line, and hold it to the other side of the relay.

Jack's low cry of disappointment was echoed by his father. "No use. I was afraid of it, my boy," said Mr. Orr resignedly.

There was a disturbance on the outskirts of the crowd, and the mayor appeared pushing his way through. "Didn't you get that message off, Jack?" he cried excitedly.

"The fire was too quick for us," said Mr. Orr. "Jack risked his life getting out one of the instruments. But it has proved useless."

"Oh say! Now I know what's the matter!" With the cry Jack sprang to his feet, broke through the circle about him, and sped back toward the store. The flames were now bursting from the front, but with head down he ran to the iron door covering the street entrance to the cellar, and lifted it. A thin stream of smoke arose, then disappeared as a draft toward the rear set in. With a thankful "Good!" Jack leaped into the opening.

His father, the mayor, and several others who had rushed after in consternation reached the sidewalk as Jack's head reappeared, followed by a green battery jar. Placing the jar on the ledge, he stooped, and raised another.



"What do you think you are doing?" cried his father.

"I'll explain in a minute. Take them over to the post, please." And Jack had again disappeared.

The mayor promptly caught up the two cells, but Mr. Orr as promptly dropped through the opening and followed Jack.

"What are you trying to do?" he demanded as he groped his way to the battery-shelf. "You can't do anything with the battery if you have no instrument."

"The instrument is all right, Father. The line has been 'grounded' south, that's all. If we put battery on here, we can reach some office between here and wherever the 'ground' is on."

"May it be so," said Mr. Orr fervently, but not hopefully, as they hurried with four more jars to the entrance.

When they had carried out a dozen jars Jack declared the number to be sufficient, and scrambling forth, they hastened back to the lamp-post.

Without delay Jack connected the cells in proper series, and removing the wire between the instrument and the iron post, substituted the battery—zinc to the post, and copper to the instrument.

Then once more he caught up the severed end of the main-line wire, and touched the opposite side of the instrument.

A cry of triumph, then a mighty shout, greeted the responding click.

"But what about a key, son?" said Mr. Orr.

"This, for the moment," replied Jack, and simply resting his elbow on his knee, and tapping with the end of the wire against the brass binding-post, he began urgently calling.

"HN, HN, HN!" he clicked. "HN, HN, HV! Rush! Qk! HN, HN!"

"Perhaps the wire is grounded between here and Hammerton," suggested his father breathlessly.

"Anybody answer! Qk!" sent Jack. "Does anybody hear this?"

"What's the matter? This is Z."

"Got Zeisler!" shouted Jack.

The mayor stepped forward. "Send them the message," he directed, "and have them 'phone it to Hammerton."

Jack did so. And fifteen minutes later the cheering news ran quickly about the threatened town that two steam fire-engines were starting by special train from Hammerton immediately, would pick up another at Zeisler, and would be on the scene within half an hour. All of which report proved true, the engines arriving on the dot—and by daylight the last of the several different fires were under control, and the safety of the town was assured.

Needless to say, Jack's name played an important part in the dramatic newspaper accounts of the conflagration—nor to add that he was the envied hero of every other lad in town for weeks to come.

The final and particular result of the affair, however, was the offer to Jack of a good position in the large commercial telegraph office at Hammerton, which he at last induced his parents to permit him to accept.

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## IV

### THE OTHER TINKER ALSO MAKES GOOD

One evening shortly after the beginning of the summer holidays Alex was chatting over the wire with Jack, who was now a full-fledged operator at Hammerton, when the despatching office abruptly broke in and called Bixton.

"I, I, BX," answered Alex.

"Is young Ward there?" clicked the instruments.

"This is 'young Ward.'"

"Say, youngster, would you care to do a couple of weeks' vacation relief at Hadley Corners, beginning next Monday? The man there wants to get off badly, and we have no one here we can send."

"Most certainly I would," replied Alex, promptly.

"OK then. We'll count on you. I'll send a pass down to-night," said the despatcher.

Thus it came about that the following Monday morning Alex alighted at the little crossing depot known as Hadley Corners, and for the second time found himself, if but temporarily, in full charge of a station.

Entering the little telegraph room, he announced his arrival to the despatcher at "X."

"Good," clicked the sounder. "And now, look here, Ward. Don't do any tinkering with the instruments while you are there. We don't want a repetition of the mix-up you got the wire into at BX through your joking a month or so ago."

The joke referred to was a hoax Alex had played on his father the previous First of April. Through an arrangement of wires beneath the office table, by which with his foot, unseen, he could make the instruments above click as though worked from another office, he had called his father to the wire, and posing as the despatcher, had severely reprimanded him for some imaginary mistake in a train order. It had been "all kinds of a lark," until, unfortunately, the connections became disarranged, tying up the entire eastern end of the line for half an hour.

At the recollection of the escapade Alex laughed heartily. Nevertheless he promptly replied, "OK, sir. I won't touch a thing." And the despatcher saying nothing more, he began calling Bixton.

"I'm here, Dad," he announced when his father answered; "and it's a fine little place. The woods come almost up to the back of the station, and the nearest house is a mile away. That's where I am to board. The other operator arranged it. It's going to be a regular little picnic."

"That's nice," ticked the sounder. "I thought you would like it." And then Alex again laughed as his father added, "And now, no tinkering with things, my boy! Remember!"

"OK, Dad. I won't touch a thing. Good-by."

It was the following Monday that the "all agents" message was sent over the wire announcing an unusually heavy shipment of gold from the Black Hill Mines, and warning station agents and operators to look out for and report any suspicious persons about their stations. But these messages, usually following hold-ups on other roads, had been intermittently sent for years, and nothing had happened on the Middle Western; and in his turn Alex gave his "OK," and thought nothing more about it.

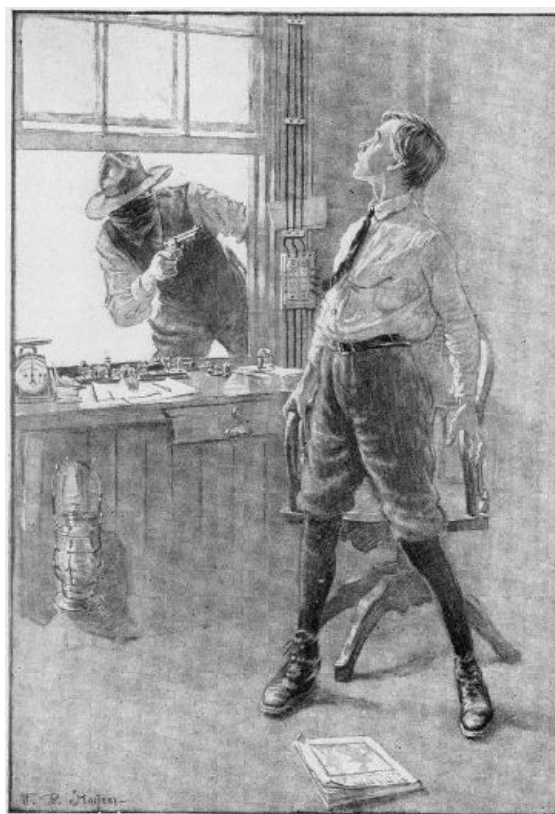
A half hour later he sat at the open window of the telegraph room, deeply interested in the July ST. NICHOLAS—so interested, indeed, that he did not hear soft footfalls on the station platform without. The man came quietly nearer—reached the window. Then suddenly Alex glanced up, the magazine fell to the floor, and with a loud cry he sprang to his feet.

He was gazing into the barrel of a revolver, and behind it was a black-masked face!

Hold-up men! The gold train!

Wildly Alex turned toward the telegraph-key. But the man leaned quickly forward, seized him by the shoulder, and threw him heavily back into the chair. "You move again and I'll shoot!" he said sharply, and Alex sank back helpless.

Yes; hold-up men. And he had betrayed his trust. Betrayed his trust! That thought stood out even above his terror. Oh, if he had only kept a lookout!



The man, who had said nothing further, presently withdrew the revolver and took a comfortable seat on the window-ledge. As the silence continued, Alex began somewhat to recover himself, and fell to wondering what the other bandits were doing while this man was watching him. 59

A few moments later the answer came in a single upward click from the instruments.

"There—wires cut, ain't they?" said his captor.

"Yes, I suppose," said Alex, bitterly.

"They sure are," said the voice from behind the mask. "And when we get through, them wires'll be cut so you won't be able to fix 'em up in a hurry."

Fifteen minutes later a second masked and heavily armed figure appeared. "Every wire cut five poles back on either side of the station," he announced briefly. "It'll take a lineman half a day to fix 'em up again, and we'll be twenty miles away by that time. Now we'll put the hobbles on the youngster, and git."

Often Alex had longed for just such an adventure as this. The final disenchantment was anything but glorious. Roughly seizing him, the two men forced him stiffly upright in the chair, drew his arms about the back of it, and there secured them, wrist to wrist, drawing the knot until Alex almost cried out in pain. Then, as tightly, they bound his ankles to the lower rungs, one on either side.

"Now one of us is going to watch from the woods for a spell—we'll leave the back door open, so we can see right in—and if you make a move, you get this quick! See?" said one of the desperadoes, tapping his pistol significantly. 60

Therewith they passed out, leaving the rear door wide open, and in utter misery of mind Alex watched them stride toward the trees.

Before the two bandits had crossed the open space, however, Alex's mind had cleared. For plainly they were hurrying! Then their promise to watch him must have been only a threat, to keep him quiet! Good! At once he began straining at his wrists, paused as the two men reached the edge of the clearing and momentarily turned, and as they disappeared amid the trees, began struggling with grim determination.

It seemed a hopeless task at first, and the rawhide thongs cut cruelly into Alex's wrists and ankles. But bravely he struggled on, wriggled and twisted, paused for breath, and struggled again. And finally one hand came suddenly free.

It required but a few seconds to get into his pocket, reach his knife, and open it with his teeth. A moment later Alex was on his feet, and staggered out onto the platform.

Yes, the wires were cut, five poles in either direction! Alex clenched his hands. After all, what could he do? To restore the line was entirely out of the question. Had there been but one break he could not have climbed the pole and carried aloft that heavy stretch of wire.

And there was less than twenty minutes in which to work, to catch the Overland at Broken Gap. For undoubtedly it was beyond that point that the bandits planned holding her up—probably on one of the steep grades of the Little Timber hills. 61

Suddenly Alex uttered a gasp of hope. A moment he debated, with nervously clasped hands, then, exhaustion forgotten, dashed back into the little telegraph room, found a screw-driver, and in a few minutes had loosened from the table the telegraph-key and the receiving instrument. Catching them up, with some short ends of wire, he darted out and up the track to the west.

Two hundred yards distant the intact end of the telegraph line drooped into the drainage ditch. Alex caught it up and dragged it to the rails. Placing the key and relay on the end of a tie, he connected them on one side to the rail, and on the other side to the end of the line wire.

But the responding click did not come. Alex groaned in disappointment. He had counted on the rails giving a "ground" connection. Then the line would have closed, and he could have worked it to the west. But apparently the hot weather had entirely dried out the sand beneath the rails, and thus insulated them.

But he was not yet beaten. There was a ground wire at the station. Why could he not use the rails that far, if they were insulated? With a hurrah he seized the end of the line wire, and in a few moments had connected it to one of the rail joints. Then, catching up the instruments, he dashed back for the station. 62

Placing the instruments again on the table, he found a piece of loose wire that would reach from the instruments, out through the window, to the rails; ran out and quickly connected it to a rail joint, and, darting back, connected the other end to the instruments. Instantly there was a sharp downward click. The line was closed!

Alex could not suppress a quick "Thank Heaven!" and, trembling with excitement, he seized the key and began swiftly calling the despatcher. "X, X, X, HC," he called. "X, X—"

He felt the line open, and closed his own key. Then, in surprise, he read: "So you have been monkeying with the wires there after all, have you? Now look here—"

Quickly Alex interrupted, and shot back: "Train robbers are after the Overland. They held me up, and cut the wires both sides of the station. I got free, and have made a connection through

the rails—HC.”

For a moment the line remained silent, while at his end of the wire the despatcher sat bolt upright in his chair, eyes and mouth wide open. But in another moment the despatcher had recovered himself, and, springing back to the key, began madly calling Broken Gap.

“B, B, B, X!” he called. “B, B, X! Qk! Qk!”



BUT THE RESPONSE CLICK DID NOT COME.

Alex shot a glance at the clock, and leaned forward over the instruments, scarcely breathing. There was yet three minutes before the Overland was due at Broken Gap. But she did not stop there, and frequently passed ahead of time. If “B” did not answer the call immediately—

The whirl of “B’s” was interrupted, and slowly and deliberately came an “I, I, B.” Alex leaped in his chair, and again strained forward tensely.

“Has 68 passed?” hurled the despatcher.

“Just coming.”

“Stop her! Flag her! Qk! Qk!”

The line opened, as though “B” was about to make a reply, then smartly closed again.

“Stop her! Stop her!” repeated “X.”

There was a leaden, breathless silence, while Alex nervously clenched and unclenched his hands. At last the line again clicked open, and with a characteristic deliberation that caused the nerve-strung boy a moment’s hysterical laugh, “B” announced: “Just got her. She’s slowing in now. What’s up?”

The despatcher at “X” had regained his equilibrium, and in his usual crisp manner he replied: “Take this for Conductor Bedford:

“BEDFORD: Hold-up apparently planned between Broken Gap and Hadley Corners. Probably on one of the grades of the Little Timbers. Gather a posse quickly, and make sure of capturing them. Report at HC.

“(Signed) JORDAN, X.”

As “B” gave his “OK” with the stumbling hesitation of blank astonishment, the line again opened. And at the first word the intense strain broke, and Alex sank forward over the table with a convulsive sob.

“Grand, my boy! Grand!” clicked the sounder. It was his father, at Bixton. He had overheard it all.

“Grand! That’s the word,” came the despatcher. “There’s not another operator on the division who would have known enough to do what he did to-day. I guess we won’t bother him any more about his ‘tinkering,’ will we?”

Only half an hour late, the mighty mogul pulling the Overland Limited drew panting to a stop before the little station, and in a moment Alex was surrounded by a crowd of congratulating trainmen and passengers. And when he reappeared after sending the message which notified the despatcher of the train’s safe arrival and of the capture of the two bandits, he was surprised and speechlessly confused by having pressed upon him by the enthusiastic passengers an impromptu purse of seventy-five dollars.

Later in the afternoon Alex was called to the wire by Jack, at Hammerton. “Say, what is all this you’ve gone and done, Al?” clicked Jack enthusiastically. “The afternoon papers here have a whole column story! Please attach statement at once!”

“Oh, it looks much bigger than it really was,” responded Alex modestly. “And anyway, it came

about through my own carelessness. I ought to have been reprimanded, instead of patted on the back."

"Nonsense! Those hold-up men would have got you, anyway. If you had seen them coming, they would simply have approached in a friendly way, then got the drop on you. You had no gun.

"But, say," added Jack mock-seriously, "how is it these real high class adventures always come your way? I'm getting jealous."

"I can assure you you needn't be. It's lots more fun reading about them. Wait and see," said Alex.

Jack was soon to have his opportunity of "seeing," though a more disagreeable experience was first to come.

## V

### AN ELECTRICAL DETECTIVE

"Orr, Mr. Black wants you."

Jack, who was passing through the business department of the Hammerton office, toward the stair which led to the operating room, promptly turned aside and entered the manager's private room.

"Good morning, Jack. Sit down.

"My boy," began the manager, "can you keep a secret?"

"Why yes, sir," responded Jack, wondering.

"Very well. But I must explain first. I suppose you did not know it—we kept it quiet—but the real reason Hansen, the janitor, was discharged a month ago was that he was found taking money from the safe here, which he had in some way learned to open. After he left I changed the safe combination, and thought the trouble was at an end.

"Last Tuesday morning the cash was again a little short. At the time I simply thought an error had been made in counting the night before. This morning a second ten-dollar bill is missing, and the cash-box shows unmistakable signs of having been tampered with.

"Now Johnson, the counter clerk, to whom I had confided the new combination (for it is customary, you know, that two shall be able to open a safe, as a precaution against the combination being forgotten)—Johnson is entirely above suspicion. Still, to make doubly sure, I am going to alter the combination once more, and share it with someone outside of the business department. And as you have impressed me very favorably, I have chosen you.

"That is, of course," concluded the manager, "if you have no objection."

"Certainly not. I am sure I appreciate the confidence, sir," said Jack quickly.

"Very well, then. The combination is 'Right twenty, twice; back nine; right ten.' Can you remember that? For you must not write it down, you know."

Jack repeated the number several times; and again thanking the manager for the compliment, continued up-stairs to the telegraph-room.

Two mornings later Jack was again called into Mr. Black's office. For a moment, while Jack wondered, the manager eyed him strangely, then asked, "What was that combination, Jack?"

"Right ninety—no, right thirty—Why, I believe I have forgotten it, sir," declared Jack in confusion.

"Perhaps you have forgotten this too, then?" As he spoke the manager took from his desk a small notebook. "I found it on the floor in front of the safe this morning."

"It is mine, sir. I must have dropped it last night. I worked extra until after midnight, sir," explained Jack, "and on the way out I chased a mouse in here from the stairway, and when it ran under the safe I dropped to my knees to find it. The book must have fallen from my pocket.

"But what is wrong, sir?"

"The cash-box is not in the safe this morning."

Jack started back, the color fading from his cheeks as the significance of it all came to him.

"And now you pretend to have the combination entirely wrong," went on the manager.

Jack found his voice. "Mr. Black, you are mistaken! You are mistaken! I never could do such a thing! Never!"

"I would prefer proof," Mr. Black said coldly.

Jack caught at the idea. "Would you let me try to prove it, sir? Will you give me a week in which to try and clear myself?"

"Well, I did not mean it that way. But, all right—a week. And if things do not look different by that time, and you still claim ignorance, you will have to go. That is all there is to it."

"Thank you, sir."

At the door Jack turned back. "Mr. Black, you are positive you returned the box to the safe?"

"Positive. It is the last thing I do before going home."

During spare moments on his wire that morning Jack debated the mystery from every side. Finally he had boiled it down to two conflicting facts:

"First: That the box was placed in the safe the night before, and in the morning was gone; and that, besides the manager, he was the only one who could have opened the safe and taken it. And,

"Second: That, of course, he knew his own innocence."

The only alternative, then, was that Mr. Black had been mistaken in thinking he had returned the box to the safe.

Grasping at this possibility, Jack argued on. How could the manager have been mistaken? Overlooked the box, say because of its being covered by something?

"Why it may be there yet!" exclaimed Jack hopefully. And a few minutes later, relieved from his wire for lunch, he hurriedly descended again to the manager's office.

"Mr. Black, may I look around here a bit?" he requested.

"Look around? What for?"

"To see if I cannot find something to help solve this mystery," responded Jack, not wishing directly to suggest that the manager had overlooked the box.

"So you keep to it that you know nothing, eh? Well, go ahead," said the manager shortly, turning back to his desk.

Jack's hopes were quickly shattered. Neither on the desk, nor a table beside the safe, was there anything which could have concealed the missing box.

Stooping, he glanced under the table. Something white, a newspaper, leaning against the wall, caught his eye. With a flutter of hope he reached beneath and threw it aside. There was nothing behind it.

Disappointed he caught the newspaper up and tossed it into the waste-basket. Suddenly, on a thought, he recovered the paper, and opened it. On discovering it was the "Bulletin," a paper he knew Mr. Black seldom read, the idea took definite shape. And, yes, it was of yesterday's date!

"Mr. Black," exclaimed Jack, "this is not your paper, is it?"

Somewhat impatiently the manager glanced up. "The 'Bulletin'? No."

"Were you reading it yesterday, sir?"

"Well, I don't see what you are driving at—but, no. It was probably left here by Smith, one of the express clerks next door. He was in for a while yesterday on some telegraph money-order business. Yes, he did have it in his hand, now I remember. But why?"

At the mention of Smith's name Jack started, and there immediately came to him a remembrance of having a few days previously seen the express clerk on a street corner in earnest conversation with Hansen, the discharged janitor.

In suppressed excitement he asked, "When was Smith here, Mr. Black? What time?"

The manager smiled sardonically, and turned back to his work. "No; you can't fasten it on Smith," he said shortly. "It was after he went out that I returned the box to the safe. But, if it's any good to you—he was in here from about five-thirty to ten minutes to six, and was talking with one of the boys in the outer office when I left."

"And Mr. Black, were you outside during the time Smith was in here?"

"No, I—Yes, I was, too. About a quarter to six I was over at the speaking-tube for a minute.

"But enough of this nonsense," the manager added sharply. "The box was in the safe when I closed it. Don't bother me any further with your pretense of investigating. I don't believe it is sincere."

Despite this cutting declaration Jack turned away with secret satisfaction.

Just outside the office door he made a second discovery—a small one, but one which further strengthened the theory he had formed.

It was a small coal cinder and an ash stain in the shape of a heel, apparently overlooked by a careless sweeper.

They could only have been left by a foot which came from the cellar!

Promptly Jack turned toward the cellar door, and made his way down into the big basement.

Going directly to one of the rear windows, he carefully examined it. The cobwebs and the dust on the sill had not been disturbed for months.

He turned to the second, and instantly emitted a shrill whistle of delight. Its cobwebs had been torn and swept aside, and the ledge brushed almost clean. And evidently but a short time before, for the cleared space showed little of the dust which constantly filtered through the floor above.

"Fine!" exclaimed Jack. "Now I—" He paused. The window was securely latched on the inside!

For several minutes Jack stood, disappointed and mystified. Then, examining the latch closely, he laughed, and grasping it with his fingers, easily pulled it out. It had been forced from the outside, and merely pressed back into the hole.

But its being replaced showed that the intruder had not made his escape that way.

Jack began an examination of the end of the cellar under the express office. And the exit was soon disclosed.

The dividing wall was of boarding, and at the outer end, to facilitate the examination of the gas metres of the two companies, was a narrow door. Ordinarily this door was secured on the telegraph company's side by a strong bolt.

The bolt was drawn, and the door swung easily to Jack's touch!

On the farther side all was darkness, however, and Jack returned to the window. As he approached it something on the floor beneath caught his eye. It was a lead-pencil. He picked it up, and with a cry of triumph discovered stamped upon it the initials and miniature crest of the express company. And, more, a peculiar long-pointed sharpening promised the possibility of fixing its actual owner.

Filled with elation, and confident that it was now only a matter of time when he should clear himself, Jack hastened up-stairs, determined to pursue his investigation next door, where he knew several of the younger clerks.

"Hello, Danny," he said, entering the express office, and addressing a sandy-haired boy of his own age. "Say, who in here sharpens pencils like this?"

"Hello! That? Oh, I'd know that whittle a mile off. We call 'em daggers—Smith's daggers. Where did you get it?"

"Smith! Who wants Smith?"

Jack turned with a start. It was the clerk himself.

Instantly Jack extended the pencil. "Is this yours, Mr. Smith?" he asked, and held his breath.

"Yes, it is. Where did you find—" Suddenly the clerk turned upon Jack with a look of terror in his face. But in a moment he had recovered himself, and abruptly snatching the pencil from Jack's hand, proceeded to his desk.

Jack was jubilant. Nothing could have been more convincing of the clerk's guilt. Following this feeling, however, came one of pity for the unfortunate man; and after a silent debate with himself, Jack followed him.

Placing a hand on the clerk's shoulder, he said in a low voice:

"Mr. Smith, I have found out about that cash-box of ours. Now look here, why not confess the wretched business before it is too late, and—"

The clerk spun about. "Cash-box! Business! What do you refer to?"

"Mr. Smith, it was you took our cash-box last night."

The clerk was colorless, but he only faltered an instant. "What nonsense is this?" he demanded angrily. "I never heard of your cash-box. What do you mean by—"

"Well then, I'll tell you just how you did it," said Jack determinedly. "While you were in Mr. Black's office yesterday afternoon he stepped out and left you alone for a moment. The cash-box was on the table. You immediately saw the opportunity (perhaps Hansen had done the same thing, and put you onto it?)—you saw the opportunity, and threw over the box a newspaper you had in your hand. As you had hoped, not seeing the box, Mr. Black forgot it, and left at six o'clock without returning it to the safe. You made sure of that by remaining about the outer office until he left. And then, after midnight you came down to the office here, forced an entrance into our cellar, and went up-stairs and secured the box.

"I'm sorry—but isn't that so?"

The clerk laughed drily. "The great Mr. Sherlock Holmes, junior!" he remarked sarcastically. "Rubbish. Run away and don't bother me with your silly detective theories," and turned back to his desk.

Jack stood, baffled and surprised.



THE CLERK WAS COLORLESS, BUT ONLY FALTERED AN INSTANT.

"Look here, Orr!" As Smith again spun about a hard look came into his face. "Look here, how do you come to know so much about this business, yourself? Eh?"

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Jack uttered an exclamation, and a sudden fear of the clerk came over him. Was Smith thinking of trying to place the blame upon him?

However, further discussion was clearly useless, and he turned away.

The following morning brought quick proof that Jack's suddenly inspired fear of Smith was too well founded. As he entered the telegraph office Mr. Black called him and handed him a note. "Now what have you to say?" he demanded solemnly.

In a lead-pencil scrawl Jack read:

"Mr. Black: Your yung operatur Orr can tell you sumthin about thet cash box, he was showin the key of the box to sumone yesteday and i saw him. Mebee you will finde the key in his offis cote.

"Yours, a frend."

"It is the key," said the manager, producing a small key on a ring. "I recall having left it in the lock."

Jack stood pale and speechless. Despite the disguised writing and poor spelling, the letter was from Smith, he had not a doubt. But how could he prove it? Truly matters were beginning to look serious for him.

80

Quickly, however, Jack's natural spirit of fight-to-the-end returned to him, and handing the letter back, he said, respectfully but determinedly, "Mr. Black, I still hold you to your promise to give me a week in which to prove my innocence. And I'll prove, too, sir, that this key was placed in my pocket by someone else, probably by the one who really took the box. I believe I know who it is, but I'll prove it first."

Reluctantly the manager consented, for he now firmly believed at least in Jack's complicity; and leaving him, Jack sought the operating-room, to spend every spare moment in turning the matter over in his mind.

What next could he do? If only he could find the box! What would Smith probably have done with it? For it seemed unlikely he would have taken it away with him. Might he not, after removing the money, have hidden it in the cellar? Jack determined to search there; and accordingly, at noon, hastening through his lunch, he descended and began a systematic hunt amid the odds and ends filling the basement.

The first noon-hour's search brought no result. The second day, returning to the task somewhat dispiritedly, Jack began overhauling a pile of old cross-pieces. There was a squeak, and a rat shot out.

In a moment Jack was in hot pursuit with a stick. The rat ran toward the old furnace, and disappeared. At the spot an instant after, Jack found a hole in the brick foundation, and thrust the stick into it. The stick caught, he pulled, and several bricks fell out.

81

Dropping to his knees, Jack peered into the opening. A cry broke from him, and thrusting in a hand he grasped something, and drew it forth.

It was the lost cash-box!

Uttering a shout of triumph, Jack leaped to his feet and started on a run for the stair. But suddenly he halted. After all, was he absolutely sure it was Smith who had placed it there? Would the producing of the box prove it?

The question, which had not before occurred to Jack, startled him.

As he stood thinking, half consciously he tried the cover of the box. To his surprise it gave. He



opened it. And the box almost fell from his hands.

It still contained the money! And apparently untouched!

But in a moment Jack thought he understood. Smith, or whoever it was, had left it as a clever means of saving themselves from the worst in the event of being found out, intending to return for it if the excitement blew safely over.

Then why not wait and catch them at it?

Good. But how?

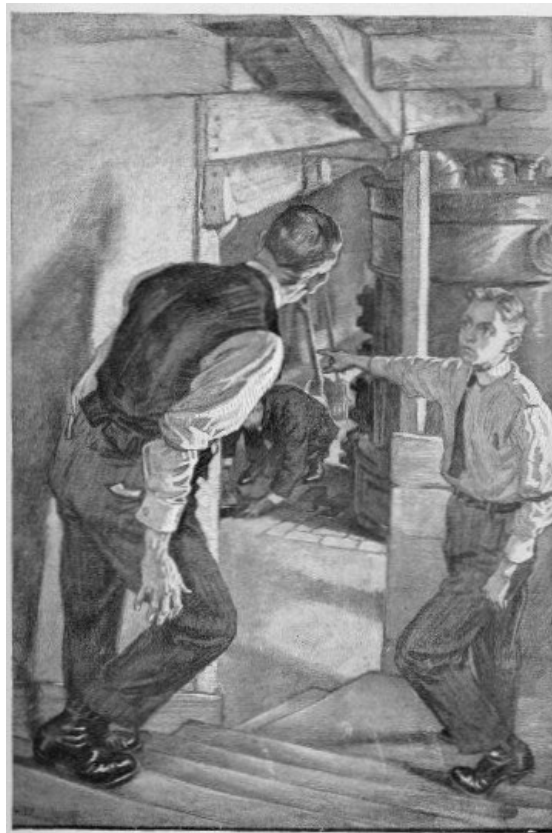
Jack's inventive genius soon furnished the answer. "That's it! Great!" he said to himself delightedly. "I'll get down and do it early in the morning. And now I'll stick this back in the hole and fix the bricks up again."

Seven o'clock the following morning found Jack carrying out his plan. First conveying to the cellar from the battery room two gravity-jars, he placed them in a dark corner behind the furnace. Next, finding an old lightning-arrester, he opened up the hiding-place, and arranged the arrester beneath the cash-box in such a way that on the box being moved the arrester arm would be released, fly back, and make a contact. Then, having carefully closed the opening, he procured some fine insulated wire, and proceeded to make up his circuit: From the arrester, out beneath the bricks, around the furnace, to the battery; up the wall, and through the floor by the steam-pipes into the business office; and, running up-stairs and procuring a step-ladder, on up the office wall, through the next floor, into the operating room. And there a few minutes later he had connected the wires to a call-bell on a ledge immediately behind the table at which he worked. And the alarm was complete.

Although Jack knew that the clerk next door returned from his dinner a half hour earlier than the others in the express office, he had little expectation of Smith visiting the cash-box at that time. Nevertheless, as the noon-hour drew near he found himself watching the alarm-bell with growing excitement.

"There might be just a chance of Smith visiting the box," he told himself, "just to learn whether I had—"

From behind him came a sharp "zip, zip," then a whirr. With a bound Jack was on his feet and rushing for the door. Down the stairs he went, three steps at a time, and into the manager's private office.



"THERE!" SAID JACK, POINTING IN TRIUMPH.

"Mr. Black," he cried, "I've got the man who took the box! Down the cellar! Quick!"

"I found the box, with the money still in it, and fixed up an alarm-bell circuit to go off when he came for it," he explained hurriedly, as the manager stared. In a moment Mr. Black was on his feet and hastening after Jack toward the cellar stairway.

Quietly they tiptoed down. They reached the bottom.

"There!" Jack said, pointing in triumph. And looking, the manager beheld Smith, the express

clerk, on his knees beside the furnace, before him on the floor the missing cash-box.

Ten minutes later the manager of the express company, who had been called in, passed out of Mr. Black's office with his clerk in charge, and the telegraph manager, turning to Jack, warmly shook his hand.

"I am more sorry than I can say to have placed the blame upon you, my boy," he said sincerely. "And I am very thankful for the clever way you cleared the mystery up.

"You are quite a detective—sort of 'electrical detective'—aren't you?" he added, smiling.

And for some time, about the office, and even over the wires, Jack went by that name—the "Electrical Detective."

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## VI

### JACK HAS HIS ADVENTURE

One afternoon a few days following the affair of the missing cash-box Manager Black appeared in the Hammerton operating room, and after a consultation with the chief operator, called Jack Orr from his wire.

"Jack," said the manager, "there have been some important developments in the big will case on trial out at Oakton, and the 'Daily Star' has asked for a fast operator to send in their story to-night. The chief tells me you have developed into a rapid sender. Would you care to go?"

"I'd be glad of the opportunity, sir," said Jack, delightedly.

"All right. The chief will let you off now, so you will have plenty of time to catch the seven o'clock train. And now, Jack, do your best, for the 'Morning Bulletin' is sending its news matter in by the other telegraph company, and we don't want them to get ahead of us in any way."

When Jack reached the station, several of the newspaper men, including West of the "Star," already were there. Among them he saw Raub, a reporter of the "Bulletin," and with him Simpson, an operator of the opposition telegraph company.

"Why, hello, kid!" said the latter on seeing Jack. "They are not sending you out to Oakton, are they?"

"They are," responded Jack, with pride. Simpson laughed, and, somewhat indignant, Jack passed on down the platform. On turning back, he noticed Simpson and Raub apart, talking earnestly. As he again neared them, both glanced toward him, and abruptly the conversation ceased. At once Jack's suspicions were aroused, for he knew Raub had the name of being very unscrupulous in news-getting matters, and that Simpson was not much better. He determined to watch them.

But nothing further attracted his attention, and finally, the train arriving, they boarded it, and made a quick run of the ten miles to the little village. There Jack headed for the local telegraph office.

He found it a tiny affair, in a small coal office on the southern outskirts of the village. Introducing himself to the elderly lady operator, who was just leaving, he went to the key and announced his arrival to the chief at Hammerton.

It was an hour later when West, the "Star" reporter, appeared. "Here you are, youngster," said he; "a thousand words for a starter. It's going to be a great story. I'll be back in half an hour with another batch."

Promptly Jack called "H," and soon was clicking away in full swing. But suddenly the instruments ceased to respond. The wire had "opened." Jack tested with his earth connection, and finding the opening was to the south, waited, thinking the receiving operator at Hammerton had opened his key. But minute after minute passed, and finally becoming anxious, he cut off the southern end and began calling "B," the terminal office to the north.

"I, I," said B.

"Get H on another wire and ask him what is wrong here," Jack sent quickly. "We are being held up on some very important stuff."

"H says it is open north of him," announced B, returning. "We are putting in a set of repeaters here, so you can reach him this way."

A moment later Jack heard Hammerton calling him from the north, and in another moment he was again sending rapidly.

But scarcely had Jack sent a hundred words when this wire also suddenly failed. When several minutes again passed and no further sound came, Jack leaned back in despair. Suddenly he sat upright. Raub and Simpson! Was it possible this was their work? Was it possible they had cut

the wires?

Quickly he made a test which would show whether the breaks were near him. Adjusting the relay-magnets near the armature, he clicked the key. There was not the faintest response. Switching the instruments to the southern end of the wire, he repeated the test, with the same result.

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On both ends the break was within a short distance of him. Undoubtedly the wires had been cut! Jack sprang to his feet and seized his hat. "I'll find that southern break if I have to walk half-way to Hammerton," he said determinedly, and leaving the office, set off down the moonlit road, his eyes fixed on the wire overhead.

Scarcely a mile distant Jack uttered an exclamation, and, running forward, caught up the severed end of the telegraph line.

A moment's examination of the wire showed it had been cut through with a sharp file.

Yes; undoubtedly it was the work of Raub and Simpson, in an effort to keep the news from the "Star," and score a "beat" for the opposition telegraph company and the "Morning Bulletin."

"But you haven't done it yet," said Jack grimly, turning to look about him. How could he overcome the break in the wire? As the cut had been made close to the glass insulator on the cross-arm, only one of the two ends hung to the ground, and he saw that he could not splice them. And in any case he could not climb the pole and take that heavy stretch of wire with him.

His eyes fell on a barb-wire fence bordering the road, and like an inspiration Alex Ward's feat with the rails at Hadley Corners occurred to him. Could he not do the same thing with one of the fence wires? Connect this end of the telegraph line (and fortunately it was the Hammerton end), say to the upper strand, then run back to the office and string a wire from the fence in to the instruments?

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To think was to act. Dragging the telegraph wire to the fence, Jack looped it over the topmost strand near one of the posts, and wound it about several times, to ensure a good contact. Then on the run he started back for the telegraph office.

As he neared the little building Jack saw a figure within. Thinking the "Star" reporter had returned with further copy, he quickened his steps. At the doorway he halted in consternation. Instead of the reporter were two desperate-looking characters, and on the table beside them a half-emptied bottle and a large revolver.

Jack hesitated a moment, then stepped inside. "What are you men doing here?" he demanded.

"Oh, hello, kiddo! We are the new operators," said one of them with tipsy humor. "You're discharged, see? And you git, too!" he suddenly shouted, catching up the pistol. And promptly Jack "got." A few yards distant, however, he halted. Now what was he to do?

"Oh here you are, eh? Where have you been?" It was West, the "Star" man, and he spoke angrily. "I was here ten minutes ago, and found the office empty, and if the other company could have handled my stuff yours would have lost it. I've just been—"

Interrupting, Jack hastily explained, telling of the severed wire, and his plan to bridge the break. The reporter uttered an indignant exclamation. "It's Raub's work, sure as you're born," he said hotly.

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"But say, youngster, we can't permit ourselves to be beaten this way. Can't we do something?"

"We might get some help, and drive the roughs out," suggested Jack.

"No; we haven't time. And then they might put up a drunken fight and shoot somebody. Come, think of something else. You surely can get over this new difficulty, after your clever idea for getting around the cut in the wire."

"I don't know," replied Jack doubtfully, glancing toward the office window. "If there was any way of getting the instruments—"

"What could you do with them?"

"We could turn the barn there into an office. I'd run connections out through the back to the fence. It's just behind."

"Say—I've an idea then! If it wouldn't take you long to remove the instruments from the table?"

"Only a couple of minutes."

"Come on," said West. Leading the way back toward the office, he explained, "I'll get these beggars out, you hide round the corner, and soon as the way is clear rush in and get your instruments, and duck for the barn. I'll join you later."

"How are you going to get them out?" whispered Jack.

"Watch," said the reporter.

As Jack drew out of sight about the rear of the building his mystification was added to when he saw West pause before the door, stoop and pick up a handful of gravel. But immediately the reporter entered the doorway and spoke his purpose was explained.

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"Hello, you two big rummies," he said in his most offensive tones. "What are you doing here?"

The two men were in a momentarily genial mood, however, and missed the insult. "Why, hello pard, ol' man," responded one of them cordially. "Come in an' make 'self t' home. Wanta buy a

telegraph office? Cheap?"

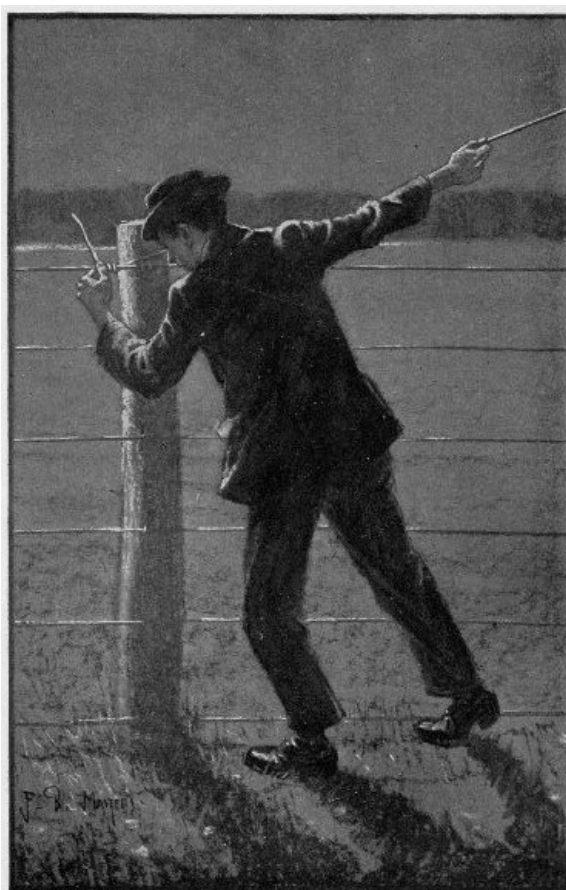
"Cheap! You are the cheapest article I see here," replied West, yet more insultingly. "What do you mean by sitting down in respectable chairs? You ought to be tied up in a cow-stable. That's where you belong."

There was an angry growl as the two men scrambled to their feet, and peering about the corner Jack saw West back into the door.

"Come on out, you big, overgrown cowards," shouted the reporter. "I'll thrash the both of you, with one hand tied behind me!"

"And take that!"

With his last words West suddenly threw the gravel full in the faces of the now enraged men, and spinning about, raced off down the road. They stumbled forth, shouting with rage, and one of them fired. The bullet went yards wide, and West ran on. Without further wait Jack darted into the office, in a few minutes had the relay and key from the table, secured some spare ends of wire for connections, and sped for the barn.



LOOPED IT OVER THE TOPMOST STRAND, NEAR ONE OF THE POSTS.

There all was darkness. Entering, a search with matches soon produced a lantern, however. Lighting it, Jack stepped without to discover whether its glimmer could be seen from the direction of the office. As he closed the door West appeared, panting and laughing.

"Well, what do you think of that stunt, youngster?" he chuckled. "Did you get the instruments?"

"Yes. I was out here to learn whether the light of a lantern I found could be seen."

"Good head! No; it doesn't show.

"And come on! Here the beggars are again!" West led the way inside, and closed the door behind them.

"Now what, my boy?"

"A table first. Here, the very thing," said Jack, making towards a long feed-box at the rear of the barn.

As they cleared its top of a pile of harness West asked, "Just what is the scheme here, youngster? I don't think I understand it."

"Oh, simple enough. I'll just run the wires out through that knot-hole, and connect one to the fence and the other to the ground."

"Simple! It looks different to me," declared the reporter admiringly. "All right, go ahead. I'll get down on this box and grind out the rest of my story."

Already Jack was at work sorting over the odd pieces of wire he had brought. Finding two suitable lengths, and straightening them out, he quickly connected them to the instruments,

placed the instruments in a convenient position on the top of the box, and thrust the wire ends through the knot-hole. Then, hastening outside to the rear of the barn, he proceeded to connect one of them to the same strand of the fence wire to which the telegraph line was secured a mile distant. The other he drove deep into the damp earth beneath the edge of the building. And, theoretically, the circuit was complete.

Hurriedly he re-entered the barn to learn the result.

"Well?" said West anxiously.

"There is current, but it's too weak." Jack's voice quavered with his disappointment. "I suppose the rusty splices of that old fence offer too much resistance.

"But I'm not beaten yet," he exclaimed, suddenly recovering his determination. Turning from the box, he began pacing up and down the floor. "I'll figure it out somehow if I—oh!" With the cry Jack darted for the door, out, and toward the office.

The intoxicated roughs were again in possession. Quietly he made his way to a dark window adjoining the lighted window of the operating room—the window of a little store-room, where, the local operator had told him, the batteries were located.

The window was unlocked, and with little difficulty he succeeded in raising it. Cautiously he climbed within, and feeling about, found the row of glass jars. Quickly disconnecting two of them, he carried them to the window-sill, clambered out, and hastened with them to the barn.

"Now I've got it, Mr. West!" he cried. "I'll have H again in fifteen minutes!"

West started to his feet. "Can't I help you?"

"All right. Come on," said Jack. And ten minutes later, working like beavers, they had transferred to the barn the entire office battery of twenty cells.

In nervous haste Jack connected the cells in series, then to the wire. Instantly the instrument closed with a solid click.

"Hurrah! We win! We win!" cried West, and Jack, springing to the key, whirled off a succession of H's. "H, H, H, ON! Rush! H, H—"

"I, I, H! Where have you been? What's the matter?" It was the chief, and the words came sharply and angrily.

"The wire was cut both sides of the village," shot back Jack. "I think it was Raub and Simpson's work. And two roughs chased me out of the office with a revolver. Hired by them, I suppose. I've fixed up an office in the barn, and am sending for a mile through a wire fence, to bridge the cut. ORR."

For a moment the chief was too amazed to reply. Then rapidly he said: "Orr, you are a trump! But come ahead with that report now. And make the best time you ever made in your life. I'll copy you myself."

And there, in a corner of the big barn, by the dim light of the lantern, and to the strange accompaniment of munching cattle and restlessly stamping horses, West wrote as though his life depended upon it, and Jack sent as he had never sent before. And exactly an hour later the young operator sent "30" (the end) to one of the speediest feats of press work on that year's records of the Hammerton office.

Though it was 3 A. M. when Jack got back to Hammerton, he found the chief operator at the station to meet him. "I had to come down, to congratulate you," said the chief. "That was one of the brightest bits of work all-round that I've heard of for years."

"But did we beat them?" asked Jack.

"We assuredly did. For didn't you know? Those two roughs later went up and cleaned out the other office—the very men who had hired them to disable us! And what with having had a slow-working wire previously, the 'Bulletin' didn't get in more than five hundred words. We gave the 'Star' over three solid columns."

The manager's congratulation the following morning was as enthusiastic as that of the chief. "And as a practical appreciation, Jack," he added, "we are going to give you a full month's vacation, with salary. We think you earned it."

When Jack returned to his wire one of the first remarks he heard was from Alex Ward, at Bixton.

"Well, old boy," clicked Alex, "your adventure came, didn't it. And it has me beaten to a standstill."



THERE, IN THE CORNER OF THE BIG BARN, JACK SENT AS HE HAD NEVER SENT BEFORE.

"Nonsense. It was your stunt at Hadley Corners that suggested the trick that got me out of it," declared Jack. "But say, the manager has given me a month's vacation. What do you think of that?"

"He did! Look here," sent Alex quickly, "come to Bixton and spend some of it with me. I'll promise you all kinds of a good time. Though I am not sure I can guarantee anything as exciting as last night's work," he added.

Jack readily accepted the invitation. And, as it turned out, Alex might as well have made his promise. He could have kept it.

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## VII

### A RACE THROUGH THE FLAMES

The fall had been an exceptionally dry one in that section of the middle west, and in consequence several forest fires had occurred, several not far from Bixton. Thus, when a few mornings following Jack's arrival he and Alex proposed a visit to the old house in the woods where Alex had had his thrilling experience with the foreign trackmen, Mrs. Ward objected.

"You know there was a fire but five miles west yesterday, Alex," she said.

"But that was only in the grass along the track, Mother, and the section-men soon had it out. They are watching everywhere. And on the first sign of smoke we will light for home like good fellows—won't we, Jack?" he promised. Somewhat reluctantly Mrs. Ward finally consented, and gave the boys a lunch, and they set off to make a day of it.

Paying a visit first to the abandoned brick-yard, it was noon when Jack and Alex emerged from the woods at the rear of the deserted old cabin.

"So that's it!" exclaimed Jack with keen interest as they went forward. "And up there is the very door you dropped from, I suppose?"

"Yes, that is it. Still half open, too—just as I left it. And over there is the barn and cow-stable. But let us have lunch first, and I'll explain everything afterward," Alex said, leading the way toward the house. "I am as hollow as a bass-drum."

Ten minutes later, sitting on the cabin floor just within the doorway, eating and chatting, the two boys became suddenly silent, and sniffed at the air. With an exclamation both leaped to their feet, and to the door.

Rolling from the trees at the southern border of the clearing was a white bank of smoke. The

woods were on fire!

"Which way?" cried Jack, as they sprang forth. "The railroad?"

Alex darted to the corner of the house and glanced about. "No! The wind has swung to the southwest! We'd never make it! North, for the brick-yard! Come on!

"If we are cornered there, we can swim the river," he explained as they ran. "The fire isn't likely to cross the water."

They reached the trees, and immediately found themselves in a madly frightened procession. At their feet scurried rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks. A fox flashed by within a yard of them. Overhead, birds screamed and called in terror.

On they dashed, and a ghostly yellow light began to envelop them. "The smoke overhead," said Alex. "It will soon be down here, too."

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"I smell it," panted Jack a moment later. Soon they began to feel it in their eyes.

Jack began to lag. "How much farther, Alex?" he gasped.

"Only a short distance, now. Yes, here we are," announced Alex, as brighter light appeared ahead of them. A moment after they broke into the clearing.

Without slackening pace Alex headed for the old semaphore. "From up there we can see just how we stand," he explained. Almost exhausted, they reached it, and Alex ran up the ladder. Scrambling onto the little platform, he turned toward the river, two hundred yards distant. A cry broke from him.

"We are cut off! The fire has crossed the river!"

Jack hastily clambered up beside him, and above the tree-tops beyond the river he beheld a gray-white cloud.

The boys gazed at one another with paling faces. "What shall we do?" asked Jack.

Alex shook his head. "We might swim the river, and try a dash for it. It is two miles out of the woods, but there might be a chance."

"We couldn't do it. We're too nearly exhausted.

"How about staying right in the river, by the bank?" Jack suggested. "I've heard of people doing that."

"It is too deep here, and it's awfully cold. We would chill and cramp in no time.

"No; I tell you," went on Alex suddenly. "We'll try one of the old tile ovens on the other side of the yard. Perhaps we can box ourselves up in one of them."

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There was no time to lose, for the clearing was now blue with smoke, and climbing hastily to the ground, the boys were again off on the run. They reached the group of round-topped ovens.

A glance showed that their hope was futile. All about the furnaces were thickets of dead weeds, and a short distance away, and directly to windward, was a huge pile of light brushwood.

Promptly Alex turned back. "We would be smothered or roasted in five minutes," he declared. "No. It is the water, or nothing. Perhaps we can work it by floating on a log."

As they approached the river, the boys crossed the old yard siding. Stumbling over the rails, partially blinded with the now stinging smoke, both suddenly ran into something, and fell in a heap. Scrambling to their feet, they found an old push-car, with low sides.

Alex uttered a cry. "Jack, why can't we make a dash down the spur with this old car—pushing it? And say, couldn't we lift it onto the main-line rails, and run all the way home?"

Jack hesitated. "Look there," he said, pointing to the wall of smoke into which the track disappeared a hundred yards away. "And wouldn't there be burned-down trees across the rails?"

"No; not yet. The fire hasn't been burning long enough. And as to the smoke, it'll soon be just as bad on the river," Alex declared.

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"All right. Let us try it. But first, let us jump in the river and get good and wet," suggested Jack.

"Good idea! Come on!

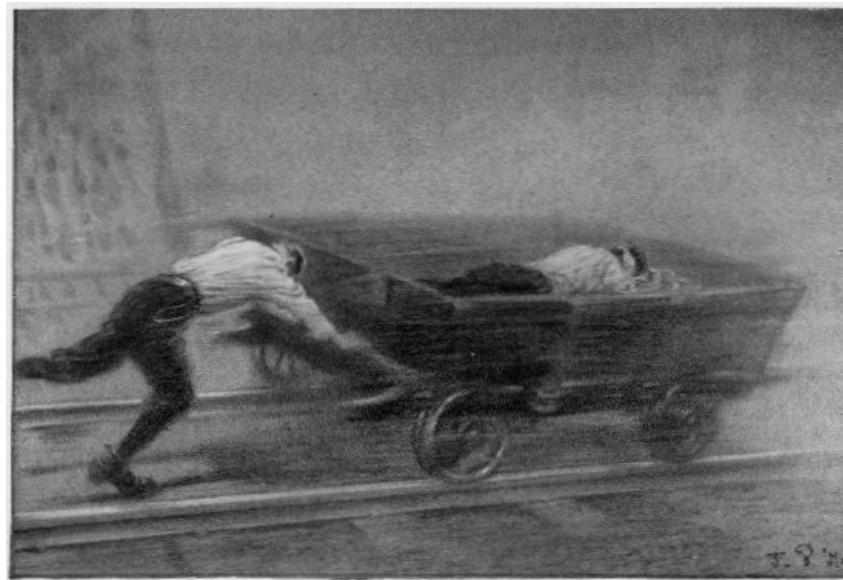
"Or; wait!" exclaimed Alex. "Another idea. There is an old rubbish pile just over here, and a lot of tin cans. Let us get some, and fill them with water—to keep our handkerchiefs wet, to breathe through."

They turned aside, quickly found and secured several empty cans each, and ran on. Reaching the water, they dropped the cans on the bank, and plunged in bodily.

As Alex had said, the water was intensely cold, and despite the relief to their eyes from the smoke, they clambered out again immediately, hastily filled the tins, and only pausing to tie their dripping handkerchiefs over their mouths, dashed back for the siding.

"You help me start her, Jack," directed Alex as they placed the cans of water in the forward end of the car, "and when we reach the edge of the woods, jump in. I'll run it the first spell, then you can relieve me. That way we can keep it going at a good clip.

"All ready? Let her go!" With bowed heads they threw themselves against the little car, the rusty wheels began to screech; rapidly they gained headway, and soon were on the run.



WITH A RUSH THEY DASHED INTO THE WALL OF SMOKE.

"Jump in, Jack!" cried Alex. Jack sprang over the tail-board and threw himself flat on his face, and with a rush they dashed into the wall of smoke.

Rumbling and screeching, the car sped onward. Alex began to feel the heat. Suddenly it swept over them like the breath of a furnace, and there came a mighty roar.

They were in the midst of the flames.

"Are you all right, Alex?" cried Jack.

"Yes." A moment later, however, Alex too sprang into the car, as he did so tearing off his handkerchief and stuffing it into one of the water-cans. "I couldn't have held on another minute," he choked. "I believe the handkerchief was burning."

Jack prepared to climb out to take Alex's place.

"No! Lay still!" interposed Alex. "The car will run by itself here. There's a down grade."

Jack dropped back thankfully. "Isn't it awful," he gasped. "My eyes are paining as though they would burst."

On rushed the car down the roaring, crackling tunnel of flames, groaning and screeching like a mad thing. Tongues of fire began to lick over the sides of the car at the cringing boys within.

Faster the car went. Presently it began to rock. "She'll be off the track!" cried Jack at last.

"Lie farther over!" directed Alex above the roar, himself moving in the opposite direction. The rearrangement steadied the car slightly, but still it rocked and plunged on the long unused track so that at times the boys' hearts leaped into their throats.

The heat was now terrific. The floor and sides of the car began to blister and crack.

"We can't stand it much longer! We'll be cooked!" coughed Jack.

"Empty one of the cans over your head," Alex shouted. "Keep up a few minutes longer, and we will be over the worst. It is the leaves and brush that are making the heat, and we'll soon be where they have burned out.

"I think we are over the worst of it now," he announced a moment later. "There's not so much crackling; and I don't think it is so hot."

Simultaneously the car began to leap less wildly, then perceptibly to slow up. Alex at once prepared to climb out again. "I'll give her another run," he said. But promptly Jack pressed him back. "No you don't! I'm going to take my turn." And in another moment he was out in the full glare of the still shrivelling heat, rushing the car on at the top of his speed. A hundred yards he drove it, and scrambled back within, gasping for breath. Emptying one of the remaining cans over Jack's head, Alex sprang out and took his place.

A moment after, they struck a slight up grade. Alex uttered a joyful shout. "Only a short run farther, Jack, and we're out of the woods!"

But immediately he followed this glad announcement with one of new alarm.

"The washout! I'd forgotten it! It's just ahead! The rails there almost hang in the air!"

In a panic Alex slowed up. Jack climbed out beside him. "Let us rush it," he suggested. "The rails may hold—like a bridge. We're not heavy. And we may as well take one more chance."

Alex debated. "All right! Come on! And jump quick when I say! I think I can tell when we are near it."



Once more the car was flying onward through the haze.

"Here we come! *Now!*"

With a bound Jack was back in the car. Alex made a final rush, and sprang after. The car dipped forward and sideways, a breathless instant seemed to hang in mid-air, then righted, and shot forward smoothly. Uttering a hoarse shout of joy, the boys leaped out, and were again running the car ahead, and a moment later gave vent to a second and louder cry.

In their faces blew the cooler air of a clearing.

A few yards farther they halted.

"I can't see a thing. Can't open them," declared Jack, as they stood rubbing their eyes, and recovering their breath.

"Neither can I. Give me your hand, and we'll soon fix it. There is a path here down to the water." Feeling with his foot, Alex found it, and pulling Jack after, hastened down, and in another moment both were on their stomachs on the river-bank, their faces deep in the cooling water.

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Ten minutes later, greatly revived, but with faces and hands intensely smarting from their burns, the boys replenished the cans of water—for they still had a two miles' run through the smother of smoke—and lifted the car onto the main-line rails.

As they did so, from far to the west came a whistle.

"A train! Can't we stop her?" suggested Jack.

"They'd never see us in the smoke."

"Then, say, let us throw the old car across the tracks, so they'll strike it. They would probably stop to see what it was."

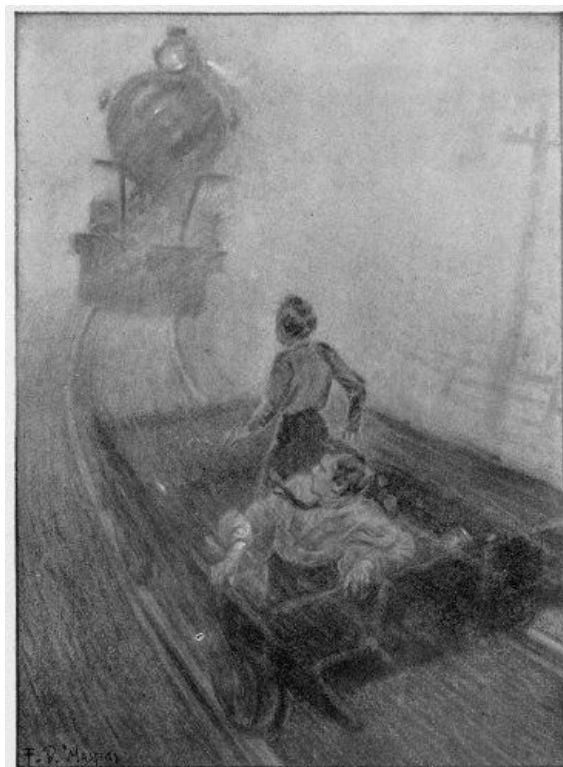
"It might derail her. No. I've got it. Come on, and get the car started so she'll cross the bridge, and I'll explain."

"Now," said Jack, as they rolled out on the trestle.

"You remember the steep grade just over the bridge? Well, we'll stop about fifty yards this side, wait till the train whistles the last crossing, then hit it up for all we are worth, and—"

"And let the train catch us?" cried Jack. "But, gracious! won't that be taking an awful chance?"

"No, for she won't be going very fast, on account of the curve at the bottom, and we'll be going like a house afire," declared Alex, confidently. "And when she bunts us, we'll jump for her cow-catcher, and five minutes later we'll be out in the glorious fresh air again."



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CLOSER CAME THE ROARING MONSTER.

"Well, all right. If you are willing to take the risk, I am," said Jack.

They reached the spot designated by Alex, and brought the car to a stand.

Again came the whistle of the train. "Ready!" cried Alex. "The next time!"

It came. Like sprinters they threw themselves at the car, and in a few strides were racing down

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the rails at full speed; reached the head of the grade, and sprang over the tail-board just as the train rumbled onto the bridge.

Downward they shot, gaining momentum at every turn of the wheels.

"Whe-ew! But we're taking an awful chance," said Jack, nervously.

"No. Listen to her brakes," said Alex.

Despite his assurance, when, a moment later, the great engine suddenly appeared out of the smoke and came thundering down upon them, Alex faltered, and, with Jack, nervously clutched the sides of the little car. But dashing on unrestrained, they yet further increased their mad speed, and for a few seconds seemed even to be holding their own with the mighty mogul.

Then the great engine began eating up the distance between them, and the boys gathered themselves together for the supreme moment.

Closer came the roaring monster. "Now, don't jump," cautioned Alex, who had regained his nerve. "Wait until she is just going to hit us, then fall forward and grab the brace—that rod there.

"Here she comes! Ready! *Now!*"

With a jolt the engine hit the car, and in an instant the boys fell forward, grasped a smoke-box brace, and in another moment had scrambled to the top of the cow-catcher.

And they were safe!

When, ten minutes later, the train came to a standstill at Bixton, the engineer suddenly felt his hair rise on end as two wildly unkempt and blackened figures appeared slowly dismounting from the front of his engine, and stumbled across the station platform. But the shout of joy which greeted them told they were no ghosts.

"Although I think we weren't far from it, were we, Jack?" said Alex, at home a few minutes after, when his mother made a similar comparison.

"I hope I'll not be as near it again for a long time to come," said Jack, earnestly.

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## VIII

### THE SECRET TELEGRAM

"Alex, will you work for me three or four hours to-night?" requested the Bixton night operator of Alex one evening late in October. "I have just had an invitation to a surprise party at Brodies', and wouldn't care to miss it."

Alex agreed willingly. "I'll be right in line then for the latest news of the chase," he declared. For an attempt had been made that morning to rob the Farmers' Savings Bank at Zeisler, a posse had been sent from Bixton to aid in the pursuit of the robbers, and reports from the hunt were being anxiously looked for.

"Take care you don't get in line for any bullets," laughed the operator as he left. "It's your weakness, you know, to get mixed up in any excitement that's going on within a mile of you."

To Alex's disappointment hour after hour passed, however, and brought no further word, either of the pursued, or the pursuers. Finally, just before midnight, hearing Zeisler "come in" on the wire to report the passing of a freight, Alex reached for the key, determined to inquire.

As he did so footsteps sounded on the silent platform without, the waiting-room door opened, and two strangers appeared at the ticket-window. Glancing in, they turned to the office door, and entered.

"Hello, youngster," said the taller of the two, cordially, leaning over the parcel-counter. "What's the news from the man-hunt?"

"I was going to ask Zeisler just as you came in," replied Alex, turning again to the key.

"Well, never mind, then. Just tell them they were captured here, instead."

"What! Captured here?" exclaimed Alex.

"That's it. About an hour ago, just north, by the Bloomsbury posse. Sheriff O'Brien sent us down with the news, so you could send word up and down the line and call in the other posses. No need of them plugging around all night."

But, instead of complying, Alex suddenly turned more fully toward the two men. "What posse did you say you were with?"

"Bloomsbury! Bloomsbury!" said the smaller man, impatiently.

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"Bloomsbury! Don't you mean Bloomsburg?"

"Well, what thundering difference—" The taller man flashed a warning gesture, and in an instant Alex understood.

*He was face to face with the bank robbers themselves!*

For a moment he stared from one to the other in consternation. Then, sharply recovering himself, he turned quickly back to the key. But he was too late. He had betrayed his discovery.

Both men laughed. "Your surmise is correct, my young friend," said the taller man, lightly. "We are the gentlemen who were forced to leave Zeisler so hurriedly this morning.

"But don't let that make any difference," he continued, producing a revolver and placing it significantly on the counter before him. "Go right ahead with the message.

"Or wait, give me a blank, and I'll write it, so you will be sure to have it right."

"Oh, hold on," interposed his companion. "Now that he knows who we are, how do you know he will send the message as you write it, and not just the other thing—give us away?"

The first speaker threw down his pen. "Well, I'm an idiot. That's so."

He thought a moment, then, turning toward Alex, eyed him sharply an instant, and said: "Youngster, I'll give you a dollar a word if you will give me your solemn promise to send this message just as I write it."

A bare instant Alex hesitated, while the tempter whispered that it would mean thirty or forty dollars for a few minutes' work, and that everyone would take it for granted he had been compelled to send it. Then abruptly he leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I couldn't do it," he said quietly but positively.

"Oh, you couldn't, eh, Goody-goody?" exclaimed the smaller man, with a snarl, catching up the revolver and pointing it at Alex's head. "Now could you do it?"

The taller man caught his arm. "Don't be a fool, Jake. After all, we couldn't be sure he wasn't fooling us even if he took the money.

"Look here, I have a scheme."

They stepped back and spoke together in low tones for a moment; then the taller turned again to Alex, who meantime had remained quiet in his chair, futilely endeavoring to think of some means of spreading the alarm.

"I suppose you are not the only operator at this station, kid?"

"No; there is a day and a night operator. I am only 'subbing' for the night man," responded Alex, wondering.

"Where is he?"

"At a party."

"Where is the day man?"

"At his boarding-house. But you couldn't get either of them to do it," Alex declared confidently, thinking he had caught the drift of their purpose.

"Never mind what we could or what we couldn't. Where does the day operator board? Is it far?"

Momentarily Alex had a mind to refuse to tell; then, on the thought that suspicion might be aroused if one of the robbers went to rout the day man out, he replied, "About a quarter of a mile," and described how the house could be reached.

Again the two men held a whispered consultation, and at its conclusion the smaller man hurriedly left.

"Now I suppose you are wondering what we propose doing with the day operator," said the tall man, with a grin, when they were alone. "Well, it's so good I think I'll tell you. One of the cleverest getaway schemes you ever heard of, and my own idea. Can you guess?"

Alex shook his head. "If it's not to send the message—and which I know he won't—I don't know."

The robber laughed. "You are going to send the message, and he is going to stand just outside the door here and tell us letter by letter just what you make the instruments say. See?"

Alex uttered an exclamation. And, strange as it may seem, it was not entirely of chagrin, for the striking originality and ingenuity of the plan immediately appealed to his own peculiar genius for getting over difficulties.

"And then," continued the talkative safe-breaker, "we will tie you both in your chairs, cut the wires, then flag the night express, and depart for the East like respectable citizens, and by the time you have been found and the wires restored we will be well out of danger.

"Now, I claim there is some class to that scheme. What?"

Despite himself, Alex could not forbear a smile, even while he at once saw that to defeat the plan would be almost an impossibility. Nevertheless, as the bank robber turned his attention to a time-table, Alex determinedly addressed his wits to the problem.

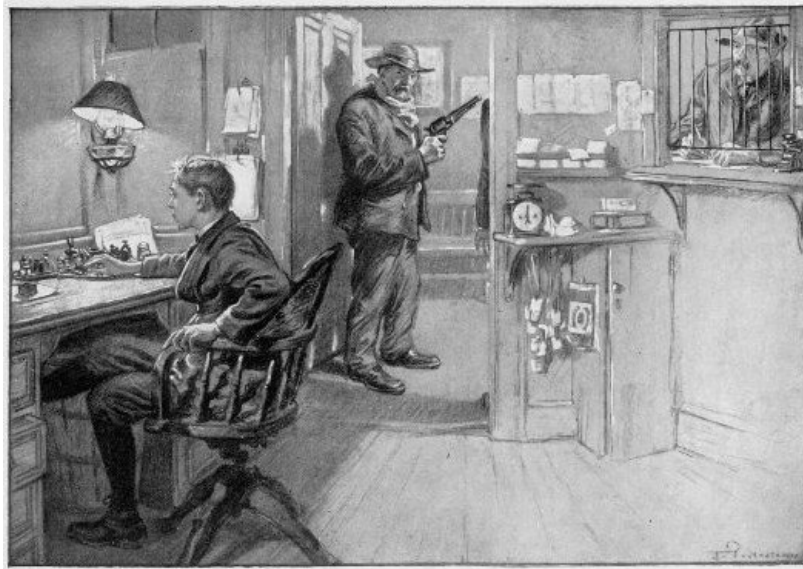
Presently, as he sat looking at the telegraph instruments for an inspiration, he started. That last First of April joke he had played on his father! The cut-off arrangement of wires was still in

place beneath the instrument table! Could he not use it?

He determined to see whether the connections were still in order. Fortunately he was sitting close to the table, with his feet beneath. Making a move as though tired of his position, he crossed one foot over the other, and sank a little lower in the chair. Then, the change having brought no comment from the man at the counter, he carefully reached out the upper foot, found the two wires and pressed them together. Immediately came a click from the instruments.

It was in working order! With hope Alex at once addressed himself to its possibilities, and soon a suggestion came. "Yes, I believe I could do it," he told himself with satisfaction. "I'll make a try anyway. So much for never giving up."

At that moment the footfalls of the returning robber and those of another sounded on the platform without. Both men were talking, and as they entered the waiting-room Alex heard the evidently still unsuspecting Jones say: "Funny, though. I never heard of the boy being troubled with his heart before."



"COME ON! COME ON!" EXCLAIMED THE MAN IN THE DOORWAY.

The next moment Jones's casual tones changed to a sharp cry of fright, and Alex knew that the robber had revealed himself. "Now you keep your tongue between your teeth, and do exactly what you are told, young man, or you get this! You understand?"

"Now turn about—your back toward the office door—so." The door was flung open, and the robber appeared standing sideways, his gun in his hand, pointing at the day operator, who was just out of Alex's sight.

"Now what you are to do is to read off letter by letter what this young shaver in here sends on the wire. You are a tab on him. You understand?"

In a trembling voice Jones responded in the affirmative.

"And the first one of you who appears to do anything not straight and aboveboard gets daylight through his head," he added, raising his voice for Alex's benefit. Then, addressing his partner, he said: "Give the kid the message, Bill."

The tall man leaned over the counter and tossed the blank on the table before Alex.

"Who will I send it to first?" asked Alex.

"The sheriff, Watson Siding."

"All right. But first, you know, I have to call him," explained Alex, somewhat nervously, now that the critical moment had come. "His call is WS."

Therewith he began slowly calling, that Jones might read off each letter as he sent it, "WS, WS, WS, BX."

"WS, WS—"

"I, I," answered WS.

"WS answers," interpreted Jones.

Steadying himself with a deep breath, Alex proceeded to carry out his plan. Carefully reaching forth with his foot beneath the table, he pressed the two wires together, then loudly clicked his key. The instruments, thus "cut out," of course failed to respond.

"The wire appears to have opened," announced Jones. "Probably the man at WS has opened his key while getting a blank or a pen."

Again Alex clicked the key as though in a futile effort to send, then leaving it open, thus holding the instruments on the table "dead," began ticking his foot against the impromptu key beneath

the table.

And while the instruments at Bixton remained momentarily silent, the surprised operator at Watson Siding read in draggy but decipherable signals the words:

"Read every other word."

"Come on! Come on!" exclaimed the man in the doorway, turning suspiciously. Immediately Alex withdrew his foot and closed the key, and at the resulting audible click Jones announced: "The wire has closed. He can send now."

"All right. Come ahead," commanded the short man, impatiently.

Then very deliberately, with a pause after each word, seemingly to enable Jones to interpret, but really to give himself time to send another word, unheard, beneath the table, Alex sent on the key, and Jones read aloud, the following message:

"SHERIFF,

"Watson Siding:

"Safe-blowers have been captured near here. Call in your posse.

"(Signed) O'Brien,  
"Sheriff Quigg County."

What the at first puzzled and then thunderstruck operator at Watson Siding read off his instrument ran very differently. It read:

"Safe THEY blowers ARE have HERE been IN captured STATION near INTEND here.  
GOING call OUT in BY your NIGHT posse. EXPRESS.

"(Signed) 'PHONE O'Brien, "BACK Sheriff HERE Quigg QUICK County."

A moment after giving his "OK" the Watson Siding operator was at the telephone calling for Bixton central.

Meantime, having thus sent the message to WS to the bank-breakers' satisfaction, Alex proceeded to call and send it by turns to Zeisler, Hammerton, and other stations on the line. Sending slowly, to make the most of his time, it was within fifteen minutes of the hour the express was due when Alex had sent the last of the messages.

"Now you can step in and see your friend," said the man in the doorway, addressing Jones, who appeared, white and trembling, and coming behind the counter, dropped into a chair facing Alex. The speaker then once more disappeared, and presently an opening click of the instruments told the nature of his errand. The wires had been cut.

He soon returned, and rummaging about, while the taller man stood guard over them, he found some ropes, and proceeded to bind Alex and the day operator tightly in their chairs.

Just as the task was completed there came a long-drawn whistle from the west. Both robbers promptly turned to the door. "Well, good night, gentlemen," said the smaller, grimly. "Much obliged for your kind services."

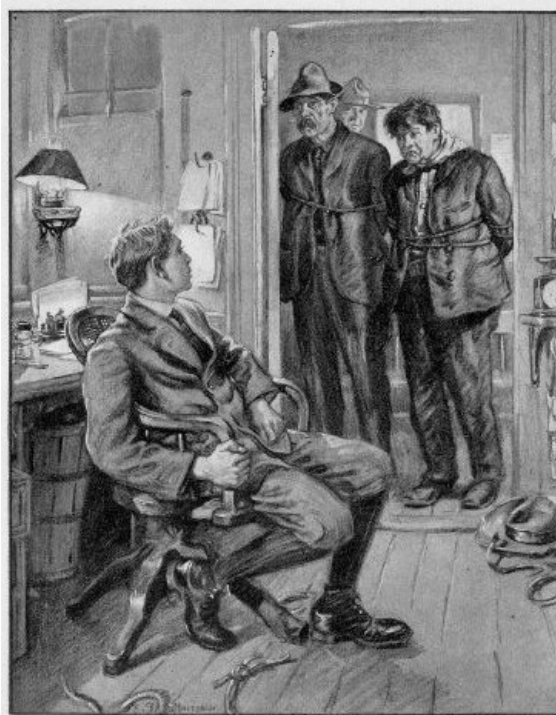
"And I would just pause to repeat," said the taller, jocosely, "that there is some class to this getaway scheme, should any one ask you. Good night."

"Yes, there is class—but it isn't first!"

Uttering a cry the two bank robbers staggered back from the door, and with a bound the deputy sheriff and a constable were upon them, bore them to the floor, and after a brief but terrific struggle disarmed and handcuffed them.

"Yes," said the sheriff, rising, and with his knife quickly freeing the two prisoners, "there was class to it, but it was *second*.

"Our young friend here takes '*first*.'"



"HOW DID YOU DO IT, SMARTY?" SNAPPED THE SHORTER MAN.

The robbers turned upon Alex with furiously flashing eyes. "How did you do it, smarty?" snapped the shorter man.

Alex laughed, kicked one foot beneath the table, and the instrument responded with a click. "A little First of April trick. What do you think of it?"

Whatever the two renegades might have said through their gritting teeth, there was no doubt as to what the sheriff and the others thought. Nor the bank officials at Zeisler, when, a day later, there came to Alex a highly commendatory letter and a check for two hundred dollars.

But better even than this, in Alex's estimation, a few mornings after the chief despatcher called him to the wire and announced his appointment as night operator at Foothills, a small town on the western division.

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## IX

### JACK PLAYS REPORTER, WITH UNEXPECTED RESULTS

Not long after Alex left Bixton to take up his duties at Foothills, Jack, at Hammerton, also received an advancement. In itself it was not of particular note, beyond an encouraging increase in salary, and a transfer from the day to the night force; but indirectly it resulted in an experience more thrilling than any Jack's genius for tackling adventurous difficulties had yet brought him.

Wheeling by the office of the "Daily Star" one afternoon, he heard his name called, and turned his head to discover West, the reporter with whom he had made the memorable Oakton trip, hastening after him.

"Just the man I was looking for, Jack," declared West, as the young operator wheeled to the curb. "I have a job for you.

"How would you like to tackle a bit of Black Hand investigation?"

Jack laughed. "You don't mean it."

"I certainly do. It's this way," went on the reporter, lowering his voice. "A Black Hand letter demanding money was received last week by Tommy Spanelli, of the Italian restaurant. It was mailed here; and we have the tip that last evening two foreigners were seen stealing across the old quarry turnpike, and into the woods, as though not wishing to be seen. Of course they may not be connected with this at all, but again they may; and I was put on the job to find out. The difficulty is that I am too well known. If they caught sight of me, they would be suspicious immediately.

"But they would never suspect a lad like you," West proceeded; "and I know you could carry

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anything through that came along. So will you run out there and investigate for me?"

"Why, certainly. But just what shall I do?" Jack asked.

"Wheel up and down the quarry turnpike for an hour or so, then, if you have seen no one, beat around through the woods as far as the old stone quarry. And any foreigners you come upon, take a good look at. That's all. And drop in at the office here in the morning, and report."

"That's easy. All right," agreed Jack readily.

"Thank you. And keep the matter quiet, you know," West added. "We want an exclusive story for the 'Star' if anything comes of it."

"I understand. And, say," said Jack as he turned away, "I'll take my camera, too. I may be able to get a snap of them, if I see anyone."

"Good idea. A picture would help to land them, if they are the fellows we want; and we could run it in the paper with our story. Go ahead, Jack, and good luck."

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Jack was not long in wheeling home and securing his folding Brownie; and a half hour later found him pedalling slowly along the quarry road near the point several miles from the city where the suspicious foreigners had been seen to enter the woods.

An hour passed, however, and he had seen no doubtful characters, and finally dismounting at the entrance to a path he knew to lead toward the old stone quarry, Jack concealed his wheel in a thicket, and set off to make an investigation in that direction.

A moment after he came to a halt with a sharp exclamation. In the path at his feet lay a murderous-looking stiletto. Picking it up, he examined it. Yes; it was of foreign make. And the still damp mud stains on the side of the blade which had lain uppermost showed it had been but recently dropped.

Apprehensively Jack cast a glance about him, almost immediately to utter a second suppressed exclamation. Emerging from the woods on the opposite side of the road was a short, dark man—undoubtedly an Italian.

With beating heart Jack watched him. Was he one of the men he was looking for?

In the middle of the road the stranger halted, looked sharply to right and left, and came quickly forward. Darting from the path Jack threw himself on the ground behind a bush, and the next moment the man hurriedly passed him. He was soon out of sight, and rising, Jack placed the dagger carefully in an inside pocket, and determinedly set off after.

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Half a mile he followed the Italian amid the trees. Then there appeared the light of an opening, and going forward more carefully, Jack found himself on the edge of the quarry clearing. The foreigner was hurrying along the brink of the excavation, evidently heading for a small tumble-down cabin at its farther end.

The man reached the shanty, and knocked. To Jack's surprise the door was opened by a negro.

Wonder at this was quickly forgotten, however, for as the door closed from the woods behind Jack came the sound of voices, then an ejaculation in Italian. A moment Jack stood, in consternation, believing he had been seen. But a glance showed that the owners of the voices were yet out of sight beyond a rise, and recalling his wits, Jack ran for a nearby clump of elders.

The voices came quickly nearer. Suddenly then, for the first time Jack recalled the camera. At once came the suggestion to get a snap of the newcomers as they stepped into the clearing.

Jack glanced about him. A short distance away, and but a few feet from the path, was a low, tent-like spruce. With instant decision he made for it, drawing the camera from his pocket as he ran.

Dropping to his knees, he wormed his way beneath the tree, and through to the opposite side. Finding an aperture commanding the exit of the path, he opened and focused the camera upon it. The next moment the two Italians appeared. For the fraction of a second Jack hesitated, fearing the click of the shutter might betray him. But he took the chance, there was a crisp, low click—and he had them, and they had passed on.

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Chuckling with delight, Jack crept forth. What next? Looking toward the shanty, he again saw the door opened by the negro. This decided him. Replacing the camera in his pocket, he set off on a circuit through the trees that would bring him back to the clearing immediately opposite the shanty, determined if possible to reach it, and learn what was going on inside.

Without incident he made the point desired, and gazing from the cover of a bush, discovered with satisfaction that the two hundred yards separating him from his goal was dotted with small bushy spruce. More important still, on that side of the cabin were no windows.

Stooping, Jack was about to steal forth, when he paused with a new idea. It came from a stray piece of wrapping-paper lying on the ground before him.

Why couldn't he conceal the camera in this paper, with a string tied to the shutter; approach the house, knock, ask some question, and secretly snap whoever opened the door?

To think was to decide, and at once he set about preparations. Finding some cord in a pocket, he first deadened the click of the shutter with a thread of the string, and secured a piece of it to the shutter trigger. Carefully then he wrapped the camera, open, in the paper, and with his knife cut a small hole opposite the lens, and a second and smaller hole beneath. Through the latter he fished out the trigger-string—and the detective camera was complete.

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Without delay Jack adjusted the parcel under his arm, holding the trigger-string in his fingers, and strode boldly forward toward the shanty. He reached it, approached the door, and knocked. From within came the sound of voices, then a heavy step. Drawing the string taut Jack moved back several paces, and pointed the opening in the package at the door.

But success was not to come too easily. The latch lifted, and the door opened only a few inches, barely showing the eyes and flat nose of the negro.

"W'at yo' want?" he demanded.

"Would you please tell me the way out to the road?" said Jack steadily.

The negro regarded him sharply a moment, then opening the door barely sufficient to reach out a hand, pointed toward the woods, and said gruffly, "Yo' see dat broke tree? Right out dah."

"Which one? I see two," declared Jack, coolly.

Impatiently the negro threw the door wide, stepped out, and pointed again. In an instant Jack had pulled the string, and from the parcel had come a soft "thugk!" "Thank you, sir," said Jack, turning away, and inwardly chuckling at the double meaning of the words. "Thank you."

"But look ahead, boy," added the colored man threateningly, "doan yo' be prowlin' roun' heah! Un'stan'?"

"No fear. I'll be glad when I'm away," responded Jack, again secretly laughing, and headed for the woods, the negro watching him until he was half way across the clearing.

Once more in the shelter of the trees, Jack determined to follow up his success by endeavoring to discover just what was taking place at the cabin. Hiding the camera in a convenient brush-heap, he made sure all was quiet, and again stole forth. Slipping quickly from shrub to shrub, he safely made the crossing, and came to a halt at the rear of the shanty.

To his ears came the sound of voices in subdued discussion. They were so muffled, however, that he could distinguish nothing, and recalling a partly open window at the front, he went forward to the corner, peered cautiously about, and tiptoed to within a few feet of it.

At once the voices came to him plainly.

"You gotta dat?"

"Stan' in doo'way, hat in yo' han', upside down," responded the colored man's gruff voice.

Wondering, Jack drew nearer.

"At halfa da past two by da beeg clock," continued the first speaker.

There was a pause, and the negro repeated, "At half pas' two by dah city clock, shahp."

Suddenly it came to Jack. At the dictation of the Italian, the negro was writing a "Black Hand" letter—ordering one of their victims to display some signal to show that the demand for money would be complied with!

The Italian's next sentence left no further doubt. "If you no giva da sign, you deada man by seex clock."

At the words, and the fierceness with which they were uttered, Jack felt a chill run up his spine. Had he followed his immediate impulse he would have fled. But determining to learn if possible who the letter was for, he waited.

"What numbah?" asked the negro.

"Feefity-nine Main."

The Italian restaurant! Another letter to Spanelli! The men he was after!

Jack waited to hear no more, but tiptoeing back about the corner, was off for the woods, jubilant at his success.

Indeed Jack was over jubilant—so jubilant that he forgot the necessity of caution, made a short cut across an open space in full view of the shanty, and half way was brought to a sudden realization of his mistake by the creak of an opening door. In consternation he at once saw he could not reach cover before being seen, and also that did he run, the Black-Handers would understand they had been discovered.

With quick presence of mind he recognized and instantly did the one thing possible. Turning, he headed back boldly for the cabin. The next instant the three Italians came into view, immediately discovered him, and halted. Secretly trembling, but with a cool front, Jack approached them as they stood, excitedly whispering.

"Would you kindly tell me the time?" he asked.

The three men exchanged glances, then, as at a signal, stepped forward and surrounded him. "Now, whata you want?" demanded one of them sharply, thrusting his dark face close to Jack's. Before Jack could repeat his question the shanty door opened and the negro appeared. Exclaiming angrily, he ran toward them.

"W'at he want? W'at he want now?" he demanded.

"He say, whata da time," repeated one of the Italians.

"W'at de time? He am a spy! A spy!" cried the negro. "In de house with him!" Jack sprang back, and turned to run. With a rush the negro and one of the foreigners were upon him, and despite



his terrified struggles he was dragged bodily into the shanty. There they flung him heavily into a chair, and gathered menacingly about him.

"Now boy, w'at yo' spyin' roun' heah fo'? Eh?" demanded the negro fiercely.

Instinctively Jack opened his lips to deny the charge, but closed them, and remained in dogged silence. Despite his peril, he felt he could not tell a deliberate falsehood. The negro repeated the question.

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"I simply asked them the time," said Jack evasively.

With a snarl one of the foreigners caught him by the shoulders and yanked him upright. "Tie heem!" he directed, and roughly two of the others drew Jack's hands behind him, and bound them with a cord. As one of the Italians then proceeded to tie a handkerchief about his ankles, Jack barely suppressed a cry of fright. But grimly he clenched his teeth, and not a sound escaped him as the negro then caught him up, carried him across the room, kicked open a door, and threw him upon the floor within.

For a few minutes Jack lay dazed, then turning on his side, he looked about him. By the dim light of a dusty window he saw he was in a small, roughly furnished bedroom. Before he had taken in further particulars, however, a sound of heated discussion in the outer room drew his attention.

"No, no! We can't taka da chance!" came the voice of one of the Italians. "Not wid dat boy!"

Filled anew with terror Jack struggled to a sitting position and began straining desperately at his bonds. A moment's effort caused his heart to sink. The knots were as taut as though made of wire.

Determinedly he continued to strain and pull, however, and presently, losing his balance, he rolled over on his side, and something hard pressed into his chest.

The dagger he had picked up! Quickly he saw the possibility of using it. Working again into a sitting position, he bent low and sought to reach inside his coat and seize the hilt of the knife with his teeth. But as often as he reached, the coat swung, and the hilt evaded him.

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Jack was not to be beaten, however. Getting to his knees, he bent far over, until his head almost touched the floor, and fell vigorously to shaking himself. At the second effort the dagger slipped out to the floor. Quickly then he got a firm hold on the end of the handle with his teeth, struggled again to a sitting position, drew his knees up as far as possible, and bending low between them, began stabbing at the handkerchief about his ankles with the point of the weapon.

At the first attempt the knife barely touched the handkerchief. He tried again, and just reached it. Throwing his head far back, to gain momentum, he lunged forward with all his strength. The keen point struck the linen squarely, there was a rip and tear—and his feet were free.

As the severed handkerchief fell from his ankles, the dagger, slipping from Jack's teeth, clattered to the floor. But the noisy discussion still going on without prevented its being heard; and promptly Jack turned to the problem of freeing his hands.

As they were tied behind him, this promised to be far more difficult. Indeed Jack's courage was beginning to fail him, when the method of freeing his ankles suggested a possibility. At once he essayed it. Rising to a kneeling position, he strained at his wrists for several minutes, then, bending far over, began working his hands down beneath him.

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It seemed as though they would never come, and again and again he had to pause for breath. Desperately he continued, and suddenly at last they slipped, and were under him, directly below his knees.

Throwing himself over on his side, he once more grasped the dagger hilt in his teeth, and as he lay, carefully aimed the point between his legs at the cord about his wrists, and gave a quick, hard thrust. At the first blow he struck the cord fairly, but only half severed the strand. Again he lunged, and the next moment he was free.

The heated debate was still in progress in the outer room, and nearly exhausted though he was, Jack immediately scrambled to his feet and tiptoed to the window. To his joy he discovered it was made of a sliding frame, only fastened by a loosely-driven nail. It required but a few minutes' work to remove this, and very cautiously he began sliding the window back.

Half way it went easily, without noise. Then it stuck. Carefully Jack put his shoulder to it. Suddenly, without warning, it gave, then stopped with a jar, and to his horror a broken pane shot from the frame and fell clattering to the floor.

From the other room came a shout and a rush of feet. In desperation Jack stepped back, and with a run fairly dove at the opening. His head and shoulders passed through, then he stuck. Behind him the door flew open. With a desperate wriggle he struggled through, and fell in a heap to the ground just as the negro reached the window and made a wild lunge for him. The next moment Jack was on his feet and off across the clearing like a hare.

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The four lawbreakers were quickly out of the house in full chase. Presently there was the report of a pistol, and a shrill "wheeeu" just over Jack's head. Ducking instinctively, but with grimly set lips, he rushed on. Again came the whine of a bullet, and again. With a final sprint Jack reached the cover of the woods in safety, darted to the brush-pile and recovered his camera, and on, straight through the trees for the spot at which he had hidden his wheel.

Love of outdoor life and sports now stood Jack in good stead. Despite the exhausting efforts of his escape, and the hard running amid the trees, over trunks and through undergrowth, he kept on at the top of his speed, and finally reached the road ahead of the nearest of his pursuers.

Rushing for his wheel, he dragged it forth, and quickly had it on the road. Not a moment too soon. As he sprang into the saddle there was a shout and a crash of bushes but a few feet from him. But throwing all his weight on the pedals, he shot away, and a moment after sped about a bend in the road—and was safe.

Jack would not have been a real boy had there not been considerable pride in his voice when, entering the "Star" office the following morning, he handed West, the reporter, two small photographs, neatly mounted, and said:

"Here are the pictures, Mr. West."

West sprang to his feet. "No! Great! Splendid!" he cried. "How did you do it, Jack?"

"But here—" Pushing Jack into a chair, he dropped back into his own, and caught up a pencil. "Give me the whole story, from beginning to end. If the police round up these fellows this morning we will run it in to-day's edition."

This, with the aid of Jack's snap-shots, the police did, capturing the entire band; and that afternoon's edition of the "Star" carried a two-column story of Jack's adventure with the Black-Handers, which, with the pictures, made what West declared "the biggest story of a month of Sundays."

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## X

### A RUNAWAY TRAIN

"Hurry in, Ward, or the lamp will be out!"

Alex, who had now been night operator at Foothills six months, closed the station door behind him, and laughingly flicked his rain-soaked cap toward the day operator, whom he had just come to relieve.

"Is it raining that hard? You look like a drowned rat for sure," said Saunders as he reached for his hat and coat. "Why didn't you stay at home, and 'phone down? I would have been glad to work for you—not."

"Wait until you are out in it, and you'll not laugh," declared Alex, struggling out of his dripping ulster. "It is the worst storm this spring."

"And wait until you see the fun you are going to have with the wire to-night, and you'll not indulge in an over-abundance of smiles. I haven't had a dot from the despatcher since six o'clock. Had to get clearance for Nineteen around by MQ, and now we've lost them."

"There is someone now," said Alex, as the instruments began clicking.

"It's somebody west. IC, I think. Yes; Indian Canyon," said Saunders, pausing as he turned to the door. "What is he after? He certainly can't make himself heard by X if we can't."

"X, X, X," rapidly repeated the sounder, calling Exeter, the despatching office. "X, X, X! Qk!"

Alex and Saunders looked at one another with a start. Several times the operator at Indian Canyon repeated the call, more urgently, then as hurriedly began calling Imken, the next station east of him.

"There must be something wrong," declared Alex, stepping to the instrument table. Saunders followed him.

"IM, IM, IC, Qk! Qk!" clicked the sounder.

"IM, IM—"

"I, I, IM," came the response, and the two operators at Foothills listened closely.

"A wild string of loaded ore cars just passed here," buzzed the instruments. "Were going forty miles an hour. They'll be down there in no time. If there's anything on the main line get it off. I can't raise X for orders."

The two listening operators exchanged glances of alarm, and anxiously awaited Imken's response. For a moment the sounder made a succession of inarticulate dots, then ticked excitedly, "Yes, yes! OK! OK!" and closed.

"What did he mean by that?" asked Saunders beneath his breath. "That there was something on the main track there?"

"Perhaps a switch engine cutting out ore empties. We'll know in a minute."

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The wire again snapped open, and whirred, "I got it off—the yard engine! Just in time! Here they come now! Like thunder!

"There—they're by! Are ten of them. All loaded. Going like an avalanche. Lucky thing the yard engine was—"

Sharply the operator at Indian Canyon broke in to hurriedly call Terryville, the next station east.

"But the runaways won't pass Terryville, will they?" Alex exclaimed. "Won't the grades between there and Imken pull them up?"

Saunders shook his head. "Ten loaded ore cars travelling at that rate would climb those grades."

"Then they will be down here—and in twenty or thirty minutes! And there's the Accommodation coming from the east," said Alex rapidly, "and we can't reach anyone to stop her!"

Saunders stared. "That's so. I'd forgotten her. But what can we do?" he demanded helplessly.

Terryville answered, and in strained silence they awaited his report. "Yes, they are coming. I thought it was thunder.

"Here they are now," he added an instant after.

"They're past!"

"They'll reach us! What shall we do?" gasped Saunders.

Alex turned from the table, and as the Indian Canyon operator hastily called Jakes Creek, the last station intervening, began striding up and down the room, thinking rapidly.

If they only had more battery—could make the current in the wire stronger! Immediately on the thought came remembrance of the emergency battery he had made the previous year at Watson Siding. He spun about toward the office water-cooler. But only to utter an exclamation of disappointment. This cooler was of tin—of course useless for such a purpose.

Hurriedly he began casting about for a substitute. "Billy, think of something we can make a big battery jar of!" he cried. "To strengthen the wire!"

"A battery? But what would we do for bluestone? I used the last yesterday!"

Alex returned to the table, and threw himself hopelessly into the chair.

At the moment the Jakes Creek operator answered his call, and received the message of warning.

"Say," said Saunders, "perhaps some of the other fellows on the wire have bluestone and the other stuff, and could make a battery!"

Alex uttered a shout. "That's it!" he cried, and springing to the telegraph key, as soon as the wire closed, called Indian Canyon. "Have you any extra battery material there?" he sent quickly.

"No. Why—"

Abruptly Alex cut him off and called Imken. He also responded in the negative. But from Terryville came a prompt "Yes. Why—"

"Have you one of those big stoneware water-coolers there?"

"Yes, but wh—"

"Do you know how to make a battery?"

"No."

"Well, listen—"

The instruments had suddenly failed to respond. A minute passed, and another. Five went by, and Alex sank back in the chair in despair. Undoubtedly the storm had broken the wire somewhere.

"Everything against us!" he declared bitterly. "And the runaways will be down here now in fifteen or twenty minutes. What can we do?"

"I can't think of anything but throwing the west switch," said Saunders. "And loaded, and going at the speed they are, they'll make a mess of everything on the siding. But that's the only way I can think of stopping them."

"If there was any way a fellow could get aboard the runaways—"

Alex broke off sharply. Would it not be possible to board the runaway train as he and Jack had boarded the engine on the day of the forest fire? Say, from a hand-car?

He started to his feet. "Billy, get me a lantern, quick!

"I'm going for the section-boss, and see if we can't board the runaways from the hand-car," he explained as he caught up and began struggling into his coat. "I did that once at Bixton—boarded an engine."

"Board it! How?"

"Run ahead of it, and let it catch us."

Saunders sprang for the lantern, lit it, and catching it up, Alex was out the door, and off across the tracks through the still pouring rain for the lights of the section foreman's house. Darting

through the gate, he ran about to the kitchen door, and without ceremony flung it open. The foreman was at the table, at his supper. He started to his feet.

"Joe, there is a wild ore train coming down from the Canyon," explained Alex breathlessly, "and the wire has failed east so we can't clear the line. Couldn't we get the jigger out and board the runaways by letting them catch us?"

An instant the section-boss stared, then with the promptitude of the old railroader seized his cap, exclaiming "Go ahead!" and together they dashed out to the gate, and across the tracks in the direction of the tool-house.

"Where did they start from? How many cars?" asked the foreman as they ran.

"Indian Canyon. Ten, and all loaded."

The section-man whistled. "They'll be going twenty-five or thirty miles an hour. We will be taking a big chance. But if we can catch them just over the grade beyond the sand-pits I guess we can do it. That will have slackened them.

"Here we are."

As they halted before the section-house door the boss uttered a cry. "I haven't the key!"

Alex swung the lantern about, and discovered a pile of ties. "Smash it in," he suggested, dropping the lantern. One on either side they caught up a tie, swayed back, and hurled it forward. There was a crash, and the door swung open.

Catching up the lantern, they dashed in, threw from the hand-car its collection of tools, placed the light upon it, ran it out, and swung it onto the rails.

"Do you hear them?" asked Alex as he threw off his coat. The foreman dropped to his knees and placed his ear to the rails, listened a moment, and sprang to his feet. "Yes, they're coming! Come on!

"Run her a ways first." They pushed the car ahead, quickly had it on the run, and springing aboard, seized the handles, and one on either side, began pumping up and down with all their strength.

As they neared the station the door opened and Saunders ran to the edge of the platform. "The wire came O K and I just heard Z pass Thirty-three," he shouted, "but couldn't make them hear me. He reported the superintendent's—"

They whirled by, and the rest was lost.

"Did you catch it?" shouted Alex above the roar of the car.

"I think he meant," shouted the foreman as he swung up and down, "superintendent's car ... attached to the Accommodation ... heard he was coming ... makes it bad.... We need every minute QQQ and Old Jerry ... the engineer ... 'll be breaking his neck ... to bring her ... through on time!

"Do you hear ... runaways yet?"

"No."



THEY WHIRLED BY, AND THE REST WAS LOST.

On they rushed through the darkness, bobbing up and down like jumping-jacks, the little car rumbling and screeching, and bounding forward like a live thing.

The terrific and unaccustomed strain began to tell on Alex. Perspiration broke out on his forehead, his muscles began to burn, and his breath to shorten.

"How much farther ... to the grade?" he panted.

"Here it is now. Six hundred yards to the top."

As they felt the resistance of the incline Alex began to weaken and gasp for breath. Grimly, however, he clenched his teeth, and fought on; and at last the section-man suddenly ceased working, and announced "Here we are. Let up." With a gasp of relief Alex dropped to a sitting position on the side of the car.

"There it comes," said the foreman a moment after, and listening Alex heard a sound as of distant thunder.

"How long before they'll be here?"

"Five minutes, perhaps. And now," said the section-boss, "just how are we going to work this thing?"

"Well, when we boarded the engine at Bixton," explained Alex, getting his breath, "we simply waited at the head of a grade until it was within about two hundred yards of us, then lit out just as hard as we could go, and as she bumped us, we jumped."

"All right. We'll do the same."

As the foreman spoke, the rain, which had decreased to a drizzle, entirely ceased, and a moment after the moon appeared. He and Alex at once turned toward the station.

Just beyond was a long, black, snake-like object, shooting along the rails toward them.

The runaway!

On it swept over the glistening irons, the rumble quickly increasing to a roar. With an echoing crash it flashed by the station, and on.

Nearer it came, the cars leaping and writhing; roaring, pounding, screeching.

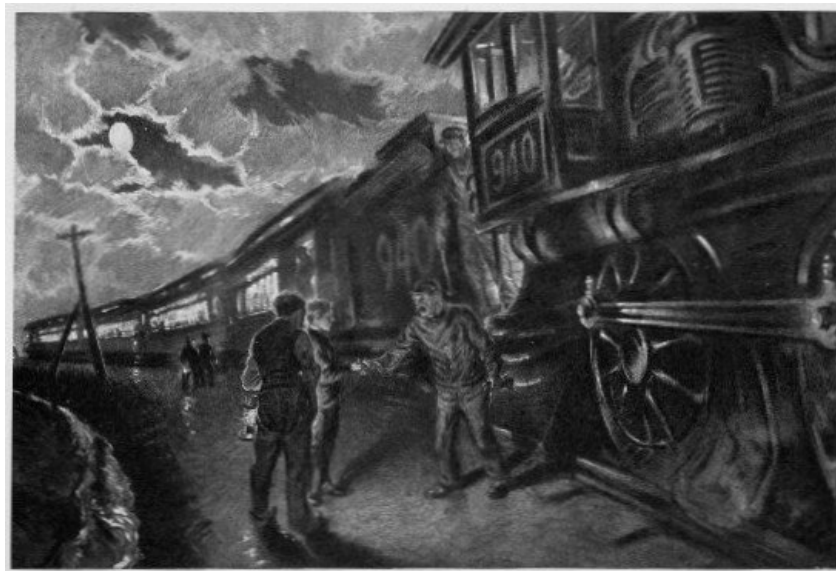
"Ready!" warned the foreman, springing to the ground behind the hand-car. Alex joined him, and gazing over their shoulder, watching, they braced themselves for the shove.

The runaways reached the incline, and swept on upward. Anxiously the two watched as they waited. Would the incline check them?

"I don't see that they're slowing," Alex said somewhat nervously.

"It won't tell until they are half way up the grade," declared the section-man. "But, get ready. We can't wait to see.

"Go!" he cried. Running the car forward, they leaped aboard, and again were pumping with all their might.



THE ENGINEER STEPPED DOWN FROM HIS CAB TO GRASP ALEX'S HAND.

For a few moments the roar behind them seemed to decrease. Then suddenly it broke on them afresh, and the head of the train swept over the rise.

"Now pull yourself together for an extra spurt when I give the word," shouted the foreman, who manned the forward handles, and faced the rear, "then turn about and get ready to jump."

Roaring, screaming, clanking, the runaways thundered down upon them.

"Hit it up!" cried the section-man. With every muscle tense they whirled the handles up and down like human engines.

"Let go! Turn about!"

Alex sprang back from the flying handles, and faced about. The foreman edged by them, and joined him.

Nearer, towering over them, rushed the leading ore car.

"Be sure and jump high and grab hard," shouted the foreman.

"Ready! *Jump!*"

With a bound they went into the air, and the great car flung itself at them. Both reached the top of the end-board with their outstretched hands, and gripped tenaciously. As they swung against it, it seemed the car would shake them off. But clinging desperately, they got their feet on the brake-beam, and in another moment had tumbled headlong within.

Alex sank down on the rough ore in a heap, gasping. The seasoned section-man, however, was on his feet and at the nearby hand-brake in a twinkling. Tightening it, he scrambled back over the bounding car to the next.

Ten minutes later, screeching and groaning as though in protest, the runaways came to a final stop.

Another ten minutes, and the engineer of the Accommodation suddenly threw on his air as he rounded a curve to discover a lantern swinging across the rails ahead of him.

"Hello there, Jerry! Say, you're not good enough for a passenger run," said the section foreman humorously as he approached the astonished engineer. "We're going to put you back pushing ore cars. There's a string here just ahead of you."

When he had explained the engineer stepped down from his cab to grasp Alex's hand. "Oh, it was more the foreman than I," Alex declared. "I couldn't have worked it alone."

A moment later the superintendent appeared. "Why, let me see," he exclaimed on seeing Alex. "Are you not the lad I helped fix up an emergency battery at Watson Siding last spring? And who has been responsible for two or three other similar clever affairs?"

"My boy, young as you are, my name's not Cameron if I don't see that you have a try-out at the division office before the month is out," he announced decisively. "We need men there with a head like yours."



THE WAIT WAS NOT LONG.

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## XI

### THE HAUNTED STATION

True to the division superintendent's promise, a month following the incident of the runaway ore train, Alex was transferred to the despatching office at Exeter. It was the superintendent himself who on the evening of his arrival presented him for duty to the chief night despatcher; and a few minutes later, having been initiated into the mysteries of directing and recording the movements of trains, Alex was shown to his wire.

"It is a short line—only as far as the Midway freight junction," the chief explained; "but if you make good here, you will soon be given something bigger.

"And, by the way, take your time in sending to the operator at the Junction," he added. "He's a

rather poor receiver, but was the only man we could get to go there, on account of that so-called 'haunting' business."

"Oh, has the 'ghost' appeared there again?" inquired Alex with interest. For the "haunting" of the Midway Junction station had been a subject of much discussion on the main-line wire a few weeks back.

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"Yes, two nights ago. And like the four men there before him, the night man left next morning. It is a strange affair. But I think the man there now will stick."

At midnight Alex called Midway Junction, and sent the order starting north the last freight for the night. Fifteen minutes later the operator at MJ suddenly called, and clicked, "That 'Thing' is here again. It's walking up and down the platform just outside."

"There it is now!" he sent excitedly. "And twice I've jumped out, and the moment I opened the door it was gone!"

"There it is again!"

"Now it's on the roof!" he announced a few moments after. "Rolling something down—just like the other chaps said! Gee, I'm no coward, but this thing is getting my nerve."

Though himself now considerably excited, Alex sought to reassure the MJ man. "But you know there must be some simple explanation to it," he sent. "No one really believes in ghosts these days. Just don't allow yourself to be frightened."

"Yes, I know," ticked the sounder. "That's what I told myself before I came. It seems vastly different, though, right here on the spot, and all by yourself, and it dark as pitch outside. If there was only someone else—"

The wire abruptly closed, a moment remained so, then suddenly opened, and in signals so excitedly made that Alex could only guess at some of them, he read: "Did you hear that? Did you get that?"

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"Hear what? The wire was closed to me."

"Clooossclosed! Goed 6eavns! Whiiiiiiii Whyyy—" By an effort the frightened operator at the other end of the wire pulled himself together, and sent more plainly:

"When I stopped that time someone broke in here and said: 'Ha ha! Hi hi! Look behind! Look beh—'"

Again the wire closed, again opened.

"Theeeereit waaawas again!"

Alex called the chief. "Mr. Allen, that 'ghost,' or whatever it is—"

Once more the instruments broke out in an almost inarticulate whirr, and with difficulty together they picked out the words: "... sounds in the next room ... yelling and groaning just other side partition ... whispering at me through a knot-hole ... an eye looking at me ... stand it any longer ... right now! G. B. (Good-by)!"

Grasping the key, the chief sent quickly, "Look here! Wait a moment! You there?"

There was no response. Again he called, and gave it up. "No use. He's off like the rest of them. Well, I'm not sure I blame him. There must be something wrong. But it beats me!"

As he was about to move away the chief turned back and handed Alex a letter. "I overlooked giving it to you when you came in," he explained.

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"From Jack Orr!" said Alex with pleasure. A moment later he uttered a second exclamation, again read a paragraph, and with a delighted "The very thing!" hastened after the chief.

"Mr. Allen, this letter is from a friend of mine, a first class commercial operator, who wants to get into railroad telegraphing, and who would be just the man to send to MJ.

"He is a regular amateur detective, and has all kinds of pluck," Alex went on, and in a few words recounted Jack's clearing up of the cash-box mystery at Hammerton, the part he played in the breaking up of the band of Black-Handers, and his resourcefulness when the wires were cut at Oakton.

The chief smiled and reached for a message blank. "Thank you, Ward," he said. "That's the man we want exactly. How soon can he come?"

"He says he could take a place with us right away, sir."

"Good. We'll have him there if possible to-morrow evening," decided the chief, writing.

Needless to say Jack was delighted when early the following morning at Hammerton he received the telegraphed appointment to the station at Midway. At once resigning at the Hammerton commercial office, he hurried home, by noon was on the train, and arrived at Midway Junction at 7 o'clock.

Entering the telegraph room, he called Exeter. "Well, here I am, Al," he ticked, when Alex himself responded. "And I'm ever so much obliged to you, old boy, for getting me the position."

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"Don't mention it. And anyway," responded Alex, "you had better save your thanks until you learn just what you are up against there. I didn't have time to write—but the former man left last night, simply on the run." And continuing, Alex explained.

"So you see, you were called in as a sort of expert."

"Hi," laughed Jack. "Well, I'll do the best I can. But probably the 'ghost' won't show up again now for a month or so?"

"On the contrary, it is more likely to return soon," clicked Alex. "That has been the way every time so far—three or four appearances in succession. So you had better prepare for business at once."

Alex's prediction was realized two nights later. A few minutes after the last freight had gone north, and Jack had been left entirely alone in the big station, he heard light footfalls outside on the platform. Going to the window, he peered out into the darkness, and seeing nothing, turned to the door. As he opened it the footsteps ceased.

Surprised, Jack returned and secured a lantern, and passed out and down the long platform. From end to end it was deserted and silent.

He returned to the office. Scarcely had he closed the door when again came the sound of footsteps.

Jack paused and listened. They were light and quick, like those of a woman—up and down, up and down, now pausing a moment, now briskly resuming, as though the walker was anxiously waiting for someone.

On tiptoe Jack went back to the door, suddenly flung it open and flashed the lantern. As quickly the steps had ceased. Not a moving object was to be seen.

Immensely puzzled, Jack withdrew, and stepped to the instrument table. As he reached toward the telegraph key from almost directly overhead broke out a thundering rumble, as of a heavy wooden ball bounding down the roof.

Catching up the lantern, he once more rushed forth. Immediately, as before, all was silence. Nervous at last, in spite of himself, Jack hesitated, then resolutely set forth on a complete round of the station and freight shed, throwing the lantern light upon the roof, through the dusty windows, and into every nook and corner. Nowhere was there a sign of life.

He returned. The moment he closed the office door the rumble broke out afresh.

Jack sprang to the instruments, called Exeter, and sent rapidly, "Al, that 'ghost' is here, and in spite of me, is beginning to get on my—"

The line opened, then sharply clicked: "Look behind! Look behind!"

With a cry Jack was on his feet, and had started for the door. Half way he pulled up, with a determined effort controlled his panic, and returned to the key. "I suppose you didn't hear that, Al?" he asked.

"Not a letter."

"Well, good gracious, what—*Oh!*"

A cold chill shot up Jack's back. The cause was a low, long-drawn moan, apparently from just the other side of the wooden partition, in the freight room. Again it came, then suddenly ceased to give place to a low, tense whispering immediately behind him. Jack sprang about, and leaped to his feet. Within touch of him was a large knot-hole.

And was there not an eye at it? Peering at him?

He sprang toward it.

No! Nothing! The whispering, too, had ceased.

Thoroughly shaken, Jack again turned for his hat—and again faltered between the chair and the door.

"You there, Jack?" clicked Alex. "Hang on, old boy. Keep your nerve."

Clenching his teeth and gripping his hands Jack regained control of himself, and returned to the instruments. "Thanks, Al," he sent. "I was about all in, sure enough. But I am OK again now, and going to stick it out unless 'they,' or 'it,' or whatever it is, lugs me off bodily."

"That's the talk," said Alex encouragingly. "I knew you'd make good. Just keep on telling yourself there must be some natural explanation somehow, and you'll win out OK."

"Yes, that's my cue—'a natural explanation somehow,'" Jack repeated to himself the following afternoon as he left the big railroad boarding-house, a half mile from the station, and set out for a walk, to think things over.

"And I believe the starting point is that talk on the wire. That certainly is the work of an operator.

"Now, why is it heard only at this office?"

"Say! Could it be on the loop? A cut-off arrangement on the station loop?"

"I'll go down and look into that right now," declared Jack, and turning about, headed for the station.

The platforms and the big freight shed were alive with the bustle of the freight handlers, loading and unloading cars, trundling boxes and bales from one part of the platform to another and in and out of the big shed; and unnoticed, Jack discovered where the wires from the pole passed in



under the roof. Entering the shed, he proceeded carefully to follow their course along the beams toward the telegraph room. He had almost reached the partition, and was beginning to think his conclusion perhaps too hastily drawn, when a few feet from the wall, where the light from an opposite window struck the roof, he caught two unmistakable gleams of copper. With a suppressed cry he made his way directly beneath, and at once saw that the insulation of both wires of the loop had been cut through.

"Right! I was right!" exclaimed Jack jubilantly beneath his breath. "And I can see in a minute how it's done. Whoever it is, simply gets up there somehow, and ticks one wire against the other—and of course the instruments inside click as they are alternately cut off and cut on, and the rest of the line is not affected!"

"Good! I'm on the trail.

"But what can be the object of it all?"

Jack turned to look about him, and as in answer the lettering of a nearby box caught his eye:

"VALUABLE! HANDLE WITH CARE!"

"Freight stealing! Could that be it?"

On reporting for duty that evening Jack called Alex on the wire and asked if any freight had recently been reported missing from the Midway depot.

"No, but I understand some valuable stuff has been mysteriously disappearing at Claxton and Eastfield," was the reply.

Jack was considerably disappointed; but before giving up this line of investigation he determined to study the freight records of the station, to discover whether any freight for the two places mentioned by Alex had passed through Midway. A few minutes' search produced the record of a valuable shipment of silk to Claxton. A moment later he found another.

When presently he found still others, and several to Eastfield, he hurried back to the wire and calling Alex asked the nature of the goods lost track of at those stations, and breathlessly awaited the reply.

"I'll ask," said Alex—"Silverware and silk. Mostly silk."

Jack uttered a shout. "Hurrah, Alex," he whirred, "I'm on the track of our friend the 'ghost.' But keep mum."

"And now the question is," he told himself, leaning back in his chair, "how do they work it?"

The answer to the query came very unexpectedly as Jack left the station office at daybreak. Strolling down the front platform, where several men already were at work unloading a car, he inadvertently got in the way of a loaded truck. On the sudden cry of the truckman he sprang aside, tripped, and fell headlong against a large, square packing-case. As he did so, he distinctly heard from within a sharp "Oh!"

Only with difficulty did Jack avoid crying out, and scrambling to his feet, hastened away, that his discovery might not be suspected by the man in the box.

The whole mystery was now clear. The "ghost" was a freight thief, who had himself shipped, in a box, to some point which would necessitate his being transferred and held over night at the freight junction. He played "ghost" either to frighten the operator away, or to lead to the belief that any noises overheard were caused by "spirits," then overhauled the valuable freight in the shed, took what he wanted with him into his own box (which supposedly he could open and close from the inside), and was shipped away with it the following morning. The rifled packages, carefully re-sealed, also went on to their several destinations, and the blame of the theft was laid elsewhere.

Jack was not long in deciding upon his next move. Coming down from the boarding-house before the sheds had been closed that afternoon, he noted where the box containing the unsuspected human freight had been placed, and selecting a window at the far end of the shed, seized a favorable moment to quietly loosen its catch.

It was near midnight, and Jack was once more the sole guardian of the station when he took the next step. And despite a certain nervousness, now that the exciting moment was at hand, he found considerable amusement in carrying it out.

It was nothing less than making up a dummy imitation of himself asleep on a cot in a corner of the telegraph room—as a precaution against the "ghost" peering within to learn the effect of his "haunting."

In making the dummy Jack used a brown fur cap for the head, a glimpse of which under an old hat looked remarkably like his own brown head. A collection of old overalls and record books carefully arranged formed the body, and his own shoes the feet.

When over the whole he threw his overcoat, the deception was complete. Chuckling at the subterfuge, Jack lost no time in slipping forth for the next step in his program.

Tiptoeing down the platform to the window whose latch he had loosened, he softly raised it, listened, and climbing through, dropped noiselessly to the floor. Feeling his way in the darkness amid the bales and boxes, he reached a nook behind a piano-case he had previously noted, and settling down, prepared to await the appearance of the "spectre."

The wait was not long. Scarcely had he made himself comfortable when from the direction of

the big packing-case came the muffled sound of a screw-driver. Soon there followed a noise as of a board being softly shoved aside, then a step on the floor. Simultaneously there was the crackle of a match, and peering forth Jack momentarily made out a thin, clean-shaven face bending over a dark-lantern. But quickly he drew back with a start of fright as the man turned and came directly toward him.

A few feet away, however, the intruder halted, and again peering cautiously forth Jack discovered the lantern, closely muffled, on the floor, and beside it the dim figure of the man working with his hands at a plank. As Jack watched, wondering, the plank came up. Laying it aside carefully, the stranger stepped down into the opening, recovered the lantern, and disappeared.

"Now what under the sun is he up to?" exclaimed Jack to himself.

From the platform outside came the sound of footsteps. Jack started, listened a moment, and uttered a low cry of triumph. At last he understood.

"Well, what a dolt I am," he laughed. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"The fellow is simply out beneath the platform, making sounds against the under side of the planking—probably with a stick!"



JACK MADE OUT A THIN, CLEAN-SHAVEN FACE BENDING OVER A DARK-LANTERN.

Jack was still chuckling delightedly over this simple explanation of the mysterious "walking" when the noise ceased, and the light of the lantern returned.

On reappearing, the unknown dragged after him a long pole. As Jack watched, puzzling over its use, the "spectre" hoisted the pole to his shoulder, cautiously picked his way amid the freight to the telegraph-room partition, and mounted a large box.

And then, while Jack fairly shook with internal laughter, he laboriously raised the pole, and began bumping and scraping it up and down the under side of the roof.

"Natural explanations!" bubbled Jack through his handkerchief. "And imagine anyone being frightened at it—beating it for home!"

When the man on the box had concluded his second "demonstration," and descended, Jack had cause to thank himself for his precaution in leaving the dummy. Evidently puzzled at the silence in the operating-room, the man placed his eye to the knot-hole in the partition, and peered through. Muttering something in surprise, he listened closely, and looked again, while Jack looked on, shaking, and holding his mouth. Apparently at last satisfied that the "operator" within was asleep at his post, the intruder turned about and threw a shaft of light up toward the wires of the loop. Expectantly Jack waited. Had he also guessed right here?

But to his disappointment, after a brief debate with himself, the "ghost" muttered, "If he's asleep, what's the use?" And catching up the pole, he returned it to the hole in the floor, and replaced the plank.

Then, in final confirmation of Jack's deductions, the intruder turned his attention to the packages of merchandise about him, speedily selected a box, and proceeded to open it.

For several hours the unsuspecting freight robber worked, frequently returning to the crack in the partition to assure himself that the negligent "operator" there was still in the land of dreams, each time to Jack's great amusement. And finally, having secured all the booty he could handle, and having carefully closed the cases from which it had been taken, he moved the plunder into his own box, crept in after; again came the squeak of the screw-driver—and the robbery was complete.

At once Jack crept from his place of concealment, and back to the window; dropped out, and was off on the run for the boarding-house. And twenty minutes after he returned with the freight-house foreman and several freight hands, armed, and with lanterns.

Entering by the door, he led them directly to the robber's box.

Sharply the foreman kicked at it, and called, "Hello, in there! Your little game is up, my friend! Come out!"

There was no response, and he drew his revolver. "Open up quick, or I'll shoot!"

"Oh, all right! All right!" cried a muffled voice hurriedly.

The next moment the Midway Junction "ghost" stepped grimly from his box, and stood before them.

"But look here, youngster," ticked the chief despatcher, who some minutes later followed Alex Ward on the wire in congratulating Jack on the solution of the mystery, "don't you talk too much about this business, or first thing you know they'll be taking you from the telegraph force, and adding you to the detective department. We want you ourselves."

"No fear," laughed Jack. "I might try a matter like this once in a while, but I want to work up as an operator, not a detective."

"You'll work up OK," declared the chief.

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## XII

### IN A BAD FIX, AND OUT

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"Good evening, young man!"

With a start Jack turned toward the quietly opened door of the telegraph-room to discover a short, dark, heavily-bearded man, over whose eyes was pulled a soft gray hat.

"I suppose you don't have many visitors at the station at this time of night?" said the stranger, entering.

"No; but you are quite welcome. Have a chair," responded Jack courteously.

To the young operator's surprise, the stranger drew the chair immediately before him, and seating himself, leaned forward secretively. "My name is Watts," he began, in a low voice, "and I've come on business. For you are the lad who worked out that 'ghost' mystery here, and caused the capture of the freight robber, aren't you?"

"Yes," confirmed Jack, in further wonder.

"I thought so. I thought as much. I know a clever lad when I see one. And that was one of the cleverest bits of detective work I ever heard of," declared Mr. Watts, with a winning smile. "If the railroad detectives had done their work as well, the whole freight-stealing gang would have been landed. As it was none of the rest were caught, were they?"



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THE STRANGER DREW THE CHAIR IMMEDIATELY BEFORE HIM,  
AND SEATING HIMSELF, LEANED FORWARD SECRETIVELY.

Instead of being pleased, the man's flattery and ingratiating manner had ruffled Jack, and briefly he answered, "No, sir."

"No. I knew that already. I was one of them myself."

At this startling statement Jack stared. "I beg your pardon, sir?" he exclaimed.

"I was a member of that gang myself," repeated Jack's strange caller, again smiling broadly. "Don't you think I look the part?" So saying, he pushed his hat back from his face.

Jack had no doubt of it. The small dark eyes were repellent with low cunning and greed. Instinctively he half turned to cast a glance toward the door. At once the smile disappeared, and the self-confessed law-breaker threw open his coat and significantly tapped the butt of a revolver. "No. You just sit still and listen," he ordered sharply; but immediately again smiling, added, "though there needn't be anything of this kind between two who are going to be good friends.

"Listen. What I called for was this: We want another man in the gang in place of Joe Corry—that is the man you caught.

"And we decided to invite you."

Jack fairly caught his breath. "Why, you must be joking, or—"

"Or crazy, eh? Not quite. I was never more serious in my life. Listen!" The speaker leaned forward earnestly. "After your spoiling our little 'ghost' game here the railroad people would never look for us starting in again at the same place. Never in the world—would they? And likewise, after your causing the capture of Corry, they would never in the world suspect you of working with us. Do you see the point?"

"And all you would have to do would be to keep your ears closed, and not hear any noises out in the freight-room at night."

"And for doing that," concluded the law-breaker, "we will give you a regular salary of \$25 a month. We'll send it by mail, or bank it for you at any bank you name, and no one will know where it comes from.

"What do you say?"

Jack drew back indignantly. "Most certainly not," he began. Then suddenly he hesitated.

As the freight-robber had said, the authorities had been unable to obtain a single clue to the whereabouts or identity of the remainder of the freight-stealing gang. Should he accept the man's offer, came the thought, undoubtedly, sooner or later, he would be able to bring about the capture of every one of them.

Immediately following, however, there recurred to Jack one of his mother's warnings—"that even the appearance of evil is dangerous, always, as well as wrong."

But this would be quite different, Jack argued to himself—to cause the capture of criminals. And what possible danger could there be in it? No one would believe for an instant that I would go into such a thing seriously, he told himself.

"All right, Mr. Watts," he said aloud. "I'll do it."

"Good! It's a go!" The freight-stealer spoke with satisfaction, and rising, grasped Jack's hand. "I told you I knew a clever boy when I saw one—and that means a wise one.

"Well, that's all there is to it, excepting the money matter. Where will we send that? Here?"

Jack responded with an effort. "Yes, you may as well send it to me here."

"All right. Look for it at the end of the month," said Watts, proceeding to the door.

"Remember, you are dumb. That's all. Good night."

Jack's sense of honor was not long in convincing him that he had made a mistake in entering into such a bargain, even with a law-breaker. A dozen times during the days that followed he would have given anything to have been able to wipe out the agreement.

Unhappily this dissatisfaction with himself was to prove but a minor result of the misstep.

Shortly after he had relieved the day operator at the station a week later he was surprised by the appearance of one of the road detectives, and with him a stranger.

"Good evening, Orr," said the detective in a peculiar tone. "Let me make you acquainted with Sheriff Bates."

Jack started, and glanced from one to the other. "Is there anything wrong?" he asked.

"Very slightly. Your little game is up, that's all. Your older partner has given the thing away, and we have just found the watch in your room at the boarding-house," announced the detective.

"Given the thing away? The watch? Why, what do you mean?" exclaimed Jack in alarm.

"Oh, come! Watts has squealed, and we found the watch hidden, just as he said, in the mattress of your bed up at the house."

In a flash Jack saw it all. Watts' offer had been a trap! A mere trap to get him into trouble, probably in revenge!

He sprang to his feet. "It's not true! It's false! Whatever it is, it's false! I did see Watts, and he asked me to go in with them, but I only agreed so as to learn who they were, so we could

capture them!"

To his utter dismay the two officers only laughed drily.

"No, no! That's quite too thin," declared the detective. "Read this."

Blankly Jack took the letter, and read:

"Chief Detective,

"Middle Western R. R.

"DEAR SIR: The young night operator at Midway Junction has joined the freight-stealing gang that Corry belonged to, and if you will look under the mattress in his room at the railroad boarding-house you will find a watch and chain of the lot we stole at Claxton two weeks ago. I gave it to him last Friday night. I came to Midway by the Eastfield freight, and when I saw another operator in the station office, I started up towards the boarding-house, and met Orr coming down. I mention this to show my story is all straight.

"I heard he was going to give us away as soon as he had got enough loot himself, and claim he only went in with us to get us. That is why I am showing him up.

"Yours truly,  
"W. WATTS."

And the day operator *had* worked for him that Friday evening, while he was at the landlady's daughter's birthday party! And he *had* come down to the station at about the time the Eastfield night freight came in!

Jack sank back in the chair, completely crushed.

"Changed your mind, eh?" remarked the sheriff sarcastically.

Jack shook his head, but said nothing. What could he say!

"If it's 'false,' as you claim, how do you explain our finding the watch in your room?" demanded the detective.

"I don't know. Someone must have put it there."

"Very likely. It wouldn't have crept up stairs and got under the bed itself. And I suppose you will deny also that you saw Watts on the night of the party, despite the fact that he could not otherwise have known the unusual hour you came down to the station that night. Eh?"

"I never saw him after the night he called here," affirmed Jack earnestly, but hopelessly.

"Well, you will have to prove it," declared the sheriff. And to Jack's unspeakable horror he was informed he must be taken into custody.

Needless to say, the news of Jack's arrest, and of his early trial at Eastfield, the county seat, came as a tremendous shock to Alex, at Exeter. Of course he thoroughly disbelieved in Jack's guilt, despite the net of circumstantial evidence which, according to the newspapers, had been woven about his friend; and morning and afternoon he read and re-read the papers, in the hope of something more favorable to Jack developing.

It was through this close reading that Alex finally came upon the discovery that was to draw him into the case himself, and to have so important a bearing on the outcome of the trial.

Early in the evening preceding the day set for the hearing, Alex, before starting work on his wire, was studying the paper as usual. For the second time he was reading the letter from the man Watts that had had such serious results for Jack.

Suddenly as he read Alex started, again read a portion of the letter, a moment thought deeply, and with a cry sprang to his feet and hastened to the chief despatcher's desk.

"Mr. Allen," he said excitedly, "in this letter Watts says he reached Midway Junction that Friday night by the Eastfield freight, and that he met and gave Jack Orr the watch after that.

"Now I remember distinctly that it was Jack reported the arrival of the Eastfield freight that night. She was twenty minutes late, and I recall asking if she was in sight yet, and his reply that she had just whistled.

"That means Jack was back at the station before the time at which Watts claims he met him!"

"Ward, why in the world didn't you think of this before?" the chief exclaimed. "It is the most important piece of evidence your friend could have.

"Call Eastfield right away on the long-distance, and get Orr's lawyer, and tell him."

Alex hastily did so, and a few minutes after he heard the lawyer's voice from the distant town, and quickly told his story.

To his surprise the lawyer for a moment remained silent, then said slowly, "Of course I would like to believe that. In fact it would make an invaluable piece of evidence—practically conclusive.

"But really now, how could you be sure it was Orr you heard? What possible difference can there be between the ticks made over a telegraph wire by one distant operator, and those made by another?"

"Why, all the difference in the world, sometimes, sir," declared Jack. "Any operator would tell you that. I would recognize Jack Orr's sending anywhere I heard it."

But the lawyer at the other end was still incredulous. "Well," he said at last, "if the jury was made up of telegraph operators, perhaps your claim might go. As it is, however—"

"Say, I have it!" cried Alex. "Let me give a demonstration right there in court of my ability to identify the sending of as many different operators as we can get together, including Jack Orr. Could you arrange that?"

The lawyer was interested at last. "But could you really do it? Are you really that sure?"

"I am absolutely positive," declared Alex.

"Then you come right ahead," was the decisive response. "Come down here by the first train in the morning, and bring two or three other operators, and the necessary instruments.

"And if you can prove what you claim, I'll guarantee that your friend is clear."

"Hurrah! Then he is clear!" cried Alex joyously.

Accompanied by three other operators from the Exeter office, and with a set of telegraph instruments and a convenient dry-battery, Alex reached the court-room at Eastfield at 10 o'clock the following morning.

The trial, which had attracted a crowd that packed the building to its capacity, already had neared its conclusion. Jack's demeanor, and that of his father, who was beside him, quickly informed Alex that matters were looking serious for his chum. Confidently he waited, however, and at last the court clerk arose and called his name.

The preliminary questions were passed, and Jack's attorney at once proceeded. "Now Alex," he said, "this letter here, which has been put in evidence, declares that the writer, Watts, went to Midway Junction by the Eastfield freight on the Friday night in question, and that he then met the defendant coming down to the station from his boarding-house, and gave him the watch.

"Have you anything to say to this?"

"Yes, sir. Jack Orr was at the telegraph instruments in the Midway Junction station several minutes before the Eastfield freight reached there that night. It was he who reported her coming over the wire to me at Exeter."

The lawyer for the prosecution looked up with surprise, then smiled in amusement, while Jack and his father started, and exchanged glances of new hope.

"You are positive it was the defendant you heard over the wire?" asked Mr. Brown.

"Positive, sir."

"If necessary could you give a demonstration here in court of your ability to identify the defendant's transmitting on a telegraph instrument?"

"Yes, sir, I could."

When the lawyer for the other side arose to cross-examine Alex he smiled somewhat derisively.

"You are a friend of the defendant, are you not?" he asked significantly.

"Yes, sir; and so know his sending over the wire unusually well," responded Alex, cleverly turning the point of the question.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and put the next question with sarcasm. "And, now, do you mean to stand there and tell this court that the clicks—the purely mechanical clicks—made over a telegraph wire by an operator miles away will sound different to the clicks made by any other operator?"

"I do," said Alex quietly. "And I am ready to demonstrate it."

"Oh, you are, are you? And how, pray?"

"Three other operators from the Exeter office are in the court-room, with a set of instruments and a battery. Let them place the instruments on the table down there; blindfold me, then have them and Jack Orr by turns write something on the key. I'll identify every one of them before he sends a half-dozen words."

A wave of surprise, then smiles of incredulity passed over the crowded room.

"Very well," agreed the lawyer readily. "Set up the instruments."

The three Exeter operators came forward, and the prosecutor, producing a handkerchief, himself stepped into the witness-box and proceeded to bind Alex's eyes. That done, to make doubly sure, he turned Alex face to the wall.

When the lawyer returned to the counsel-table the proceedings were momentarily interrupted by a whispered consultation with his assistant, at the end of which, while the spectators wondered, the latter hastened from the room.

Curiosity as to the junior counsel's mission was quickly forgotten, however, as the prosecutor then called Jack Orr to the table beside the telegraph instruments, and stood Jack and the three Exeter operators in a row before him.

"Now," said he in a low voice, "each of you, as I touch you, step quietly to the key, and send these words: 'Do you know who this is?'"

A moment the lawyer paused, while spectators, judge and jury waited in breathless silence, then reaching out, he lightly touched one of the Exeter men.

"Do you know who this is?" clicked the sounder.

All eyes turned toward Alex. Without a moment's hesitation he answered, "Johnson."

The operator nodded, and a flutter passed over the court-room.

"Huh! A guess," declared the prosecutor audibly, and still smiling confidently, he touched another of the Exeter operators. The instruments repeated the question.

"Bradley," said Alex promptly.

The flutter of surprise was repeated. Quickly the prosecutor made as though to touch the third Exeter man, then abruptly again touched Bradley.

"Bradley again," said Alex.

A ripple like applause swept over the crowded room. With tightening lips the prosecutor turned again toward the third Exeter operator. At the moment the door opened, and he paused as his assistant reappeared, with him two young ladies.

The newcomers were operators from the local commercial telegraph office.

At once Jack's lawyer, recognizing the prosecution's purpose, was on his feet in protest. For of course the young women were utter strangers to the blindfolded boy in the witness-stand.

The judge promptly motioned him down, however, and with a smile of anticipated triumph the prosecutor greeted the two local operators, and whispering his instructions to one of them, led her to the telegraph key.

In a silence that was painful the sounder once more rattled out its inquiry, "Do you know who this is?"

Alex started, hesitated, made as though to speak, again paused, then suddenly cried, "That's a stranger!"

"And it's awfully like the light, jumpy sending of a girl!"

A spontaneous cheer broke from the excited spectators. "Silence! Silence!" shouted the judge.

It was not necessary to repeat the order, for the disconcerted prosecutor, whirling about, had grasped Jack Orr by the arm and thrust him toward the key.



"AND IT'S AWFULLY LIKE THE LIGHT, JUMPY SENDING OF A GIRL!"

The final test had come.

Jack himself realized the significance of the moment, and for an instant hesitated, trembling. Then determinedly gripping himself he reached forward, grasped the key, and sent,

"Do you know—"

"Orr! Orr! That's he!" cried Alex.

With a shout the entire court-room was on its feet, women waving their handkerchiefs and men cheering wildly again and again. And equally disregarding the etiquette of the court, Alex tore the handkerchief from his eyes, and leaping down beside Jack, fell to shaking his hand as though he would never let go, while Jack vainly sought to express himself, and to keep back the tears that came to his eyes.

Ten minutes later, with order restored, Jack was formally declared "Not guilty," and with Alex on one side and his father on the other, left the room, free and vindicated.

"Well, good-by, my lad," said Mr. Orr, as he and Alex that evening dropped Jack off their

returning train at Midway Junction. "And I suppose it is unnecessary to warn you against understandings with such men as Watts in the future, no matter for what purpose."

"Hardly, Dad," responded Jack earnestly. "No more agreements of any kind for me unless they are on the levellest kind of level, no matter who they are with, or for what purpose."

## XIII

### PROFESSOR CLICK, MIND READER

Some months previously Alex and Jack had arranged to take their two weeks' vacation at the same time, and to spend one week at Haddowville, Jack's home, and the other at Bixton.

The long looked-for Monday had at length arrived, early that morning Jack had joined Alex at Exeter, and the two boys, aboard the Eastern Mail, were now well on their way to Haddowville.

For some minutes Alex's part in the animated conversation of the two chums had waned. Presently, plucking Jack's sleeve, he quietly directed his companion's attention to the double seat across the aisle of the car.

"Jack, watch that soldier's fingers," he said in a low voice. "What's the matter with him?"

The soldier in question, in the uniform of an infantry regular, sat facing them, beside a stout elderly gentleman. Opposite the first soldier was a second, in a similar uniform; and sharing the seat with the latter, and facing the old gentleman, was a decidedly pretty young girl.

It was the first soldier's left hand, however, which attracted the boys' particular attention. Resting in his lap, and partly concealed by a newspaper, the hand was so doubled that the thumb stood upright. And this latter member was bobbing and wagging up and down, now slowly, now quickly, in most curious fashion.

"Perhaps it's St. Vitus' dance," ventured Jack.

"But that affects the whole body, or at least the whole limb, doesn't it?"

Jack, who sat next the window, leaned slightly forward. "The other soldier is watching him," he said. "Maybe the fellow with the wiggling thumb is out of his mind, and this one is taking him somewhere. He is watching his hand."

Silently the boys continued to regard the curious proceeding.

Suddenly the thumb became quiet, there was the rattle of a paper in the hands of the second soldier, and in turn his thumb became affected with the wagging. In a moment the boys understood.

The two soldiers were army signallers, and were carrying on a silent conversation, using their thumbs as they would a flag.

Jack and Alex looked at one another and laughed softly. "We're bright, eh?" Alex remarked.

"Let us watch when the other starts again—we can't see this chap's hand well enough—and see if we can't read it," suggested Jack. "That one-flag signal system is based on the telegraph dot and dash code, you know. And it's not likely they are speaking of anything private—only amusing themselves."

The paper opposite again covered the first soldier's hand, and observing closely, after a few minutes the boys were able to interpret the strokes of the wagging thumb with ease. They corresponded precisely to the strokes of a telegraph sounder, and of course were very much slower.

"... not much. I saw her first," they read. "You have three girls at K now.... Get out. I'll tell Maggie O'Rorke, and she'll pick your eyes out.... No, sir. You can have the two old maids just back of you, and the fat party with the red hair. That's your taste anyway.... If you spoke she'd freeze you so you'd never thaw out."

The two boys exchanged glances, and chuckled in amusement.

"Say, look at the gaudy nose on that old chap across the aisle," went on the wagging thumb. "Talk about danger signals! They ought to hire him to sit on the cow-catcher foggy nights.... I wouldn't like to pay for all the paint it took to color it.... Plain whiskey, I guess. You can see what you are coming to if you don't look out.... What's the matter with that baby back there? Is the woman lynching it, or is it lynching the woman?... It's not, either. It's just like your high tenor, singing the Soldier's Farewell. Only better. More in tune.... Yes, if they knew what we'd been saying about them there'd be a riot. I wouldn't give much for your hair when the two old ladies behind got through with it."

At this point, unable to resist the temptation, Alex nudged Jack, drew a pencil from his pocket, and slyly tapped on the metal of the seat-arm the two letters of the telegraph laugh, "Hi!"



The soldier opposite started, looked quickly over, caught the two boys' twinkling eyes, and coloring, laughed heartily. Promptly then he raised his thumb, and wagged, "You young rascals! I'll have you in the guard-house for stealing military information. Who are you?"

Alex replied, using his thumb as he had seen the soldier do; and the animated exchange of signals which followed continued until a whistle from the engine announced a stop, and the soldier wagged, "We get off here. Good-by."

"Glad to have met you," he said, smiling, as he and his companion passed them.

"Glad to have met you," responded the boys heartily. "And to have got onto the signalling. It may come in useful some day," Alex added. "Good day."

"That's just what I was thinking myself, Al," declared Jack. "We must practice it."

Following the disappearance of the out-going passengers, a group of newcomers appeared at the farther car door.

"Here comes someone I know," Jack observed. "The big man in front—Burke, a real estate agent."

The tall, heavy-featured man passed them and took the seat immediately behind.

"He didn't speak to you," commented Alex.

"I'm glad he didn't. He's no friend; just knew him, I meant," responded Jack. "He is a proper shark, they say. I know he practically did a widow out of a bit of property just back of ours." 202

"And here is another, same business, from the next town. And not much better," Jack went on, as a short, bustling, sharp-featured man appeared.

The man behind them stood up and called, "Hi, there, Mitchell! Here!" The newcomer waved his hand, came forward quickly, and also dropped into the seat at the rear of the two boys.

"Nice pair of hawks," said Jack. "I'll bet they are hatching up something with a shady side to it. I'd be tempted to listen if I could."

As the train was again under way, Jack had no opportunity of overhearing what was being said behind them. A few miles farther, however, they came once more to a stop, and almost immediately he pricked up his ears and nudged Alex.

"... don't believe the ignorant dolt knows the real value of butter and eggs." It was the deep voice of the bigger man, Burke. "He's one of those queer ducks, without any friends. Lives there all by himself, doesn't read the papers, and only comes to town about once a month. No; there's not one chance in ten of his waking up and getting onto it."

"You always were a lucky dog," declared the other. "If you land it you ought to clear fifty thousand inside of five years."

"A hundred. I intend holding for a cold hundred thousand. There has been talk of the town building a steam plant already; but water is of course away ahead of that, and they are sure to swing to it. And this fall is the only one within ten miles of Haddowville." 203

"Didn't I tell you!" exclaimed Jack in a whisper. "Doing somebody out of something, whatever it is."

"You might build the plant yourself, and hold the town up for whatever you wished," the second speaker went on.

"Yes, I could. But I prefer the ready cash. That has always been my plan of doing business. No; I figure on disposing of the farm just as it stands, either to the town, or a corporation, for an even hundred thousand."

"Does that give you a clue, Jack?" Alex asked.

Jack shook his head. At the next remark, however, he sharply gripped Alex's arm.

"What fall has the stream there?"

"Forty feet, and the lake back of it is nearly a mile long, and a half mile wide."

The rumble of the train again drowned the voices of the two men, but Jack had heard enough. "It's old Uncle Joe Potter—his farm," he said with indignation. "Now I understand. The old farmer apparently doesn't know its value as an electric power plant site, and Burke is trying to get hold of it for a song."

"Let us put the old man onto him," Alex immediately suggested.

"I'll talk the matter over with Father, and see what he says," said Jack.

"But here comes the good old town," he broke off with boyish enthusiasm. "Look, there is the creek, and the old swimming-hole at the bend. I'll bet I've been in there a thousand times. And see that spire—that's our church. Our house is just beyond." 204

"Come on, let's be getting out."

Catching up their suitcases, the boys passed down the aisle. As they halted at the door, they glanced back and saw that their neighbors of the next seat were following them. The two men were still talking; and coming to a stand behind the boys, the latter caught a further remark from Burke apparently referring to the Potter farm deal.

"... wrote asking him to town this evening," he was saying. "I'll give him a bit of a good time to-

night, and put him up at one of the hotels—and, unless something unexpected happens, I'll guarantee I'll have the thing put through by noon to-morrow."

"I hope you do," responded his companion.

"And I hope you don't!" exclaimed Jack beneath his breath. "And I may do something more than hope."

Twenty minutes later, after a joyous welcome from his father and mother, and sister Kate, and the cordial reception extended Alex, Jack was seated at his "old corner" of the vine-hidden veranda, recounting the conversation they had overheard between the two real estate men. Before Mr. Orr had ventured an opinion in the matter, however, the subject was temporarily thrust aside by the appearance of a party of Kate's girl friends, evidently much disturbed over something. When on running forward Kate's voice was quickly added to the excited conversation, Jack followed to greet the girls, and learn the cause, and returned with the party to the veranda.

205

"Now what do you think of this?" he exclaimed with tragic horror. "Professor Robison, the world renowned mind reader (though I never heard of him before), owing to his inability to arrive, will not be able to be present at the Girls' Club song-fight to-night! Did you ever!"

"But it's no laughing matter," said Kate, following the introduction of her friends to Alex. "He was the feature of our program to-night, and I simply can't see what we are going to do. Many of the people will be coming just to hear him."

"Jack, couldn't you help us out?" asked one of the other girls, half seriously. "You used to pretend you were a phrenologist and all that kind of thing at school, I remember."

"No thanks, Mary. I've gotten over all that sort of foolishness," Jack responded, expanding his chest and speaking in a deep voice. "I leave that for you younger folks."

A small laughing riot followed this pompous declaration, and at its conclusion Jack carried Alex off to introduce him to his pigeons and chickens, and other former treasures of the back yard.

Some minutes later Jack was dilating on the rich under-color of his pet Buff Orpington hen, when Alex, with an apology, abruptly broke in. "Say, Jack, what kind of a crowd do they have at these Girls' Club affairs? Very swell?"

206

"Well, about everyone in the church goes, and quite a few farmers usually come in from out of town. They are as 'swell' as anything we have here, I guess. The Sunday-school room is usually well filled. Why?"

"I was just wondering whether we *couldn't* help the girls out, and have a little fun out of it into the bargain. Remember the soldiers on the train? Now, why couldn't we," and therewith Alex briefly sketched his plan. Jack promptly tossed the hen back into the coop. "Great, Al! We will! It will be all kinds of a lark. I think there is just the stuff we'll need up in the garret."

"Come on; we'll break the joyful tidings to the girls."

"I'd rather you played the part, though," said Alex as they returned toward the veranda. "You of course know everyone."

"That will make no difference according to this plan. If I am in full view, too, that will add to the mystery, and help keep up the fun. The folks will be breaking their heads to learn who it is on the platform. No; it's settled. You are the distinguished professor and phreno-what-do-you-call-it."

The girls on the veranda were still in dejected debate as the boys reappeared. "Ladies, we've got this thing fixed for you," announced Jack. "We have just wirelessly and engaged that world-famous thought-stealer, bumpologist and general seer, Prof. Mahomet Click, of Constantinople, to plug up that hole in your program to-night. He stated that it would give him great pleasure to come to the assistance of such charming young women, et cetera, and that he could be counted upon."

207

"You two mean things!" exclaimed Kate. "We saw you with your heads together out there, laughing. This is no joking matter at all."

"We are serious," Jack protested. "Positively. You go ahead and announce that owing to an attack of croup, or any other reason, Prof. Robison will not be able to appear, but that Prof. Click has kindly consented to substitute, and we will look after the rest."

"Do you really mean it?" cried the girls.

"On our word as full-grown gentlemen," responded Jack. "But we're not going to explain."

"Come on, Alex, until we have further debate with the distinguished Turk up in the garret. He probably has arrived by this time."

Whatever doubts Kate had as to the seriousness of the boys' intentions, they had not only been dissipated by noon, but had given place to lively curiosity and expectation. Alex and Jack had devoted the entire morning to their mysterious preparations; had made numerous trips to the church school-room, to the stores; had borrowed needles, thread, mucilage; had turned the library shelves upside-down in a search for certain books; and once, coming on them unawares, she had surprised them practising strange incantations with their fingers.

208

It was late in the afternoon that the serious, and what was to prove the most important, feature of the evening's performance developed. On a return trip to the dry-goods store Jack drew Alex

to a halt with an exclamation, and pointed across the street. Burke, the real estate man, was walking slowly along with a shrivelled-up little old gentleman in dilapidated hat, faded garments, and top-boots.

"The victim!" said Jack with deep disgust. "Old Uncle Joe Potter.

"Look at him sporting along with a cigar in his mouth—one of Burke's cigars!"

The boys paralleled the oddly assorted pair some distance, and it could readily be seen that Burke was doing his best to win the old man's confidence, and that the latter already was much impressed with the attention and deference shown him by the well-dressed agent.

"If we could get the old man alone," said Alex.

"Not much chance, I am afraid. Now that he has him in hand, Burke probably won't lose sight of him until he has closed his bargain. Remember what he said just before we left the train, about giving the old chap a good time to-night, and putting him up at one of the hotels."

Alex halted. "Give him a good time! Say, Jack, why shouldn't he give him a good time at the Girls' Club entertainment to-night? And then why shouldn't we—" 209

Jack uttered a shout, and struck Alex enthusiastically on the back. "Al, you've hit it! You've hit it! Bully!

"Here! Give me those complimentary tickets Kate gave us, and I'll go right after them, before they make any other arrangements. You wait."

Jack was running across the street in a moment, and drawing up alongside the two men, he addressed them both. "Excuse me, Mr. Potter, Mr. Burke—but wouldn't you like to take in our Girls' Club entertainment to-night? It's going to be really quite good—good music, and fun, and a bit of tea social in between.

"I'm sure you would enjoy it," he declared, addressing himself to the older man. "One of the features of the program is a chap who claims he can read people's thoughts. Of course nobody thinks he can, but he will make lots of fun."

The old man smiled, and looked at his companion.

"It is up to you, Mr. Potter," responded Burke genially. "If you think you would enjoy it, why, I would. Your taste is good enough recommendation for me."

"Then let us go," said the old gentleman, putting his hand into his pocket.

"No; this is my treat," interposed Burke, grasping the tickets. "Here you are, lad, and keep the change." 210

"Thank you, sir," said Jack. And with difficulty restraining a shout, he dashed back toward Alex, waving his hat above his head as a token of victory.

The scene of the Girls' Club entertainment, the church school-room, was filled to the doors when the program began that evening.

"I'm beginning to be anxious about Mr. Burke and the old man, though," observed Jack, who with Alex had been standing near the entrance, and remarking on the good attendance. A moment after the door again opened, and Jack started forward with an expression of relief. They had come.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter, Mr. Burke," he said. "Shall I find you a seat?"

"Yes, and a good one, now," requested the real estate man.

"I saved two, well to the front," responded Jack. "This way, please."

"Now, Alex," he said, returning, "it's up to us."

The "mind-reading" number on the program was at length reached. The chairman arose.

"I am very sorry to say, ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "that Prof. Robison, who is next on the program, was unexpectedly not able to keep his engagement. However, in his place we have secured the services of Prof. Mahmoud Click, of Constantinople; astrologer, phrenologist, mind-reader, and general all-round seer; and I am sure you will find him no less instructive and entertaining." 211

Despite this assurance, in the silence which followed there was a distinct note of disappointment, even displeasure. For it was obvious that the flowery title of the substitute concealed some local amateur.

Disappointment, however, quickly gave place to a flutter of interest when the rear door opened, and preceded by Jack Orr, there swept down the aisle a tall, venerable figure in flowing robes; white-bearded, spectacled, and crowned with a tall conical hat bearing strange hieroglyphics.

When, on Jack stepping aside and taking an unobtrusive front seat, the aged professor mounted the platform and solemnly surveyed his audience, titters, then a burst of laughter swept over the school-room. The long yellow robe was covered with grotesque caricatures of cats, frogs, dogs, cranes and turtles, interspersed with great black question-marks.

The famed Oriental turned about toward a table, and the laughing broke out afresh. In the center of his back was a large cat's-head, with wonderfully squinting eyes. When the cat slowly closed one distorted optic in a wink, then smiled, there was an unrestrained shout of merriment, and those who were not excitedly inquiring of one another the identity of the "seer," settled

back in their seats expectantly.

Placing the table at the front of the platform, the professor again faced the audience, and with dignified air, and deep, tragic voice, addressed them.

"Ladees and gentlemen. Ze chairman have spoke. I am Mahmoud Click, ze great seer, ze great mind-read, ze great bump-read, ze great profess. (Laughter.) I am ze seventeen son, of ze seventeen son, of ze seventeen son.

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"An' also have I bring for do ze magic pass," thrusting a hand within his robe, "Tom ze Terrible, ze son of Tom, ze son of Tom."

The hand reappeared, and placed on the table a tiny black kitten.

The burst of laughter which greeted this was renewed when the tiny animal began making playful passes at a spool on a string which the dignified professor held before it, remarking, "See? Ze magic pass.

"Now Tom ze Terrible will answer ze question, and show he onderstan' ze Ingleesh," the magician announced, at the same time swinging the spool out of the kitten's sight.

"Tom, how old you are?"

The spool was swung back, the kitten began again hitting at it, solemnly the professor counted to twenty, and whisked the spool away. "Twenty year. Correc'.

"You see, ladees and gentlemen, ze venerable cat he cannot make mistake," he observed amid laughing applause.

"Now Tom, tell some odder ting. How old is ze chairman?" indicating the dignified elderly man at the farther end of the platform. "Five? Correc'.

"You see, he always is right, yes.

"Now, Tom, how old is ze Rev. Mr. Borden?... Seven? Correc' again."

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When the laughter which followed this "demonstration" had subsided the professor took up a new line. Earlier in the evening a certain John Peters, one of the town's foppish young gallants, and who now occupied a prominent front seat, had widely announced the fact that he was present for the express purpose of "showing the mind-reader up." At him accordingly the first quip was directed.

"Now Tom, tell ze audience, how many girl have Mr. John Wilberforce Peters?" was asked. "What? None?" For, the spool being held out of sight, the kitten gazed before it stolidly, without raising a foot. "Well, how many does he think he have?"

The spool being returned, the kitten tapped it ten times, paused, and struck it eight more, while the resulting wave of amusement grew, and the over-dressed object glowered threateningly at the figure on the platform.

"And how many will he marry?... What? Not one? Well, well," commented the seer, to further hearty laughter.

"Now tell us about some of ze young ladies," the professor went on. "How many beaux has Miss K. O.?" While Kate Orr bridled indignantly the spool was lowered, and the kitten tapped several times on one side, several times on the other, then, to an outburst of laughing and clapping, sat up and began hitting it rapidly with both paws.

"I was unable to keep ze count," announced the seer, "but apparently about ze seventy-five. Miss O. she is popular wiz ze young men, yes.

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"And now, Tom," continued the magician, "how many special lady friend have Mr. Kumming (an extremely bashful member of the choir)?... Twenty-two! And how many young lady are in ze choir? Twenty-two!

"Ah! A strange coincidence," observed the learned professor amid much merriment.

With similar quips and jokes the mind-reader continued, then giving the kitten into the charge of a little girl in a front seat, announced:

"Now will I read ze head. Will some small boys please come up and bring their heads and bumps?"

Coaxing finally brought a half-dozen grinning youngsters of eight or ten to the platform. From the pocket of the last to respond protruded the unmistakable cover of a dime-novel. Him the professor seized first, and having gravely examined his head, announced, "Ladees and gentlemen, for this boy I predict a great future. Never have I seen such sign of literary taste. Yes, he will be great—unless he go west to kill ze Indian, and ze Indian see him first."

On turning to the head of the second boy, the phrenologist started, looked more sharply, and slowly straightening up, announced, "Ladees and gentlemen, I have made ze great discovery. This boy some days you will be proud to know. Never have I seen such a lovely bump—for eat ze pie! And any kind of pie you will name. He don't care. He will eat it."

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And so, to continued laughter, he went on, finding remarkable cake-bumps, holiday-bumps, and picnic-bumps, and proportionately under-developed school and chore-bumps—with the exception of one glowing example, which finally proved to have been developed by a baseball bat.

Then came the "mind-reading." Placing a small blackboard on the front of the platform, facing

the audience, the professor seated himself in a chair ten feet behind it, and invited someone to step to the board and write.

"All I ask is," announced the mind-reader, "please write not too fast, and fix ze mind on what you write. And by ze thought-wave will I tell it, letter by letter."

The first to respond wrote the name of his father, a doctor. Expecting only some humorous guess as to what was written, the audience was somewhat surprised when the professor spelled out the name correctly, only adding the humorous touch of "mud," hastily corrected to "M. D." As others followed with figures, and more difficult names and words, the interest of the audience began to take on a new tone.

The last of the first party which had stepped forward to write was the over-dressed young man Alex had poked some of his fun at, and who was bent on "showing him up."

He wrote: "You are a faker."

"Explain to ze audience how I do it, zen, Mr. Peters," retorted the professor. In some confusion Peters sought his seat, and the minister approached the board. 216

The interest of the audience had now become serious and silent. Even Kate Orr, though knowing there was trickery somewhere, was nonplussed. For Jack, in the front row, appeared as immovable, and as frankly interested as those about him. Loosely folded in his lap was a newspaper which for a moment attracted Kate's suspicious eye; but watching closely, she saw not the hint of a movement that might have been a signal.

The minister's first word was the name Hosea. This was promptly called off, and the writer went on with others, gradually more difficult. Finally, in rapid succession, one under the other, he wrote "ZEDEKIAH, AHOLIBAH, NEBUCHADNEZZAR." As readily the figure on the platform announced them, and the reverend gentleman turned away with an expression frankly puzzled.

"Pardon me, Mr. Professor, but since this is genuine mind-reading, of course you could read just as well with your eyes blindfolded, could you not? Would you kindly give a demonstration that way?"

It was Peters. There was immediate clapping at the suggestion, and calls of "Yes, yes! Do it blindfolded!"

In alarm Kate, from her seat, gazed toward Jack. To her surprise he was one of the most energetic in clapping the proposal. 217

The professor himself, however, was plainly disconcerted, to the particular delight of Peters and his circle of friends, who, as the mind-reader continued to hesitate, clapped more and more loudly.

Finally the seer arose. "Well, ladees and gentlemen, if you wish, certainly. Though I do read just as good with my eyes open."

This negative statement brought further derisive laughter and clapping from Peters and his friends, which was added to when the professor continued, "Will some young lady be kind enough to lend me ze handkerchief—ze tiny leetle one with plenty holes all round?"

Peters was again on his feet. "Here is one!"

It was a large, dark neckerchief, obviously brought for this very purpose. As Peters stepped forward and mounted the platform the professor removed his spectacles with apparent reluctance. Broadly smiling, Peters threw the folded kerchief over the mind-reader's eyes, saw that it fitted snugly, and tied it. "Now we've got you, Mr. Smart, of Constantinople," he whispered derisively.

"Have ze good time and laugh while you may," responded the professor, and raising his voice he asked, "Will someone kindly bring ze glass water? Mind-reading, it is dry."

It was Jack started to his feet, passed down the room, and returned with the desired water. Watching, Kate expected to see a consultation between the two boys, as to some way out of the apparent difficulty. Jack, however, merely placed the glass in the extended hand, and received it back without the exchange of a syllable. Not only that, he returned to the back of the hall, and instead of resuming his seat at the front, mounted to a window ledge at the rear. 218

"Well, I am ready," announced the professor. "And I make ze suggestion that Mr. Peters himself write ze first."

The latter was speedily at the board. As he wrote, a silence fell. Previously the professor had called off each letter as written. This time there was no response. With a smile that gradually broadened to a laugh Peters finished an odd Indian name, and asked, "The thought-waves haven't gone astray already, have they, Mr. Professor? Haven't been frightened off by a mere handkerchief, surely?"

"I was wondering how to pronounce it," came the quiet response. "I'll spell it instead. It is,

"M U S Q U O D O B O I T."

Peters stared blankly. Not more blankly than the majority of the audience, however, including Kate herself. She turned toward Jack. He appeared as surprised as Peters. Indeed, if there was anything suspicious, it was that Jack appeared a trifle over-astonished.

As the burst of applause which followed the first surprise was succeeded by a wave of laughter, Kate turned back to discover Peters, very red in the face, drawing on the board a picture. As she

looked a grotesquely ugly face took shape. The face completed, there was a renewed burst of merriment when Peters topped it with a fool's-cap, and on that sketched rough hieroglyphics.

"Now whose picture have I drawn?" he demanded loudly.

"Well, you tried to draw mine," responded the professor, dropping into normal English, "but as the dunce's tie is far up the back of his collar, I leave the audience to decide whose it is."

At this there were shouts and shrieks of laughter, and Peters, hurriedly feeling, and finding his own tie far out of place, threw the chalk to the floor and dashed back to his seat amid a perfect bedlam of hilarity.

The uproar soon subsided, however, for not one in the crowded room but was now thoroughly wonderstruck at the demonstration. Some of the older people began to step forward, writing the most difficult names they could think of, meaningless words, groups of figures. A teacher chalked a proposition in algebra. Without error all were called out promptly.

The climax was reached when one of the church elders advanced to the board, and while writing, fixed his eyes on something in his half-opened hand.

Without hesitation the blindfolded unknown announced, "Mr. Storey is writing the name of one of the Apostles, but is thinking of a penknife."

The clapping which followed was scattered and brief. "It's simply uncanny," exclaimed one of Kate's neighbors. Kate, glancing back toward Jack, shook her head. Up there, in full view, she could not possibly see how he could have anything to do with it.

At this point the minister again stepped forward. "Will you answer a few questions?" he scrawled.

"With pleasure, Mr. Borden."

"How old am I?"

"Forty-nine next September."

The minister ran his fingers through his hair, perplexedly.

"How old is Mrs. Borden?"

There was a slight pause, then in gallant tones came the answer, "Twenty-two."

Amid a renewal of laughter, and much clapping from the ladies, the minister was about to turn away, when on second thought he turned back, and wrote:

"Name the twelve Apostles."

For the first time the learned seer displayed signs of uneasiness. After some stumbling, however, he completed the list.

With a twinkle in his eyes, the preacher inscribed a second question, "Name Joshua's captains."

Prof. Click cleared his throat, ran his fingers down his beard, moved uneasily in his chair, and at length, while a smile began to spread over the room, shook his head.

"But I am thinking of them—hard," declared the minister, chuckling.

The professor was again about to shake his head, when suddenly he paused, then replied boldly, "Shem, Ham, Hezekiah, Hittite, Peter, Goliath, Solomon and Pharaoh."

It was during the shouts of merriment following this ridiculous response that Kate's mystification began to dissolve. Glancing again toward her brother, she saw that, despite a show of laughing, there was an uneasiness in his face similar to that shown by the professor. And when presently she saw him cast a covertly longing eye toward a pile of Bibles in the next window, she turned back to the platform, silently laughing. She thought she had discovered the source of the "thought waves."

The success of the brazenly invented answer to the last question, meantime, had quite restored the professor's confidence, and as the minister went on, he continued to respond in the same ridiculous fashion, claiming, on the minister's protest, that he was only reading the thought-waves as they came to him. And finally the pastor laughingly gave it up.

At the next, and final, "demonstration" mystification of another kind came to the observant Kate. Rising to his feet, the mind-reader announced that he would now inform a few of the "stronger thinkers" before him the subject of their thoughts; and both in his manner and tone Kate noted an unmistakable nervousness. Glancing toward Jack, she saw that his face also was grave, and with a stirring of apprehension of she knew not what, she waited.

"The first thought which reaches me," began the professor, "is from Miss Mary Andrews. Miss Andrews thinks her pretty toque is on straight. It's not quite. I think one pin is coming out."

Following this laughingly applauded "reading," the speaker informed Miss James that she was thinking her lace collar was not loose behind. "Which was quite correct." As also was Mr. Storey's impression that there was not a long blond hair on his coat collar. "There was not."

Then Kate distinctly saw the speaker take a deep breath.

"Mr. Joseph Potter is a strong thinker," he proceeded. "I read several thoughts from Mr. Potter."

The old farmer, to whom the whole performance had appeared as nothing less than magic,

leaned out into the aisle, breathless and staring.

"It seems to me, Mr. Potter," the mind-reader went on, "it seems to me you are thinking about some important business deal—some big deal concerning land."

The old man's mouth opened.

"Also it seems to me that this land may be worth a great deal more than—"

There was an exclamation, a commotion, and Burke, the real estate man, was on his feet. A moment he stood staring, as though doubting his ears, then catching up his hat he said in a loud voice, "Come, Mr. Potter, we must go. That other engagement, you know—I had forgotten it."

The old man sprang up, and brushed Burke aside. "Go on! Go on!" he cried toward the figure on the platform. The startled audience gazed from one to another. Several arose.

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"It seems to me," resumed Alex quietly, "that there is a waterfall on your farm, and that—"

"Hold on there! Hold on!" The words came in a shout, and springing into the aisle, Burke strode toward the platform, purple with rage. "What do you mean? What are you doing?"

"Who is this man?" he demanded at the top of his lungs. "I demand to know! What does he mean by—?"

Swiftly hobbling down the aisle behind him, the old man attempted to pass. Roughly Burke pushed him back.

The minister stepped forward. "Mr. Burke, what do you mean?"

"What does this man here mean by—by—"

"Yes, by what, Mr. Burke?"

"By making reflections against me," shouted Burke. "I demand an explanation! I—"

"But my dear sir, I am sure nothing was said—"

The old man dodged by, ran to the edge of the platform, and cried in a thin, high voice, "Do you mean my farm? My farm that Burke wants to buy?"

There was a momentary silence, during which here and there could be heard long in-drawn gasps. Then abruptly Alex tore the bandage from his eyes, swept off the hat and beard, and stepped to the front.

"There need be no further mystery about this," he declared in a grimly steady voice. "On the train this morning Jack Orr and I accidentally overheard—"

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From Burke came a scream, he sprang forward with raised fists, faltered, and suddenly whirling about, dashed down the aisle for the door, and out. And in the breathless silence which followed Alex completed his explanation.

As the old man climbed the platform steps and extended a shaking hand, the applause that burst from every corner of the room fairly rattled the windows; and as the uproar continued, and Alex sprang hastily to the floor, he was surrounded by a jostling, enthusiastic crowd of strangers from whom in vain he sought to escape.

Some minutes later, enjoying tea and cake in a circle which included the minister, the latter smilingly remarked, "But you haven't yet explained the rest of the mysterious doings, Master Alex. Aren't you going to enlighten us all round? Prefer to keep it a secret, eh? Well, if you will promise us another 'exposition' I'm sure we will agree not to press you," declared the minister, heartily.

And as a matter of fact, save Kate, no one has yet solved the mystery, not even the janitor, although on cutting the grass a few days later he picked up beneath one of the school-room windows an unaccountable piece of fine copper wire.

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## XIV

### THE LAST OF THE FREIGHT THIEVES

225

"No; I'm not after you this time," laughingly responded Detective Boyle to Jack's half serious inquiry on recognizing his visitor at the station one evening a month later as the road detective who on the previous memorable occasion had called in company with the sheriff. "Instead, I want your assistance.

"Do you know," he asked, seating himself, "that your friends the freight thieves are operating again on the division?"

"No!" said Jack in surprise.

"They are. And they have evolved some scheme that is more baffling even than the 'haunting' trick you spoiled for them here last spring. Every week they are getting away with valuable stuff from one of the night freights between Claxton and Eastfield, while the train is actually en route, apparently. That sounds incredible, I know, but it is the only possible conclusion to come to, since the train does not stop between those places, and I made sure the goods each time were aboard when it left Claxton."

Jack whistled. "That does look a problem, doesn't it! But where do I come in, Mr. Boyle?"

"Last evening, while thinking the matter over, the trick the thieves used here at the Junction recurred to me—the man shipped in a box. It came to me: Why couldn't that same dodge be played back against them in this case?"

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"Oh, I see! Have yourself shipped in a box, and 'stolen' by them! Clever idea," exclaimed Jack.

"Not so bad I think, myself. Well, in the country between Claxton and Eastfield, where it is my theory the gang has its headquarters, there are no telephone or telegraph lines, and it struck me it would be a good plan to take someone along with me who in case of things going wrong could make his way back to the railroad, and cut in on the wire and call for help. And naturally you were the first one I thought of. Do you want the job?" asked the detective.

"I'd jump at the chance," Jack agreed eagerly. "It'd be more fun than enough."

"But, Mr. Boyle, how do you know that the boxes are taken to the freight thieves' headquarters, unopened, and not broken into right at the railroad?"

"I figure that out from the number and size of the packages they have taken each time—just a good load for a light wagon. And anyway you can see that that would be their safest plan. If they broke up boxes near the track they would leave clues that would be sure to be found sooner or later, and put us on their trail."

"And through a friend in the wholesale dry-goods business at Claxton, who I'll see down there to-night," the detective went on, "I can make practically sure of our being 'stolen' together. The thieves have shown a partiality for his goods; and by having our boxes attractively labelled 'SILK,' and placed just within the car door, there will be little chance of the robbers passing us by."

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"My plan is to bring it off to-morrow night. Would that suit you?" concluded the detective.

"Yes, sir. That is, if I can get away. For it will take all night, I suppose?"

"Yes. There will be no trouble about your getting off, though. I spoke to Allen before I came down," said Boyle, rising. "All right, it is arranged. You take the five-thirty down to-morrow evening, with the necessary instruments, and I'll be at the station to meet you. Good night."

As Boyle had promised, Jack had no difficulty in arranging to be off duty the following night, and early that evening he alighted from the train at Claxton, to find the railroad detective awaiting him.

"The instruments, eh?" queried Boyle, indicating a parcel under Jack's arm as they left the station. "Yes, sir; and I have some wire and a file in my pocket."

"That's the ticket. And everything here is arranged nicely. We will head for the warehouse at once."

"Here's the other 'bolt of silk,' Mr. Brooke," the detective announced a few minutes later as they entered the office adjoining a large brick building. "All ready for us?"

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"Hn! He's a pretty small 'bolt,' isn't he?" commented the merchant, eyeing Jack with some surprise.

"A trifle; but he makes up for size in quality," declared the detective, while Jack blushed. "He is the youngster who solved the 'ghost' riddle and spoiled this same gang's game at Midway Junction."

The merchant warmly shook Jack's hand. "I'm glad to meet you, my boy," he said. "After that, I can readily believe what Boyle says."

"Yes, I am all ready. This way, please," he requested.

Following the speaker, Jack and the detective found themselves in a large shipping-room. As they entered, a workman with a pot and ink-brush in his hand was surveying lettering he had just completed on a good-sized packing-case.

"Here are the 'goods,' Judson," announced the merchant.

"All ready, sir," the workman responded, eyeing Jack and the detective curiously.

"Did you substitute boards with knot-holes?" Mr. Brooke asked.

"Yes, sir. And this is the door," said the man, indicating two wide boards at one end. "I used both wooden buttons and screw-hooks on the inside, as you suggested."

"Good."

The detective examined the box. "You've made a good job of it," he commented.

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"I suppose this is the boy's?" he added, turning to a smaller box, on which also were the words: "SILK—VALUABLE!"

With lively interest Jack examined the case.



"Get in and let us see how it fits," suggested the merchant. Jack did so.

"Fine," he announced. "I could ride all night in it, easily—either sitting, or lying down curled up on my side."

Detective Boyle glanced at his watch. "You may as well stay right there, Jack," he said. "We will start just as soon as the wagon is ready."

"It's ready now. Judson, go and bring the dray around," the merchant directed.

As the man left, the detective produced and handed Jack a small pocket revolver. "Here, take this, Jack," said he. "I hope you'll not have to use it, but we must take all precautions.

"Now to box you in." So saying the detective fitted the "door" of Jack's box into place, and Jack on the inside secured it with the hooks and wooden buttons, and announced "O K." The detective then entered his own box, and with the merchant's assistance closed the opening. As he tested it there was a rattle of wheels without, and the big door rumbled open.

A few minutes later the two boxes of "valuable silk" had been slid out onto the truck, and the first stage of the strange journey had begun.

As planned, it was dusk when the two boxes reached the freight depot. The station agent himself met them. "Everything O K, Boyle?" he whispered. 230

"O K. Place us right before the door, with the lettering out," the detective directed. The agent did as requested, and with a final "Good luck!" closed and sealed the car door just as the clanging of a bell announced the approach of an engine. A crash and a jar told the two unsuspected travelers that their car had been coupled, there was a whistle, a rumble, a clanking over switch-points—and they were on their way.

The wheels had been drumming over the rail-joints for perhaps half an hour, and the disappearance of the light which had filtered through the car door had announced the fall of darkness, when there came a screeching of brakes.

"Where do you suppose we are now, Mr. Boyle?" asked Jack from his box.

"It's the grade just north of Axford Road. When we hit the up-grade two miles beyond we may begin to expect something. It was along there I figured that the—

"What's that?"

Both listened. "One of the brakemen, isn't it?" suggested Jack.

"What is he doing down on the edge of the car roof?"

The next sound was of something slapping against the car door. 231

Suddenly the detective gave vent to a cry that was barely suppressed.

"Jack, I've got it! I've got it at last!" he whispered excitedly.

"The freight thieves have bought up one of the brakemen! He lets himself down to the car door by a rope, opens it, and throws the stuff out!"

Jack's exclamation of delight at this final revelation of the heart of the mystery was followed by one of consternation. "But won't we get an awful shaking up if we're pitched off, going at full speed?" he said in alarm.

"We may. We'll have to take it. It's all in the game you know," declared Boyle grimly. "Sit tight and brace hard, and it'll not be so bad, though.

"Sh! Here he is!"

There was a sound of feet scraping against the car door, a rattle as the seal was broken and the clasp freed, then a rumble and the sudden full roar of the train told the two in the boxes that the door had been opened.

Swinging within, the intruder closed the door behind him, and lit a match. Peering from a knot-hole, Jack saw that the detective's guess was correct. It was a brakeman.

As Jack watched, the man produced and lit a dark-lantern, and turned it on the cases before him. Jack held his breath as the light streamed through the cracks of his own box.

"Just to order," muttered the brakeman audibly. 232

"And the bigger one, too. I'll not have to haul any out."

Then, to Jack's momentary alarm, then amusement, the man seated himself on the box, above him.

Presently, as Jack was wondering what the trainman was waiting for, from the distant engine came the two long and two short toots for a crossing, and the man started to his feet. With his eye to the knot-hole Jack watched.

Again came a whistle, and the creaking of brakes. Immediately the brakeman slid the car door back a few inches, flashed his lantern four times, muffled it, and ran the door open its full width.

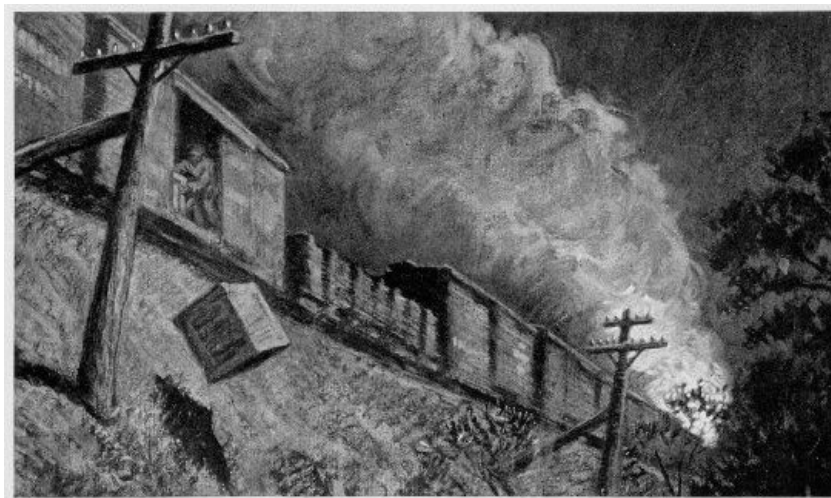
The critical moment had come. Gathering himself together, Jack braced with knees and elbows. The trainman seized the box, swung it to the door, and tipped it forward. The next instant Jack felt himself hurled out into the darkness.

For one terrible moment he felt himself hurtling through space. Then came a crackle of branches, the box whirled over and over, again plunged downward, and brought up with a

crash.

A brief space Jack lay dazed, in a heap, head down. But he had been only slightly stunned, and recovering, he righted himself, and found with satisfaction that he had suffered no more than a bruise of the scalp and an elbow.

He had not long to speculate on his whereabouts. From near at hand came a sound of breaking twigs, and a voice.



THE NEXT INSTANT JACK FELT HIMSELF HURLED OUT INTO  
THE DARKNESS.

"Here's one," it said.

Only with difficulty did Jack avoid betraying himself. It was the voice of the man "Watts"!

"What is it?" inquired a second voice.

Through a crack a light appeared. "Silk," announced Watts.

"A good weight, too," he added, tipping the box. "Catch hold."

The packing-case was caught up; and rocked and jolted, Jack felt himself carried for what he judged a full quarter-mile. As the men slowed up a gleam of moonlight showed through the knot-hole, and peering forth he discovered a tree-lined road, and a two-horse wagon.

Sliding the box into the rear of the wagon, and well to the front, the men disappeared. The wait that followed was to Jack the most trying experience of the evening. Had the detective safely landed? Was there not a possibility of the larger box having been shattered? Or sufficiently broken to reveal its true contents, and disclose the plot to the freight-robbers? And what then would be his fate?

These and many other disquieting possibilities passed through Jack's mind, causing him several times as the minutes went by to finger the hooks and buttons which would permit of his escape. Finally snapping twigs, then heavy, stumbling footfalls allayed his anxiety, and the two men reappeared, staggering under the box containing the officer.

With difficulty the unsuspecting thieves raised the heavy packing-case to the tail-board of the wagon.

"It won't go in," said Watts' companion.

"Push this way a little," Watts directed.

"I can't—*Look out!*" There was a scramble, and the box crashed to the ground. At the same moment came a muffled exclamation, and Jack caught his breath. Was it the detective? If so, had the others overheard it?

With relief, however, he heard Watts, who apparently was the chief of the gang, call his companion a mule, and order him to catch hold again. The box this time was successfully slid aboard; and at once the two men climbed to the seat, and the wagon rumbled off.

As they rattled along over a badly-kept road Jack gave as close attention to the passing scenery as his limited view permitted, in order that he might be able to find his way back to the railroad if it should prove necessary. This did not promise to be difficult. On either side the dim moonlight showed an unbroken succession of trees, and also that the robbers were continuing in one direction—apparently due south.

For what seemed at least two miles they proceeded. Then appeared a small clearing, and with a quickening of the pulse Jack felt the wagon slow up and turn in. They were at their destination.

A forbiddingly suitable place for its purpose it was. Standing out darkly on the crest of a rise two hundred yards back, was a low shanty-like house, in which appeared a single gleam of light. Between, to the road, stretched a desolate moonlit prospect of stumps, decaying logs and brush-piles. On either side the woods formed a towering wall of blackness.

Rocking and pitching, the wagon made its way up a rutty, corkscrew lane. They reached the house, and the door opened, and a tall, unpleasant-looking woman appeared and greeted the men.

"Good luck, eh?" she remarked briefly.

"Sure. Don't we always have good luck?" responded Watts. "Is supper ready?"

"Yes. You-uns better come in before you opens them boxes," said the woman.

"All right."

Passing on, the wagon came at last to a halt before a good-sized barn. The two men leaped to the ground, and while one of them opened the large side doors the other proceeded to back the wagon to it.

As the two freight thieves then unhooked, and led their horses to the stable, there came to Jack's ears a welcome tapping. "Are you all right, lad?" whispered the detective.

"Yes, O K, sir, though a bit nervous," Jack acknowledged.

"Keep cool and we'll soon have them where we want them. As they are going in to supper first we'll not leave the boxes till then. That'll give us just the opportunity we want to look around and arrange things nicely.

"Sh! Here they come!"

"Catch hold," said Watts. Jack heard the detective's box slide out, an "Up!" from Watts, the staggering steps of the men across the barn floor, and a thud as the box was dropped.

At what then immediately followed Jack for a moment doubted his senses. It was the voice of Watts saying quietly and coldly, "Now my clever friend in the box, kindly come out!"

They *had* heard Boyle's exclamation when the box had fallen!

Scarcely breathing, Jack listened. Would the detective give himself up without a—

There was a muffled report, instantly a second, louder, then silence.

"Will you come out now?" demanded Watts.

To Jack's horror there was no response. Watts repeated the order, then called on his companion for an axe, and there followed the sound of blows and splintering wood.

"Now haul him out."

Terror-stricken, Jack listened. Suddenly there came the sound of a scramble, then of a terrific struggle.

The detective was all right! It had been only a ruse! Uttering a suppressed hurrah Jack began hurriedly undoing the fastenings of his door, to get out to the detective's assistance. Before he had opened it, however, there was the sound of a heavy fall, and a triumphant shout from Watts. Promptly Jack paused, debated a moment, and restored the fastenings. He would wait. Perhaps they would bind Boyle and leave him in the barn.

A moment later Jack regretted his decision. Through the knot-hole he saw the detective led by, his arms bound behind him, and one of the freight-robbers on either side.

The voices and footsteps died away in the direction of the house, and Jack fell to wondering what he should do. Before he had decided he heard the voices of the men returning. Apprehensively he waited. Had they any suspicion of his presence in the second packing-case?

While he held his breath and grimly clutched his revolver, they slid his box to the rear of the wagon, lifted it out, and deposited it on the barn floor.

"Going to have a look at it? Make sure it hasn't some live stock in it too?" inquired the second man.

Jack's heart stood still.

"No; it's all right," declared Watts confidently. "We'll have supper first." And to Jack's unspeakable relief they passed out and closed the barn door. Listening until from the house had come the slamming of a door, Jack once more freed the fastenings within the box, slipped the board aside, again listened a moment, and crawled forth.

As he stood stretching his cramped limbs, he glanced about. A tier of what looked like bolts of cloth in the moonlight beneath one of the barn windows caught his eye. He stepped over.

It was silk—silk such as he had seen in the warehouse at Claxton!

Instantly there came to Jack a startling suggestion. As quickly he decided to act upon it. "They may never 'catch on,'" he told himself delightedly, "and in any case it will give me a good start back for the railroad, for help."

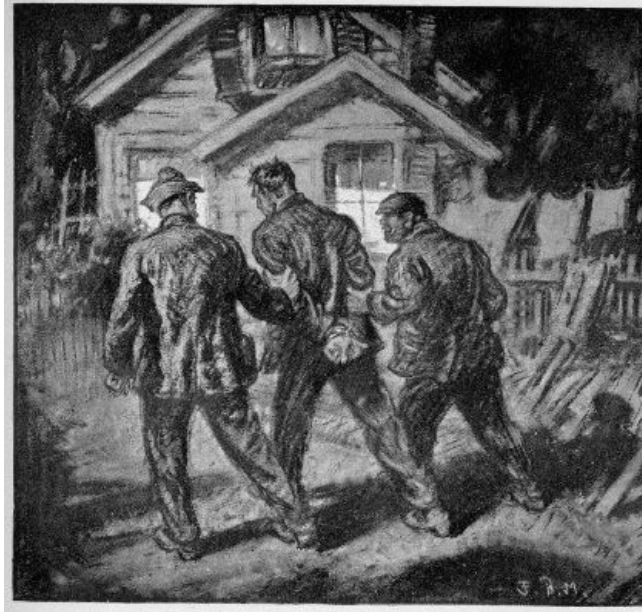
Glancing from the barn window, to make sure all was quiet in the direction of the house, he drew his box into the moonlight, took out the parcel containing the telegraph instruments, and proceeded to remove the hooks and buttons, and all other signs of the "door." Then quickly he filled the box with bolts of silk from the pile beneath the window.

That done, he found a hammer and nails, and muffling the hammer with his handkerchief, as quietly as possible nailed the boards into place. Triumphant he slid the box to its former position on the floor.

"I think that will fool you, Mr. Watts," he said with a smile, and catching up the telegraph instruments he turned to the door.

On the threshold he started back. The two men, and two others, were returning from the house.

In alarm Jack looked about for a way of escape. Across the barn was a smaller door. He ran for it on tiptoe, darted through, and found himself in the stable. Passing quietly on to the outer door, which the cracks and moonlight revealed, he waited until the four men had entered the main barn, then slipped forth, and keeping in the shadows, ran toward the house.



HE SAW THE DETECTIVE LED BY, HIS ARMS BOUND BEHIND HIM.

A beam of light streamed from one of the rear windows. Jack made for it, and cautiously approaching, peered within. The woman he had seen at the door was at a table, washing dishes, her back toward him. And just beyond, facing him, and bound hand and foot in a big arm-chair, was the detective.

For some minutes Jack tried in vain to attract the officer's attention. Then the woman obligingly stepped into the pantry with some dishes, and quickly Jack gave a single tap on the window-pane. Boyle looked up instantly, started, smiled, then nodded his head in the direction of the railroad. Jack held up the parcel containing the telegraph instruments, the detective nodded again, and in a moment Jack was off.

It was an exhausting run over the rough, little-used road, now darkened by the overhanging trees; but at length Jack recognized the point at which he had been carried from the woods, and turning in, soon found himself at the railroad.

Hurrying to the nearest telegraph pole, he swarmed up to the cross-tree, and quickly filed through the wire on one side of the glass insulator. The broken wire fell jangling to the rails. Connecting an end of the wire he had brought with him to the wire on the other side of the pin, Jack slid to the ground, made the connections with the instrument, and the relay clicked closed.

At once someone on the wire sent, "Who had it open? What did you say?"

"Alex!" exclaimed Jack, at once recognizing the sending; and was about to break in when the instrument clicked, "17 just coming—CX."

"Claxton, and 17! Just what we want!" Quickly interrupting, Jack sent, "CX—Hold 17! Hold her!"

Then, "To X—This is Jack, Al. I'm in the woods about four miles from Claxton. We found the freight thieves, but they have Boyle prisoner. Ask the chief to have 17 take on a posse at CX and rush them here. I'll wait here, and lead them back. If they are quick they'll capture the whole gang."

"OK! OK! Good for you," shot back Alex. The wire was silent a moment, then Jack heard the order go on to Claxton as desired.

Twenty-five minutes later, waiting in the darkness on the track, Jack saw the headlight of the fast-coming freight. The engineer, on the lookout, discovered him, pulled up, and a moment after Jack was off through the woods followed by two officers and several of the train crew.

When they reached the farm, lights were still moving about in the barn. Stealthily the party made for it, and surrounded it.

"How would you like to lead the way in, Jack?" whispered the sheriff as they paused before the door. "That would be only fair, after the trick Watts played on you."

Jack caught at the idea delightedly, and all being ready, boldly threw open the barn door and entered with drawn revolver, followed by the sheriff.

The four occupants were so completely taken by surprise that for a moment they stood immovable about a box of dry-goods they had been repacking.

"How do you do, Mr. Watts," said Jack, smiling. "This is my friend the sheriff, and the barn is surrounded. I think you would be foolish not to give up."

"Yes, hands up!" crisply ordered the sheriff. And slowly the four pairs of hands went into the air, and the entire balance of the long-successful gang of freight thieves were prisoners.

It was Jack himself who rushed off to the house and freed Detective Boyle. A half hour later, with one of the robbers' own wagons filled with a great quantity of recovered stolen goods, the sheriff escorted his prisoners back to the railroad, and before daylight they were in the jail at Eastfield.

Jack received considerable attention because of his part in the capture, and the affair still forms one of the popular yarns among trainmen on that division of the Middle Western.

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## XV

### THE DUDE OPERATOR

Alex Ward, like most vigorous, manly boys of his type, had a fixed dislike for anything approaching foppishness, especially in other boys. Consequently when on reporting at the Exeter office one evening he was introduced to Wilson Jennings, Alex treated him with but little more than necessary courtesy. For the newcomer, an operator but little older than himself, was distinctly a "dude"—from his patent-leather shoes and polka-dotted stockings to his red-and-yellow banded white straw hat. His carefully-pressed suit was the very latest thing in light checked gray, he wore a collar which threatened to envelope his ears, and his white tie was of huge dimensions. Also he possessed the fair pink-and-white complexion of a girl.

Alex was not alone in his derisive attitude toward the stranger. Shortly following the appearance of the night chief Mr. Jennings nodded everyone a good-evening, and departed, and immediately there was a general roar of laughter in the operating-room.

"Where did he fall from?" "Whose complexion powder is he advertising?" "Did you get onto his picture socks?" were some of the remarks bandied about.

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When the chief announced that the new operator was from the east, and was being sent to the little foothills tank-station of Bonepile, there was a fresh outburst of hilarity.

"Why, that cowboy outfit near there will string him up to the tank spout," declared the operator on whose wire Bonepile was located. "It's the toughest proposition on the wire."

"On the quiet, that is just why Jordan is sending him," the night chief said. "Not to have him strung up, that is, but to put him in the way of 'finding himself,' so to speak."

"He'll certainly 'find himself' there, then—if there's anything left to find when the ranch crew get through," laughed the operator. "I'd give five real dollars to see that show, and walk back."

"At that, you *might* have to walk back, if you wagered your money on the outcome," responded the chief more gravely, turning to his desk. "Clothes don't make a man—neither do they unmake one. The 'Dude' may surprise us yet."

Whether the outcome of his appointment to the little watering station was to be a surprise or no, there was no doubt of Wilson Jennings' surprise when the following morning he alighted from the train at Bonepile, and as the train sped on, awoke to the realization that he was entirely alone. Blankly he gazed at the little red-brown "drygoods-box" depot, the water-tank, the hills to the west, and to north, south and east the limitless stretching prairie. He had never imagined anything like this when he had decided on giving up a good position in the east to taste "some adventure" in the great west.

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However, here he was; and picking up his two suitcases, the boy made his way in to the tiny operating-room, and on into the bunk-kitchen-living-room behind. For here, "a hundred miles from anywhere," the operator's board and lodging was provided by the railroad.

Early that evening Wilson was sitting somewhat disconsolately at the telegraph-room window when he was startled by a loud whoop. There was a second, then a rush of hoofs, and a party of cowboys came into view.

It was the "welcoming committee" of the Bar-O ranch, the "outfit" referred to by the operator at Exeter.

With a final whoop the cowmen thundered up to the station platform, and dismounted. Muskoka Jones, a huge, heavily-moustached ranchman over six feet in height, was first to reach the open window. Diving within to the waist, he brought a bottle down on the instrument table with a crash.

"Pardner, welcome to our city!" he shouted.

The response should have been instantaneous and hearty. Instead there was a strange quiet.

The following Bar-O's faltered, and exchanged glances. Surely the Western had not at last "fallen down" on its first obligation at Bonepile! For since the coming of the rails they had regarded the station operator as a sort of social adjunct to the ranch—the keeper of an open house of hospitality, their daily paper, the final learned authority on all matters of politics and sport. And if this latest change of operators had brought them—

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Muskoka spoke again, and the worst was realized.

"Well, you gal-faced little dude!"

The cowmen crowded forward, and peering over Muskoka's board shoulders, studied Wilson from head to foot with speechless scorn.

Muskoka settled forward on his elbows.

"Are you a real operator?" he inquired.

In a voice that sounded foolish even to himself Wilson responded in the affirmative.

"Actooal, real, male operator?"

The cluster of bronzed faces guffawed loudly.

"But y' don't play kiards, do you?" Muskoka asked incredulously. "Now I bet you don't. Or smoke? Or chew? Or any of them wicked—"

"Here are some cigarettes the other man left." Hopefully the boy extended the package—to have it snatched from his hand, scramblingly emptied, and the box flipped ceilingward.

In falling the box brought further trouble. It struck something on the wall which emitted a hollow thud, and glancing up the cowmen espied Wilson's new, brilliantly-banded hat. In a trice Muskoka's long arm had secured it, with the common inspiration the cluster of faces withdrew; the hat sailed high in the air, there was an ear-splitting rattle of shots, and the shattered remnant was returned to Wilson with ceremony.

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"There—all proper millinaried dee la Bonepile," said Muskoka. "An' don't mention it."

"Now give me that white-washed fence you have around your ears." The boy shrank farther back in his chair, then suddenly turned and reached for the telegraph key. In a moment the big cowman's pistol was out.

"Back in your chair! Give me that white fence!" he commanded.

Trembling, Wilson removed his collar and handed it over. The cowman stepped back and calmly proceeded to shoot a row of holes in it.

"There," he announced, returning it, "much better. That's Bonepile fashion. Put it on."

Meekly Wilson obeyed, and the circle of cowmen roared at the result.

"Now," proceeded Muskoka, "that coat of yours is nice. Very nice. But I think it'd look better inside-out. Try it."

Wilson again turned desperately toward the key, the cowman banged on the table with his pistol, and slowly the boy complied. And a few minutes after, on a further command, he emerged from the doorway—in shattered hat, perforated collar, ridiculously turned coat, and with trousers rolled to his knees—a spectacle that set the cowboys staggering and shouting about the platform in convulsions of laughter.

In fact the result was so pleasing that after enjoying it to the full, the ranchmen decided to carry the hazing no further, and only requesting of Wilson that he wave his hat and give "three cheers for the citizens of Bonepile," they mounted their ponies, and scampered away.

251

Hastening in to the telegraph instruments, Wilson began frantically calling Exeter. Before X had responded, however, the boy paused, and sat back in his chair, a new light coming into his eyes.

"Yes, sir; I'll wager they sent them down here to do this," he said aloud.

Suddenly he arose, and began removing the turned coat. "I'll stick it out here for two weeks—if they lynch me!" declared the "dude" grimly.

It was early Wednesday evening of a week later that the monthly gold shipment came down from the Red Valley mines. The consignment was an unusually large one, and in view of the youth of the new operator the superintendent wired a request that Big Bill Smith, the driver of the mines express, remain at the station until the treasure was safely aboard train.

On reading the message, however, Big Bill flatly refused. "Why, it's the night of Dan Haggerty's dance," he pointed out indignantly. "Doesn't the superintendent know that?"

"The superintendent didn't—and didn't care," was the response to the wired protest. "The driver was supposed to remain at all times. It was an old understanding."

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Understanding or not, Big Bill declined to remain, and stormed out the door, announcing that he would get someone down from the Bar-O ranch. Half an hour later Muskoka Jones appeared.

"Good evening. I'm sorry it was necessary to trouble you, sir," apologized Wilson.

"Good evening, Willie. Don't mention it," was the big cowman's scornful response. Then, having momentarily paused to cast a contemptuous eye over the lad's neat attire, he threw himself on

the floor in the farthest corner of the room, and promptly fell fast asleep.

Some time after darkness had fallen the young telegrapher, dozing in his chair at the instrument table, was startled into consciousness by the sound of approaching hoofbeats. With visions of Indians or robbers he sprang to the window, to discover a dim, tall figure dismounting on the platform. In alarm he turned to call the sleeping guard, but momentarily hesitating, looked again, the figure came into the light of the window, and with relief he recognized Iowa Burns, another of the Bar-O cowmen.

"Hello, kid," said the newcomer, entering. "Where's Old Muskoke?"

"Good evening. Over there, asleep, sir. I suppose you knew he was taking Mr. Smith's place, guarding the gold until the train came in?"

"Sure, yes. I was there when Bill come up." He crossed to the side of the snoring Jones, and kicked him sharply on the sole of his boots. "M'skoke! Git up!" he shouted. "Here's something to keep out the chills."

Again, and more sharply, he kicked the sleeping man, while the boy looked on, smiling.

Suddenly the smile disappeared, and the lad's heart leaped into his throat. He was gazing into the black, round muzzle of a pistol, and beyond it was a face set with a deadly purpose. Instinctively his staring eyes flickered towards the box of bullion.

"Yep, that's it. But wink an eye agin, an' y' git it!" said Burns coldly, advancing. "Now, git back there up agin the corner of the table, an' stand, so 'f anyone comes along you'll appear to be leanin' there, conversin'. Go on, quick!"

Dazed, cold with fear, the boy obeyed, and Iowa, producing a sheaf of hide thongs, proceeded to bind his arms to his side.

As the renegade tightened a knot securing the boy's left leg to the leg of the table, Muskoka's snoring abruptly ceased, and the sleeper moved uneasily. In a flash Iowa was over him, pistol in hand. But the snoring presently resumed, and after watching him sharply for a moment, Iowa returned to the boy.

"Now move, remember, an' I shoot," he repeated warningly. "To make sure, I'm going to fix up that snoring idiot over there before I finish you. An' don't you as much as shuffle your hoof!" Recovering the bundle of thongs, he strode back to the sleeper.

As previously the man's back had been turned Wilson had shot a frantic glance about him. In their sweep his eyes had fallen on the partly open drawer in the end of the table, immediately below his left hand, and in the drawer had noted the bowl of a pipe. At the moment nothing had resulted, but as the renegade's back was again turned his eyes again dropped to the drawer, and a sudden wild possibility occurred to him.

His heart seemed literally to stand still at the audacity, the danger of it. But might it not be possible? The light from the single lamp, on the wall opposite, was poor, and his left side thus in deep shadow. And his left hand—he tried it—yes, though tightly bound at the wrist, the hand itself was free.

His first day at the station, the visit of the men from the ranch, Muskoka's contemptuous greeting, recurred to him. Here was his opportunity of vindication.

With a desperate clenching of the teeth the boy decided, and at once began cautiously straining at the thongs about his wrist, to obtain the reach necessary. Finally they slipped, slightly, but enough. Carefully he leaned sideways, his fingers extended. He reached the pipe, fumbled a moment, and secured it.

Burns was on his knees beside the unconscious guard, splicing a thong. An instant Wilson hesitated, then springing erect, pointed the pipe-stem, and in a voice he scarcely knew, a voice sharp as the crack of a whip, cried:

"Hands up, Burns! I got you!"

"*Quick! I'll shoot!*"

The renegade cowman, taken completely by surprise, leaped to his feet with a cry, without turning, his hands instinctively half-raised.

"Quick! Up! *Up!*" cried the boy. A breathlessly critical instant the hands wavered, then slowly, reluctantly, they ascended.

For a moment the young operator stood panting, but half believing the witness of his own eyes to the success of the stratagem. Then at the top of his voice he cried: "Mr. Jones! Mr. Jones! Muskoka! Wake up! Wake up!"

Iowa, muttering beneath his breath, paused anxiously to watch results.

"Muskoka! Muskoka!" shouted the lad. The snoring continued evenly, unbrokenly.

Iowa indulged in a dry laugh. "Save your wind, kid," he said. "I fixed a drink he took before he came down."

At this news the boy's heart sank.

"But look here, kid." Iowa turned carefully, hands still in the air. "Look here, can't we square this thing up? You got the drop on me, O K—and with a blame little pea-shooter," he added, catching a glimpse, as he thought, of the end of a small black barrel, but nevertheless

continuing his attitude of surrender. "You got the drop—and you're a smart kid, you are—but can't we fix this thing up? You take half, say? I'd be glad to let you in. Honest! An' no one'd ever think you was in the game. Come, what d' y' say?"

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Though apparently listening, the young operator was in reality urgently casting about in his mind for other expedients. Obviously it would be too dangerous to attempt to reach with the fingers of one of his bound hands the thongs holding his left leg to the leg of the table. He might reveal the pipe, or drop it. And neither could he reach the telegraph key, to get in touch with someone on the wire. And in any case, how could that help him? For the next train was not due for two hours, and it did not seem possible he could carry on his bluff that length of time.

But think as he would, the wire seemed the only hope. Could he not reach the key in some way?

The solution came as Iowa ventured a short step nearer, and repeated his suggestion. At first sight it seemed as ridiculously impossible as the bluff with the pipe, but quickly the boy weighed the chances, and determined to take the risk.

"Now, Mr. Iowa," he said, "you are to do just exactly what I tell you, step by step, so much and no more. If you make any other move, if I only think you are going to, I shall shoot. My finger is pressing the trigger constantly. And I guess you can see that at this range, though my hold on the gun is a bit cramped, I could not miss you if I wanted to."

"Listen, now. You will come forward until you can reach the chair here by sticking out your foot. Then you will push it back along the table to the wall, and turn it face to me. Then you will sit down in it. After that I'll tell you some more."

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"Go ahead! And remember—my finger always pressing the trigger!"

As Burns came forward, infinitely puzzled, the boy turned slowly, so that the "muzzle" of the pipe continued to cover the would-be bullion thief. Gingerly Iowa reached out with his foot and shoved the chair back to the wall, and turning, backed into it and sat down. With the shadow of a grin on his face, he demanded, "Wot next?"

"Now, slowly let your left arm down at full length on the table. There—hand is on the key, isn't it?"

"Now," continued Wilson, who never for an instant allowed his eyes to wander from the man's face, "now feel with your fingers at the back of the key, and find a screw-head, standing up."

"Which one? There are two or three," said Iowa craftily.

"No, there are not. There's just one. And I give you 'three' to find it," said the young operator sharply. "One, two—"

"Oh, go on! I got it!" exclaimed Iowa angrily.

"Below the screw-head is a binding-nut. Loosen it, and turn it leftwise. Found it? Now take hold of the screw-head again, and turn it to the left. It turns free, doesn't it?"

"Sure."

"Turn it about four times completely around. Now the binding nut again, down, the other way, till it's tight. Got it?"

"Now, hold your finger tips over the black button at the inner end of the key, and hit down on it smartly."

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There was a click.

"That's it. It has plenty of play, hasn't it?"

"Works up and down about an inch, if that's wot you mean," growled Iowa, still puzzled. "But wot—"

"I'm going to give you a lesson in telegraphy and you are going to—"

Iowa saw, and exploded. "Well, of all the—Say, wot do you think—"

"All right!" Sharply, bravely, though inwardly steeling himself for catastrophe, the lad counted, "One!—Two!—"

Again he won. "Oh, go on!" sputtered Iowa, through gritting teeth. And the boy resumed.

"Hit the key a sharp rap! Pretty good. Now, two raps, one right after the other. Good."

"Now, those are what we call 'dots.' Remember. Now, press the key down, hold it for just a moment, and let it come up again. Very good. You would learn telegraphy quickly, Mr. Burns. That is what we call a 'dash.'" With the situation apparently so well in hand, Wilson was beginning almost to enjoy it.

"Now I'll have you do what I've been aiming at. And remember always—my finger is constantly pressing the trigger!"

"Now then, feel just this side of the key button, below. The little button of a lever? Got it? Press it from you."

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There was a single sharp upward click of relay and sounder. The key was "open," ready for operation.

"Now listen. I want you to make the letter X—a dot, a dash, then two more dots right together. And keep repeating till I stop you."



Still under the spell of the fancied revolver and the boy's unfaltering gaze, the renegade cowman obeyed, and the telegraph instruments clicked out a painfully deliberate, but fairly readable "X."

It was an idle half-hour, and when the despatcher at Exeter heard his call he glanced up from a magazine, listened a moment, and impatiently remarking, "Some idiot student!" returned to his reading.

But steadily, insistent, the repetition of X's continued, and at length he reached forward, struck open the key, and demanded, "Who? Sign!"

Clumsily came the answer, "B."

"Bonepile! Now what's happening down there? It doesn't sound like the new operator, either."

The wire again clicked open, and slowly, in the same heavy hand, the mystified and then amazed despatcher read:

"H-E-L-P—H-E-L-D U-P—A-F-T-E-R G-O-L-D—T-I-E-D T-O T-A-B-L-E—G-O-T D-R-O-P O-N H-I-M—M-A-K-I-N-G H-I-M S-E-N-D—B."

The despatcher grasped his key. "Good boy! Good boy!" he hurled back. "Keep it up for twenty-five minutes and we'll get help to you. There's an extra engine at H, waiting for 92. I'll start her right down." And therewith he whirled off into an urgent succession of "H's."

But through young Jennings' strange feat in telegraphy help was nearer even than the unexpected succor from Hillside. Despite the sleeping draught Burns had administered to Muskoka Jones, the unaccustomed clicking of the telegraph instruments had begun to arouse the big cowman. When finally, in climax, came the lightning whirr of the despatcher's excited response, he gasped into consciousness, blinked, and suddenly found himself sitting upright, staring open-mouthed at the spectacle before him.

The next moment, with a shout, he was on his feet in the middle of the floor, and the nerve-strung boy had fainted.

As the lad sank forward his "pistol" fell from his hand and rolled into the light.

From Burns came an inarticulate cry, his jaw dropped, his eyes started in his head. Muskoka halted in his stride, wet his lips and muttered incredulous words of admiration and amazement. Then in a moment he had cut Wilson free, and stretched him on the floor.

It was Iowa broke the silence. Rising, with compressed lips he held toward Muskoka the butt of his pistol. "Here, shoot me—with my own gun!" he said hoarsely. "I deserve it."

Muskoka considered. "No," he decided at length. "Leave your gun as a present for the kid, and," turning and indicating the door, "git!"

Thus was it the young "dude" operator proved himself, and came into possession of a handsome pearl-handled Colt's revolver—and, early the following morning, from a "committee" of the Bar-O cowmen, headed by Muskoka Jones, a fine high-crowned, silver-spangled Mexican sombrero, to take the place of the hat they had destroyed, and "as a mark of esteem for the pluckiest little operator ever sent to Bonepile."

More important still, however, the incident won Wilson immediate esteem at division headquarters, where one of the first of the operators to congratulate him was Alex Ward.

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## XVI

### A DRAMATIC FLAGGING

Since shortly following Jack Orr's appointment to Midway Junction Alex had been "agitating," as he called it, for his friend's transfer to the telegraph force at the division terminal. At length, early in the fall, Alex's efforts bore fruit, and Jack was offered, and accepted, the "night trick" at one of the big yard towers at Exeter.

Of course the two chums were now always together. And the day of the big flood that October was no exception to the rule. All afternoon the two boys had wandered up and down the swollen river, watching the brown whirling waters, almost bank high, and the trees, fences, even occasional farm buildings, which swept by from above. When six o'clock came they reluctantly left it for supper, and the night's duties.

"Well, what do you think of the river, Ward?" inquired the chief night despatcher as Alex entered the despatching-room.

"It looks rather bad, sir, doesn't it. Do you think the bridge is quite safe?"

"Quite. It has been through several worse floods than this. It's as strong as the hills," the despatcher affirmed.

Despite the chief's confidence, however, when about 5 o'clock in the morning there came reports of a second cloud-burst up the river, he requested Alex to call up Jack, at the yard tower which overlooked the bridge, and ask him to keep them posted.

"Tell him the crest of this new flood will likely reach us in half an hour," he added; "and that by that time, as it is turning colder, there'll probably be a heavy fog on the river."

Twenty-five minutes later Jack suddenly called, and announced, "The new flood's coming! There is a heavy mist, and I can't see, but I can hear it. Can you see it from up there?"

Alex and the chief despatcher moved to one of the western windows, raised it, and in the first gray light of dawn gazed out across the valley below. Instead of the dark waters of the river, and the yellow embankment of the railroad following it, winding away north was a broad blanket of fog, stretching from shore to shore. But distinctly to their ears came a rumble as of thunder.

"It must be a veritable Niagara," remarked the chief with some uneasiness. "I never heard a bore come down like that before."

"Here she comes," clicked Jack from the tower. They stepped back to his instruments.

"Say!—"

There was a pause, while the chief and Alex exchanged glances of apprehension, then came quickly, "Something has struck one of the western spans of the bridge and carried it clean away

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"No—No, it's there yet! But it's all smashed to pieces! Only the upper-structure seems to be holding!"

Sharply the despatcher turned to an operator at one of the other wires. "McLaren, Forty-six hasn't passed Norfolk?"

"Yes, sir. Five minutes ago."

A cry broke from the chief, and he ran back to the window. Alex followed, and found him as pale as death.

"What's the matter, Mr. Allen?" he exclaimed.

"Matter! Why, Norfolk is the last stop between that train and the bridge! She'll be down here in twenty minutes! And even if we can get someone across the bridge immediately, how can they flag her in that wall of mist?" Hopelessly he pointed where on the farther shore the tracks were completely hidden in the blanket of white vapor. "And there's no time to send down torpedoes."

At the thought of the train rushing upon the broken span, and plunging from sight in the whirling flood below, Alex felt the blood draw back from his own face.

"But we will try something! We must try something!" he cried.

At that moment the office door opened and Division Superintendent Cameron appeared. "Good morning, boys," he said genially. "I'm quite an early bird this morning, eh? Came down to meet the wife and children. They're getting in from their vacation by Forty-six."

265

"Why, Allen, what is the matter?"

The chief swayed back against the window-ledge. "One of the bridge spans—has just gone," he responded thickly, "and Forty-six—passed Norfolk!"

The superintendent stared blankly a moment, started forward, then staggered back into a chair. But in another instant he was on his feet, pallid, but cool. "Well, what are you doing to stop her?" he demanded sharply.

The chief pulled himself together. "It only happened this moment, sir. The man at the yard tower just reported. One of the western spans was struck by something. Only the upper-structure is hanging," he says.

"Can't you send someone over on foot, with a flag, or torpedoes?"

"There are no torpedoes at the bridge house, and there's not time to send them down. As to flagging—look at the mist over the whole valley bottom," said the despatcher pointing. "Except directly opposite, where the wind between the hills breaks it up at times, the engineer couldn't see three feet ahead of him."

The superintendent gripped his hands convulsively. Suddenly he turned to Alex. "Ward, can't you suggest something?" he appealed. "You have always shown resource in emergencies."

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"I have been trying to think of something, sir. But, as the chief says, even if we could get a man across the bridge, what could he do? I was down by the river yesterday morning, and the haze was like a blind wall."

"Couldn't a fire be built on the tracks?"

"Not quickly enough, sir. Everything is soaking wet."

The superintendent strode up and down helplessly. "And of course it had to happen after the Riverside Park station had closed for the season," he said bitterly. "If we had had an operator there we—"

The interruption was a cry from Alex. "I've something! Oil!"

He dashed for the tower wire.

"What? What's that?" cried the superintendent, running after.

"Oil on a pile of ties, or anything, sir—providing Orr can get over the bridge," Alex explained hurriedly as he whirled off the letters of Jack's call. The official dropped into the chair beside him.

"I, I, TR," answered Jack.

"OR, have you any oil in the tower?" shot Alex.

"No, but there's some in the lamp-shed just below."

"Look here, could you possibly get across the bridge?"

"I might manage it. There is a rail bicycle in the lamp-house. If the rails are hanging together perhaps I could shoot over with that. Why?"

"46 is due in twenty minutes, and apparently we have no way of stopping her except through you."

"Why, certainly I'll risk it," buzzed the sounder. "I suppose the oil is to make a quick blaze, to flag her?" Jack added, catching Alex's idea.

"That's it. Make it just this side of the Riverside Park station."

"OK! Here goes!"

"Good luck," sent Alex, with a sudden catch in his throat, as he realized the danger his chum was so cheerfully running. "God help him!" added the superintendent fervently.

Jack, in the distant tower, took little time to think of the danger himself. Catching up a lantern and lighting it, he was quickly out and down the tower steps, and running for the nearby shed. Fortunately it was unlocked. Darting in, he found a large can of oil. Carrying it out to the main-line track, he returned, and hurriedly dragged forth the yard lamp-man's rail bicycle—a three-wheeled affair, with the seat and gear of an ordinary bicycle.

Swinging the little car onto the rails, he placed the oil can on the platform between the arms, swung the lantern over the handlebars, mounted, and was off, pedalling with all his might.

As he speedily neared the down-grade of the bridge approach, and the roar of the flood met him in full force, Jack for the first time began to realize the danger of his mission. But with grimly set lips, he refused to think of it, and pedalled ahead determinedly.

He topped the grade, and below him was a solid roof of mist, only the bridge towers showing.

Apprehensively, but without hesitation, he sped downward. The first dampness of the vapor struck him. The next moment he was lost in a blinding wall of white. He could not see the rails.

On he pedalled with bowed head. Suddenly came a roar beneath him. He was over the water.

Jack's occasional views from the tower had shown him where the bridge was shattered; and for some distance he continued ahead at a good speed. Then judging he was nearing the wrecked portion, he slowed down and went on very slowly, peering before him with straining eyes, and listening sharply for a note in the tumult of water below which might tell of the broken timbers and twisted iron.

It came, a roar of swirling, choking and gurgling. Simultaneously there was a trembling of the rails beneath him.

He was on the shattered span.

At a crawl Jack proceeded. The vibration became more violent. On one side the track began to dip. Momentarily Jack hesitated, and paused. At once came a picture of the train rushing toward him, and conquering his fear, he went on.

Suddenly the track swayed violently, then dipped sharply sideways. With a cry Jack sprang off backwards, and threw himself flat on his face on the sleepers. Trembling, deafened by the roar of the cataract just beneath him, he lay afraid to move, believing the swaying structure would give way every instant. But finally the rails steadied, and partly righted; and regaining his courage, Jack rose to his knees, and began working his way forward from tie to tie, pushing the bicycle ahead of him.

Presently the rails became steadier. Cautiously he climbed back into the saddle, and slowly at first, then with quickly increasing speed and rising hope, pushed on. The vibration decreased, the track again became even and firm. Suddenly at last the thunder of the river passed from below him, and he was safely across.

A few yards from the bridge, and still in the mist, Jack peered down to see that the oil can was safe. He caught his breath. Reaching out, he felt about the little platform with his foot.

Yes; it was gone! The tipping of the car had sent it into the river.

As the significance of its loss burst upon him, and he thought of the peril he had come through to no purpose, Jack sat upright in the saddle, and the tears welled to his eyes.

Promptly, however, came remembrance of the Riverside Park station, a mile ahead of him. Perhaps there was oil there!

Clenching his teeth, and bending low over the handlebars, Jack shot on, determined to fight it out to the finish.

Meantime, at the main office the entire staff, including the superintendent, the chief despatcher and Alex, were crowded in the western windows, watching, waiting and listening. Shortly after Alex had announced Jack's departure a suppressed shout had greeted the tiny light of his lantern on the bridge approach, and a subdued cheer of good luck had followed him as he had disappeared into the wall of mist.

Then had succeeded a painful silence, while all eyes were fixed anxiously on the spot opposite where a light west wind, blowing down through a cut in the hills, occasionally lifted the blanket of fog and dimly disclosed the river bank and track.

Minute after minute passed, however, and Jack did not reappear. The silence became ominous.

"Surely he should be over by this time, and we should have had a glimpse of his light," said the chief. "Unless—"

An electrifying cry of "There he is!" interrupted him, and all momentarily saw a tiny, twinkling light, and a small dark figure shooting along the distant track.

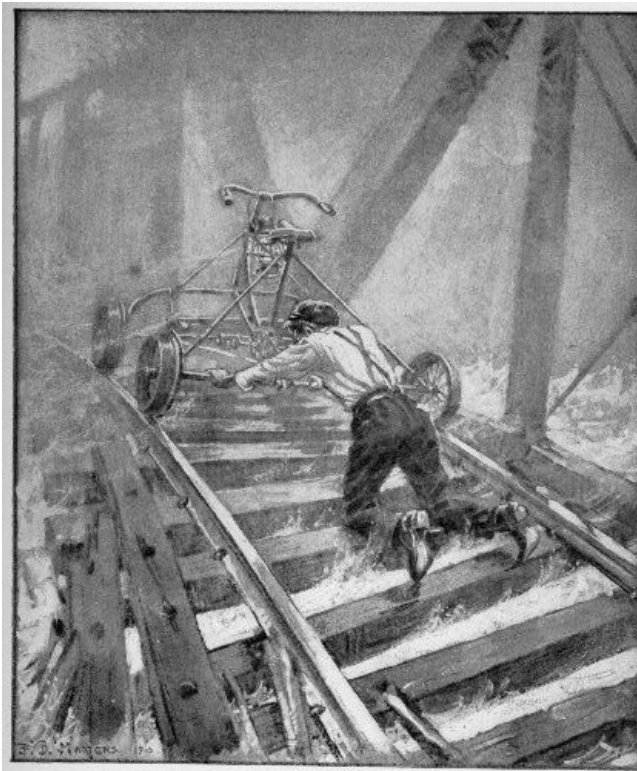
A moment after the buzz of excited hope as suddenly died. From the north came a long, low-pitched "Too—oo, too—oo, oo, oo!"

The train!

"How far up, Allen?"

"Three miles."

The superintendent groaned. "He'll never do it! He'll never do it! She'll be at the bridge in five minutes!"



JACK ROSE TO HIS KNEES, AND BEGAN WORKING HIS WAY FORWARD FROM TIE TO TIE.

"No; Broad is careful," declared the chief, referring to the engineer of the coming train. "He won't keep up that speed when he strikes the worst of the fog. There are eight or ten minutes yet."

Again came the long, mellow notes of the big engine, whistling a crossing.

"Who's that?" said Alex suddenly, half turning from the window. The next moment with a cry of "He's at the station! Orr's at the Park station!" he darted to the calling instruments, and shot back an answer. The rest rushed after, and crowded about him.

"I'm at the Park station," whirled the sounder. "I broke in. I lost the oil can on the bridge. There is no oil here. What shall I do?"

As the chief read off the excited words to the superintendent, the official sank limply and hopelessly into a chair.

"But might there not be some there, somewhere? Who would know, Mr. Allen?"

At Alex's words the chief spun about. "McLaren, call Flanagan on the 'phone!" he cried. "Quick!"

The operator sprang to the telephone, and in intense silence the party waited.

He got the number.

"Hello! Is Flanagan there?"

"Say, is there any oil across the river at the Park station?"

"For Heavens sake, don't ask questions! Is there?"

"Yes; he says there's a half barrel in the shed behind," reported the operator.

Alex's hand shot back to the key.

At the first dot he paused.

Through the open window came a whistle, strong and clear.

The chief threw up his hands. Alex himself sank back in his chair, helplessly.

Suddenly he again started forward.

"I have it!"

With the sharp words he again grasped the key, and while those about him listened with bated breath he sent like a flash, "Jack, there's a barrel of oil in the shed at the rear. Knock the head in, spill it, and set a match to it.

*"Burn the station!"*

The chief and the operators gasped, then with one accord set up a shout and darted back for the windows. The superintendent, told of the message, rushed after.

In absolute silence all fixed their eyes on the spot a mile up the river where lay the little summer depot.

Once more came the long-drawn "Too—oo, too—oo, oo, oo!" for a crossing.

"The next'll tell," said the chief tensely—"for the crossing this side of the station, or—"

It came. It was the crossing.

But the next instant from the mist shot up a lurid flare. From the windows rose a cry. Higher leaped the flames. And suddenly across the quiet morning air came a long series of quick sharp toots. Again they came—then the short, sharp note for brakes.



WITH THE SHARP WORDS HE AGAIN GRASPED THE KEY.

And the boys and the flames had won!

The superintendent turned and held out his hand. "Ward, thank you," he said huskily. "Thank you. You are a genuine railroader."

"And—about the station?" queried Alex, a sudden apprehension in his face and voice. For the moment the crisis was past he had realized with dismay that he had issued the unprecedented order for the burning of the station entirely on his own responsibility.

"The station?" The superintendent laughed. "My boy, that was the best part of it. That was the generalship of it. There was no time to ask, only act. The fraction of a second might have lost the train.

"No; that is just why I say you are a genuine railroader—the burning of the station was a piece of the finest kind of railroading!

"And this reminds me," added the superintendent some minutes later, leading Alex aside and speaking in a lower voice. "We expect to start construction on the Yellow Creek branch in six weeks, and will be wanting an 'advance guard' of three or four heady, resourceful operators with the construction train, or on ahead. Would you like to go? and your friend Orr? There'll be plenty of excitement before we are through."

"I'd like nothing better, sir, or Orr either, I know," declared Alex with immediate interest. "But where will the excitement come in, sir?"

"You have heard the talk of the K. & Z. also running a line to the new gold field from Red Deer? And that they were held up by right-of-way trouble? Well, we have just learned that that was all a bluff; that they have been quietly making preparations, and are about to start construction almost immediately. And you see what that means?"

"A race for the Yellow pass?"

"A race—and more than that. Did you ever read of the great war between the Santa Fe and the Rio Grande for the Grand Canyon of Colorado? Regularly organized bands of fighting men on either side, and pitched battles? Well, I don't anticipate matters coming to that point between us and the K. & Z., but I wouldn't be surprised if it came near it before we are through. The lines traverse wild country, and the K. & Z. people have men in their construction department who would pull up track or cut wires as soon as light a pipe. In the latter case they would cut at critical times. There is where an operator with a head for difficulties might prove invaluable."

"I would be more than glad to tackle it, sir," agreed Alex enthusiastically.

"Very well then. You may consider yourself, and your friend Orr, appointed. And if you know of anyone else of the same brand, you might suggest him," the superintendent concluded.

"I don't think I do, sir—at the moment," Alex responded.

The week succeeding brought Alex a suggestion.

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## XVII

### WILSON AGAIN DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF

It was decidedly warm the following Monday noon at Bonepile, and Wilson Jennings, his coat off, but wearing the fancy Mexican sombrero that the Bar-O cowmen had given him, sat in the open window to catch the breeze that blew through from the rear. From the window Wilson could not see the wagon-trail toward the hills to the west. Thus was it that the low thud of hoofs first told him of someone's hurried approach.

Starting to his feet, he stepped to the end of the platform. At sight of a horseman coming toward him at full speed, and leading a second horse, saddled, but riderless, Wilson gazed in surprise. Wonder increased when as the rider drew nearer he recognized Muskoka Jones, the big Bar-O cowman.

"What is it, Muskoka?" he shouted as the ponies approached.

The cow-puncher pulled up all-standing within a foot of the platform.

"There's been an explosion at the Pine Lode, kid, and ten men are bottled up somewhere in the lower level. Two men got in through a small hole—the mouth of the mine is blocked—and one of them is tapping on the iron pump-pipe. Bartlett, the mine boss, thinks it may be telegraph ticking—that maybe Young knows something about that. Will you come up and listen?"

"You see, if they knew what was what inside, they'd know what they could do. They are afraid to blast the big rock that's blocking the mouth for fear of bringing loosened stuff down on the men who have been caught."

Wilson was running for the station door. "I'll explain to the despatcher," he shouted over his shoulder.

"I, I, X," responded the despatcher.

"There has been an explosion at the Pine Lode mine," sent Wilson rapidly, "and a man has been sent to take me there to try and read some tapping from the men inside. Can you give 144 and the Mail clearance from Q and let me go up?"

"Some tapping? What—Oh, I understand. OK! Go ahead," ticked the despatcher. "Get back as soon as possible."

"I will."

"All right, Muskoke," cried Wilson, hastening forth, struggling into his coat as he ran.

"Get round thar," shouted the cowboy, swinging the spare pony to the platform. Wilson went into the saddle with a neat bound.

"Say, you've seen a hoss before, kid," observed Muskoka with surprise as he threw over the reins.

"Sure I have. Used to spend my summer vacations on a farm. Can ride a bit standing up," said Wilson, with pride.

They swung their animals about together, and were off on the jump. As the two ponies stretched out to their full stride the cowboy eyed Wilson's easy seat with approval. "Well, kid," he observed after a moment's silence, "next time I come across a dude I'll git him to do his tricks before I brand him. I don't see but what you sit about as good as I do."

Wilson's pleased smile gave place to gravity as he returned to the subject of the explosion. "When did it happen?" he asked.

"Early this morning. Just after the men went in. They're not sure, but think it was powder stored at the foot of the shaft down to the lower level. The main lead of the Pine Lode, you know, runs straight into the mountain, not down; and the shaft to the lower level is a ways in. We heard the noise at the Bar-O.

"There's nothing much to see, or do, though," the cowman added as they raced along neck and neck. "A big rock just over the entrance came down, and when they got the dirt away they found it had bottled the thing up like a cork. It's that they are afraid to blast until they know how the men are fixed inside. Hoover and Young got in through a small hole at the top, Hoover about half an hour before Young. He started tapping on the pipe too, then stopped. They don't know what happened to him."

Twenty minutes' hard riding brought them to the foothills. Still at the gallop the ponies were urged up a winding rocky trail, and finally a tall black chimney and a group of rough buildings came into view.

"There it is," said the cowboy, indicating a ledge just above.

As they went forward, still at full speed, Wilson gazed toward the mine entrance with some astonishment. Mine disasters he had always thought of as scenes of great excitement—people running to and fro, wringing their hands, excited crowds held back by ropes, and men calling and shouting. Here, about a spot but little distinguished from the rest of the rocky, sparsely-treed mountain side, was gathered a group of perhaps fifty men, some sitting on beams and rocks, others moving quietly about, all smoking.

On their being discovered, however, there was a stir, and as Muskoka and the boy dismounted at the foot of a rough path and ascended there was a general movement of the miners and cowmen to meet them.

"I got him," Muskoka announced briefly to a grizzle-haired man who met them at the top. "This is Bartlett, the mine boss," he said to Wilson by way of introduction. The boss nodded.

"The tapping's going on yet, is it, Joe?"

"No. It's stopped, just like Hoover's did," was the gloomy response. "And just when we were getting onto it ourselves."

The speaker held up a small board pencilled with figures and letters. "Redding there hit on the idea that maybe Young was knocking out the numbers of letters in the alphabet, and we made this table, and just found out we had it right when the tapping stopped. That was twenty minutes ago, and we haven't had another knock since."

"Let's see it. What did you get?"

"There—'20, 7, 5, 20, 21, 16'—'T G E T U P.' Something about 'can't get up,' we figured it. But it's not enough to be of any use.

"And there's not another man here can wriggle in through the hole," went on the boss, turning toward the great rock which sealed the mouth of the mine. "A dozen of 'em tried it, and Redding got stuck so we had to get a rope on him. Nearly pulled his legs off."

Wilson made his way forward and examined the strangely blocked entrance. The small hole referred to was a triangular-shaped opening about a foot in height and some sixteen inches in width, apparently just at the roof of the gallery. Some minutes Wilson stood studying it, pondering. Finally he turned about with an air of decision and returned to Muskoka and the mine boss.

"I have a plan," he announced. "If you will go back to the station again, Muskoke, I'll send for another operator, and go in the mine myself. Two operators could talk backwards and forwards easily on the piping. And—"

"But whar's the other operator?" interrupted the cowboy.

"There is a freight due at the station in about twenty-five minutes. I can give you a message to hand the engineer for the operator at Ledges, the next station—a message asking the despatcher to send the Ledges operator down on the Mail. Someone could wait for him, and if there is no hitch he'd be here inside of an hour and a half."

"That'll work!" exclaimed the boss. "That's it! You'll go, Muskoke?"

"Sartenly. I'll get a fresh hoss, and wait fer him myself." Wilson, finding an envelope in his pocket, dropped to a boulder and began writing.

"W. B. J., Exeter," he scribbled. "Am at the mine. The tapping has stopped. No one else can go in, so I am going myself. Please send down operator from Ledges to read my tapping if I am unable to return.

"JENNINGS."

"Redding! Whar's Red?" shouted Muskoka as he folded the message.

"Here. What?"

"I'm going back to the station for another operator. I'm going to take your Johnny hoss. Mine's blowed."

"Sure yes," agreed the owner, and with a "Good luck, kid," Muskoka was clattering down the path.

"Now, Mr. Bartlett, will you please explain the plan of things inside; just how the tunnel runs?" requested Wilson.

"Have a seat and I'll draw it," said the boss, setting the example. He turned the board bearing the fragmentary message, and Wilson dropped down beside him.

"The main gallery, the old lead, runs straight in, at about this dip down," he said, drawing as he spoke. "Runs back 550 feet, and ends. That was where the old lead petered out.

"Here, about 200 feet from the entrance, is a vertical shaft, 90 feet, that we put down to pick up the old Pine-Knot lead. It's from the foot of that the new gallery, the lower level, starts. It slopes off just under the old lead—so—330 feet, there's a fault, and it cants up 12 feet—so—then on down again at a bit sharper dip, nearly 600 feet; then another fault and a drop, and about 50 feet more.

"It's down there at the end we think most of the men have been caught, but some may have been near the shaft. The pumping-pipe where Hoover and Young must have been tapping is here, half way between the first and second faults, where it comes down through a boring from the old gallery. It must have been at that point, because we had disconnected two leaking sections just below there only this morning."

"How do you get down the shaft to the lower level?" Wilson asked.

"There was a ladder, but it was smashed by the explosion. Hoover, the first man in, came out for a rope, so I suppose that's there now. Young must have gone down by it.

"Hoover also reported that the roof of the old gallery was in bad shape just over the shaft. That's the particular reason we are afraid to blast the rock here until we know whether any of the men were caught at the bottom of the pit."

Wilson arose and began removing his collar. "How about water, Mr. Bartlett, since the pump is not working?" he inquired.

"Unless the explosion tapped new water, there'll be no danger for twenty-four hours at least. But if the drain channel of the lower gallery has been filled the floor will be very slippery," the mine boss added. "It's slate, and we left it smooth, as a runway for the ore boxes."

As the young operator removed his spotless collar—one similar to that which had so aroused the cowmen's derision on his first day at Bonepile—without a smile one of the very men who had formed the "welcoming committee" that day rubbed his hands on his shirt, took it carefully, and placed it on a clean plank.

"You'll want a lamp. Somebody give the boy a cap and lamp," the boss directed. A dozen of the miners whipped off caps with attached lamps, and trying several, Wilson found one to fit. Then, buttoning his coat and turning up the collar, he made his way to the rock-sealed entrance, and climbed up to the narrow opening.

"I'll tap as soon as I reach the pipe," he said. "So long!" and without more ado crawled head first within and disappeared.

The lamp on his cap lighting up the narrow trough-like tunnel, Wilson easily wormed his way forward ten or twelve feet. Then the passage contracted and became broken and twisted. However, given confidence by the knowledge that others had passed through, Wilson squeezed on, there presently came a widening of the hole, then a black opening, and with a final effort he found himself projecting into the black depths of the empty gallery.

Below him the debris sloped to the floor. Pulling himself free, he slid and scrambled down, and quickly was on his feet, breathing with relief. Only pausing to brush some of the dust from his clothes, Wilson hastened forward.

Two hundred feet distant a windlass took shape in the obscurity. He reached it, and the black opening of the shaft to the lower level was at his feet. Looking, he found the rope the mine boss had spoken of. It was secured to one of the windlass supports, and disappeared into the depths on the opposite side of the pit. Directly below was the shattered wreck of the ladder.

Leaning over, Wilson shouted, "Hello! Hello!" The words crashed and echoed in the shaft and about him, but there was no reply. Once more he shouted, then resolutely suppressing his instinctive shrinking, he made his way about to the rope, carefully lowered himself, and began descending hand under hand.

Wilson had not gone far when with apprehension he found the rope becoming wet and slippery with drip from the rocks above. Despite a tightened grip his hands began to slip. In alarm he wound his feet about the rope. Still he slipped. To dry a hand on his sleeve, he freed it. Instantly with a cry he found himself shooting downward. He clutched with hands, feet and knees, but onward he plunged. In the light of his lamp the jagged broken timbers of the shoring shot up by him. He would be dashed to pieces.



But desperately he fought, and at last got the rope clamped against the corner of a heel, and the speed was retarded. A moment after he landed with an impact that broke his hold on the rope and sent him in a heap on his back.

Rising, Wilson thankfully discovered he had escaped injury other than a few bruises, and gazed about him. At first sight he appeared to be in the bottom of a well filled with broken water-soaked timbers and gray, dripping rock. He knew there must be an exit, however, and set about looking for it, at the same time listening and watching shrinkingly for signs of anyone buried in the heap of stone and timber. Not a sound save the monotonous drip of seeping water was to be heard, however, and presently behind a shield of planking he located the black mouth of a small opening.

Dropping to his knees, he crawled through, and stood upright in a downward sloping gallery similar to that above—the “lower level.”

Once more he shouted. “Hello! Hello!” The clashing echoes died away without response, and he started forward.

Scarcely had he taken a half dozen steps when without warning his feet shot from under him and he went down on his back with a crash, barely saving his head with his hands. The smooth hard rock was as slippery as ice from the water flowing over it. Wondering if this icy declivity had anything to do with the failure of Hoover and Young to return, Wilson arose and went on more cautiously.

As he proceeded the walking became more and more treacherous. Several times he again went down, saving himself by sinking onto his outstretched hands.

On rising from one of these falls Wilson discovered something which sent him ahead with new concern. A few yards farther he halted with an exclamation on the brink of a yellow stretch of water that met the gallery roof twenty feet beyond him.

Blankly he gazed at it. Then he recalled the “fault” the mine boss had spoken of—an abrupt rise of the gallery twelve feet. This must be it. Its drain had choked, and filled it with water.

But both Hoover and Young had passed it! The pipe they had tapped upon was beyond. They must have waded boldly in, dove or ducked down, and come up on the other side. At the thought of following them in this Wilson drew back. Had he not better return?

Could he, though? Could he ascend a rope down which he had been unable to prevent himself sliding? The answer was obvious.

Desperately Wilson decided to venture the water, to reach those he now knew were on the other side, and the pumping-pipe. In preparation he first securely wrapped the matches he carried in notepaper taken from an envelope, and placed them in the top of the miner’s hat. Then removing his shoes, to give him firmer footing, he stepped into the yellow pool and carefully made his way forward. Six feet from the point at which the water met the top of the gallery the water was up to his chin, and he saw he must swim for it, and dive. Without pause, lest he should lose his nerve, he struck out, reached the roof, took a deep breath, and ducked down.

Three quick, hard strokes, and he arose, and with a gasp found himself at the surface again. A few strokes onward in the darkness, and his hands met a rough wall, over which the water was draining as over the brink of a dam.

At the same moment a sound of dull blows reached his ears. Spluttering and blinking, Wilson drew himself up. A shout broke from him. Far distant and below was a point of light.

“Hello!” he cried. Immediately came a chorus of response, as though many were excitedly shouting at once. Unable to distinguish anything from the jangle of echoes, Wilson cried back, “Are you all safe?”

Again came the clashing, incomprehensible shout.

“I’m coming down,” he called, though not sure that they heard him. Producing the matches from the crown of the hat, he found they had come through dry, and after some difficulty lighting one against the side of another, he re-lit the lamp. While at this, voices continued to come up to him, evidently shouting something. But try as he could he was unable to make out what was said. It was all a reverberating clamor, as though a hundred people were talking at once.

As the lamp spluttered up, after the ducking which had extinguished it, Wilson gazed down the gallery before him with a touch of new dismay. The water was flowing over it in a thin, glossy coat, and it was considerably steeper than on the outer side of the fault. Apparently the only thing to do was to slide.

Working about into a sitting position, facing down the slope, with feet spread out, as though steering a sleigh, Wilson allowed himself to go. The rapidity with which he gained momentum startled him. Soon the gray damp walls were passing upward like a glistening mist. With difficulty he kept his feet foremost.

Meantime the voices from below had continued shouting. Onward he slid, and the sounds became clearer. At last the words came to him. They were, “The pipe! The pipe! Catch the pump-pipe!” Then Wilson suddenly recollected that the pipe was but half way down the slope.

Digging with his heels he sought to slow up, gazing first at one flitting wall, then the other. On the right a vertical streak of black appeared. He clutched with heels and hands, and sought to steer toward it. He swept nearer, and reached with outstretched hand. The effort swung him sideways, his fingers just grazed the iron, and twisting about, he shot downward head first at

greater speed than ever. A moment after there was a chorus of shouts, a sharp cry in his ears, an impact, a rolling and tumbling, a second crash, and Wilson felt himself dragged to his feet.

About him, in a single flickering light, was a group of strange faces. While he gazed, dazed, rubbing a bruised head, all talked excitedly, even angrily.

"Why didn't you hang on, you idiot?" demanded a voice.

"Who is it, anyway? It's a stranger!"

"And a boy!" said another.

Wilson recovered his scattered wits, and quickly explained who he was and what he had come for. Immediately there was a joyful shout. "We'll be out inside of an hour!" cried one.

"But how am I going to get up to the pipe?" demanded Wilson.

"We are cutting footholds up the incline.

"White, get back on the job," directed the speaker, who Wilson later learned was the fire-boss.

"You brought him down with you," he added, to the boy.

The man spoken to began creeping up the water-covered slope dragging a pick, and Wilson turned to look about him. The eleven men in the party, not including the man on the slope, were crowded together on the level floor of what evidently was the lower fault of the lead. From the darkness beyond came the sound of water trickling to a lower level.

"Are all here, and no one hurt?" he asked.

"Hoover and Young, and everybody, and not one scratched," responded the fire-boss. "You were the one nearest hurt.

"You were a mighty plucky youngster," he added, "to come through that water up there."

Wilson interrupted a chorus of hearty assent. "What happened to Hoover and Young at the pipe?" he inquired. "That mystified everybody outside."

"They both caught it coming down, but Hoover lost his hold trying to change hands for tapping, and Young dropped the knife he was knocking with, and slipped fishing for it," the fire-boss explained.

Meantime at the entrance to the mine, a half hour having passed without a knocking on the pipe to announce the arrival inside of the young operator, anxiety began to be felt for his safety also. When another half hour had passed, and there was still no response to frequent tappings of inquiry, the mine-boss, Bartlett, began to stride up and down before the blocked entrance. "I shouldn't have allowed him to go in," he muttered repeatedly. "He was only a boy."

When at length Muskoka Jones reappeared on the scene, and with him the operator from Ledges, Bartlett met them with a gloomy face. At that very moment, however, there was a shout from the men gathered about the pumping-pipe. "He's knocking!" cried a voice.

Bartlett, Muskoka and the Ledges operator went forward on the run. The latter dropped to his knees and placed his ear to the pipe. At the quick smile of comprehension which came into his face a great cheer went up. It was immediately stilled by a gesture from the operator, and in tense silence he caught up a stone, tapped back a signal, then read aloud Wilson's strangely telegraphed words of the safety of the men below, their situation, and the means to be taken to reach them.

And just at sunset the bedraggled but joyful, cheering party of rescuers and rescued emerged from the entrance—Wilson to a reception he will remember as long as he lives.

The most important result of Wilson's courage and resourcefulness, however, was an interview Alex Ward had that evening at Exeter with the division superintendent. Following a recital of Wilson's feat at the mine, Alex added: "You said last week, Mr. Cameron, that I might suggest a third operator for the Yellow Creek construction 'advance guard' of operators. I'd like to suggest Jennings, sir."

"He is appointed, then," said the superintendent. "Go and tell him yourself."

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## XVIII

### WITH THE CONSTRUCTION TRAIN

On a newly-made siding parallel to the main-line tracks, and in the center of a rolling vista of yellow-brown prairie, stood a trampish-looking train of weather-beaten passenger coaches and box-cars. In the sides of the latter small windows had been cut, and from the roofs projected chimneys. North of the train, to a din of clanking, pounding and shoveling, a throng of men were laying ties and rails, driving spikes and tightening bolts, in the construction of further short

stretches of track.

It was the Yellow Creek branch "boarding" and construction train, and the laying of the sidings of the newly-created Yellow Creek Junction was the first step in the race of the Middle Western and the K. & Z., some miles below the southern horizon, for the just-discernible break to the southwest in the blue line of the Dog Rib Mountains—the coveted entrance to the new gold fields in the valley beyond.

And here, the first of the construction operators sent forward, Alex had been two days established in the "telegraph-car."

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As he had anticipated, Alex was enjoying the experience hugely. It was every bit as good as camping out, he had declared over the wire to Jack—having for an office a table at one end of the old freight-car, sleeping in a shelf-like bunk at the other end, and eating in the rough-and-ready diner with the inspectors, foremen, time-keepers and clerks who shared the telegraph-car with him. As well, the work going on about him was a constant source of interest during Alex's spare moments.

On this, the second day, Alex had been particularly interested in the newly-arrived track-laying machine—which did not actually lay track at all, but by means of roller-bottomed chutes fed out a stream of rails and ties to the men ahead of it. After supper, the wire being silent, Alex made his way amid several trains of track-material already filling completed sidings, for a closer view of the big machine.

There proved to be less to see than he had expected; and having climbed aboard the pilot-car and examined the engine, Alex ascended the tower from which a brakeman controlled the movements of the train.

On his right lay a string of flats piled high with timbers for bridges and culverts. Glancing along them, Alex was surprised to see a man's head cautiously emerge from an opening in the lumber on one of the cars, and quickly disappear on discovering him. A moment after he had a fleeting glimpse of the intruder running low along the side of the train toward the rear.

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"Only a hobo," Alex decided on second thought. For numbers of tramps had come through on the material-trains. And presently Alex returned to the telegraph-car.

Shortly after midnight the young operator was awakened by someone running through the car and shouting for Construction Superintendent Finnan. When he caught the word "Fire!" he scrambled into his clothes and leaped to the floor, and out.

Over the tops of the cars in the direction of the track-machine was a dancing glare.

In alarm Alex joined the stream of men dropping to the ground all along the boarding-cars. Dodging through the intervening trains, he brought up with an expression of relief beside, not the track-machine, but a car of bridge material.

Fanned by a brisk wind, flames were spouting from amid the timbers at several points. Already men were pitching the burning beams over the side, however; and finding a shovel, Alex joined those who were smothering them with sand.

"Tramps, sure!" Alex heard another of the shovelers remark angrily. Immediately then he recalled the man he had seen from the track-machine tower, and pausing in his work, he counted the cars back.

It was the same car. Yes; undoubtedly the fire was the careless work of the tramp he had seen running away.

The force of fire fighters was rapidly augmented, and soon, despite the fresh breeze, the last of the burning beams were smothered, and all danger of a general conflagration was past.

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It was as Alex at last headed back for the boarding-train that a theory other than the tramp theory of the origin of the fire occurred to him. It came from a sudden recollection of Division Superintendent Cameron's prediction of interference from the K. & Z. "Could that be the real explanation?" he asked himself with some excitement.

The first streak of dawn found Alex again at the scene of the fire, bent on proving or disproving the theory of incendiarism. Climbing aboard the scorched car, he dropped to his knees and began carefully brushing aside the sand with which the burning floor had been covered.

A few minutes' search produced the burned ends of shavings!

"So!—the 'fight' is on!" observed Alex to himself gravely.

With several of the tell-tale fragments in his pocket Alex was about to leap to the ground when Construction Superintendent Finnan appeared. "Good morning, my lad. You beat me here, eh?" he said genially. "Well, what do you make of it?"

Alex sprang down beside him, and produced the charred pine whittlings. "I found these on the bottom of the car, sir. They don't seem to support the careless tramp theory, do they?" Continuing, Alex then told of the man he had seen there the evening before. "Do you think it was the work of the K. & Z., sir?" he concluded.

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The superintendent's lips were drawn tight. "Yes; I believe it was. Could you identify the man?"

"I am afraid not, sir. It was getting dusk, and he was five or six car-lengths from me, and running stooped over.

"Perhaps we could follow his footsteps down the side of the train?" Alex suggested.

"Good idea! Lead ahead. There has been a good deal of tramping about, but we may pick them out."

Proceeding to the point several cars distant at which he had seen the stranger on the ground, Alex moved on slowly, carefully inspecting the freshly turned but considerably trampled earth, the superintendent following him.

A car-length beyond, the latter suddenly paused, retraced his steps a few feet, and pointing out three succeeding impressions, exclaimed, "I think we have him, Ward! See? A long step! He was running on his toes."

Aided by the known length of the stride, they continued, following the footprints with comparative ease. Passing the second car from the end, they found the steps shorten, then change to a walk. "Probably turned in between this and the last car," the superintendent observed.

"Yes; here they go," announced Alex, halting at the opening between the two flats. "He stood for a moment, then went on through."

Alex and the superintendent followed, and continued toward the rear of the last car. Half way Alex halted, and with an ejaculation stooped and picked up something white. "A small shaving, sir!"

The official took it. "That decides the matter," he said. "Probably it was sticking to his clothes."

"He sat down here, for some time, did he not?" Alex was pointing to a depression in the earth well under the car, between two ties, and to the marks of bootheels. The superintendent went to his knees and closely examined the impressions left by the heels.

"Good! Look here," he said with satisfaction. "The marks of spurs! Our 'tramp' was a horseman."

Alex turned to look about. "Where would he have kept his horse?"

Superintendent Finnan led the way beyond the cars into the open. A mile distant, and hidden from the boarding-train by the cars on the sidings, was a depression in the prairie bordered with low scrub. "We'll have a look there," he said.

Some minutes later they stood in the bottom of the miniature valley, beside the unmistakably fresh hoofprints of a hobbled pony.

The official was grimly silent as they retraced their steps toward the construction-train. They had almost reached it when Alex, who had been examining the fragments of burned shavings, broke the silence. "Mr. Finnan, let me see the bit of shaving we found by the rear car, please." There was a touch of excitement in Alex's voice, and the superintendent halted.

"What is it?" he asked as he produced the whittling.

Alex glanced at it, and smiling, placed it beside two of the charred fragments in his hand. "Look at these little ridges, sir! The same knife whittled them all. The blade had two small nicks in it.

"All we have to do now, sir, is to find the owner of the knife!"

"A bright idea, Ward! Splendid!" exclaimed the superintendent heartily.

"But," he added as they moved on, "how are we going to find him? We can't very well round up the whole Dog Rib country, and hold a jack-knife inspection."

They came within sight of the bleached-out dining-cars. Basking in the morning sun on the steps of one of the old coaches was the figure of a young Indian, who had come from no one knew where the first day of their arrival, and had attached himself to the kitchen department.

Alex laid his hand on the superintendent's arm. "Mr. Finnan, why not try Little Hawk?"

"It occurred to me just as you spoke. I will. Right now.

"You go on in to breakfast, Ward," he directed. "And say nothing of our suspicions or discoveries."

"Very well, sir."

The members of the telegraph-car party were leaving for the diner as Alex appeared.

"Hello, Ward! Catch the early worm?" inquired one of the track-foremen jocularly.

"You mean, 'did he shoot it?'" corrected a time-clerk.

At this there was a general laugh, and glancing about for an explanation, Alex saw Elder, Superintendent Finnan's personal clerk and aide de camp, hastily remove a cartridge-belt and revolver from his waist and toss them into his bunk.

Elder was the one unpopular man in the telegraph-car. An undersized, aggressively important individual, just out of college, and affecting a stylish khaki hunting-suit, natty leather leggings and a broad-brimmed hat, he bore himself generally as though second in importance only to the construction superintendent himself. And naturally he had promptly been made the butt of the party.

"But you know," gravely observed one of the inspectors, as they took their places about the plain board table in the dining-car, "some of these tramps are dangerous fellows. They'd just as soon pull a gun on you as borrow a dime. So there's nothing like being prepared. Particularly when one carries about such evidence of wealth and rank as friend Elder, here."

At the chuckles which followed the clerk bridled angrily.

"Well, anyway, Ryan," he retorted, "I am ready to fight if one of them interferes with me. I'll not stick up my hands and let him go through me, as you did once."

"Oh, you wouldn't, eh?"

"No, I wouldn't. In fact, I'd like to see anyone make me throw up my hands, even if I didn't have a revolver," Elder went on emphatically. "I'd rather be shot—yes, sir, I'd rather be shot than have to think afterward that I'd been such a weak-kneed coward. And that's what I think of any man who would permit a low-down tramp to go through his pockets."

Loud applause greeted these remarks, clapping, banging of plates, and cries of "Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Elder!"

"Show him up!"

"It's on me. He has me labelled, OK," admitted Ryan with marked humility. "But then, gentlemen, I protest it is hardly fair to compare an ordinary mortal to so remarkably courageous a man as Elder. I claim it is not given many men to be that fearless. Why, 'with half an eye,' as the old grammars say, you can see courage sticking out all over him."

"All right, laugh. But I never showed the white feather to a hobo," Elder repeated scathingly.

"No; but—what is it Kipling, or Shakespeare, says?—'While there's life there's soap?'" observed Ryan, a sudden twinkle appearing in his eye.

The inspector explained the meaning of his facetiously garbled quotation when Elder left the table. The proposal he made was greeted with enthusiasm.

Work had been started on the branch road itself that morning, and on returning to the telegraph-car at noon the superintendent's clerk found most of the party there before him, preparing for dinner. An animated debate which was in progress ceased as he entered, and someone exclaimed, "Here he is now. He'd soon straighten them up."

"What is the trouble, men?" inquired Elder, with the air of a sergeant-major.

"Our two head-spikers had a disagreement this morning, and have gone across the yards to settle it," explained one of the time-keepers through his towel. "Couldn't you go after them, and interfere? They may put each other out of commission. Refused to listen to me or the foreman."

"The childish idiots! Certainly," agreed Elder, turning back to the door. "Which way did they go?"

"Straight across the yard. But hadn't you better take your gun?" the time-clerk suggested. "They are a pair of pretty tough customers."

"Well—perhaps I had, since you mention it," Elder responded. Going to his bunk, he secured and buckled on the belt, drew the revolver from its holster to examine it, and set forth grimly. As he disappeared the men in the car broke into barely-subdued splutterings of laughter, and crowding to the door, waited expectantly.

With an air of responsibility and determination the clerk made his way between the adjacent cars. There were six tracks filled with the long trains of construction material. He had passed the fifth, and was stooping beneath the couplings of two flats beyond, when from the other side he heard footsteps.

One hand on the butt of his revolver, he leaped forth. Uttering a choking cry he sprang back. Within a foot of his eyes were the barrels of two big Colt's-pistols, and looking over the tops of them was a villainous handkerchief-masked face.

"Hands up!" ordered the tramp hoarsely.

Elder's hands flew into the air. Immediately, despite his fright, there returned a remembrance of his boast that morning. He half made as though to bring his hands down. Instantly the cold muzzles of the pistols were pressed close beneath his nose. With a wild flutter Elder's fingers shot upward to their fullest stretch.

"Come out!" ordered the tramp.

Quaking, and almost on tiptoes in his effort to keep his hands aloft, Elder obeyed. Lowering one of the pistols and thrusting it into his belt, the tramp reached forward and secured the clerk's revolver, dropping it to the ground beneath his feet.

"Now, Mr. Superintendent," he ordered gruffly, "hand over your roll!"

"Why, I'm not the superintendent," quavered Elder hopefully. "I am—only a clerk."

"Clerk nothing! Don't you think I know a superintendent when I see one? Out with those yellowbacks you drew yesterday, or by gum—" The pistol was again thrust under his nose, and Elder blanched.

"But I'm not the superintendent! Honestly I'm not!" he protested. "I'm only a clerk. And I only get—only get—"

"Yes, come on! You only get?" thundered the tramp.

"I only get thirty-five dollars a month," whispered the clerk.

"Only thirty-five bones a month? Well, by gum!" The tramp looked the shrinking clerk over with

unspeakable contempt. "Why, there ain't a Dago shoveler in the outfit doesn't get more than that!

"Very well, then," he conceded loftily. "You can keep your coppers. I never let it be said I rob the poor.

"But I tell you what I will have," he went on suddenly. "Them clothes are sure too good for any man not getting as much money as a Dago. These," indicating his own tattered and grimy garments, "are more in your line. Come on! Peel off!"

The trimly-dressed clerk stared aghast.

"You surely—don't mean—"

"I surely DO mean! *Shell off!*" roared the tramp.

And utterly beyond belief as it was, ten minutes later Elder was surveying himself in the unspeakable rags of the hobo, and the latter, before him, was ridiculously attired in his own natty, smaller garments.

Having then removed Elder's fancy Stetson and clamped his own greasy and battered christy down to the clerk's ears, the tramp had one further humiliation. Pointing to a clump of black, oily waste hanging from a nearby axle-box, he ordered, "Pull out a bunch of that!"

Slowly, wondering, Elder did so.

"No one would believe you were a genuine hobo with such a scandalously clean face as that. Rub the waste over it," commanded the tramp.

This was too much. Blindly Elder turned to escape. Instantly both pistols were once more at his head. And in final abject surrender he slowly rubbed the black car-grease upon his cheeks.

"Very good. A little on the forehead now," directed the relentless tramp. "Now the ears.

"*Go on!*... Very good.

"Now you may go."

Frantically Elder spun about and dove between the cars. As he did so, behind him roared out six quick pistol shots.

Blindly he scrambled under the next train. Shouts rose ahead of him. "Help, help!" he cried. "Tramps! Tramps! Help!"

From the boarding-cars broke out a hubbub of excitement. "Tramps! Tramps!" he shrilled, scuttling beneath the third train.

On the other side he suddenly pulled up. He had forgotten his outlandish appearance! What if— Men sprang into view from between the cars farther down. "Here he is!" they shouted, instantly heading for him.

"It's me! Elder!" cried the apparent tramp.

More men appeared. "The tramp who burned the car!" rose the cry. "Lynch him! Lynch him!"

Elder dove back the way he had come. The trackmen raced for the nearest openings, and dove after.

As Elder dashed for the next train several of his pursuers sprang into view but a car-length away. "Head him off! Don't let him get away!" they shouted.

Madly Elder rushed on, darted beneath the last string of flats, and on out into the open.

A figure was approaching on horseback. He recognized Superintendent Finnan. Uttering a cry of hope, he headed for him. At sight of the desperately running figure, with its grimy face and flapping rags, the superintendent pulled up in sheer amazement. When the stream of men broke through the train and poured after, yelping like a pack of hounds, he urged his horse forward.

"Catch him! Stop him!" shouted the pursuers.

"It's me! Elder!" screamed the clerk. "Elder! Elder!"

A big Irishman, a pick-handle in his hand, was gaining on the supposed tramp at every bound, roaring, "I'll fix ye! I'll fix ye, ye vermin!"

With a last desperate sprint the flying clerk reached the horse and threw himself at the superintendent's stirrups. "It's Elder, Mr. Finnan!" he gasped. "Elder! Elder!"

The superintendent gazed down into the blackened face an instant, then suddenly doubled up over his horse's head, rocking and shaking in a convulsion of laughter. The action saved the clerk from the Irishman. The descending pick-handle halted in mid-air, the wielder gazed open-mouthed at the convulsed official, then suddenly grasping the clerk's head, twisted it about, and staggered back, roaring and shouting at the top of his lungs. As fast as the others arrived the riot of merriment increased; and when presently the superintendent moved on toward the train, the crestfallen clerk still at his stirrup, they were the center of a hilariously howling mob.

The final blow came when Elder entered the telegraph-car. Carefully laid out in his bunk were the garments he had surrendered to the "tramp."

The incident had its final good result, however. The mangling of Elder's vanity disclosed an unsuspected streak of common-sense and manliness, and a day or so after he frankly thanked Ryan, the perpetrator of the joke, for "having put him right." And finally he became one of the

## XIX

### THE ENEMY'S HAND AGAIN, AND A CAPTURE

"Good morning, Ward. Any word of the progress made by the K. & Z.?" inquired Construction Superintendent Finnan the following morning, Sunday, looking into the telegraph-car.

Alex threw down his towel and stepped to the instrument table. "Yes, sir; here's one that came late last night.

"It says they started from Red Deer yesterday morning, and made nearly three and a half miles."

The superintendent looked somewhat glum as he read the message. "That beats us by half a mile," he remarked. "If the news is reliable, that is. They may plan to give out inflated distances, in order to discourage us. That would be a small matter to them, after trying to burn us out."

"There has been no sign of Little Hawk yet, sir?" Alex inquired.

"No. I am beginning to think the rascal has gone over to the K. & Z.," said the superintendent, turning away. At the door he paused. "By the way, Ward, remind me to give you a message tomorrow morning asking for two more operators. We will have made six or seven miles by Monday night, and will be running the train down the branch. And the temporary station is almost completed," he added, glancing from the window toward a box-car which had been lifted from its trucks and placed on a foundation of ties beside the main-line tracks.

Alex promised gladly. It meant the coming of Jack Orr and Wilson Jennings.

Following breakfast, the morning being a beautiful one, Alex determined on a walk, and set off along the main-line to the west. Two miles distant he struck a small bridge and a deep, dry creek-bed, and turning south along its border, headed for the distant rail-head of the new branch.

At a bend in the creek some two hundred yards from the track-machine and its string of flat-cars, Alex sharply paused. Two saddled ponies were hobbled together in the creek-bottom. Casting a glance toward the construction-train, Alex leaped into the gully, out of sight.

He had not a doubt that the horses belonged to men in the service of the K. & Z., and that something was on foot similar to the attempted burning of the bridge-car.

What should he do? Return the three miles to the junction? or continue on to the track-machine? For undoubtedly the owners of the horses were there; and the machine, he knew, was in the sole charge of an oiler.

Alex decided on the latter course, and making his way along the bed of the stream, passed the hobbled ponies, and on to the new bridge fifty feet in rear of the construction-train.

As he there halted, low voices reached Alex's ears. Peering cautiously out, and seeing no one, he crept forth, and made his way along the side of the embankment toward the train. A few feet from the rear car Alex came upon a three-wheeled track velocipede, used by Elder, the superintendent's clerk in running backwards and forwards between the rail-head and the junction. Pausing, he debated whether he should not put it on the rails, and make a run for the junction immediately. Finally Alex concluded first to learn something further of what was going on, and to count on the velocipede as a means of making his escape in case of emergency. To this end he proceeded cautiously to place the little jigger in a position from which he could quickly swing it onto the irons. Then continuing forward under the edge of the train, he reached the pilot-car.

"Yes; it's a first class machine—the best on the market."

The voice was that of the oiler. Apparently he had been showing the strangers over the track-machine. For a brief space Alex wondered whether after all his suspicions were justified. But at once came the thought, "Why had the strangers hidden their horses in the creek-bottom if they were genuine visitors?" and he remained quiet.

"Where is the boiler?" inquired a new voice, evidently one of the owners of the horses.

"There is none. The steam comes from the engine, behind," the oiler responded. "Here—it comes in here."

"So! And does the machine get out of order very easily?" asked a second voice.

There was something in the tone that caused Alex to prick up his ears.

"Almost never. It's all simple. Nothing intricate," the man in charge replied.

"I suppose it could be put out of order, though—say, you fellows were to go on strike, and wanted to disable things? Eh?"

"Huh! That's rather a funny question. But I suppose it could. Anything could, for that matter."

"What do they pay you, as oiler?"

"Say, what are you two fellows driving at?" the oiler demanded sharply.

There was a momentary silence, during which Alex imagined the two strangers looking questioningly at one another. Then one of them spoke.

"Look here, whatever you get, we will give you a hundred dollars a month extra to put this machine out of order two or three times a week. Nothing very bad, but just enough to lose two or three hours' work each time. We are—well, never mind who we are. The thing stands this way: We have a big bet on that the K. & Z. will win in this building race for Yellow Creek, and—well, you see the point, I guess. What do you say?"

During the pause that followed Alex waited breathlessly, and with growing disappointment. Was the oiler considering the bribe?

"Well," said the oiler at length, "is that your best offer? Couldn't you make it a thousand?"

"A thousand! Nonsense—"

"Two thousand, then."

"What do you mean—"

"Just this!" cried the oiler, and simultaneously there was a rush of feet and a sound of blows. Exultingly Alex was scrambling forth to go to the oiler's assistance, when just above him was a crash of falling bodies, and a figure bounded over the side of the car and rolled sprawling down the embankment.

It was the plucky oiler, and Alex shrank back in horror as the man came to a stop flat on his back, and lay immovable, blood trickling from a wound over his eyes.

Overhead was the sound of someone getting to their feet. "He nearly got you," said a voice.

"Nearly. But I guess I 'got him' one better."

"Is he safe for awhile, do you think?"

As the two men moved to the edge of the car and apparently gazed down at the prostrate figure in the ditch, Alex shrank back with apprehension on his own account.

"Perhaps we'd better make sure of him."

"All right. Here is a bit of rope."

Hurriedly Alex crawled beneath the nearby truck, behind the wheels, and a tall figure in the garb of a cowboy dropped to the ground before him and ran down to the still unconscious oiler. Binding the prostrate man's feet together at the ankles, the cowman turned the oiler on his face, and secured his hands behind his back. Turning him again face up, he studied his eyes a moment, and announcing, "Good job. Only stunned," he returned to the car and drew himself up on it.

"Now what'll we do?" inquired his companion. "That idiot has knocked our plans to pieces. We can't go back and say we neither made the deal, nor did anything else for our money."

"We'll have to tear things up ourselves," said the first man decisively. "Let us see what we can do in the engine-room here."

The footsteps passed into the engine-house, and Alex at once crawled forth, to make his way back to the velocipede.

As he emerged from beneath the car he paused to glance down at the prostrate oiler. Should he leave him lying there? It did not seem right, despite the obvious necessity of heading for the junction without a moment's delay.

As he hesitated, the eyes of the prostrate man flickered, and opened. Alex dodged back, lest the oiler should betray his presence to the men on the car. As he dropped down there came the recollection that there were two seats on the velocipede. Why not take the man with him, if he sufficiently recovered? Good!

Anxiously Alex watched as the stunned man blinked about him. Finally comprehension, then a hot flush of rage appeared in the oiler's face, and with a violent kick he twisted about toward the car.

Springing into view, Alex caught the oiler's startled eye, and made a warning gesture. The man stared dully for a moment, then nodded, and on Alex's further urgent signalling, dropped back and again closed his eyes. Alex produced and opened his jack-knife.

The men above were busily fumbling about in the engine-room. Only pausing to make sure they were entirely occupied, Alex slipped forth, cautiously crept down the embankment, reached the bound man, and with a slash of the knife freed his feet and hands.

"Let us slip back to the velocipede—it's ready to throw on the rails—and make a dash of it for the junction," Alex whispered. The oiler arose, and with one eye on the engine-room door they crept up under the edge of the car, and on toward the rear of the train.



They reached the little track-car, and cautiously lifted it onto the rails.

"Better push it a ways," the oiler advised in a low voice. "They might hear the rumble, with our weight on it."

Gently they set the velocipede in motion. With the first move one of the wheels gave forth a shrill screech. The two paused as the sounds on the pilot-car immediately ceased.

"If we hear one of them going to the edge to look for me, we'll make a run of it," said the oiler.

"They may go on tiptoe," Alex pointed out.

The suggestion was followed by a sharp exclamation from the head of the train. "The oiler's gone!" cried a voice. Simultaneously there was the sound of someone springing to the ground, and Alex and the oiler scrambled into the velocipede seats, Alex facing the rear, and threw themselves against the handles. The oilless wheel again screeched, and from the pilot-car rose the cry, "Around at the end! Quick!"

Alex and the oiler wrenched the handles backwards and forwards with all their might, and the little car leaped ahead. Before they had gained full headway, however, one of the machine-wreckers appeared about the end of the train, and with a cry to his companion, dashed after. He ran like a deer, and despite the increasing speed of the velocipede, quickly gained upon them.

"He'll get us!" Alex exclaimed.

"The creek bridge is just ahead. That'll stop him," said the oiler.

The second man appeared, and joined in the chase.

The first runner saw the bridge, and redoubled his efforts. In spite of their best endeavors, he drew rapidly nearer. A hand shot out to clutch the oiler's shoulder.

It reached him—and with a rumble they were on and over the bridge, and their pursuer had sprawled forward flat on his face.

He was on his feet again like a wildcat, however, and crossing the bridge three ties at a time, leaped to the flat ground beside the track, and was again after the velocipede like a race-horse.

Try as they would, Alex and the oiler could get no more speed out of the low-gear machine, and with alarm Alex saw the runner once more drawing near. The second man they had outdistanced.

Closer the cowman came. "Stop!" he shouted. "Stop! You may as well! I've got you!"

Determinedly they held on, working the handles desperately, Alex watching the grim, clean-shaven face and the fluttering dotted handkerchief about the pursuing man's neck with a curious fascination.

At last he was parallel with them. Still running, he drew his revolver. "Stop!" he ordered. "Stop, or I'll put one through you!"

"Keep it up, boy," the oiler directed sharply. "He daresn't fire. He daresn't add murder to it. And he'd be heard at the junction."

The runner snapped his gun back into its holster, and putting on an extra spurt, rushed slanting up the embankment, and threw himself bodily upon the oiler. They tumbled off backwards in a struggling heap. Throwing his weight against the handles, Alex stopped the velocipede, sprang off, and dashed to the oiler's assistance.

The cowman's revolver had fallen from his belt. Alex caught it up and pressed it against the back of the man's head. "Stop it! Let go!" he cried. "I'll certainly shoot!"

The man half relaxed, and glared up sideways. Alex brought the muzzle to his eyes, and slowly he freed his hold on the oiler. "Oh, very well," he muttered with a curse. "You win."

"No—don't!" said Alex, as the enraged oiler spun about to strike the half-prostrate man. "He's down, and has given up."

At that moment interruption came from another quarter. It was a shrill cry from the direction of the creek-bed, and turning, all three saw a round-shouldered figure on horseback scrambling from the creek-bottom, leading the ponies of the two would-be wreckers, and the second cowman running toward him.

"It's Little Hawk!" Alex exclaimed.

The cowboy reached the Indian, sprang at him, there was a terrific scrimmage, and the white man sprang from the melee with the bridle of one of the ponies, leaped into the saddle, and was off across the prairie in a whirl of dust.

So interested had Alex been in the second conflict that momentarily he had forgotten the man on the ground before him. He was reminded by suddenly finding himself sprawling upon his back, and regaining his feet, found their prisoner also racing off at top speed. The oiler darted after, but quickly gave it up. He was no match for the light-footed cowman.

Seeing the pistol still in Alex's hand, he cried, "Shoot! Shoot him!"

Alex raised the revolver, faltered, and lowered it. "No. I can't," he said.

"I can!" The oiler darted back and wrested it from Alex's hand. As he whirled about to fire, Alex grasped his arm. "No! Wait! Look!" he exclaimed. "The Indian is after him!"

Turning, the oiler saw the Indian, with his own and one of the other ponies, storming across the ground in pursuit of the runner. Silently they watched.

As he heard the pounding hoofs behind him, the fleeing cowboy glanced about, and set on at greater speed than ever. Quickly, however, the horses cut down the distance between them.

The Indian leaned toward the second pony, took something from the saddle-horn, and began to adjust it on his arm.

"He's going to lasso him!" said Alex breathlessly.

Nearer drew the Indian to the fleeing man, and hand and lasso went into the air and began to weave circles. Tensely the two on the embankment watched.

Closer the horses drew. Wider the circle of the lasso extended.

Suddenly it leaped through the air like a great snake. The runner saw the shadow of it, and with a cry that they heard, half turned and threw out his arms to ward it off. The loop was too large, the cowman missed it, and as the Indian pulled up in a cloud of dust, he whipped in the slack, and the noose tightened fairly about the renegade's waist. An instant after, however, the second pony, plunging ahead of the Indian's, threw the rider forward, slackening the lariat. In a twinkling the cowman had loosened the noose, and was wriggling out of it. He had freed one foot before the Indian had recovered himself. Then with a terrific yank the horse snapped in the slack, the cowman's feet flew from under him, and with one foot taut in the air, caught at the ankle, he lay cursing and shaking an impotent fist.

As Alex and the oiler ran forward the Indian sat on his horse like a statue, holding the lariat taut.

The oiler reached the prisoner first, revolver in hand.

"Get up, you!" he ordered. Sullenly the man obeyed. Removing a handkerchief from about his neck, the oiler gave it to Alex, who securely bound the man's hands behind him. Throwing off the lasso, they turned toward the Indian. With some wonder, they saw he was carefully examining the hoofs of the pony he was leading. Concluding the inspection with a grunt, he came forward, winding up the rope, and halted before them.

"You hoss?" he asked of the prisoner, pointing over his shoulder.

The cowboy looked at him contemptuously, and responded, "Well, what if it is, Old Ugly-Mug?"

The oiler brought up the pistol. "I don't know why he wants to know, but you go ahead and tell him!" he ordered threateningly. "He's twice the man you are. Is it your horse?"

"Yes."

Little Hawk turned away with a grunt of satisfaction, and mounting his pony, rode off towards the junction.

What the Indian meant Alex learned when, with their prisoner between them, he and the oiler approached the boarding-train, and met Little Hawk returning with Superintendent Finnan.

"That him!" said the Indian briefly as they drew near. "Him burn cars!"

From the prisoner came a hissing gasp. As Alex turned upon him with a sharp ejaculation of understanding, however, the man assumed an indifferent air, and strode on nonchalantly.

"What do you want?" he demanded insolently of the superintendent. "Can't a man pull off a—little joke without these idiots of yours going out of their heads? It was nothing more than a bit of fun me and my mate was having," he affirmed boldly.

Superintendent Finnan smiled sardonically. "That is what the K. & Z. call it, eh?"

Alex, still with a hand on the prisoner's arm, felt him start. But brazenly the man replied, "K. & Z.? What's the K. & Z.? A ranch brand? I never heard of it."

On a thought Alex stepped forward and whispered a word in the official's ear.

"Go ahead," said the superintendent.

"I'm going to search your pockets," Alex announced, stepping back to the side of the renegade cowman. "No objection, I suppose, since you don't know what K. & Z. means?"

"Search ahead," agreed the prisoner, half smiling. "And good luck to you if you find anything to connect me—if you find anything," he corrected quickly.

From a trouser pocket Alex drew out a large jack-knife. With a suspicion of trembling he opened one of the blades and examined it, while the owner regarded him curiously. With a shake of the head the young operator opened the second blade. A quick smile of triumph lit up his face, and delving into a vest pocket, he brought forth a scrap of paper, unfolded it, and took out a fragment of charred pine shaving.

Turning his back on the now anxiously watching, though still puzzled, owner of the knife, he held the shaving against the edge of the blade. The superintendent bent over it, and uttered a delighted "Exactly!"

Triumphantly Alex turned toward the prisoner, and held the hand with the knife and shaving before him. "Does this help you to recall what K. & Z. means?" he asked.

"Recall? I don't—"

"See these two little ridges on the shaving? See these two little nicks in the blade?"

With a hoarse cry the man flung himself backward, and bound as he was, began struggling like a madman. Alex, the superintendent and the Indian were to the oiler's assistance in a twinkling, however, and a few minutes later saw the renegade in their midst on the way to the boarding-train—and, as it finally proved, to the jail at Exeter.

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"I don't know who to thank most," said Superintendent Finnan later—"you, Ward, or the oiler, or Little Hawk. Nor what appreciation to suggest higher up."

"You might make it a blanket and Winchester for the Indian, and a purse for the oiler, for the knocks he got and the bribe he refused," Alex suggested.

"And yourself?"

"Oh, just let me keep the rascal's knife, as a memento," responded Alex modestly.

"Very well; we'll agree on that—for the present," said the superintendent.

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## XX

### A PRISONER

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When the early-morning mail train stopped at Yellow Creek Junction on Tuesday, Alex was at the little box-car station to greet Jack Orr and Wilson Jennings. Jack, who had not met Wilson before the latter boarded the train at Bonepile, had taken a liking to the easterner at once, and confided to Alex that he was "the real goods," despite the "streak of dude."

"We ought to have some good times together," Jack predicted, as, with lively interest, he and Wilson accompanied Alex back toward the nondescript but businesslike-looking boarding-train.

Jack's hope, as far as it concerned the three boys being together, was soon shattered. As they reached the telegraph-car, Superintendent Finnan appeared, and having cordially shaken hands with Jack and Wilson, turned to Alex. "Ward," he said, "I have just decided to send you on to the Antelope viaduct. A courier has brought word from Norton, the engineer in charge, that trouble appears to be brewing amongst his Italian laborers, and I would like to get in direct touch with him. The telegraph line was strung within two miles of the bridge yesterday, and should reach Norton's camp to-day. How soon could you start?"

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"As soon as I have breakfast, sir," responded Alex, stifling his disappointment. "It's twenty miles there, isn't it, Mr. Finnan? How am I to go?"

"You can ride a horse?"

"Yes, sir."

"Elder will have a pony here for you by the time you are ready. And you had better take an extra blanket with you," advised the superintendent as he turned away. "You will be living in a tent, you know."

Half an hour later Alex, mounted on a spirited little cow-pony, with a few necessities in a sweater, strapped to the saddle, and a blanket over his shoulder, army fashion, waved a good-by to Jack and Wilson, and was off over the prairie at a lope, following the telegraph poles.

It was a beautiful morning, and with the sun shining and the sparkling air brushing his cheeks and tingling in his nostrils, Alex quickly forgot his disappointment at being so quickly separated from Jack and Wilson, and soon was enjoying every minute of his ride. Keeping on steadily at a hand-gallop, before he realized he had covered half the distance, he came upon the wire-stringing and pole-erecting gangs. A half mile farther, a long, dark break appeared in the plain, and a muffled din of pounding began to reach him. And pushing ahead, Alex drew up on the brink of a wide, deep gully, from either side of which reached out a great wooden frame, dotted with busy men.

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It was the bed of the old Antelope river, which years before had changed its course, and which the railroad finally proposed crossing with a permanent fill.

Directly below, in a group of shrubby trees on the border of the stony creek which alone remained of the river, was a village of white tents. From Alex's feet a rough trail slanted downward toward it. Giving his pony free rein, he descended.

"Where is Mr. Norton?" he asked of a water-boy at the foot of the path.

"That's him at the table in front of the middle tent," the boy directed. Thanking him, Alex urged the pony forward, and leaped to the ground beside a dark-haired, energetic young man bending over a sheet of figures.

"I am the operator Mr. Finnan sent on," Alex announced as the engineer looked up.

"Glad to meet you," said the engineer, cordially rising and extending his hand. "You are a trifle young for this rough work, though, are you not?" he ventured, noting Alex's youthful face. "You are not the operator who caught that K. & Z. man Sunday?"

"I helped catch him," Alex corrected.

"You'll do, then," said Norton. "And I'll give you a place here in my own tent," he added, turning and entering a small marquee, followed by Alex.

"This corner will be yours, and the box your 'office.' It will do for the instruments?"

"Fine," responded Alex.

As the wire-stringing gang was not due to reach the viaduct before mid-afternoon, on completing his arrangements in the tent, Alex set out for a tour of his new surroundings. Climbing up the western slope of the gully, he found a large gang of foreigners, mostly Italians, working in a cutting. Judging that this was the gang which was causing the anxiety, Alex paused some moments to watch them.

Scattered over a system of miniature track, the men were shovelling earth into strings of small dump-cars, which when filled were run out over the completed western end of the viaduct, and dumped. As Alex stood regarding the active scene, a string of cars rumbled toward him from one of the more distant sidings. Others had been pushed by several men. This was being driven by a single burly giant. With admiration Alex watched. Suddenly a sense of something familiar about the figure stirred within him. The man came opposite, and Alex uttered an involuntary ejaculation. It was Big Tony, the Italian who had led the trouble amongst the trackmen at Bixton two years back, and with whom he had had the thrilling encounter at the old brick-yard.

When the Italian glanced toward him, Alex started back. But the foreigner did not recognize the young operator, with his two years of rapid growth, and passed on. Breathing a sigh of relief, Alex turned and made his way to the foreman in charge of the gang.

"How do you do," he said, introducing himself. "Who is that big Italian pushing the string of cars alone?"

"Tony Martino. The best man in the gang," responded the foreman. "Why? Do you know him?"

"He was on a surfacing-gang near my father's station two years ago," said Alex, "and caused no end of trouble. He was discharged finally."

"He must have reformed, then," the foreman declared. "He's certainly the best man we have—more than willing, and strong as an ox."

"He had nothing to do with the trouble you have had here, then?"

"He helped me put it down," said the foreman. "No; I only wish we had a few more like him."

Alex passed on, thoughtful. At Bixton Big Tony had been no more remarkable for his willingness to work than for his peaceableness. Had he really changed for the better? Or was it possible he was "playing possum," to cover the carrying-out of some plan of revenge against the road?

Three evenings later, a beautiful, moonlit night, Alex left the camp for a stroll. To obtain a look up and down the old river-bed by the moonlight, he made his way out on the now nearly completed viaduct.

As he stood gazing down the ravine to the south, a half-mile distant a dark figure passed over a bright patch of sand. It was quickly lost in the dark background beyond. But not before Alex had recognized the unmistakable figure and walk of the Italian, Big Tony. His suspicions at once awakened, Alex was but a moment in deciding to follow the foreigner, and returning to the eastern bank, he scrambled down to the gully bottom, and hastily followed, keeping well in the shadows on the eastern side of the ravine.

Reaching the spot at which he had seen the Italian, he went on more cautiously. A quarter-mile farther the ravine swung abruptly to the west. As Alex arrived at the bend, subdued voices reached him. Continuing cautiously, and keeping to the deepest shadows, Alex reached a clump of willow bushes.

He glanced beyond, and in a patch of moonlight discovered Big Tony in conversation with an almost equally tall stranger, apparently a cowboy. The latter's back was toward him.

The stranger turned, and Alex drew back with a start, and then a smile.

It was the second man of the two who on the previous Sunday had attempted to wreck the track-machine—the one who had made his escape.

As the man turned more fully, and he caught his words, Alex's jubilant smile vanished.

"... enough to blow the whole thing to matchwood, if you place it right," he was saying.

There was no doubt what this meant. They were planning to blow up the viaduct.

"Oh, I fixa it alla right, alla right," declared Big Tony confidently. "No fear. I usa da dynamite all-aready. I blow up da beega da house once."

"A house and a big wooden bridge are quite different propositions. And a wooden bridge isn't to be blown up like a stone or iron affair, you know."

"Suppose you come, taka da look, see my plan all-aright, den," the Italian suggested. "No one on disa side da bridge, to see, disa time night."

The cowman hesitated. "Well, all right. It would be best to make sure.

"We don't want to carry this, though. Where'll we put it?"

As he spoke the man leaned over and picked up a good-sized parcel done up in brown paper. From the careful way he handled it there could be no doubt of its contents. It was the dynamite they proposed using.

"Here, I fin' da place."

Alex caught his breath at the display of carelessness with which the foreigner took the deadly package. Backing into a nearby clump of bushes, Big Tony stooped and placed the dynamite on the ground, well beneath the branches.

"Dere. No one see dat. Come!"

As the two conspirators strode toward him, Alex crept closer into the shadows of the willows. Passing almost within touch of him, they continued up the gully, and soon were out of sight.

Before the footsteps of the two men had died away Alex was sitting upright, debating a suggestion that caused him to smile. With decision he arose, approached the bush under which the dynamite was concealed, and reaching beneath with both hands, very carefully brought the package forth and placed it on the ground in the moonlight. With great caution he then undid the twine securing the parcel, and opened it. On discovering a second wrapping of paper within, he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Lifting out the inner parcel intact, he glanced about, and choosing a group of bushes some distance away, carried the dynamite there and concealed it. Returning, he secured the piece of outer wrapping paper, and proceeded to carry out his idea.

Where the moonlight struck the western wall of the gully was a bed of cracked, sun-baked clay. Making his way thither, Alex found a fragment a little larger than the package of dynamite, and with his knife proceeded to trim it into a square. Carefully then he wrapped this in the brown paper, and wound it about with the cord just as the original parcel was secured. And with a smile Alex placed this under the bush from which he had taken the genuine package.

"Dynamite with that as much as you please, Mr. Tony," he laughed as he turned away.

When Alex had covered half the distance in returning to the viaduct he began keeping a sharp lookout ahead for the returning of the Italian and his companion. He was within a hundred yards of the great white structure when he discovered them. Turning aside, he concealed himself behind a small spruce.

With no apprehension of danger Alex waited, and the two men came opposite. Suddenly, without a motion of warning, the two turned and darted toward him, one on either side of the tree. Before Alex had recovered from his astonishment he found himself seized on either side, and threateningly ordered to be silent.

They dragged him on some distance, then into the moonlight. "Why, it's one of the fellows who captured Bucks on Sunday!" declared the cowboy. "What are you doing here, boy?" he demanded angrily.

"I was out for a moonlight stroll," Alex responded, stifling his apprehension.

"Why did you hide behind that tree, then?"

"Well—perhaps I was afraid," said Alex vaguely. "There are some rough people here among the foreign laborers."

As he spoke Alex noted with new alarm that the Italian was regarding him sharply. He turned his back more fully to the moonlight. Immediately he chided himself for his stupidity. The move emphasized the struggling sense of recognition in the Italian's mind, he smartly turned Alex's face full to the moon, and uttered a cry in Italian.

"Now I know! I know!" he cried exultingly. "I know heem before! And he a spy! A boy spy!"

Rapidly he gave the stranger a distorted account of the strike at Bixton, and Alex's part in his final discomfiture.

The cowman listened closely. "Is that so, boy?" he demanded.

"Partly. But it was not a strike. It was a simple piece of murderous revenge against one man, the section-foreman. And I helped spoil it."

"Good. That's all I want to know," said the cowboy with decision. "Not that I care one way or the other about the affair itself. It shows you are a dangerous man to leave around loose. I'll just take you along with me. Come on!"

"Come? Where?" said Alex, holding back in alarm.

"Never mind! Just come!" Securing a new hold on Alex's arms, the speaker and the Italian dragged him with them back down the gorge.

As they neared the spot at which the dynamite was supposed to be safely hidden, the stranger halted abruptly, studied Alex intently a moment, then sent Big Tony on ahead, after a whispered word in his ear.

Alex knew the foreigner had gone to learn whether the dynamite had been touched. In suspense he awaited the result. Would the Italian be deceived? Would he notice the new footprints about the bush?

Big Tony returned. "All-aright," he announced. Alex breathed a sigh of relief, and continued forward with his captors.

They proceeded some distance in silence, and presently Alex had sufficiently plucked up courage to again ask what they proposed doing with him.

"I'm going to take you where you will be out of mischief, that's all," replied the unknown cowman. As he spoke he halted, looked about, and resigning Alex to the guardianship of the Italian, disappeared in the shadow of an over-hang of the ravine. A moment later there was a clatter of hoofs, and he reappeared leading a horse.

"Make heem rida too?" questioned Big Tony.

"Hardly," responded the cowman, at the same time freeing and swinging a lariat from the saddle-horn. "He's going to trot along behind me like the blame little coyote he is.

"Hold out your hands, kid!" he ordered. Seeing resistance was useless, Alex reluctantly complied. Running the noose of the lasso about the boy's wrists, the cowman tightened it, and secured it with several knots. Swinging into the saddle, he fixed the other end to the saddle-horn.

"You may go now, Tony," he said to the foreigner as he caught up the reins and headed the pony toward a path to the surface which Alex had not noticed.

"Gooda night, Meester Munson. And gooda-by, smart boy," said the Italian. "Lucky for you I havanta my way. 'Scrugk!' That's what you get," he declared, drawing his hand across his throat.

"Munson, eh?" murmured Alex as the lasso tightened, and he stumbled up the path behind the pony. "That's another good thing learned."

Arrived at the surface, his captor halted to look about, then set off across the plains due south, at a walk, Alex trailing after at the end of the rope.

The situation was not without its humorous side, it occurred to Alex after his first apprehension had worn off. When a few minutes later the pony broke into a slow canter, and he was forced into an awkward dog-trot, a chuckle broke from him.

The man ahead turned in surprise. "Well, you're sure a game one," he observed. "Imagine it's funny, eh?"

"I was thinking how I would look to some of my friends, if they could see me here," explained Alex good-naturedly. "Trotting along like a little dog on a string."

The cowman pulled up and laughed. "Youngster, you're all right," he said heartily. "I'm sorry you're—that is—"

"On the wrong side?" suggested Alex, smiling.

"Very well. Let it go at that. Look here! If I take that thing off, will you promise to come along, and not play any tricks?"

"Yes, I will," agreed Alex readily. For he saw there was little chance of making his escape from the horseman on an open plain.

"Hold up your hands, then," directed the cowboy. Alex complied, and quickly he was free.

"How far are we going?" he asked as they moved on, Alex walking abreast.

"About twenty miles," replied the cowman.

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## XXI

### TURNING THE TABLES

The moonlight had given place to darkness, and Alex was thoroughly exhausted from his long walk when the fence of a corral, then a group of small buildings, loomed up, and his captor announced that they were at their destination.

"Do you live here all alone?" Alex asked, seeing no lights.

"Since you fellows captured Bucks—yes," responded the cowboy, halting at the corral bars. Dismounting, he whipped saddle and bridle from the pony as it passed inside, and replacing the bars, led the way to the house.

It was a small, meagerly-furnished room that a match, then a lamp, disclosed. Against the rear wall was a small stove, in the center a rough table, at either end a low cot, and in one corner a cupboard. Two or three chairs, some pictures and calendars and two or three saddles completed the contents. The floor was of hard earth.

"That'll be your bunk there," said the owner, indicating one of the cots. "And you can turn in just as soon as you like."

Crossing the room, he stood at the foot of the bed, thinking. "What's the trouble? It looks comfortable enough," observed Alex, following.

"I have it," said the cowman, and going to the saddles, he returned with a coiled lariat. Alex laughed uncomfortably.

"Lie down," the man directed. "Or, hold on! Let's see first if you have any knives about you." Objection would have been fruitless, and Alex of his own accord surrendered his pocket-knife.

"Now lie down."

With what grace he could, Alex complied. Making a slip-loop in the center of the lariat, the cowman passed it over one of the boy's ankles, and made the holding-knot as firm as he could draw it. Then passing the two ends of the rope inside one of the lower legs of the cot, he ran them across the room and secured them to his own bed.

"That'll leave you comfortable, and put the knots out of temptation," he remarked. "Also, if you start any wriggling this old shake-down of mine will act as watch-dog. It squeaks if you look at it. And I'm a powerful light snoozer, and powerful quick with the gun when it's necessary," he added, with an emphasis which Alex could not doubt.

Nevertheless, when presently the cowman blew out the light, and retired, Alex only waited until a steady, deep snore announced that the man was asleep. Cautiously he sat up, and reached toward his encircled ankle.

The knots had been secured cleverly and tightly. Pry and pull as he could, they gave no more than if they had been made of wire.

Working lower, Alex sought to reach the cot leg, to see whether it was fixed to the floor. With some difficulty, because of the sitting position made necessary, he was straining toward it, when suddenly the bound foot lunged from him, the rope tightened, and from the cot opposite came a squeak. The snoring instantly ceased, and Alex sat motionless, holding his breath. The ominous silence continued, and finally he lay back with a movement as though turning in his sleep.

Minute after minute passed, and still the breathing of the man across the room did not resume.

Then suddenly, it seemed, Alex found himself sitting upright, and daylight flooding the room. He had fallen asleep.

The second cot was empty, but a moment after the door opened and the cowman appeared.

"How did you sleep, stranger?" he inquired. "I thought for a spell last night you were trying some funny business."

Alex laughed. "I slept like a log," he declared truthfully, ignoring the last remark. "Are you going to keep me tied up here all day?"

"Until after breakfast anyway," responded his host, proceeding to start a fire in the stove. "Suppose you'll have some bacon and coffee?"

"Thank you, yes. I'm more than hollow, after that Marathon run you gave me last night."

As the cowman turned to the cupboard Alex seized the opportunity to examine the leg of the cot about which the lasso was passed. With disappointment he discovered it to be a stout post driven into the floor.

Despite the discomfort of his position Alex enjoyed the simple breakfast of biscuits and bacon. He was passing his cup for a third filling of the fragrant coffee, when his host abruptly sat the coffee-pot down and listened. "Someone coming," he remarked. Alex also heard the hoofbeats. They approached rapidly, there was a step at the door, and a tall, well-dressed figure in riding-breeches and leggings appeared. At sight of Alex he halted in surprise.

"Who's this, Munson?" he demanded.

The cowman led the way outside and closed the door, and low words told Alex that he was explaining the previous night's occurrences. More, they told him that this well-dressed man was the connecting link between the K. & Z. and the men who were seeking to interfere with the Middle Western in the race for the Yellow Creek Pass.

What would be the outcome of the man's visit for him? Alex asked himself. For the newcomer would not fail to appreciate the disadvantage of having been seen there by the young employee of the M. W.

The young operator was not left long in doubt. The door again opened, and the stranger re-entered, followed by the cowman, and without preliminary placed a chair before Alex and dropped into it.

"Look here, my boy," he began, "how would you like to earn some extra money—a good decent sum?"

At once seeing the man's intention, Alex bridled indignantly. But suppressing his feelings, he responded, "I'd like to as well as anyone else, I suppose—if I can earn it honorably."

At the last word a flush mounted to the stranger's cheeks, but he continued. "Well, that's all a matter of opinion, you know. Every man has his own particular code of honor. However—

"You probably have guessed who I am?"

"A K. & Z. man."

"Yes. Now look here: Suppose the K. & Z. was anxious to know from day to day the precise progress the Middle Western is making in this race for Yellow Creek, and suppose they were willing to pay a hundred dollars a month for the information—would that proposition interest you?"

Alex replied promptly, "No, sir. And anyway, it's not the information you want. It's my silence."

The man's face darkened. He had one more card to play, however.

"Well, let it go at that, then. And suppose, in addition to a hundred a month to keep silent as to seeing me here, and what you have learned generally, I should give you—" He thrust his hand into an inside pocket and brought forth a long pocketbook. "Suppose I should give you, say two hundred dollars, cash?"

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Alex caught a knee between his hands and leaned back against the wall.

"I'm not for sale," he replied quietly.

The would-be briber thrust the book back into his pocket and sprang to his feet, purple with anger.

"Very well, my young saint," he sneered, "stay where you are, then—till we're good and ready to let you go!"

He strode to the door, Munson following him. "If he tries to get away," Alex heard him add as he mounted his horse, "shoot him! I'll protect you!"

"You *are* a young fool, all right," Munson said, returning. "You've simply made it worse for yourself. You've sure now got to stay right here, indefinite."

"And, as he ordered," the cowman added determinedly, "if you try to make a break-away of it, I'll sure shoot—and shoot to kill! When I go into a thing, I put it through!"

Alex, however, had no intention of staying, whatever the risks, and when presently Munson, after assuring himself that the knots were secure, passed out, he immediately addressed himself to the task of making his escape. It did not look difficult at first sight, since both hands were free, and only one foot tied. But an energetic attempt to loosen the cleverly-tied slip-loop failed as completely as it had the night before. Likewise, strain as he could at the cot leg, he could not budge it, so firmly was it driven into the hard ground.

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With something like despair Alex at last relinquished these endeavors, and turned to the problem of cutting the rope in some way. In the hope of finding a nail with which he might pick or fray the lariat apart, he made a thorough examination of the cot. There were nails, but they were driven in beyond hope of drawing with his fingers.

Dispiritedly Alex relinquished the search, and sat up. His eyes wandered to the window near him. Starting to his feet, he strained toward it.

The lower corner of one of the panes had been broken, and the triangle of glass leaned inward loosely. With a low expression of hope Alex was reaching for it, when from the rear of the cabin sounded the returning footsteps of the cowman. Speedily Alex sank back on the cot, and assumed an air of dejection.

A few minutes later the boy again found himself alone. But in the meantime he had decided to leave the securing of the fragment of glass and the attempt at escape until night. In further preparation for the attempt Alex that afternoon stretched himself on the cot, and slept several hours.

To the young operator it seemed that the cowman would never retire that night. And when at length he blew out the light, and threw himself upon his bed, he apparently lay an interminable time awake. At length, however, when the moonlight in the window pointed to approaching midnight, there came a faint regular breathing, then a full long snore. Without loss of time Alex got to his feet at the foot of the cot, and leaning against the wall, reached toward the window.

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He could just touch the broken corner of pane with the tips of his fingers. Moving his supporting hand farther along the wall, he drew back, and reached forward with a lunge. This time he got his wrist on the window-ledge. Thus leaning, he finally secured a hold on the fragment of glass with his fingers, and pulled on it. A crackle caused him to falter. Munson's breathing continued undisturbed. At the next pull the piece came free. The next moment Alex was sitting on the cot-end, sawing at the rope with the sharp edge of the broken glass.

To his disappointment, the edge, though sharp to the feel, did not cut into the closely-woven and seasoned twine as he had expected. Vigorously he sawed away, however, and at last found that the extemporized knife was taking hold.

And finally, as the last gleam of moonlight died from the window-panes, the remaining strand was severed, and there was a faint slap as the rope fell to the floor. A restless move by the sleeper and a momentary cessation of the snoring gave Alex a thrill of fear. Then the heavy breathing resumed, and getting to his feet, he slipped to the door, found the catch, lifted it, and passed out.

As he closed the door, Alex paused a moment to assure himself that the cowman was still breathing regularly, and turned away jubilantly.

Exultation over his escape was considerably tempered when Alex discovered that the moon was

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almost down in the west, and that in addition the sky overhead was clouding. He set off immediately, however, heading straight north, and when a safe distance had been put between him and the cabin, broke into a run.

At a steady jog Alex kept on for several miles over the dimly-lit plain. Then the moon finally disappeared, and he fell into a rapid walk. Some time later he halted in alarm. Was he going in the right direction? On every hand was a wall of darkness, and overhead not a star was to be seen.

He moved on, and again halted to debate the situation. Certainly, for the time being, he was lost. What should he do? Remain where he was till daylight? or go ahead, and take the chance of circuiting back? He decided to continue.

Perhaps an hour later, still pushing ahead, Alex strode full tilt into a barb-wire fence. As he staggered back a second cry broke from him. Had he circled back to Munson's corral?

His heart in his throat, he felt hurriedly along the top wire to a post, and reached upward. A gasp of relief greeted the discovery that the top of the post was well within his reach. The corral posts were not less than eight or nine feet, with wires to the top.

A further cheering idea followed. On the ride to the Antelope viaduct he had noted a three-wire fence similar to this paralleling the right-of-way for several miles. Perhaps this was the same fence?

If he only knew its direction!

Dropping to the ground for a brief rest, Alex set his brains at recalling every bit of woods or plains lore he had ever heard or read of for the telling of direction.

It was a puff of air against his cheek that suggested the answer.

The prevailing wind! What was it here?

Southwest!

In a moment he was on his knees at the foot of the adjacent fence-post.

On the farther side, half covering the dead grass, was a small eddy of sand!

Hopefully Alex hastened to the next post. *The same!*

To make doubly sure, he tried the third, and with an exulting, "*The same again!*" started to his feet, and struck on, whistling gaily, confident he was heading due north, and that this was the same fence he had seen along the new embankment.

A further cheering thought occurred to the young operator presently. The construction-train should not be far from the stretch of road which paralleled the fence!

Onward he pushed through the darkness at a steady, swinging gait, feeling frequently for the fence, to make sure he was not wandering.

For what seemed several hours Alex had been walking, when a faint light appeared in the sky. It was to his right. His plainsmanship had not put him amiss.

As the light brightened he gazed anxiously ahead. The ragged, thin-posted fence stretched unbroken to the northern horizon. He had hoped the light would reveal the swing to the east, and the dark shape of the construction-train.

Alex continued steadily ahead, however, buoying up his lagging energies with pictures of a hot, appetizing meal and a pleasant meeting with Jack and the rest of his friends on the train. And finally, when the sun had been some time above the horizon, he uttered a shout. Far in front, but distinct in the beautifully clear air, the fence turned abruptly to the east. And less than a mile sun-ward was a long dark shape and columns of smoke rising lazily into the air.

Scrambling through the fence, Alex set off on a bee-line for the train, whistling a brisk march.

Five minutes later the whistler paused in the middle of a note and spun sharply about. The color left his bronzed face. A mile to the rear, on the other side of the fence, a horseman was following him at full speed. A glance at the white-faced pony told it was Munson, and turning, Alex was off, running with every ounce of his remaining energy.

The thud of the hoofs gained rapidly.

Closer they came, and Alex headed off farther from the fence. Perhaps he'll be afraid to put the horse at the wire, he thought hopefully. He glanced back. The cowman was wheeling off for the jump.

In despair Alex looked over the long mile still separating him from the train, and again over his shoulder. Would the horse make it? He slightly slowed his steps as the animal made the rush.

It went over like a bird.

Gritting his teeth, Alex dashed straight back for the fence. "I'll make him jump his head off before he gets me, anyway," he said grimly. Flogging the pony, the cowman endeavored to head the boy off, but Alex reached the wire, and dove safely through. Scrambling to his feet, he was on again, this time keeping closer to the fence.

It was as the pony drew up abreast fifty feet distant, and while the train was still a good mile away, that the idea of signalling for help on the fence-wire occurred to Alex. He acted immediately. Catching up a good-sized stone, he ran forward, and on the topmost wire, near one

of the posts, pounded with all his might the telegraph dot letters "Oh! Oh! Orr! Orr!"

Munson had pulled up as Alex ran for the fence. When the boy began pounding the wire he at once recognized its purpose, and sprang from his horse, drawing his pistol.

Instantly Alex darted on, carrying the stone. The cowman ran after. But the man was slow on his feet, and despite his fatigue, Alex drew away from him.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" cried the cow-puncher. "*Pull up! I will!*"

"Go ahead, and they'll hear you at the train!" called Alex, though secretly trembling. The cowman hesitated, then returned the revolver to its holster, and ran back for his horse. Immediately Alex was again at the wire, pounding out, "*Oh! Oh! Orr! Orr!*"

The cowman was again up with him, and once more he ran on, gazing anxiously toward the train for signs of commotion to show his appeal had been heard.

For some distance the strange race continued, the cowman, angry and puzzled, on one side of the fence, Alex keeping close to the wires on the other, in readiness to dodge under should his pursuer jump.

Finally the rider again swung off, and headed in at a gallop. Grimly Alex halted. With a rush the horse came directly toward him. Waiting until it was within a few yards of him, he dropped to his knees, and crawled half way through the fence.

It was his undoing. Straight at him the horseman came, as though to jump. Then suddenly the rider whirled broadside, leaned from the saddle, and before Alex, wildly scrambling, could withdraw, had him firmly by the hair. By main force the cowboy dragged his prisoner through the fence, and upright beside him.

With a half-stifled sob Alex lurched limply against the pony's shoulders. "Never mind, kid," said the cowman not unkindly. "You made a good fight of it. You did your best. But I had to do my best too.

"If you'll give me your word to go quiet, I'll let you ride behind me," he added. "Promise?"

Alex cast a last look back toward the construction-train. A few figures were moving about, slowly. Clearly his signals had not been heard.

"All right," he said wearily, and with some difficulty mounting behind the cowboy, they were off the weary way he had come.

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Jack, at the construction-train, rose late that morning. He had been up nearly all night, awaiting news from the viaduct search-party, which throughout the entire day had been scouring the nearby country for his unaccountably missing chum. As he emerged from the telegraph-car door he found the Indian, Little Hawk, on the adjoining steps of the store-car.

"Good morning, Mr. Little Hawk," he said. "Sunning yourself?"

"I wait for you. I hear noise—knock," the Indian said.

"Knock, like little tick-knock in car," he added as Jack regarded him, mystified.

"Tick-knock? What do you mean?"

"On fence," said the Indian stolidly. "Hearum twice. Like dis:" And while Jack's eyes opened wide, with a stone he held in his hand the Indian tapped on the iron hand-rail of the car the telegraph words, "Oh—Oh—Orr."

In a moment Jack was on the ground before him, all excitement. "Where? Where did you hear it?" he cried.

"Fence. Sleep dar," said the Indian, pointing to the nearby fence. "No t'ink much about. Den see horse run—way dar. Den t'ink tick-knock, an' come you."

Uttering a shrill shout Jack was off on the jump to find Superintendent Finnan. And fifteen minutes later the superintendent, Little Hawk, and one of the foremen, mounted, were away on the gallop along the ranch fence toward the point at which the Indian had seen the disappearing horseman.

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Alex was thoroughly exhausted when he found himself once more at the ranch. Slipping to the ground, he entered the cabin of his own accord, and threw himself dejectedly upon the couch.

"You've near spoiled a dinged fine rope," observed Munson, following him, and kicking at the lariat, still stretched across the floor. "Oh, well, I can take it out of the K. & Z.

"Now for some breakfast. Suppose you don't feel too bad to grub, eh? Though you sure don't deserve none."

As on the previous morning, Alex and his jailer were near the conclusion of the meal when hoofbeats again told of the approach of a visitor. Going to the door, the cowman announced "Bennet."

"So that's his name, is it?" said Alex quickly.

"What? Did I say—Well, let it go. I don't see that it makes much difference. Yes, Bennet's his name.

"And mighty lucky thing I have you back here," he added over his shoulder.

"Good morning, Mr. Bennet," he said. "Caught us at breakfast again."

"Breakfast! What are you doing at breakfast this time of day?" inquired the K. & Z. man, entering. When the cowman explained, the newcomer glowered at Alex threateningly. "Why didn't you shoot?" he demanded.

"Too near the train. They would have heard it," responded Munson.

"Well, clear off the table. I have something I want to show you," said Bennet, producing what looked like a map from his pocket.

"And you get off to a corner," he snarled at Alex. "Why isn't he tied up?" he demanded of the cowboy.

"He agreed to a twenty-four hours' truce—not to make another break in that time," the cowman answered as he swept their few dishes into the cupboard.

Bennet's lip curled under his moustache. "And you believe him, eh?"

There was a suggestion of tartness in the cowman's prompt "Sure! He rode behind me all the way back, on his word not to attempt anything, and kept it. Could have pulled my own gun on me if he'd wanted to."

"The more fool," muttered the railroad man as he spread the roll of paper on the table.

Alex meantime had stepped to the window from which he had taken the fragment of glass, and was disconsolately watching a half dozen hens scratching about below.

Lifting his eyes, he glanced out over the plain. The men at the table heard a sharply-indrawn breath. It was immediately changed into a low whistling, however, and they gave their attention again to the map.

Alex had discovered three horsemen heading for the ranch from the north. And the leading pony he would have known in a hundred. It was Little Hawk's heavily-mottled horse.

That they were coming to his assistance—that someone had heard the knocking on the wire—he had not a doubt.

The horsemen were still some distance out of hearing. Ceasing the whistling, Alex glanced casually toward the table. Seated in chairs, the two men were still deeply engrossed in the plan before them, talking in low voices.

When on turning back to the window Alex recognized the second horseman as Superintendent Finnan, he shot a further glance toward the K. & Z. man at the table, and a smile of anticipation and delight overspread his face.

Then suddenly it occurred to him that in a few minutes the hoofbeats of the on-coming horses would be heard, and that Bennet would have time to get to the door and escape.

He must halt his rescuers, and signal them to approach on foot!

A moment Alex thought, then casually remarking to the cowman, "I'm going to open the window. It's hot," unlatched and swung the sash inward. The move passed unnoticed, and leaning out he pretended to call the chickens.

What he was in reality doing was energetically waving his handkerchief backwards and forwards below, making the railroad "stop" signal.

The horsemen came on. If they came much farther they would be heard!

He paused, and waved again, more energetically. The third horseman pulled up. Quickly Alex followed with the signal to "come ahead with caution." The rear pony spurred forward, pulled up beside the second, and apparently at a call, the Indian also halted. On Alex repeating the last signal, all dismounted, and he knew he had been understood.

Leaving their horses where they were, the three men came on at a quick walk. Alex, continuing to talk to the hens, could scarcely contain his secret delight.

When his rescuers were within a hundred yards of the cabin, he once more signalled caution, and they continued stealthily, revolvers in hand.

They reached the corner of the house, unheard by the men at the table. The superintendent raised his eyebrows questioningly. Alex glanced over his shoulder, and nodded sharply. The next moment there was a rush of feet without, and all in a twinkling Bennet and the cowman were out of their chairs, at the door, and staggering back before three threatening revolvers. Staring open-mouthed, they brought up beside the overturned table.

Alex's words were the first. "These were the chickens I was calling, Mr. Bennet," he remarked gleefully. The K. & Z. man recovered himself and turned on the boy, white with passion. He was stopped by an exclamation from Finnan. "Bennet! George Bennet! What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps this will explain, sir," said Alex, handing over the map, which he had caught up during the excitement. Bennet made a frantic move to intercept him, but promptly Little Hawk's revolver was in his face, and he sank back into a chair, gritting his teeth.

"A plan showing every bridge and culvert on our line, and directions for blowing them all up, simultaneously! Well—" Words failed the superintendent.

"And this is what you have come to, Bennet? I'd never have believed it!"

There was a second awkward silence, when Superintendent Finnan suddenly broke it with,

"Look here. I've got you now, haven't I? I've got you where I can put you in jail for a year or so at least. Well, instead of doing that, I'll make you a proposition:

"Drop all this kind of work; guarantee that there will be no more of it—agree to make it a straight, square building race between your road and mine, the first one to reach the Pass to win—guarantee that, and I'll let you go.

"Do you agree?"

Bennet rose to his feet and held out his hand. "I'll give you my solemn word, Finnan.

"And—and I'm awfully sorry I ever consented to go into this kind of thing," the K. & Z. man went on, a quaver in his voice. "But it was put up to me, and when I'd taken the first step, I thought I'd have to carry it through."

He turned to Alex. "I'm sorry for the way you have been treated, my lad. You are a plucky boy, and straight. You keep on as you have, and you'll never find yourself in the position I am.

"I offered him two hundred dollars cash and a hundred a month to keep his mouth quiet," the speaker explained to the superintendent, "and he refused it."

"How about the Antelope viaduct, Mr. Finnan?" Alex asked as they rode away, he on one of Munson's loaned ponies. "It wasn't blown up?"

"No, but an attempt of some kind was made. Rather a mysterious affair," the superintendent said. "Late last night an Italian of the fill gang was seen stealing to one of the main foundations, then kicking and tearing something to pieces. Norton followed him, and found some fuses, and fragments of paper that had been wrapped about some strange kind of explosive, which apparently had failed to ignite. The Italian has not been seen since."

Alex was chuckling. "I think I can guess why that 'strange explosive' failed to go off, sir," he said. "It was clay." And continuing, he explained the mystery in detail. Superintendent Finnan laughed heartily.

"Well, Ward, you are certainly due a vote of thanks," he declared seriously. "You saved the viaduct, and now you probably have brought about the ending of the entire trouble with the K. & Z. people. I'll not fail to turn in a thorough report of it."

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## XXII

### THE DEFENSE OF THE VIADUCT

Thanks to the termination of the interference from the opposition road, the work on the extension progressed rapidly, and two weeks later found the rail-head seven miles beyond the Antelope viaduct, in the lower slopes of the Dog Rib Mountains. The coveted pass to the Yellow Creek gold-field lay but eight miles distant, and as the K. & Z. was still twenty miles east, it appeared certain that the Middle Western would win the great race.

The time had passed uneventfully with the three young telegraphers, the end of the second week finding Alex and Jack together with the construction-train at the rail-head, and Wilson Jennings back at the temporary station and material-sidings at the viaduct.

Perhaps the last few days had passed least interestingly with Wilson, alone in his little box-car station, not far from the old river-bed. Saturday had seemed particularly slow, for some reason, and shortly after 8 o'clock Wilson threw aside a book he had been reading, and catching up his hat, made for the door, for a brief stroll, previous to retiring.

The moon was momentarily showing through a break in the cloudy sky, and looking to the west, Wilson was somewhat surprised to discover the figures of two men approaching. When as he watched they reached the first of a train of tie-cars, and leaving the rails, continued forward in the shadows, Wilson stepped back, in disquiet.

The strangers came opposite, and paused, looking toward the station window and speaking in subdued voices. Convinced that something was afoot, the young operator turned quickly, and stooping low, that his shadow might not be seen on the window, crept to the little instrument table and reached for the telegraph key. He opened, and pressed it down. The sounder did not respond. He tried again, adjusting the relay, and turned about in genuine alarm.

The wire had been cut! Some mischief was surely afoot.

From without came the crunch of stealthy footsteps. Springing to his bunk, Wilson secured his revolver and belt—the same taken from the would-be bullion thief he had captured at Bonepile—and stealing to the rear door, slipped out and to the ground just as the strangers approached the opposite side of the little car-depot.

The car was raised on a foundation of ties, and as the two men entered, Wilson crept beneath.

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"No one here," said a gruff voice. "Say, do you s'pose he saw us, and sneaked?"

"Like as not. I told you to keep to the rails and come straight up," chided the other.

"Perhaps he will come back. We're in charge of the station anyway. That was the real thing."

Wilson waited to hear no more. Creeping forth, he stole off toward the ravine, intending to get out of sight in its shadows.

A short distance from the head of the viaduct was the green light of a small target-switch. The head of the downward path lay just beyond, and Wilson headed for the light. He reached it, and passed on.

Abruptly he halted and turned about. Like an inspiration had come the remembrance of Alex Ward's signalling feat two years before at Bixton, of which he had heard from Jack Orr. Could he not do the same? Try and signal Alex or Jack, at the construction-train? Say, from one of the box-cars at the farther corner of the yard?

Casting a glance toward the little station to assure himself that all was quiet there, Wilson retraced his steps to the switch, removed the lantern, and tucking it under his coat, was off between the material-cars for the farthest corner of the sidings.

The outermost car was a box-car. Climbing the ladder, with his handkerchief Wilson tied the lantern to the topmost rung, the red light out, and using his hat just as Alex had done, began flashing the call of the construction-train,

"KX, KX, V! KX, KX, V!"

Since the construction-train had started from Yellow Creek Junction it had been a center of attraction to coyotes for fifty miles around, and one of the few recreations enjoyed by the men of the train had been hunting them at night.

This Saturday night Alex and Jack, borrowing Winchesters from other members of the telegraph-car party, had set out for a "couple of good rugs," as they put it, and on leaving the train had headed east, toward the aqueduct, in which direction they had heard barks of the midnight prowlers.

They had gone perhaps three miles, and had fired on several of the wily animals, without success, when suddenly Jack caught Alex by the arm and pointed away to the east.

"Look, Al! What's that?"

"Why, it looks like—It is! It's a signal light!

"And calling us—KX!" cried Alex. "Something must be wrong with Wilson!"

"What'll we do? Back to the train?"

"Have you a match and some paper?" said Alex, going hurriedly through his own pockets.

"Some matches."

"Here's a couple of letters. Come on back to the rails, find some chips, and make a fire. See if we can't answer him, and learn what the trouble is."

They were already racing for the track, reached it, and quickly gathering together a little pile of dry bark and chips knocked from the ties, made a fire at the track-side, and lit it.

As the flames burst up Alex threw off his coat, and using it as a curtain, raised and lowered it in a flashed "I, I, KX!"

The call twinkled on. Wilson had not seen it. But the next moment, before Alex had completed a second answer, the red light disappeared. Alex again shot forth the gleaming "I, I, KX!" and in blinking response they read:

"Chased out of station. Two men. Wire cut. Something wrong. Help!—V."

"OK. But we are three miles from the train. Hunting. Will we come, or go back for help?" signalled Alex.

There was a pause, and the red light blinked, "Come! Quick!"

"OK. Coming." Only pausing to stamp out the fire, the two boys were away at a run, heading directly for the light, which at intervals Wilson continued to show, as a guide.

Their open-air experience of a month had put the two boys in the best of condition, and keeping on at a smart pace, within half an hour the light showed just ahead, and a few minutes after Wilson ran forward to greet them.

"I don't know what's in the air, but certainly something," he announced. "As you fellows are armed too, suppose we go back and get the two men in the station car, and see if we can't make them tell?" he suggested.

"Lead ahead," agreed the others.

Stealthily they made their way amid the intervening cars, and emerged opposite the little depot. In the window was the shadow of a man smoking.

They stole across to the door, and Wilson, leading, cautiously glanced within. He turned and held up one finger. Revolver in hand, he tiptoed up the steps, and with a cry sprang inside and toward the man in the chair. The intruder was so taken by surprise that he tumbled over

backward. In a jiffy the three boys were upon him, and had pinned him to the floor; and while Alex closely clutched his mouth, to prevent him calling out, the others speedily bound his hands and feet with some convenient pieces of wire.

Satisfied that their prisoner was firmly secured, and having removed his pistol and cartridge-belt, the boys replaced him in the chair, and Wilson, pointing his revolver at the man's head, demanded, "Where is your pard? And what are you and he up to?"

There was a look of amusement in the man's face as Alex removed his hand, and he replied, "Nothin' doin', boys. You'll have to guess."

"I'll give you three, to tell," said Wilson, assuming a fierce expression and beginning to count.

The prisoner laughed outright. "You gentleman kids wouldn't shoot a fly," he declared coolly.

Wilson colored with mortification. For of course he had had no intention of shooting. Even Alex and Jack were forced to smile at the turn of the situation. Wilson had his revenge, however. "Gag him, then, Al," he suggested, "and we will stow him away beneath the car."

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The man's mouth opened for a shout. In a flash Alex had slapped a handkerchief between his teeth, and despite the man's struggles stuffed it well in. Then, taking from his neck a long colored neckerchief, he bound it twice about the man's face.

"Now out with him, this side," said Wilson, opening the rear door.

"Wouldn't it be better to take him over under one of the cars on the sidings?" Jack suggested. "His pard might return, and he kick, or make some kind of a noise underneath."

"That's so." Dragging their prisoner forth, they glanced up and down to see that no one was in sight, and with Jack at his feet and Alex and Wilson at his arms, they hastened across the rails, passed between two freight-cars, and in the deep shadow beyond placed him on the ground and bound him firmly to a rail.

"Be sure you don't talk now," said Wilson derisively as they turned away.

"What next?" Jack asked.

"It's pretty sure to be some mischief about the bridge. Let's have a look around there," suggested Alex.

Approaching the brink of the ravine at a point some distance from the viaduct, the boys glanced below. From the three broke a simultaneous low cry of understanding and indignation.

In the light of several lanterns a party of seemingly fifteen or twenty men were piling brush about the base of one of the central wooden piers.

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"The K. & Z. people again, sure as you're born!" exclaimed Alex hotly. "And after their solemn agreement!"

"If they succeed in burning it, they will hold back our supplies two or three weeks, and reach the pass ahead of us, dead certain," added Jack through his teeth. "We've got to stop them, boys!"

"Isn't there a hand-car or a velocipede here, Wilse?" Alex inquired.

"No. Not even a push-car. And it'd take one of us an hour and a half to reach the construction-train."

"But that's certainly the only thing to be done," Jack pointed out. "Perhaps two of us, with the rifles, could hold them—"

A flicker of light broke out below which was not a lantern, and approached the dimly disclosed brush-pile. Quick as a flash Jack's rifle went to his shoulder, and there was a reverberating crash. The light disappeared and there came up a chorus of surprised shouts and the clatter of running feet.

"Now we are in for it. I think we had better stick it out together," said Alex quietly. "Perhaps the firing will be heard at the train."

The others agreed, and at Wilson's suggestion they made their way a few feet down the slope to a ledge from which the whole structure of the bridge could dimly be seen.

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"How are you fellows off for ammunition?" whispered Wilson.

"I have four more rounds in the rifle, and thirty in my belt," said Jack.

"Five in the gun and twenty-seven in the belt," Alex announced.

Wilson had been examining the revolver and belt they had taken from the prisoner, and which he had brought with him. "Fourteen in the two pistols and nearly sixty in the two belts," he said.

"We ought to be able to put up all kinds of a fight," Alex declared confidently. "That is, unless they—"

He broke off, and all leaned forward, peering down into the gloom, and listening. From a little to the left rose the clatter of a pebble. Wilson stretched himself on his face, and bent over, one of his pistols extended. Barely breathing, they waited, and again came a faint clatter as of loosened earth, nearer.

"Don't let him get too close," Alex whispered.

There came the sound of something snapping, a smothered exclamation, and instantly Wilson

fired. There was a shrill cry, and the crash of something rolling downward. At the same moment from below came a crashing volley of shots, and bullets snarled upward by them like a swarm of bees. The boys shrank back flat, then leaned over and returned two quick volleys.

Another cry indicated that one of their bullets had found a mark, and following a scattering return volley from the darkness there were sounds of a hurried scuttling for cover.

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"Anyone touched?" Jack asked.

"I think I lost a little hair," said Wilson quietly.

"Me too," said Alex. "But a miss is as good as a mile, you know. And we have the advantage so far."

"Sh!" warned Jack. In the silence came the sound of running footsteps farther up the gully, followed by a continuous rattle of falling stones.

"They're making a rush up another path. Quick, and stop them!" exclaimed Wilson, starting to his feet.

"Hold on," Alex interrupted as they reached the crest of the slope. "Perhaps it's a ruse to get us away, so they can start the fire. You two run and chase them down, and I'll stay and watch here. If you need help, shout."

Wilson and Jack sprang away along the brink of the ravine. A hundred yards distant the sounds of men ascending rose from directly beneath them. Without pause they fired. Cries of rage followed, and as the boys dropped to the ground a dozen bullets whined over them. Promptly Wilson replied with the entire seven shots from one of his pistols, there was a crash as of someone falling, then a general scrambling as the entire party apparently tumbled precipitately down the steep slope. Rising to their feet, the boys fired several more shots, and hastened back toward Alex.

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As they neared him the crash of his rifle told he had guessed rightly that another attempt would be made to light the fire.

"Quick!" he said, slamming the loading mechanism. "They're sticking to it!"

Wilson and Jack saw several twinkling flames, and the roar of Alex's next shot was followed by the crash of their own weapons. A cry of agony followed, and one of the lights disappeared. Another faltered, and also went out.

Alex once more brought up his rifle, took careful aim; the jet of flame leaped from the muzzle, and with a shout the boys saw the last spot of light describe an arc in the air, and go out.

An angry howl followed, then a continuous volley from several different points. The spirit of fight had taken full possession of the three lads on the brink of the ravine, however, and lying close, they gave back shot for shot, quickly but steadily. Finally a lull came, and Alex rose exultingly on an elbow and shouted below, "Come on, you cowards! Come—"

From behind one of the bridge pillars leaped a flame, and with a sharp intake of breath Alex slipped sideways. But as Wilson and Jack sprang to his side he again rose. "It's nothing," he declared. "Just a graze inside the arm."

The quiet continuing, the others insisted on removing Alex's coat, and feeling, found the shirt-sleeve wet. "Tie a handkerchief round it," Alex directed. "There. That's all right."

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"That's what I get for allowing myself to be carried away, isn't it?" he added as Wilson and Jack helped him into his coat. "I didn't realize how—"

All three snatched up their weapons and spun about.

A tall stooped figure was standing within a few feet of them.

"Surrender!" cried Wilson. "*Quick, or I'll—*"

"It me, Little Hawk," said a quiet voice. "Why shoot?"

With a common cry of joy the boys sprang forward, and quickly explained the situation. The Indian grunted. "Not K. & Z. man," he said. "Bad cowboy, miner, gambler, from Yellow Creek. Makeum big bet K. & Z. win, come burn bridge, makeum win. Little Hawk hearum talk, come follow, hearum fight, come quick."

"Thinkum big fight. Only three boy fight, eh?" he added in surprise.

Alex had been considering. "Look here, Little Hawk," he suggested, "you ride back to the construction-train and give the alarm, will you? I think we have these fellows scared now, and can hold them till help comes. And none of us could ride that pony of yours."

"I findum nother hoss—cowboy hoss," said the Indian, pointing the way he had come. "You go, takeum, Little Hawk stay fight."

Alex thought a minute. "No; I'd rather stick, and see the thing through, now," he declared.

"Me too," said Jack promptly.

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"Same here," Wilson agreed.

"It's up to you, then, Little Hawk."

"Say, hold on!" Alex interrupted as the Indian turned away. "Boys, how about Little Hawk taking our prisoner back with him on the other horse? The folks at the train might get some

information out of him.

"Could you take him, Little Hawk?" he asked.

The redskin grunted assent. "Tieum to saddle," he said.

"I'll go and show him where the rascal is," volunteered Wilson.

A few minutes later, with the boys' prisoner trailing behind, securely bound to the saddle of the wandering horse he had picked up, the Indian was off across the plain to the west at the top of his mottled pony's speed.

When Wilson returned to Alex and Jack he found them busy constructing a miniature block-house of ties they had thrown from a neighboring car. "That's the idea," he said, joining them. "We could hold out in that all night, easily."

"No; leave that opening, Wilse," Jack interposed as Wilson began closing a gap at one of the corners. "That's to command the bridge. We're going to fire through, not over."

The boys had just completed their little fort when from the top of the gully immediately opposite came a spit of flame, followed by the plaintive hum of a pistol bullet above them. Promptly they dropped below the ties, and Alex, who had that side, aimed toward the spot at which he had seen the flash, and as it spat out again, crashed back with his Winchester. From several points along the opposite level a ragged fire followed, and continued intermittently.

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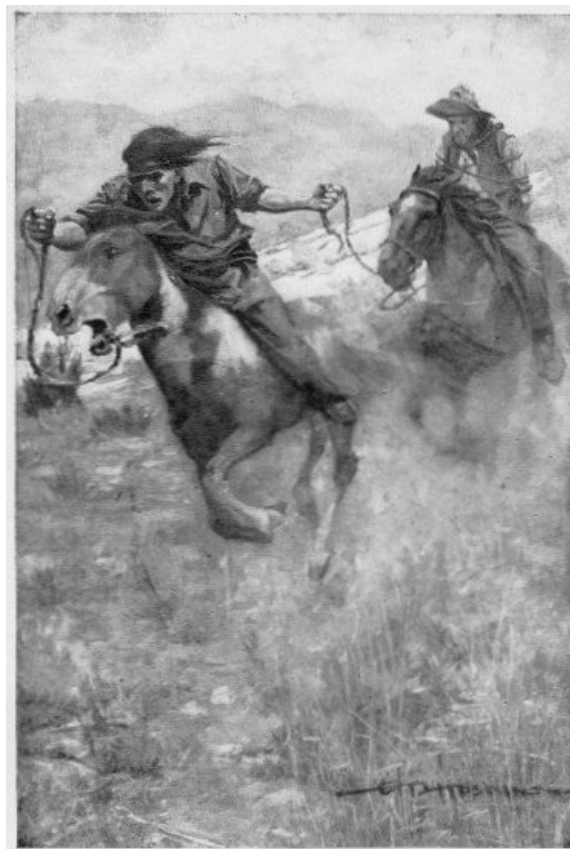
Then finally, as the boys had half expected, there came a smattering volley from amid the cars on the sidings behind them. The body of their assailants had reached the surface on their side.

Now it was that the three began to experience their first real anxiety. For despite their show of confidence to one another, each secretly knew that if a determined rush was made from near at hand, there was scarcely an even chance of their standing it off.

As a provision against this eventuality Wilson did very little firing during the almost steady exchange of shots that followed, keeping the chambers of his two revolvers always full. To the same end, Alex and Jack used their magazine-rifles as single-shots, holding the magazines, fully charged, in reserve.

"I think I'm getting one of them now and then," Alex was saying about half an hour after the disappearance of the Indian. "Or else—" He broke off to fire again. "Unless their ammunition is giving out over there."

Suddenly Jack snapped open his magazine. "Here they come!" he whispered. Alex scrambled about beside him. Wilson thrust the pistol-barrels through the loop-hole.



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WITH THE BOYS' PRISONER SECURELY BOUND TO THE SADDLE OF THE WANDERING HORSE, THE INDIAN WAS OFF ACROSS THE PLAIN.

From the dark line of the cars rose a shouted command, there came a ripping volley of a dozen Colts, and a dim group of figures rushed toward them.

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"Now, steady!" warned Alex. "And shoot low!"

"Fire!"

"Crash!" went the Winchesters, "Crack, crack, crack!" the pistols.

Two of the leading runners went to their hands and knees. The others rushed on, shouting and spitting flames.

Keeping well under cover, the boys fired as quickly as they could work their weapons. Wilson felt a stinging snip at his right ear, and a warm stream trickling down his neck. He emptied the first pistol, and began with the second.

"Crash! Crash!" roared the Winchesters.

The attackers held on. They had made half the distance. In spite of themselves, the boys began firing nervously.

Closer the running figures came.

Jack snapped back his reloading mechanism, and pulled the trigger. There was no report.

His cry of consternation was echoed by Alex.

They had fired their last shots!

With a wild shout of triumph two of their assailants were upon them.

From a clear patch of sky bright moonlight flooded the construction-train and the gray slope of the hill to the southeast about which the rails had crept that day. Grouped on the rear steps of the store-car, Superintendent Finnan and several of his foremen sat and smoked, and listened.

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"Yes; it's a horse," said one of the foremen.

"Two horses," declared the superintendent. "And coming as though Old Nick were after them."

Over the moonlit rise swept a figure on horseback, then another.

On discovering the group at the car, the leader uttered a shrill whoop, and tore down the slope toward them.

"The first is Little Hawk! The other is a prisoner! What's wrong?" cried the superintendent, springing to the ground.

The Indian pulled up in a cloud of dust before him, and threw himself from his reeking pony.

"Want burnum bridge," he said, indicating his prisoner. "Five, ten, more! Much more! Three boy—tick-knock boy—fightem!"

"Hear? Hear?"

He placed his hand to his ear.

The incredulous group turned to the east and listened.

As from infinitely far away, half heard, half felt, came a low, deadened "Plugk!... Plugk, plugk!... Plugk!"

A moment the startled railroadmen stared at one another. Then quickly the superintendent spoke.

"Ryan, rout out the engineer and firemen! The rest of you run for your guns, and a dozen good men from your gangs! Don't lose a minute!"



THE INDIAN PULLED UP IN A CLOUD OF DUST.

The group scattered with a rush. Fifteen minutes later, with men filling her cab and clustered on the tender, the engine was under way, rushing eastward.

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As rapidly the speed was increased, the locomotive rocked and leaped over the new roadbed, but with the superintendent at his elbow, the engineer drove her up to the last notch, and the prairie streamed by them like a blanket.

Half the distance was made, and above the noise of the engine came a sharp "Tap, tap! Tap, tap, tap!"

On the engine rushed, and the distant shapes of cars appeared. Simultaneously there came a crashing volley of shots, and a chorus of shouting. The men on the engine gripped their guns, and stared ahead into the space lit up by the headlight.

With reducing speed they struck a curve, and the stream of light swung about toward the bridge. The next moment into the glare broke a group of madly struggling figures.

On the flash of the light the fighting ceased. There were cries of alarm, and the renegades began to break and flee. A small party stood, and fired toward the engine. But with a roar the railroadmen leaped and tumbled to the ground, and rushed at them, and they too broke and fled.

And the great fight was over, and won.

The superintendent was first to reach the little barricade. Jack, he found unconscious from a blow on the head. Wilson had fainted, and Alex drooped limply on the wall of ties, exhausted past speaking. The faces, hands and clothes of all bore mute witness to the desperate struggle they had put up during those last terrible minutes.

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Within a short time, however, all three boys had somewhat recovered, and were able to take their places in the engine cab; and a half hour later the party headed back for the construction-train, coupled behind them a box-car containing eighteen prisoners. Ten of the captured men were found to have been wounded, several seriously; but to the relief of the boys none had been killed outright.

When rescued, rescuers and prisoners arrived at the construction-train they found an excited crowd of over three hundred men awaiting them. And on the details of the affair quickly spreading, the three boys were literally swept from their feet by the enthusiastic foreigners, hoisted into the air, and carried to the telegraph-car to a continuous roar of "hurrahs" and "bravos."

The following Wednesday a special train, to which was attached Division Superintendent Cameron's private car, drew up at the rear of the boarding-train. Proceeding thither in response to a message, Alex and Jack found Wilson, who had been picked up at the viaduct station, Construction Superintendent Finnan and several other Middle Western officials.

Having greeted them warmly, the division superintendent took a small package from his desk, and opened it. "I know you don't like speeches, boys," he began; "and in any case, I'm not sure I

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could do justice to the occasion. But, here! These three gold watches—the very finest the company’s money could buy, I may say—will show you what we think of the loyalty to the company, and the splendid courage you three lads displayed last Saturday night in defense of the Antelope viaduct.

“I might just read one of the inscriptions,” he said, opening Alex’s watch.

“‘To Alex Ward, from the Middle Western Railroad, in recognition of the heroic part he played in the defense of the Antelope viaduct, November 2nd, 18—, and in thus ensuring the victory of the Middle Western in its memorable race with the K. & Z. for the Yellow Creek Pass.’

“For that is precisely what it meant,” declared the superintendent. “The pass is ours now, beyond any chance.

“And finally,” he concluded, as Alex, Jack and Wilson, scarcely knowing what to say, took the three beautiful watches, “I would just like to remark that if you three boys do not some day stand where I stand, or higher, I’ll be both greatly surprised and disappointed.”

That this prediction was justified, you can to-day learn from any directory of railroad officials—for there, in the pages devoted to the Middle Western, you will find the name of Alexander Ward, Superintendent, Western Division; John Orr, Superintendent, Central Division; and, as General Superintendent of Telegraphs, Wilson A. Jennings.

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG RAILROADERS \*\*\*

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