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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RALPH ON THE OVERLAND EXPRESS; OR,
THE TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS OF A YOUNG ENGINEER ***



"AN AVALANCHE!" DECLARED FOGG. "DODGE—SOMETHING'S
COMING!"

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RALPH ON THE OVERLAND EXPRESS

CHAPTER I

NO. 999

"All aboard."

Ralph Fairbanks swung into the cab of No. 999 with the lever hooked up for forward motion, and placed a firm hand on the throttle.

It looked as though half the working force of the railroad, and every juvenile friend he had ever known in Stanley Junction, had come down to the little old depot that beautiful summer afternoon to especially celebrate the greatest event in his active railroad career.

Ralph was the youngest engineer in the service of the Great Northern, and there was full reason why he should center attention and interest on this the proudest moment of his life. No. 999 was the crack locomotive of the system, brand new and resplendent. Its headlight was a great glow of crystal, its metal bands and trimmings shone like burnished gold, and its cab was as spick and span and neat as the private office of the division superintendent himself.

No. 999 was out for a trial run—a record run, Ralph hoped to make it. One particular car attached to the rear of the long train was the main object of interest. It was a new car to the road, and its blazoned name suggested an importance out of the ordinary—"China & Japan Mail."

This car had just come in over a branch section by a short cut from the north. If No. 999 could beat timetable routine half an hour and deliver the mail to the Overland Express at Bridgeport, two hundred miles distant, on time, it would create a new schedule, and meant a good contract for the Great Northern, besides a saving of three hours' time over the former roundabout trip of the China & Japan Mail.

Ralph had exchanged jolly greetings with his friends up to now. In an instant, however, the sonorous, echoing "All aboard" from the conductor way down the train was a signal for duty, prompt and imperative. The pleasant depot scene faded from the sight and mind of the ambitious young railroader. He turned his strict attention now to the cab interior, as though the locomotive was a thing of life and intelligence.

"Let 'er go, Ralph!"

John Griscom, the oldest engineer on the road, off duty, but a privileged character on all occasions, stepped from the gossiping crowd of loungers at a little distance. He swung up into the cab with the expert airiness of long usage. His bluff, hearty face expressed admiration and satisfaction, as his rapid eye took in the cab layout.

"I'll hold up the tender rail till we get to crossing," announced Griscom. "Lad, this is front rank service all right, and I'm happy to say that you deserve it."

"Thank you, Mr. Griscom," answered Ralph, his face beaming at the handsome compliment. "I don't forget, though, that you helped some."

"Oh, so, so," declared Griscom. "I say, Fogg, you're named right."

It was to Lemuel Fogg that Griscom spoke. Fogg was Ralph's fireman on the present trip. He presented a decided contrast to the brisk, bright engineer of No. 999. He shoveled in the coal with a grim mutter, and slammed the fire door shut with a vicious and unnecessary bang.

"What you getting at?" he growled, with a surly eye on Griscom.

"Fogg—fog, see? foggy, that's you—and groggy, eh? Sun's shining—why don't you take it in? No slouch privilege firing this magnificent king of the road, I'm thinking, and you ought to think so, too."

"Huh!" snapped Fogg, "it'll be kid luck, if we get through."

"Oho! there's where the shoe pinches, is it?" bantered the old railroad veteran. "Come, be fair, Fogg. You was glad to win your own spurs when you were young."

"All right, mind the try-out, you hear me!" snorted Fogg ungraciously. "You mind your own business."

"Say," shot out Griscom quickly, as he caught a whiff from Fogg's lips, "you be sure you mind yours—and the rules," he added, quite sternly, "I advise you not to get too near the furnace."

"Eh, why not?"

"Your breath might catch fire, that's why," announced Griscom bluntly, and turned his back on the disgruntled fireman.

Ralph had not caught this sharp cross-fire of repartee. His mind had been intently fixed on his task. He had started up the locomotive slowly, but now, clearing the depot switches, he pulled

the lever a notch or two, watching carefully ahead. As the train rounded a curve to an air line, a series of brave hurrahs along the side of the track sent a thrill of pleasure through Ralph's frame.

The young engineer had only a fleeting second or two to bestow on a little group, standing at the rear fence of a yard backing down to the tracks. His mother was there, gaily waving a handkerchief. A neighbor joined in the welcome, and half-a-dozen boys and small children with whom Ralph was a rare favorite made the air ring with enthusiastic cheers.

"Friends everywhere, lad," spoke Griscom in a kindly tone, and then, edging nearer to his prime young favorite, he half-whispered: "Keep your eye on this grouch of a Fogg."

"Why, you don't mean anything serious, Mr. Griscom?" inquired Ralph, with a quick glance at the fireman.

"Yes, I do," proclaimed the old railroader plainly. "He's got it in for you—it's the talk of the yards, and he's in just the right frame of mind to bite off his own nose to spite his face. So long."

The locomotive had slowed up for crossing signals, and Griscom got to the ground with a careless sail through the air, waved his hand, and Ralph buckled down to real work on No. 999.

He glanced at the schedule sheet and the clock. The gauges were in fine working order. There was not a full head of steam on as yet and the fire box was somewhat over full, but there was a strong draft and a twenty-mile straight run before them, and Ralph felt they could make it easily.

"Don't choke her too full, Mr. Fogg," he remarked to the fireman.

"Teach me!" snorted Fogg, and threw another shovelful into the box already crowded, and backed against the tender bar with a surly, defiant face.

Ralph made no retort. Fogg did, indeed, know his business, if he was only minded to attend to it. He was somewhat set and old-fashioned in his ways, and he had grown up in the service from wiper.

Ralph recalled Griscom's warning. It was not pleasant to run two hundred miles with a grumpy cab comrade. Ralph wished they had given him some other helper. However, he reasoned that even a crack fireman might be proud of a regular run on No. 999, and he did not believe that Fogg would hurt his own chances by any tactics that might delay them.

The landscape drifted by swiftly and more swiftly, as Ralph gave the locomotive full head. A rare enthusiasm and buoyancy came into the situation. There was something fascinating in the breathless rush, the superb power and steadiness of the crack machine, so easy of control that she was a marvel of mechanical genius and perfection.

Like a panorama the scenery flashed by, and in rapid mental panorama Ralph reviewed the glowing and stirring events of his young life, which in a few brief months had carried him from his menial task as an engine wiper up to the present position which he cherished so proudly.

Ralph was a railroader by inheritance as well as predilection. His father had been a pioneer in the beginning of the Great Northern. After he died, through the manipulations of an unworthy village magnate named Gasper Farrington, his widow and son found themselves at the mercy of that heartless schemer, who held a mortgage on their little home.

In the first volume of the present series, entitled "Ralph of the Roundhouse," it was told how Ralph left school to earn a living and help his self-sacrificing mother in her poverty.

Ralph got a job in the roundhouse, and held it, too, despite the malicious efforts of Ike Slump, a ne'er-do-well who tried to undermine him. Ralph became a favorite with the master mechanic of the road through some remarkable railroad service in which he saved the railroad shops from destruction by fire.

Step by step Ralph advanced, and the second volume of this series, called "Ralph in the Switch Tower," showed how manly resolve, and being right and doing right, enabled him to overcome his enemies and compel old Farrington to release the fraudulent mortgage. Incidentally, Ralph made many friends. He assisted a poor waif named Van Sherwin to reach a position of comfort and honor, and was instrumental in aiding a former business partner of his father, one Farwell Gibson, to complete a short line railroad through the woods near Dover.

In the third volume of the present series, entitled "Ralph on the Engine," was related how our young railroad friend became an active employee of the Great Northern as a fireman. He made some record runs with old John Griscom, the veteran of the road. In that volume was also depicted the ambitious but blundering efforts of Zeph Dallas, a farmer boy who was determined to break into railroading, and there was told as well the grand success of little Limpy Joe, a railroad cripple, who ran a restaurant in an old, dismantled box car.

These and other staunch, loyal friends had rallied around Ralph with all the influence they could exert, when after a creditable examination Ralph was placed on the extra list as an engineer.

Van and Zeph had been among the first to congratulate the friend to whom they owed so much, when, after a few months' service on accommodation runs, it was made known that Ralph had been appointed as engineer of No. 999.

It was Limpy Joe, spending a happy vacation week with motherly, kind-hearted Mrs. Fairbanks, who led the cheering coterie whom Ralph had passed near his home as he left the Junction on his present run.

Of his old-time enemies, Ike Slump and Mort Bemis were in jail, the last Ralph had heard of them. There was a gang in his home town, however, whom Ralph had reason to fear. It was made up of men who had tried to cripple the Great Northern through an unjust strike. A man named Jim Evans had been one of the leaders. Fogg had sympathized with the strikers. Griscom and Ralph had routed the malcontents in a fair, open-handed battle of arguments and blows. Fogg had been reinstated by the road, but he had to go back on the promotion list, and his rancor was intense when he learned that Ralph had been chosen to a position superior to his own.

"They want young blood, the railroad nobs tell it," the disgruntled fireman had been heard to remark in his favorite tipping place on Railroad Street. "Humph! They'll have blood, and lots of it, if they trust the lives of passengers and crew to a lot of kindergarten graduates."

Of all this Ralph was thinking as they covered a clear dash of twenty miles over the best stretch of grading on the road, and with satisfaction he noted that they had gained three minutes on the schedule time. He whistled for a station at which they did not stop, set full speed again as they left the little village behind them, and glanced sharply at Fogg.

The latter had not spoken a word for over half-an-hour. He had gone about his duties in a dogged, sullen fashion that showed the permanency of the grouch with which old John Griscom had charged him. Ralph had made up his mind to leave his cab companion severely alone until he became more reasonable. However, there were some things about Fogg of which the young engineer was bound to take notice, and a new enlightenment came to Ralph's mind as he now glanced at his helper.

Fogg had slipped clumsily on the tender plate in using the coal rake, and Ralph had marveled at this unusual lack of steadiness of footing. Then, twice he had gone out on the running board on some useless errand, fumbling about in an inexplicable way. His hot, fetid breath crossed Ralph's face, and the latter arrived at a definite conclusion, and he was sorry for it. Fogg had been "firing up" from a secret bottle ever since they had left the Junction, and his condition was momentarily becoming more serious and alarming.

They were slowing down to a stop at a water tank as Ralph saw Fogg draw back, and under cover of the tender lift a flask to his lips. Then Fogg slipped it under the cushion of his seat as he turned to get some coal.

He dropped the shovel, coal and all, with a wild snort of rage, as turning towards the fire box door he saw Ralph reach over swiftly, grab the half empty bottle from under the cushion, and give it a fling to the road bed, where it was dashed into a thousand pieces.

Blood in his eye, uncontrollable fury in his heart, the irrational fireman, both fists uplifted, made a wild onslaught upon the young engineer.

"You impudent meddler!" he raved. "I'll smash you!"

CHAPTER II

A SPECIAL PASSENGER

"Behave yourself," said Ralph Fairbanks quietly.

The young engineer simply gave his furious antagonist a push with his free hand. The other hand was on duty, and Ralph's eyes as well. He succeeded in bringing the locomotive to a stop before Fogg needed any further attention.

The fireman had toppled off his balance and went flat among the coal of the tender. Ralph did not feel at all important over so easily repelling his assailant. Fogg was in practically a helpless condition, and a child could have disturbed his unsteady footing.

With maudlin energy, however, he began to scramble to his feet. All the time he glowered at Ralph, and made dreadful threats of what he was going to do to the youth for "knocking him down." Fogg managed to pull himself erect, but swayed about a good deal, and then observing that Ralph had the free use of both hands now and was posed on guard to meet any attack he might meditate, the irate fireman stooped and seized a big lump of coal. Ralph could hardly hope to dodge the missile, hemmed in as he was. It was poised for a vicious fling. Just as Fogg's hand went backwards to aim the projectile, it was seized, the missile was wrested from his grasp, and a strange voice drawled out the words:

"I wouldn't waste the company's coal that way, if I were you."

Ralph with some surprise and considerable interest noted the intruder, who had mounted the tender step just in time to thwart the quarrelsome designs of Lemuel Fogg. As to the fireman, he wheeled about, looked ugly, and then as the newcomer laughed squarely in his face, mumbled some incoherent remark about "two against one," and "fixing both of them." Then he climbed up on the tender to direct the water tank spout into place.

"What's the row here, anyhow?" inquired the intruder, with a pleasant glance at Ralph, and leaning bodily against the fireman's seat.

Ralph looked him over as a cool specimen, although there was nothing "cheeky" about the intruder. He showed neither the sneakiness nor the effrontery of the professional railroad beat or ride stealer, notwithstanding the easy, natural way in which he made himself at home in the cab as though he belonged there.

"Glad you happened along," chirped the newcomer airily. "I'll keep you company as far as Bridgeport, I guess."

"Will you, now?" questioned Ralph, with a dubious smile.

The lad he addressed was an open-faced, smart-looking boy. He was well dressed and intelligent, and suggested to Ralph the average college or home boy. Certainly there was nothing about him that indicated that he had to work for a living.

"My name is Clark—Marvin Clark," continued the intruder.

Ralph nodded and awaited further disclosures.

"My father is President of the Middletown & Western Railroad," proceeded the stranger.

Ralph did not speak. He smiled slightly, and the keen-eyed intruder noticed this and gave him a sharp look.

"Old racket, eh? Too flimsy?" he propounded with a quizzical but perfectly good-natured grin. "I suppose they play all kinds of official relationships and all that on you fellows, eh?"

"Yes," said Ralph, "we do hear some pretty extravagant stories."

"I suppose so," assented the youth calling himself Marvin Clark. "Well, I don't want to intrude, but if there's room for myself and my credentials, I'd rather keep you company than free pass it in the parlor coach. There you are."

As the boy spoke of "credentials," he drew an unsealed envelope from his pocket and handed it to Ralph. The latter received it, noting that it bore in one corner the monogram of the Great Northern, with "President's office—official business" printed under it. He withdrew the enclosure and perused it.

The sheet was a letter head of the Middletown & Western Railroad. It bore on one line in one handwriting the name "Marvin Clark," and beneath it the words: "For identification," in another handwriting, and the flourishing signature below "Nathaniel Clark, President."

In typewriting beneath all this were the words: "Pass on all trains, Marvin Clark," and below that a date and the name in writing of Mr. Robert Grant, the President of the Great Northern, unmistakably genuine. There were few employees on the road who were not familiar with that signature.

"All right," said Ralph, refolding the sheet, re-inclosing it in the envelope, and handing it back to the stranger. "I guess that passes you anywhere on the line."

"You see, I've got a sort of roaming commission," explained young Clark buoyantly, as he got comfortably seated on the fireman's cushion. "No particular use at school, and father wants me to learn railroading. The first step was to run down all the lines and pick up all the information I could. I've just got to put in two months at that, and then report to family headquarters my store of practical knowledge. See here."

Marvin Clark drew a blank from his pocket. Some thirty of its pages he showed to Ralph were filled with memoranda. Thus: "Aug. 22, cattle freight, Upton to Dover. O. K. Simpson, Conductor." There followed like items, all signed, forming a link of evidence that the boy had been a passenger on all kinds of rolling stock, had visited railroad shops, switch towers, water stations, in fact had inspected about every active department of several railroad lines that connected with the Middletown & Western Railroad.

"That is a pretty pleasant layout, I should say," remarked Ralph.

"Oh, so, so," replied Clark indifferently. "Athletics is my stronghold. If I ever get money enough—I mean if I had my own way—I'd train for expert on everything from golf to football."

"I'm pretty strong in that direction myself," said Ralph, "but a fellow has to hustle for something to eat."

"I know what that means," declared Clark. "Had to help the family by peddling papers—."

Clark paused and flushed. Ralph wondered at the singular break his visitor had made. A diversion covered the embarrassment of the young stranger and caused Ralph to momentarily forget the incident. Fogg had swung back the water spout, set the tender cover, and climbed down into the cab. Then he took the side light signals and went around to the pilot. No. 999 carried two flags there, now to be replaced by lanterns. Fogg came back to the cab rolling up the flags.

"All right," he announced ungraciously, and hustled Clark to one side without ceremony as the latter abandoned his seat. Ralph gave the starting signal and Clark edged back in the tender out of the way.

The young engineer took a good look at his fireman. The latter was muddled, it was plain to see that, but he went about his duties with a mechanical routine born from long experience. Only

once did he lurch towards Ralph and speak to him, or rather hiss out the words.

"You'll settle with me for your impudence yet, young fellow. You're a high and mighty, you are, breaking the rules giving your friends a free ride."

Ralph did not reply. One anxiety kept him devoted to his work—to lose no time. A glance at the clock and schedule showed a ten minutes' loss, but defective or experimental firing on a new locomotive had been responsible for that, and he counted on making a spurt, once beyond Plympton.

Marvin Clark knew his place, and Ralph liked him for keeping it. The young fellow watched everything going on in the cab in a shrewd, interested fashion, but he neither got in the way of the cross-grained Fogg, nor pestered Ralph with questions.

Plympton was less than five miles ahead just as dusk began to fall. Ralph noticed that his fireman rustled about with a good deal of unnecessary activity. He would fire up to the limit, as if working off some of his vengefulness and malice. Then he went out on the running board, for no earthly reason that Ralph could see, and he made himself generally so conspicuous that young Clark leaned over and said to Ralph.

"What's the matter with your fireman, anyhow—that is, besides that load he's got aboard?"

"Oh, he has his cross moods, like all of us, I suppose," explained Ralph, with affected indifference.

"I wouldn't take him for a very pleasant comrade at any time," observed Clark. "It's a wonder he don't take a tumble. There he is, hitching around to the pilot. What for, I wonder?"

Ralph was not paying much attention to what the cab passenger was saying. He had made up five minutes, and his quick mind was now planning how he would gain five more, and then double that, to Plympton and beyond it.

He gave the whistle for Plympton, as, shooting a curve, No. 999 drove a clattering pace down the grade with the lights of the station not a quarter-of-a-mile away. They were set for clear tracks, as they should be. Ralph gave the lever a hitch for a rattling dash on ten miles of clear running. Then fairly up to the first station semaphore, he broke out with a cry so sharp and dismayed that young Clark echoed it in questioning excitement.

"The siding!" cried Ralph, with a jerk of the lever—"what's the meaning of this?"

"Say!" echoed Clark, in a startled tone, "that's quick and queer!"

What had happened was this: No. 999 going at full speed on clear signals had been sent to a siding and the signals cancelled without a moment's warning. Under ordinary circumstances, a train thus sidetracked would be under notified control and run down the siding only a short distance. Going at high speed, however, and with a full head of steam on, Ralph realized that, long as the siding was, he would have to work quick and hard to check down the big locomotive before she slid the limit, and stuck her nose deep into the sand hill that blocked the terminus of the rails.

It was quite dark now. The lights of the station flashed by. Both hands in use to check the locomotive and set the air brakes, Ralph leaned slightly from the cab window and peered ahead.

"Shoot the sand!" he cried, almost mechanically.

It was a good thing that the cab passenger was aboard and knew something about the cab equipment. Young Clark reached the side of the engineer's seat in a nimble spring. His hand located the sand valve without hesitancy.

Ralph uttered a short, sharp gasp. That look ahead had scared him. He was doing all he could to slow down, and was doing magnificently, for the reverse action moved to a charm. Still, he saw that after dashing fully two hundred yards down the siding, the natural momentum would carry the train fully one-third that distance further.

"Any obstruction?" shot out his agile companion, springing to the fireman's seat, sticking his head out of the window and staring ahead. "Whew! we're going to hit."

The speaker saw what Ralph also beheld. Dimly outlined directly in their path was a flat car, and above it, skeletonized against the fading sunset sky, was the framework of a derrick. A repair or construction gondola car was straight ahead of No. 999.

They seemed to be approaching it swiftly and irresistibly. The wheels slid now, fairly locked, there was a marked ease-down, but Ralph saw plainly that, great or small, a collision was inevitable.

"Say, that fireman of yours!" shouted young Clark—"there he goes."

The locomotive was fairly upon the obstruction now. Ralph stuck to the lever, setting his lips firmly, a little pale, his muscles twitching slightly under the stress of excitement and suspense.

"Zing!" remarked the cool comrade of the young engineer—"we're there!"

At that moment a flying form shot from the running board of the locomotive. Lemuel Fogg had jumped.

CHAPTER III

ONE OF THE RULES

Locomotive No. 999 landed against the bumper of the gondola car with a sharp shock. However, there was no crash of consequence. The headlight radiance now flooded fully the obstruction. Young Clark suddenly shouted:

"Look out!"

The quick-witted, keen-eyed special passenger was certainly getting railroad training so coveted by his magnate father. He saw the fireman shoot through the air in his frightened jump for safety. Lemuel Fogg landed in a muddy ditch at the side of the tracks, up to his knees in water.

The sharp, warning cry of Marvin Clark was not needed to appraise Ralph of the danger that threatened. The jar of the collision had displaced and upset the derrick. Ralph saw it falling slantingly towards them. He pulled the reverse lever, but could not get action quick enough to entirely evade the falling derrick. It grazed the headlight, chopping off one of its metal wings, and striking the pilot crushed in one side of the front fender rails.

The young engineer gave the signal for backing the train, and kept in motion. His purpose was to allay any panic on the part of the passengers, whom he knew must be alarmed by the erratic tactics of the past few moments. Then after thus traversing about half the distance back to the main line, he shut off steam and whistled for instructions.

"Another notch in my education," observed young Clark with a chuckle—"been waiting to pass examination on a smash up."

"Oh, this isn't one," replied Ralph. His tone was tense, and he showed that he was disturbed. He was too quick a thinker not to at once comprehend the vital issue of the present incident. With Fogg headed down the track towards him from the ditch, trying to overtake the train, and the conductor, lantern in hand, running to learn what had happened, Ralph sized up the situation with decided annoyance.

The action of the station man in giving the free track signal and then at a critical moment shooting the special onto the siding, had something mysterious about it that Ralph could not readily solve. The slight mishap to the locomotive and the smashing of the derrick was not particularly serious, but there would be a report, an investigation, and somebody would be blamed and punished. Ralph wanted to keep a clear slate, and here was a bad break, right at the threshold of his new railroad career.

All he thought of, however, were the delays, all he cared for at this particular moment was to get back to the main tracks on his way for Bridgeport, with a chance to make up lost time. A sudden vague suspicion flashing through his mind added to his mental disquietude: was there a plot to purposely cripple or delay his train, so that he would be defeated in his efforts to make a record run?

"What's this tangle, Fairbanks?" shouted out the conductor sharply, as he arrived breathless and excited at the side of the cab.

His name was Danforth, and he was a model employee of long experience, always very neat and dressy in appearance and exact and systematic in his work. Any break in routine nettled him, and he spoke quite censoriously to the young engineer, whom, however, he liked greatly.

"I'm all at sea, Mr. Danforth," confessed Ralph bluntly.

"Any damage?—I see," muttered the conductor, going forward a few steps and surveying the scratched, bruised face of the locomotive.

"There's a gondola derailed and a derrick smashed where we struck," reported Ralph. "I acted on my duplicate orders, Mr. Danforth," he added earnestly, "and had the clear signal almost until I passed it and shot the siding."

"I don't understand it at all," remarked the conductor in a troubled and irritated way. "You had the clear signal, you say?"

"Positively," answered Ralph.

"Any serious damage ahead?"

"Nothing of consequence."

"Back slowly, we'll see the station man about this."

The conductor mounted to the cab step, and No. 999 backed slowly. As they neared the end of the siding the train was again halted. All down its length heads were thrust from coach windows. There was some excitement and alarm, but the discipline of the train hands and the young engineer's provision had prevented any semblance of panic.

The conductor, lantern in hand, ran across the tracks to the station. Ralph saw him engaged in vigorous conversation with the man on duty there. The conductor had taken out a memorandum book and was jotting down something. The station man with excited gestures ran inside the depot, and the signal turned to clear tracks. Ralph switched to the main. Then the conductor

gave the go ahead signal.

"That's cool," observed young Clark. "I should think the conductor would give us an inkling of how all this came about."

"Oh, we'll learn soon enough," said Ralph. "There will have to be an official report on this."

"I'm curious. Guess I'll go back and worm out an explanation," spoke Clark. "I'll see you with news later."

As Clark left the cab on one side Fogg came up on the other. He had been looking over the front of the locomotive. Ralph noticed that he did not seem to have suffered any damage from his wild jump beyond a slight shaking up. He was wet and spattered to the waist, however, and had lost his cap.

Lemuel Fogg's eyes wore a frightened, shifty expression as he stepped to the tender. His face was wretchedly pale, his hands trembled as he proceeded to pile in the coal. Every vestige of unsteadiness and maudlin bravado was gone. He resembled a man who had gazed upon some unexpected danger, and there was a half guiltiness in his manner as if he was responsible for the impending mishap.

The fireman did not speak a word, and Ralph considered that it was no time for discussion or explanations. The injury to the locomotive was comparatively slight, and with a somewhat worried glance at the clock and schedule card the young railroader focussed all his ability and attention upon making up for lost time.

Soon Ralph was so engrossed in his work that he forgot the fireman, young Clark, the accident, everything except that he was driving a mighty steel steed in a race against time, with either the winning post or defeat in view. There was a rare pride in the thought that upon him depended a new railway record. There was a fascinating exhilaration in observing the new king of the road gain steadily half a mile, one mile, two miles, overlapping lost time.

A smile of joy crossed the face of the young engineer, a great aspiration of relief and triumph escaped his lips as No. 999 pulled into Derby two hours later. They were twenty-one minutes ahead of time.

"Mr. Fogg," shouted Ralph across to the fireman's seat, "you're a brick!"

It was the first word that had passed between them since the mishap at the siding, but many a grateful glance had the young engineer cast at his helper. It seemed as if the shake-up at Plympton had shaken all the nonsense out of Lemuel Fogg. Before that it had been evident to Ralph that the fireman was doing all he could to queer the run. He had been slow in firing and then had choked the furnace. His movements had been suspicious and then alarming to Ralph, but since leaving Plympton he had acted like a different person. Ralph knew from practical experience what good firing was, and he had to admit that Fogg had outdone himself in the splendid run of the last one hundred miles. He was therefore fully in earnest when he enthusiastically designated his erratic helper as a "brick."

It was hard for Fogg to come out from his grumpiness and cross-grained malice quickly. Half resentful, half shamed, he cast a furtive, sullen look at Ralph.

"Humph!" he muttered, "it isn't any brick that did it—it was the briquettes."

"The what, Mr. Fogg?" inquired Ralph.

"Them," and with contemptuous indifference Fogg pointed to a coarse sack lying among the coal. "New-fangled fuel. Master mechanic wanted to make a test."

"Why, yes, I heard about that," said Ralph quickly. "Look like baseballs. Full of pitch, oil and sulphur, I understand. They say they urge up the fire."

"They do, they burn like powder. They are great steam makers, and no question," observed Fogg. "Won't do for a regular thing, though."

"No?" insinuated Ralph attentively, glad to rouse his grouchy helper from his morose mood.

"Not a bit of it."

"Why not?"

"Used right along, they'd burn out any crown sheet. What's more, wait till you come to clean up—the whole furnace will be choked with cinders."

"I see," nodded Ralph, and just then they rounded near Macon for a fifteen minutes wait.

As Fogg went outside with oil can and waste roll, Mervin Clark came into the cab.

"Glad to get back where it's home like," he sang out in his chirp, brisk way. "Say, Engineer Fairbanks, that monument of brass buttons and gold cap braid is the limit. Discipline? why, he works on springs and you have to touch a button to make him act. I had to chum with the brakeman to find out what's up."

"Something is up, then?" inquired Ralph a trifle uneasily.

"Oh, quite. The conductor has been writing a ten-page report on the collision. It's funny, but the station man at Plympton--"

"New man, isn't he?" inquired Ralph.

"Just transferred to Plympton yesterday mornin'," explained Clark. "Well, he swears that your

front signals were special at the curves and flashed green just as you neared the semaphore.”

“Absurd!” exclaimed Ralph.

“That’s what the conductor says, too,” said Clark. “He told the station agent so. They nearly had a fight. ‘Color blind!’ he told the station agent and challenged him to find green lights on No. 999 if he could. The station man was awfully rattled and worried. He says he knew a special was on the list, but being new to this part of the road he acted on Rule 23 when he saw the green lights. He sticks to that, says that he will positively swear to it. He says he knows some one will be slated, but it won’t be him.”

“What does the conductor say?” inquired Ralph.

“He says Rule 23 doesn’t apply, as the white lights prove. If there was any trickery or any mistake, then it’s up to the fireman, not to the engineer.”

At that moment, happening to glance past Clark, the young engineer caught sight of Lemuel Fogg. The latter, half crouching near a drive wheel, was listening intently. The torch he carried illuminated a pale, twitching face. His eyes were filled with a craven fear, and Ralph tried to imagine what was passing through his mind.

There was something mysterious about Fogg’s actions, yet Ralph accepted the theory of the conductor that the station man had made a careless blunder or was color blind.

“You see, it isn’t that the smash up amounts to much,” explained Clark, “but it might have, see?”

“Yes, I see,” replied Ralph thoughtfully.

“Then again,” continued Clark, “the conductor says that it delayed a test run, and there’s a scratched locomotive and a busted construction car.”

“I’m thankful that no one was hurt,” said Ralph earnestly.

When the next start was made, Fogg was taciturn and gloomy-looking, but attended strictly to his duty. Ralph voted him to be a capital fireman when he wanted to be. As an hour after midnight they spurted past Hopeville forty minutes to the good, he could not help shouting over a delighted word of commendation to Fogg.

“I said you were a brick, Mr. Fogg,” he observed. “You’re more than that—you’re a wonder.”

Fogg’s face momentarily lighted up. It looked as if he was half minded to come out of his shell and give some gracious response, but instantly the old sullenness settled down over his face, accompanied by a gloomy manner that Ralph could not analyze. He half believed, however, that Fogg was a pretty good fellow at heart, had started out to queer the run, and was now sorry and ashamed that he had betrayed his weakness for drink.

“Maybe he is genuinely sorry for his tantrums,” reflected Ralph, “and maybe our narrow escape at the siding has sobered him into common sense.”

What the glum and gruff fireman lacked of comradeship, the young passenger made up in jolly good cheer. He was interested in everything going on. He found opportunity to tell Ralph several rattling good stories, full of incident and humor, of his amateur railroad experiences, and the time was whiled away pleasantly for these two acquaintances.

Ralph could not repress a grand, satisfied expression of exultation as No. 999 glided gracefully into the depot at Bridgeport, over forty-seven minutes ahead of time.

The station master and the assistant superintendent of the division came up to the cab instantly, the latter with his watch in his hand.

“Worth waiting for, this, Fairbanks,” he called out cheerily—he was well acquainted with the young railroader, for Ralph had fired freights to this point over the Great Northern once regularly for several weeks. “I’ll send in a bouncing good report with lots of pleasure.”

“Thank you,” said Ralph. “We’ve demonstrated, anyhow.”

“You have, Fairbanks,” returned the official commendingly.

“Only, don’t lay any stress on my part of it,” said Ralph. “Any engineer could run such a superb monarch of the rail as No. 999. If you don’t tell them how much the experiment depended on our good friend, Fogg, here, I will have to, that’s all.”

The fireman flushed. His eyes had a momentary pleased expression, and he glanced at Ralph, really grateful. He almost made a move as if to heartily shake the hand of his unselfish champion.

“You’re too modest, Fairbanks,” laughed the assistant superintendent, “but we’ll boost Fogg, just as he deserves. It’s been a hard, anxious run, I’ll warrant. We’ve got a relief crew coming, so you can get to bed just as soon as you like.”

The passenger coaches were soon emptied of the through passengers. A local engineer, fireman and brakeman took charge of the train to switch the China & Japan Mail car over to another track, ready to hitch on to the Overland express, soon to arrive, sidetrack the other coaches, and take No. 999 to the roundhouse.

CHAPTER IV

A WARNING

Ralph doffed his working clothes, washed up at the tender spigot, and joined Clark, who stood waiting for him on the platform. Fogg, without tidying up, in a sort of tired, indifferent way was already some distance down the platform. Ralph hurried after him.

"Six-fifteen to-night, Mr. Fogg, isn't it?" spoke Ralph, more to say something than anything else.

"That's right," returned Fogg curtly.

"Griscom directed me to a neat, quiet lodging house," added Ralph. "Won't you join me?"

"Can't—got some friends waiting for me," responded the fireman.

Ralph followed him seriously and sadly with his eyes. Fogg was making for Railroad Row, with its red saloon signs, and Ralph felt sorry for him.

"See here," spoke Clark, as they walked along together, "headed for a bunk, I suppose?"

"Yes," answered Ralph. "John Griscom, that's our veteran engineer, and a rare good friend of mine, told me about a cheap, comfortable lodging house to put up at. It's some distance from the depot, but I believe I shall go there."

"Good idea," approved Clark. "I've been in some of those railroad men's hotels yonder, and they're not very high toned—nor clean."

"What's your program?" inquired Ralph.

"Got to sleep, I suppose, so, if I'm not too much of a bore and it's pleasing to you, I'll try the place your friend recommends."

"I shall be delighted," answered Ralph.

Within half-an-hour both tired lads tumbled into their beds in rooms adjoining in a private house about half a mile from the depot. Ralph stretched himself luxuriously, as he rested after the turmoil and labor of what he considered the most arduous day in his railroad career.

The young engineer awoke with the bright sun shining in his face and was out of bed in a jiffy. These lay-over days had always been prized by the young railroader, and he planned to put the present one to good use. He went to the closed door communicating with the next room and tapped on it.

"Hey, there!" he hailed briskly, "time to get up," then, no response coming, he opened the door to find the apartment deserted.

"An early bird, it seems," observed Ralph. "Probably gone for breakfast."

John Griscom had told Ralph all about the house he was in, and the young engineer soon located the bathroom and took a vigorous cold plunge that made him feel equal to the task of running a double-header special. Ralph had just dressed when Marvin Clark came bustling into the room.

"Twenty minutes for breakfast!" hailed the volatile lad. "I've been up an hour."

"You didn't take a two hundred mile run, or you wouldn't be up for four," challenged Ralph.

"Guess that's so," admitted Clark. "Well, here we are. I've been out prospecting."

"What for?" inquired Ralph.

"A good restaurant."

"Found one?"

"A dandy—wheat cakes with honey, prime country sausages and Mocha, all for twenty cents."

"Good," commended Ralph. "We'll take air line for that right away."

Clark chattered like a magpie as they proceeded to the street. It was evident that he had taken a great fancy to Ralph. The latter liked him in return. For the son of a wealthy railroad magnate, Clark was decidedly democratic. The one subject he seemed glad to avoid was any reference to his direct family and friends.

He was full of life, and Ralph found him very entertaining. Some bad breaks in grammar showed, indeed, that he had not amounted to much at school. Some of his adventures also suggested that the presence and power of money had not always been at his command. Ralph noticed some inconsistencies in his stories here and there, but Clark rattled on so fast and jumped so briskly from one subject to another, that it was hard work to check him up.

As they reached the porch of the house Clark gave Ralph a deterring touch with his hand.

"Just wait a minute, will you?" he spoke.

"Why what for?" inquired Ralph in some surprise.

"I want to find out something before we go out into the street," and the speaker glided down the walk to the gate, peered down the street, and then beckoned to his companion.

"Come on," he hailed. "They're still there, though," he added, his tones quite impressive.

"Who is there?" asked Ralph.

"Just dally at the gate here and take a look past the next street corner—near where there's an alley, see?"

"That crowd of boys?" questioned Ralph, following his companion's direction.

"Yes, that gang of hoodlums," responded Clark bluntly, "for that is what they are."

"And how are we interested in them?" inquired Ralph.

"We're not, but they may become interested in us."

"Indeed?"

"Mightily, if I don't mistake my cue," asserted Clark.

"You are pretty mysterious," hinted Ralph, half-smiling.

"Well, I'll explain. Those fellows are laying for you."

"Laying for me?" repeated Ralph vaguely.

"That's it."

"Why? They don't know me, and I don't know them."

"Not much acquainted at Bridgeport, eh?"

"Only casually. I've laid over here several times when I was firing on the fast freight. I know a few railroad men, that's all."

"Ever hear of Billy Bouncer?"

"I never did."

"Then I'm the first one to enlighten you. When I went out to find a restaurant I passed that crowd you see. I noticed that they drew together and scanned me pretty closely. Then I heard one of them say, 'That's not Fairbanks.' 'Yes, it is, didn't he come out of the place we're watching?' said another. 'Aw, let up,' spoke a third voice. 'Billy Bouncer will know, and we don't want to spoil his game. He'll be here soon.'"

"That's strange," said Ralph musingly.

"What are you going to do about it?" inquired Clark.

"Oh, I'm not at all alarmed," replied Ralph, "barely interested, that's all. We'll walk by the crowd and see if they won't throw some further light on the subject."

"Tell you, Fairbanks," said Clark quite seriously, "I'm putting two and two together."

"Well," laughed Ralph, "that makes four—go ahead."

"More than four—a regular mob. That crowd, as I said, for some reason is laying for you. What's the answer? They have been put up to it by some one. You know, you told me incidentally that you had some enemies on account of the big boost you've got in the service. You said, too, that your friend, Engineer Griscom, warned you on just that point. I haven't said much so far, but the actions of that grouch fireman of yours, Fogg, looked decidedly queer and suspicious to me."

Ralph made no comment on this. He had his own ideas on the subject, but did not feel warranted in fully expressing them.

"I believe that Fogg started out on your run yesterday to queer it. Why he changed tactics later, I can't tell. Maybe he was scared by the smash-up on the siding. Anyhow, I never saw such mortal malice in the face of any man as that I saw in his when I came aboard No. 999. This crowd down the street is evidently after you. Some one has put them up to it."

"Oh, you can't mean Fogg!" exclaimed Ralph.

"I don't know," replied Clark.

"I can't believe that he would plot against me that far," declared Ralph.

"A malicious enemy will do anything to reach his ends," said Clark. "Doesn't he want you knocked out? Doesn't he want your place? What would suit his plans better than to have you so mauled and battered, that you couldn't show up for the return trip to Stanley Junction this afternoon? Are you going past that crowd?"

"I certainly shall not show the white feather by going out of my way," replied Ralph.

"Well, if that's your disposition, I'm at your call if they tackle us," announced Clark.

They proceeded down the street, and Ralph as they advanced had a good view of the crowd, which, according to the views of his companion, was laying in wait for him. There were about fifteen of them, ranging from selfish-faced lads of ten or so up to big, hulking fellows of twenty. They represented the average city gang of idlers and hoodlums. They were hanging around the entrance to the alley as if waiting for some mischief to turn up. Ralph noticed a rustling among them as he was observed. They grouped together. He fancied one or two of them pointed at him, but there was no further indication of belligerent attention as he and Clark approached nearer to the crowd.

"I fancy Billy Bouncer, whoever he is, hasn't arrived yet," observed Clark.

Just then one of the mob set up a shout.

"Hi there, Wheels!" he hailed, and some additional jeers went up from his fellows. Their attention seemed directed across the street, and Ralph and Clark glanced thither.

CHAPTER V

AT BAY

A queer-looking boy about eighteen years of age was proceeding slowly down the pavement. He was stockily built, and had an unusually massive head and great broad shoulders. He was a boy who would be remarked about almost anywhere. His hair was long, and this gave him a somewhat leonine aspect.

The hat of this boy was pushed far back on his head, and his eyes were fixed and his attention apparently deeply absorbed upon an object he held in his hand. This was a thin wooden rod with two cardboard wheels attached to it. These he would blow, causing them to revolve rapidly. Then he would study their gyrations critically, wait till they had run down, and then repeat the maneuver.

His side coat pockets were bulging, one with a lot of papers. From the other protruded what seemed to be a part of a toy, or some real mechanical device having also wheels in its construction.

"Well, there's a queer make-up!" observed Clark in profound surprise.

"He is certainly eccentric in his appearance," said Ralph. "I wonder who he can be."

"No, what he can be," corrected Clark, "for he's an odd genius of some kind, I'll wager."

The object of their interest and curiosity had heard the derisive hail from across the street. He halted dead short, stared around him like a person abruptly aroused from a dream, traced the call to its source, thrust the device with which he had been experimenting into his pocket, and fixing his eyes on his mockers, started across the street. The hoodlum crowd nudged one another, blinked, winked, and looked as if expecting developments of some fun. The object of their derision looked them over in a calculating fashion.

"Did any one here speak to me?" he asked.

"No, Wheels—it was the birdies calling you!" hooted a jocose voice.

"You sort of suggest something, somehow," drawled the lad in an abstracted, groping way. "Yes, certainly, let me see. What is it? Ah, perhaps I've made a memorandum of it."

The lad poked into several vest pockets. Finally he unearthed a card which seemed to be all written over, and he ran his eye down this. The crowd chuckled at the profound solemnity of his manner.

"H'm," observed the boy designated as "Wheels." "Let me see. 'Get shoes mended.' No, that isn't it. I have such a bad memory. 'Order some insulated wire.' No, that's for an uptown call. 'Buy Drummond on Superheated Steam.' That's for the bookstore. Ah, here we have it. 'Kick Jim Scroggins.' Who's Jim? Aha! you young villain, I remember you well enough now," and with an activity which could scarcely be anticipated from so easy-going an individual, Wheels made a dive for a big hulking fellow on the edge of the crowd. He chased him a few feet, and planted a kick that lifted the yelling hoodlum a foot from the ground. Then, calmly taking out a pencil, he crossed off the memorandum—"Kick Jim Scroggins"—gave the crowd a warning glance, and proceeded coolly down the sidewalk, resuming his occupation with the contrivance he had placed in his pocket.

The gang of loafers had drawn back. A sight of the massive arms and sledge hammer fists of the young giant they had derided, and his prompt measures with one of their cronies, dissuaded them from any warlike move.

"Whoop!" commented Clark in an exultant undertone, and he fairly leaned against his companion in a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter. "Quick, nifty and entertaining, that! Say Engineer Fairbanks, I don't know who that fellow Wheels is, but I'd be interested and proud to make his acquaintance. Now steam up and air brake ready, while we pass the crossing!"

"Passing the crossing," as Clark designated it, proved, however, to be no difficult proceeding. The crowd of hoodlums had got a set-back from the boy with the piston-rod arm, it seemed. They scanned Ralph and Clark keenly as they passed by, but made no attempt to either hail or halt them.

"We've run the gauntlet this time," remarked Clark. "Hello—four times!"

The vigilant companion of the young engineer was glancing over his shoulder as he made this sudden and forcible remark.

"Four times what?" inquired Ralph.

"That fireman of yours."

"Mr. Fogg?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"Say," replied Clark, edging close to Ralph, "just take a careless backward look, will you? About half the square down on the opposite side of the street you'll see Fogg."

"Why such caution and mystery?" propounded Ralph.

"I'll tell you later. See him?" inquired Clark, as Ralph followed out the suggestion he had made.

Ralph nodded assentingly. He had made out Fogg as Clark had described. The fireman was walking along in the direction they were proceeding. There was something stealthy and sinister in the way in which he kept close to the buildings lining the sidewalk.

"That's four times I've noticed Fogg in this vicinity this morning," reported Clark. "I discovered him opposite the lodging house when I first came out this morning. When I came back he was skulking in an open entry, next door. When we left the house together I saw him a block away, standing behind a tree. Now he bobs up again."

"I can't understand his motive," said Ralph thoughtfully.

"I can," declared Clark with emphasis.

"What's your theory?"

"It's no theory at all, it's a dead certainty," insisted Clark. "Your fireman and that gang of hoodlums hitch together in some way, you mark my words. Well, let it slide for a bit. I'm hungry as a bear, and here's the restaurant."

It was a neat and inviting place, and with appetizing zeal the two boys entered and seated themselves at a table and gave their order for wheat cakes with honey and prime country sausages. Just as the waiter brought in the steaming meal, Clark, whose face was toward the street, said:

"Fogg just passed by, and there goes the crowd of boys. I'm thinking they'll give us a chance to settle our meal, Engineer Fairbanks!"

"All right," responded Ralph quietly, "if that's the first task of the day, we'll be in trim to tackle it with this fine meal as a foundation."

Their youthful, healthy appetites made a feast of the repast. Clark doubled his order, and Ralph did full credit to all the things set before him.

"I was thinking," he remarked, as they paid their checks at the cashier's counter, "that we might put in the day looking around the town."

"Why, yes," assented his companion approvingly, "that is, if you're going to let me keep with you."

"Why not?" smiled Ralph. "You seem to think I may need a guardian."

"I've got nothing to do but put in the time, and get a signed voucher from you that I did so in actual railroad service and in good company," explained Clark. "I think I will go back to Stanley Junction on your return run, if it can be arranged."

"It is arranged already, if you say so," said Ralph. "We seem to get on together pretty well, and I'm glad to have you with me."

"Now, that's handsome, Engineer Fairbanks!" replied Clark. "There's some moving picture shows in town here, open after ten o'clock, and there's a mechanics' library with quite a museum of railroad contrivances. We've got time to take it all in. Come on. Unless that crowd stops us, we'll start the merry program rolling. No one in sight," the youth continued, as they stepped into the street and he glanced its length in both directions. "Have the enemy deserted the field, or are they lying in ambush for us?"

They linked arms and sauntered down the pavement. They had proceeded nearly two squares, when, passing an alley, both halted summarily.

"Hello! here's business, I guess," said Clark, and he and Ralph scanned closely the group they had passed just before the breakfast meal.

The hoodlum gang had suddenly appeared from the alleyway, and forming a circle, surrounded them. There was an addition to their ranks. Ralph noted this instantly. He was a rowdy-looking chunk of a fellow, and the swing of his body, the look on his face and the expression in his eyes showed that he delighted in thinking himself a "tough customer." Backed by his comrades, who looked vicious and expectant, he marched straight up to Ralph, who did not flinch a particle.

"You look like Fairbanks to me—Fairbanks, the engineer," he observed, fixing a glance upon Ralph meant to dismay.

"Yes, that is my name," said Ralph quietly.

"Well," asserted the big fellow, "I've been looking for you, and I'm going to whip the life out of you."

CHAPTER VI

FOUR MEDALS

Marvin Clark stepped promptly forward at the announcement of the overgrown lout, who had signified his intention of whipping the young engineer of No. 999. Clark had told Ralph that athletics was his strong forte. He looked it as he squared firmly before the bully.

"Going to wallop somebody, are you?" spoke Clark coolly. "Watch the system-cylinder"—and the speaker gave to his arms a rotary motion so rapid that it was fairly dizzying, "or piston rods," and one fist met the bulging breast of the fellow with a force that sent him reeling backwards several feet.

"Hey, there! you keep out of this, if you don't want to be massacred!" spoke a voice at Clark's elbow, and he was seized by several of the rowdy crowd and forced back from the side of Ralph.

"Hands off!" shouted Clark, and he cleared a circle about him with a vigorous sweep of his arms.

"Don't you mix in a fair fight, then," warned a big fellow in the crowd, threateningly.

"Ah, it's going to be a fair fight, is it?" demanded Clark.

"Yes, it is."

"I'll see to it that it is," remarked Clark briefly.

The fellow he had dazed with his rapid-fire display of muscle had regained his poise, and was now again facing the young engineer.

"Understand?" he demanded, hunching up his shoulders and staring viciously at Ralph. "I'm Billy Bouncer."

"Are you?" said Ralph simply.

"I am, and don't you forget it. I happen to have got a tip from my uncle, John Evans, of Stanley Junction. I guess you know him."

"I do," announced Ralph bluntly, "and if you are as mean a specimen of a boy as he is of a man, I'm sorry for you."

"What?" roared the young ruffian, raising his fists. "Do you see that?" and he put one out, doubled up.

"I do, and it's mighty dirty, I can tell you."

"Insult me, do you? I guess you don't know who I am. Champion, see?—light-weight champion of this burg, and I wear four medals, and here they are," and Bouncer threw back his coat and vauntingly displayed four gleaming silver discs pinned to his vest.

"If you had four more, big as cartwheels, I don't see how I would be interested," observed Ralph.

"You don't?" yelled Bouncer, hopping mad at failing to dazzle this new opponent with an acquisition that had awed his juvenile cohorts and admirers. "Why, I'll grind you to powder! Strip."

With this Bouncer threw off his coat, and there was a scuffle among his minions to secure the honor of holding it.

"I don't intend to strip," remarked Ralph, "and I don't want to strike you, but you've got to open a way for myself and my friend to go about our business, or I'll knock you down."

"You'll--Fellows, hear him!" shrieked Bouncer, dancing from foot to foot. "Oh, you mincemeat! up with your fists! It's business now."

The young engineer saw that it was impossible to evade a fight. The allusion of Bouncer to Jim Evans was enlightening. It explained the animus of the present attack.

If Lemuel Fogg had been bent on queering the special record run to Bridgeport out of jealousy, Evans, a former boon companion of the fireman, had it in for Ralph on a more malicious basis. The young railroader knew that Evans was capable of any meanness or cruelty to pay him back for causing his arrest as an incendiary during the recent railroad strike on the Great Northern.

There was no doubt but what Evans had advised his graceless nephew of the intended visit of Ralph to Bridgeport. During the strike Evans had maimed railroad men and had been guilty of many other cruel acts of vandalism. Ralph doubted not that the plan was to have his precious nephew "do" him in a way that he would not be able to make the return trip with No. 999.

The young engineer was no pugilist, but he knew how to defend himself, and he very quickly estimated the real fighting caliber of his antagonist. He saw at a glance that Billy Bouncer was made up of bluff and bluster and show. The hoodlum made a great ado of posing and exercising

his fists in a scientific way. He was so stuck up over some medal awards at amateur boxing shows, that he was wasting time in displaying his "style."

"Are you ready?" demanded Bouncer, doing a quickstep and making a picturesque feint at his opponent.

"Let me pass," said Ralph.

"Wow, when I've eaten you up, maybe!"

"Since you will have it, then," observed Ralph quietly, "take that for a starter."

The young engineer struck out once—only once, but he had calculated the delivery and effect of the blow to a nicety. There was a thud as his fist landed under the jaw of the bully, so quickly and so unexpectedly that the latter did not have time to put up so much as a pretense of a protection.

Back went Billy Bouncer, his teeth rattling, and down went Billy Bouncer on a backward slide. His head struck a loose paving brick. He moaned and closed his eyes.

"Four—medals!" he voiced faintly.

"Come on, Clark," said Ralph.

He snatched the arm of his new acquaintance and tried to force his way to the alley opening. Thus they proceeded a few feet, but only a few. A hush had fallen over Bouncer's friends, at the amazing sight of their redoubtable champion gone down in inglorious defeat, but only for a moment. One of the largest boys in the group rallied the disorganized mob.

"Out with your smashers!" he shouted. "Don't let them get away!"

Ralph pulled, or rather forced his companion back against two steps with an iron railing, leading to the little platform of the alley door of a building fronting on the street.

"No show making a break," he continued in rapid tones. "Look at the cowards!"

At the call of their new leader, the crowd to its last member whipped out their weapons. They were made of some hard substance like lead, and incased in leather. They were attached to the wrist by a long loop, which enabled their possessors to strike a person at long range, the object of the attack having no chance to resist or defend himself.

"Grab the railing," ordered Clark, whom Ralph was beginning to recognize as a quick-witted fellow in an emergency. "Now then, keep side by side—any tactics to hold them at bay or drive them off."

The two friends had secured quite a tactical position, and they proceeded to make the most of it. The mob with angry yells made for them direct. They jostled one another in their eager malice to strike a blow. They crowded close to the steps, and their ugly weapons shot out from all directions.

One of the weapons landed on Ralph's hand grasping the iron railing, and quite numbed and almost crippled it. A fellow used his weapon as a missile, on purpose or by mistake. At all events, it whirled from his hand through the air, and striking Clark's cheek, laid it open with quite a ghastly wound. Clark reached over and snatched a slungshot from the grasp of another of the assaulting party. He handed it quickly to his companion.

"Use it for all it's worth," he suggested rapidly. "Don't let them down us, or we're goners."

As he spoke, Clark, nettled with pain, balanced himself on the railing and sent both feet flying into the faces of the onpressing mob. These tactics were wholly unexpected by the enemy. One of their number went reeling back, his nose nearly flattened to his face.

"Rush 'em!" shouted the fellow frantically.

Half-a-dozen of his cohorts sprang up the steps. They managed to grab Ralph's feet. Now it was a pull and a clutch. Ralph realized that if he ever got down into the midst of that surging mob, or under their feet, it would be all over with him.

"It's all up with us!" gasped Clark with a startled stare down the alley. "Fogg, Lemuel Fogg!"

The heart of the young engineer sank somewhat as he followed the direction of his companion's glance. Sure enough, the fireman of No. 999 had put in an appearance on the scene.

"He's coming like a cyclone!" said Clark.

Fogg was a rushing whirlwind of motion. He was bareheaded, and he looked wild and uncanny. Somewhere he had picked up a long round clothes pole or the handle to some street worker's outfit. With this he was making direct for the crowd surrounding Ralph and Clark. Just then a slungshot blow drove the latter to his knees. Two of the crowd tried to kick at his face. Ralph was nerved up to desperate action now. He caught the uplifted foot of one of the vandals and sent him toppling. The other he knocked flat with his fist, but overpowering numbers massed for a headlong rush on the beleaguered refugees.

"Swish—thud! swish!" Half blinded by a blow dealt between the eyes by a hurling slungshot, the young engineer could discern a break in the program, the appearance of a new element that startled and astonished him. He had expected to see the furious Fogg join the mob and aid them in finishing up their dastardly work. Instead, like some madman, Fogg had waded into the ranks of the group, swinging his formidable weapon like a flail. It rose, it fell, it swayed from side to side, and its execution was terrific.

The fireman mowed down the amazed and scattering forces of Billy Bouncer as if they were rows of tenpins. He knocked them flat, and then he kicked them. It was a marvel that he did not cripple some of them, for, his eyes glaring, his muscles bulging to the work, he acted like some fairly irresponsible being.

Within two minutes' time the last one of the mob had vanished into the street. Flinging the pole away from him, Fogg began looking for his cap, which had blown off his head as he came rushing down the alley at cyclone speed.

Clark stared at the fireman in petrified wonder. Ralph stood overwhelmed with uncertainty and amazement.

"Mr. Fogg, I say, Mr. Fogg!" he cried, running after the fireman and catching at his sleeve, "How—why--"

"Boy," choked out Lemuel Fogg, turning a pale, twitching face upon Ralph, "don't say a word to me!"

And then with a queer, clicking sob in his throat, the fireman of No. 999 hastened down the alley looking for his cap.

CHAPTER VII

DAVE BISSELL, TRAIN BOY

"I don't understand it at all," exclaimed Ralph.

"Mad—decidedly mad," declared young Clark. "Whew! that was a lively tussle. All the buttons are gone off my vest and one sleeve is torn open clear to the shoulder, and I guess there were only basting threads in that coat of yours, for it's ripped clear up the back."

Clark began to pick up some scattered buttons from the ground. His companion, however, was looking down the alley, and he followed Fogg with his eyes until the fireman had disappeared into the street.

"You're wondering about things," spoke Clark. "So am I."

"I'm trying to figure out the puzzle, yes," admitted the young engineer. "You see, we were both of us wrong, and we have misjudged Mr. Fogg."

"I don't know about that," dissented Ralph's companion.

"Why, he has helped us, instead of hurt us."

"Yes," said Clark, "but why? It's nonsense to say that he didn't start out on your trip fixed up to put you out of business if he could do it. It is folly, too, to think that he didn't know that this Billy Bouncer, relative of that old-time enemy of yours back at Stanley Junction, Jim Evans, had put this gang up to beat you. If that wasn't so, why has he been hanging around here all the morning in a suspicious, mysterious way, and how does he come to swoop down on the mob just in the nick of time?"

"Perhaps he was planning to head off the crowd all the time," suggested Ralph.

"Not from the very start," declared Clark positively. "No, sir—I think he has had a fit of remorse, and thought better of having you banged up or crippled."

"At all events, Fogg has proven a good friend in need, and I shall not forget it soon," observed Ralph.

When they came out into the street the hoodlum crowd had dispersed. They entered the first tailor shop they came to and soon had their clothing mended up.

"There's a moving picture show open," said Clark, after they had again proceeded on their way. "Let's put in a half-hour or so watching the slides."

This they did. Then they strolled down to the shops, took in the roundhouse, got an early dinner, and went to visit the museum at the Mechanics' Exchange. This was quite an institution of Bridgeport, and generally interested railroad men. Clark was very agreeable to the proposition made by his companion to look over the place. They found a fine library and a variety of drawings and models, all along railroad lines.

"This suits me exactly," declared Clark. "I am not and never will be a practical railroader, but I like its variety just the same. Another thing, a fellow learns something. Say, look there."

The speaker halted his companion by catching his arm abruptly, as they turned into a small reading room after admiring a miniature reproduction in brass of a standard European locomotive.

"Yes, I see," nodded Ralph, with a slight smile on his face, "our friend, Wheels."

Both boys studied the eccentric youth they had seen for the first time a few hours previous. He occupied a seat at a desk in a remote corner of the room. Propped up before him was a big volume full of cuts of machinery, and he was taking notes from it. A dozen or more smaller books were piled up on a chair beside him.

Young as he was, there was a profound solemnity and preoccupation in his methods that suggested that he had a very old head on a juvenile pair of shoulders. As Ralph and his companion stood regarding the queer genius, an attendant came up to Wheels. He touched him politely on the shoulder, and as the lad looked up in a dazed, absorbed way, pointed to the clock in the room.

"You told me to inform you when it was two o'clock," spoke the attendant.

"Did I, now?" said Wheels in a lost, distressed sort of a way. "Dear me, what for, I wonder?" and he passed his hand abstractedly over his forehead. "Ah, I'll find out."

He proceeded to draw from his pocket the selfsame memorandum he had consulted in the case of Jim Scroggins. He mumbled over a number of items, and evidently struck the right one at last, for he murmured something about "catch the noon mail with a letter to the patent office," arose, put on his cap, and hurriedly left the place, blissfully wool-gathering as the fact that noon had come and gone several hours since.

"I'm curious," observed Clark, and as Wheels left the place he followed the attendant to the library office, and left Ralph to stroll about alone, while he engaged the former in conversation. In about five minutes Clark came back to Ralph with a curious but satisfied smile on his face.

"Well, I've got his biography," he announced.

"Whose—Wheels?"

"Yes."

"Who is he, anyway?" inquired Ralph.

"He thinks he is a young inventor."

"And is he?"

"That's an open question. They call him Young Edison around here, and his right name is Archie Graham. His father was an aeronaut who was an expert on airships, got killed in an accident to an aeroplane last year, and left his son some little money. Young Graham has been dabbling in inventions since he was quite young."

"Did he really ever invent anything of consequence?" asked Ralph.

"The attendant here says that he did. About two years ago he got up a car window catch that made quite a flurry at the shops. It was used with good results, and the Great Northern was about to pay Graham something for the device, when it was learned that while he was bringing it to perfection some one else had run across pretty nearly the same idea."

"And patented it first?"

"Both abroad and in this country. That of course shut Graham out. All the same, the attendant declares that Graham must have got the idea fully a year before the foreign fellow did."

The boys left the place in a little while and proceeded towards the railroad depot. Ralph had conceived quite a liking for his volatile new acquaintance. Clark had shown himself to be a loyal, resourceful friend, and the young engineer felt that he would miss his genial company if the other did not take the return trip to Stanley Junction. He told Clark this as they reached the depot.

"That so?" smiled the latter. "Well, I'll go sure if you're agreeable. I've got no particular program to follow out, and I'd like to take in the Junction. Another thing, I'm curious to see how you come out with your friends. There's that smash-up on the siding at Plympton, too. Something may come up on that where I may be of service to you."

They found the locomotive, steam up, on one of the depot switches in charge of a special engineer. It lacked over half an hour of leaving time. While Clark hustled about the tender, Ralph donned his working clothes and chattered with the relief engineer. The latter was to run the locomotive to the train, and Ralph walked down the platform to put on the time.

"I've stowed my vest in a bunker in the cab," said Clark, by his side.

"That's all right," nodded Ralph.

"And I'm going to get some sandwiches and a few bottles of pop for a little midnight lunch."

"All right," agreed the young engineer, as his companion started over towards Railroad Row.

Lemuel Fogg had not put in an appearance up to this time, but a few minutes later Ralph saw him in the cab of No. 999, which he had gained by a short cut from the street. As Ralph was looking in the direction of the locomotive, some one came briskly up behind him and gave him a sharp, friendly slap on the shoulder.

"Hello, Ralph Fairbanks!" he hailed.

"Why, Dave Bissell!" said the young railroader, turning to face and shake hands with an old acquaintance. Dave had been a train boy on an accommodation run at Stanley Junction about a year previous, and had graduated into the same line of service on the Overland Limited.

"I'm very glad to see you," said Ralph; "I hear you've got a great run."

"Famous, Fairbanks!" declared Dave. "I'm hearing some big things about you."

"You call them big because you remember the Junction and exaggerate home news," insisted Ralph.

"Maybe so, but I always said you'd be president of the road some time," began Dave, and then with a start stared hard at young Clark, who appeared at that moment crossing the platform of a stationary coach from the direction of Railroad Row. "Why!" exclaimed Dave, "hey! hi! this way."

Clark had halted abruptly. His expressive features were a study. As he evidently recognized Dave, his face fell, his eyes betokened a certain consternation, and dropping a package he carried he turned swiftly about, jumped from the platform and disappeared.

"Why" spoke Ralph, considerably surprised, "do you know Marvin Clark?"

"Who?" bolted out Dave bluntly.

"That boy—Marvin Clark."

"Marvin Clark nothing!" shouted the train boy volubly. "That's my cousin, Fred Porter, of Earlville."

CHAPTER VIII

AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY

The young engineer of No. 999 faced a new mystery, a sharp suspicion darted through his mind. He recalled instantly several queer breaks that the special passenger had made in his conversation.

"Your cousin, is he?" observed Ralph thoughtfully.

"That's what he is," affirmed Dave Bissell.

"And his name is Fred Porter?"

"Always has been," declared Dave. "Why, something up? Humph! I can guess. Bet he's been up to some of his old tricks. He always was a joker and full of mischief."

"Tell me more about him," suggested Ralph.

"Why, there isn't much to tell," said Dave. "He and I were raised at Earlville. His parents both died several years ago, and he wandered around a good deal. This is the first I've seen of him for over two years."

"Might you not be mistaken—facial resemblance?"

"Not much," observed Dave staunchly. "Think I don't recognize my own relatives? Why, didn't you notice how he acted?"

"Yes, surprised."

"No, scared," corrected Dave, "and ran away."

"Why?" demanded Ralph.

"Well, from your seeming to know him under another name, I should say because he is found out. What game has he been playing on you, Fairbanks?"

"He has done me more good than harm," evaded Ralph. "I've only known him since yesterday."

"Well, he has run away, that's certain. That bothers me. Fred Porter was never a sneak or a coward. He was full of jolly mischief and fun, but a better friend no fellow ever had."

"He struck me that way," said Ralph. "I hope he'll come back. There's my engine coming, and I'll have to go on duty. Try and find him, Dave, will you?"

"If I can."

"And if you find him, tell him I must see him before we leave Bridgeport."

"All right."

Ralph picked up the lunch package that his odd acquaintance had dropped and moved along the platform to where No. 999 had run. The locomotive was backed to the coaches and the relief engineer stepped to the platform.

"I say," he projected in an undertone to Ralph, "what's up with Fogg?"

"Is there anything?" questioned Ralph evasively.

"Dizzy in the headlight and wobbly in the drivers, that's all," came the response, with a wink.

Ralph's heart sank as he entered the cab. Its atmosphere was freighted with the fumes of liquor, and a single glance at the fireman convinced him that Fogg was very far over the line of sobriety. Ralph hardly knew how to take Fogg. The latter nodded briefly and turned away, pretending to occupy himself looking from the cab window. Ralph could not resist the impulse to try and break down the wall of reserve between them. He stepped over to the fireman's side and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"See here, Fogg," he said in a friendly tone, "I've got to say something or do something to square accounts for your help in routing that crowd this morning."

"Don't you speak of it!" shot out the fireman fiercely. "It's over and done, isn't it? Let it drop."

"All right," laughed Ralph genially. "Say, I saw a dispatch in the Bridgeport paper to-day from Stanley Junction that ought to make you feel pretty good."

"Did?" snapped Fogg, determinedly antagonistic and stubbornly keeping his face turned away.

"Yes. It gave the list of names of those in our district who passed an examination as school teachers."

Ralph observed that a tremor ran through the fireman's frame at this intelligence.

"Who—who was in it?" he questioned, his voice hoarse and tense.

"Two from the Junction."

"Two?"

"Yes, and the one who led with the highest average was your daughter, Nellie."

"I—I don't deserve it!" fairly sobbed the fireman, getting up suddenly and striving to hide his emotion. "Boy!" and he trembled all over as he now faced Ralph, "I'm steamed up again, as you can plainly see. I won't deny it, but I had to, I couldn't fire a mile unless I steamed up, but I'll say one thing with truth—I've got no bottle in the cab."

"That's good, Mr. Fogg," said Ralph.

"And never will have again, and you've seen the last signs of the dirty stuff on me. I'm going home to make a new start."

"Heaven bless you in your new resolution, Mr. Fogg!" cried Ralph, his own tones none too steady.

"I'll—I'll have something to say to you after we get home," continued Fogg. "Just leave me alone till then."

Something was working on the mind of the fireman, this was very plain—something for good, Ralph fervently hoped. The young engineer took his cue promptly. During all the trip to Stanley Junction he avoided all conversation except commonplace routine remarks. Up to the time of leaving Bridgeport Ralph had waited expectantly for some sign of the youth he had known as Marvin Clark. Clark or Porter, his new acquaintance did not put in an appearance, nor did Dave Bissell return.

"Dave did not succeed in finding him," decided Ralph, as No. 999 started up. "I'm sorry." Dave had been pretty positive as to the identity of his cousin, and the elusive actions of his relative seemed to verify his recognition.

"Traveling under false colors, I fear," reflected the young engineer. "A pretty bold and difficult imposture, I should think. Are his credentials false or stolen? But how to explain his motive? He doesn't like railroading, and the system and the vouchers he is at so much trouble to get and preserve make this business decidedly mysterious. If it wasn't for those features, I would feel it my duty to report the affair and notify the real Marvin Clark, if there is one."

Ralph had both mind and hands full during the trip. As to Fogg, he went straight about his duties, grimly silent and mechanically. As the fire and vim of stimulation died down, Ralph could see that it was with the most exhaustive effort that his fireman kept up his nerve and strength. Fogg was weak and panting the last shovel full of coal he threw into the furnace, as they sighted Stanley Junction. He was as limp as a rag, and looked wretched as the train rolled into the depot.

They ran the locomotive to the roundhouse. Ralph went at once to the foreman's office, while Fogg attended to the stalling of No. 999. He found the night watchman asleep there and no orders on the blackboard for Fogg or himself. This meant that they need not report before noon.

Ralph looked around for the fireman when he came out of the office, but the latter had disappeared, probably headed for home. Ralph, half-across the turntable, halted and went over to No. 999.

"The vest of that mysterious new acquaintance of mine, Clark—Porter," said Ralph—"he said he left it in the locomotive."

Ralph did not find the article in question in his own bunker. He threw back the cover of Fogg's box, to discover the vest neatly folded up at the bottom of that receptacle. With some curiosity he looked over its pockets.

"Whew!" whistled Ralph, as he removed and opened the only article it contained—a check book. The checks were upon a bank at Newton. About half of what the book had originally contained had been removed. Examining the stubs, Ralph calculated that over \$1,000 had been deposited

at the bank in the name of Marvin Clark, and that fully half that amount had been checked out.

"This is pretty serious," commented the young engineer. "It looks as if the impostor has not only stolen Clark's name, but his passes and his check book as well. I don't like the looks of this. There's something here I can't figure out."

Ralph placed the check book in his own pocket and returned the vest to the box. As he did this, he disturbed a piece of cloth used by Fogg to wipe grease from the cab valves. Something unfamiliar to the touch was outlined wrapped up in the rag, and Ralph explored.

Two objects came into view as he opened the piece of cloth. With a great gasp the young engineer stared at these. Then he rolled up the rag and placed it and its contents in his pocket.

His face grew grave, and Ralph uttered a deep sigh, startled and sorrowful.

The young engineer of No. 999 had made a discovery so strange, so unexpected, that it fairly took his breath away.

The mystery of the collision on the siding at Plympton was disclosed.

CHAPTER IX

THE LIGHT OF HOME

Ralph walked home in the quiet night in a serious and thoughtful mood. His usually bright face was clouded and his head bent, as though his mind was greatly upset. As the light of home came into view, however, with a effort he cast aside all railroad and personal cares.

"Always the same dear, faithful mother," he murmured gratefully, as he approached the cheerful looking cottage all alight down stairs, and hurried his steps to greet her waiting for him on the porch.

"Ralph," she spoke anxiously, "you are not hurt?"

"Hurt!" cried Ralph, "not a bit of it. Why," as he noticed his mother trembling all over, "what put that into your head?"

"The fear that what Zeph heard downtown at the roundhouse might be true," replied Mrs. Fairbanks. "There was a rumor that there had been a collision. Besides, I knew that some of your enemies were watching your movements."

"You must stop worrying over these foolish notions," said Ralph reassuringly. "We made a successful run, and as to the enemies, they generally get the worst of it. Men in the wrong always do."

Ralph was glad to get back to his comfortable home. As he passed through the hallway he noticed Zeph Dallas, asleep on the couch. Ralph did not hail or disturb him. Young Dallas had been at work for the friends of Ralph who operated the Short Line Railroad up near Wilmer, but about two weeks previous to the present time had got tired of the dull route through the woods and had come to Stanley Junction. The young engineer had gotten him a job "subbing" as a helper on a yards switch engine. Zeph had been made welcome at the Fairbanks home, as were all friends of Ralph, by his devoted mother.

"You are the best mother and the best cook in the world," declared Ralph, as he sat down at the table in the cozy little dining room, before a warm meal quickly brought from the kitchen. "Really, mother, you are simply spoiling me, and as to your sitting up for me this way and missing your sleep, it is a positive imposition on you."

His mother only smiled sweetly and proudly upon him. Then she asked:

"Was it a hard trip, Ralph?"

"In a way," responded Ralph. "But what made it harder was some unpleasant developments entirely outside of railroad routine."

"That so? It never rains but it pours!" proclaimed an intruder abruptly, and, awakened from his sleep by the sound of voices, Zeph Dallas came into the dining room yawning and stretching himself.

"Why!" exclaimed Ralph, giving the intruder a quick stare, "what have you ever been doing to yourself?"

"Me?" grinned Zeph—"you mean that black eye and that battered cheek?"

"Yes—accident?"

"No—incident," corrected Zeph, with a chuckle. "A lively one, too, I can tell you."

"Fell off the engine?"

"No, fell against a couple of good hard human fists. We had been sorting stray freights all the

afternoon on old dinky 97, and had sided to let a passenger go by, when I noticed a man with a bag and a stick picking up coal along the tracks. Just then, a poor, ragged little fellow with a basket came around the end of the freight doing the same. The man thought he had a monopoly in his line, because he was big. He jumped on the little fellow, kicked him, hit him with his stick, and—I was in the mix-up in just two seconds.”

“You should keep out of trouble, Zeph,” advised Mrs. Fairbanks, gently.

“How could I, ma’am, when that little midget was getting the worst of it?” demurred Zeph. “Well, I pitched into the big, overgrown bully, tooth and nail. I’m a sight, maybe. You ought to see him! He cut for it after a good sound drubbing, leaving his bag of coal behind him. I gave the little fellow all the loose change I had, filled his basket from the bag, and sent him home happy. When I got back to the engine, Griggs, the assistant master mechanic, was in the cab. He said a few sharp words about discipline and the rules of the road, and told me to get off the engine.”

“Discharged, eh?”

“And to stay off. I’m slated, sure. Don’t worry about it, Fairbanks; I’d got sick to death of the job, anyway.”

“But what are you going to do?” inquired Ralph gravely.

“Get another one, of course. I’m going to try to get Bob Adair, the road detective, to give me a show. That’s the line of work I like. If he won’t, I’ll try some other town. I’m sorry, Fairbanks, for my wages will only settle what board I owe you, and there’s that last suit of clothes you got for me, not paid for yet--”

“Don’t trouble yourself about that, Zeph,” interrupted Ralph kindly. “You’re honest, and you’ll pay when you can. You may keep what money you have for a new start until you get to work again.”

Zeph looked grateful. Then Ralph gave some details of the record run to Bridgeport, there was some general conversation, and he went to bed.

Ralph had asked his mother to call him at nine o’clock in the morning, but an hour before that time there was a tap at the door of the bedroom.

“Ralph, dear,” spoke up his mother, “I dislike to disturb you, but a messenger boy has just brought a telegram, and I thought that maybe it was something of importance and might need immediate attention.”

“That’s right, mother. I will be down stairs in a minute,” answered the young railroader, and he dressed rapidly and hurried down to the sitting room, where his mother stood holding out to him a sealed yellow envelope. Ralph tore it open. He looked for a signature, but there was none. It was a night message dated at Bridgeport, the evening previous, and it ran:

“Clark—Porter—whatever you know don’t speak of it, or great trouble may result. Will see you within two days.”

“I wonder what the next development will be?” murmured Ralph. “‘Great trouble may result.’ I don’t understand it at all. ‘Will see you in two days’—then there is some explanation coming. Clark, or whatever his real name is, must suspect or know that his cousin, Dave Bissell, has told me something. Well, I certainly won’t make any move about this strange affair until Clark has had an opportunity to straighten things out. In the meantime, I’ve got a good deal of personal business on my hands.”

Ralph was a good deal in doubt and anxious as to his railroad career, immediate and prospective. As has been told, his trip to Bridgeport had been a record run. The fact that the China & Japan Mail could be delivered on time, indicated a possibility that the Great Northern might make a feature of new train service. It would not, however, be done in a day. No. 999 might be put on the Dover branch of the Great Northern, or accomodation service to other points, and the Overland Express connection canceled.

There had been all kinds of speculation and gossip at the dog house as to the new system of business expansion adopted by the Great Northern. That road had acquired new branches during the past year, and was becoming a big system of itself. There was talk about a consolidation with another line, which might enable the road to arrange for traffic clear to the Pacific. New splendid train service was talked of everywhere, among the workmen, and every ambitious railroader was looking for a handsome and substantial promotion.

Ralph could not tell until he reported at the roundhouse after twelve o’clock when and how he would start out again. On the Bridgeport run he was not due until the next morning. All he was sure of was that he and Fogg were regulars for No. 999 wherever that locomotive was assigned, until further orders interfered. Despite the successful record run to Bridgeport, somebody was listed for at least a “call-down” on account of the accident on the siding at Plympton. Every time Ralph thought of that, he recollected his “find” in Lemuel Fogg’s bunker, and his face became grave and distressed.

“It’s bound to come out,” he reflected, as he strolled into the neat, attractive garden after breakfast. “Why, Mr. Griscom—I’m glad to see you.”

His old railroad friend was passing the house on his way to the roundhouse to report for duty. His brisk step showed that he was limited as to time, but he paused for a moment.

“You got there, Fairbanks, didn’t you?” he commented heartily. “Good. I knew you would, but

say, what about this mix-up on the signals at Plympton?"

"Oh, that wasn't much," declared Ralph.

"Enough to put the master mechanic on his mettle," objected the veteran engineer. "He's going to call all hands on the carpet. Had me in yesterday afternoon. He showed me your conductor's report wired from Bridgeport. It throws all the blame on Adams, the new station man at Plympton. The conductor declares it was all his fault—'color blind,' see? Master mechanic had Adams down there yesterday."

"Surely no action is taken yet?" inquired Ralph anxiously.

"No, but I fancy Adams will go. It's a plain case, I think. Your signals were special and clear right of way, that's sure. Danforth is ready to swear to that. Adams quite as positively swears that the green signals on the locomotive were set on a call for the siding. He broke down and cried like a child when it was hinted that a discharge from the service was likely."

"Poor fellow, I must see the master mechanic at once," said Ralph.

"You'll have to, for your explanation goes with him and will settle the affair. You see, it seems that Adams had broken up his old home and gone to the trouble and expense of moving his family to Plympton. Now, to be let out would be a pretty hard blow to him. Of course, though, if he is color blind--"

"He is not color blind!" cried Ralph, with so much earnestness that Griscom stared at him strangely.

"Aha! so you say that, do you?" observed the old engineer, squinting his eyes suspiciously. "Then—Fogg. Tricks, I'll bet!"

"I'll talk to you later, Mr. Griscom," said Ralph.

"Good, I want to know, and I see you have something to tell."

The young engineer had, indeed, considerable to tell when the time came to justify the disclosures. He was worried as to how he should tell it, and to whom. Ralph sat down in the little vine-embowered summer-house in the garden, and had a good hard spell of thought. Then, as his hand went into his pocket and rested on the piece of cloth with its enclosure which he had found in Fogg's bunker on No. 999, he started from his seat, a certain firm, purposeful expression on his face.

"I've got to do it," he said to himself, as he went along in the direction of the home of Lemuel Fogg. "Somebody has got to take the responsibility of the collision. Adams, the new station man at Plympton, is innocent of any blame. It would be a terrible misfortune for him to lose his job. Fogg has sickness in his family. The truth coming out, might spoil all the future of that bright daughter of his. As to myself—why, if worse comes to worse, I can find a place with my good friends on the Short Line Railway down near Dover. I'm young, I'm doing right in making the sacrifice, and I'm not afraid of the future. Yes, it is a hard way for a fellow with all the bright dreams I've had, but—I'm going to do it!"

The young engineer had made a grand, a mighty resolve. It was a severe struggle, a hard, bitter sacrifice of self interest, but Ralph felt that a great duty presented, and he faced its exactions manfully.

The home of Lemuel Fogg the fireman was about four blocks distant. As Ralph reached it, he found a great roaring fire of brush and rubbish burning in the side yard.

"A good sign, if that is a spurt of home industry with Fogg," decided the young railroader. "He's tidying up the place. It needs it bad enough," and Ralph glanced critically at the disordered yard.

Nobody was astir about the place. Ralph knew that Mrs. Fogg had been very ill of late, and that there was an infant in the house. He decided to wait until Fogg appeared, when he noticed the fireman way down the rear alley. His back was to Ralph and he was carrying a rake. Fogg turned into a yard, and Ralph started after him calculating that the fireman was returning the implement to a neighbor. Just as Ralph came to the yard, the fireman came out of it.

At a glance the young engineer noted a change in the face of Fogg that both surprised and pleased him. The fireman looked fresh, bright and happy. He was humming a little tune, and he swung along as if on cheerful business bent, and as if all things were coming swimmingly with him.

"How are you, Mr. Fogg?" hailed Ralph.

The fireman changed color, a half-shamed, half-defiant look came into his face, but he clasped the extended hand of the young railroader and responded heartily to its friendly pressure.

"I've got something to tell you, Fairbanks," he said, straightening up as if under some striving sense of manliness.

"That's all right," nodded Ralph with a smile. "I'm going back to the house with you, and will be glad to have a chat with you. First, though, I want to say something to you, so we'll pause here for a moment."

"I've—I've made a new start," stammered Fogg. "I've buried the past."

"Good!" cried Ralph, giving his companion a hearty slap on the shoulder, "that's just what I was going to say to you. Bury the past—yes, deep, fathoms deep, without another word, never to be

resurrected. To prove it, let's first bury this. Kick it under that ash heap yonder, Mr. Fogg, and forget all about it. Here's something that belongs to you. Put it out of sight, and never speak of it or think of it again."

And Ralph handed to the fireman the package done up in the oiling cloth that he had unearthed from Fogg's bunker in the cab of No. 999.

CHAPTER X

FIRE!

Lemuel Fogg gave a violent start as he received the parcel from Ralph's hand. His face fell and the color deserted it. The package unrolled in his grasp, and he let it drop to the ground. Two square sheets of green colored mica rolled out from the bundle.

"Fairbanks!" spoke the fireman hoarsely, his lips quivering—"you know?"

"I surmise a great deal," replied Ralph promptly, "and I want to say nothing more about it."

"But—"

"I have figured it all out. Adams, the station man at Plympton, has a family. You are going to turn over a leaf, I have decided to take all the blame for the collision on the siding. I shall see the master mechanic within an hour and settle everything. I am going to resign my position with the Great Northern road."

The fireman's jaws dropped at this amazing declaration of the young railroader. It seemed as if for a moment he was fairly petrified at the unexpected disclosure of the noble self-sacrifice involved. He did not have to explain what those two sheets of green mica signified—Ralph knew too well. Inspired by jealousy, Lemuel Fogg had slipped them over the white signal lights of No. 999 as the locomotive approached Plympton, getting the siding semaphore, and removing them before the smash-up had come about.

"Never!" shouted Fogg suddenly. "Let me tell you, Fairbanks—"

Before the speaker could finish the sentence Ralph seized his arm with the startling words:

"Mr. Fogg, look—fire!"

Facing about, Lemuel Fogg uttered a frightful cry as he discerned what had just attracted the notice of the young engineer. The Fogg house was in flames.

When Ralph had first noticed the fiercely-burning heap of rubbish on the Fogg premises, he had observed that it was dangerously near to the house. It had ignited the dry light timber of the dwelling, the whole rear part of which was now a mass of smoke and flames.

"My wife—my helpless wife and the little child!" burst from the lips of the frantic fireman in a shrill, ringing scream.

Ralph joined him as he ran down the alley on a mad run. The great sweat stood out on the bloodless face of the agonized husband and father in knobs, his eyes wore a frenzied expression of suspense and alarm.

"Save them! save them!" he shouted, as Ralph kept pace with him.

"Don't get excited, Mr. Fogg," spoke Ralph reassuringly. "We shall be in time."

"But she cannot move—she is in the bedroom directly over the kitchen. Oh, this is a judgment for all my wickedness!"

"Be a man," encouraged Ralph. "Here we are—let me help you."

"Up the back stairs!" cried Fogg. "They are nearest to her."

"No, no—you can never get up them," declared Ralph.

The side door of the house was open, showing a pair of stairs, but they were all ablaze. Smoke and sparks poured up this natural funnel fiercely. Ralph caught at the arm of his companion and tried to detain him, but Fogg broke away from his grasp.

Ralph saw him disappear beyond the blazing barrier. He was about to run around to the front of the house, when he heard a hoarse cry. Driven back by the overpowering smoke, Fogg had stumbled. He fell headlong down a half a dozen steps, his head struck the lower platform, and he rolled out upon the gravel walk, stunned.

Ralph quickly dragged the man out of the range of the fire and upon the grass. He tried to arouse Fogg, but was unsuccessful. There was no time to lose. Seizing a half-filled bucket standing by the well near by, Ralph deluged the head of the insensible fireman with its contents. It did not revive him. Ralph sped to the front of the house, ran up on the stoop and jerked at the knob of the front screen door.

It was locked, but Ralph tore it open in an instant. A woman's frantic screams echoed as the young railroader dashed into the house. He was quickly up the front stairs. At the top landing he paused momentarily, unable to look about him clearly because of the dense smoke that permeated the place.

Those frenzied screams again ringing out guided him down a narrow hallway to the rear upper bedroom. The furniture in it was just commencing to take fire. On the floor was the fireman's wife, a tiny babe held in one arm, while with the other she was trying unsuccessfully to pull herself out of range of the fire.

"Save me! save me!" she shrieked, as Ralph's form was vaguely outlined to her vision.

"Do not be alarmed, Mrs. Fogg," spoke Ralph quickly—"there's no danger."

He ran to the bed, speedily pulled off a blanket lying there, and wrapped it about the woman.

"Hold the child closely," he directed, and bodily lifted mother and babe in his strong, sinewy arms. The young railroader staggered under his great burden as he made for the hallway, but never was he so glad of his early athletic training as at this critical moment in his life.

It was a strenuous and perilous task getting down the front stairs with his load, but Ralph managed it. He carried mother and child clear out into the garden, placed them carefully on a rustic bench there, and then ran towards the well.

By this time people had come to the scene of the fire. There were two buckets at the well. A neighbor and the young railroader soon formed a limited bucket brigade, but it was slow work hauling up the water, and the flames had soon gained a headway that made their efforts to quench them useless.

Ralph organized the excited onlookers to some system in removing what could be saved from the burning house. In the meantime he had directed a boy to hasten to the nearest telephone and call out the fire department. Soon the clanging bell of the hose cart echoed in the near distance. The rear part of the house had been pretty well burned down by this time, and the front of the building began to blaze.

Ralph got a light wagon from the barn of a neighbor. A comfortable couch was made of pillows and blankets, and Mrs. Fogg and her child were placed on this. Ralph found no difficulty in enlisting volunteers to haul the wagon to his home, where his mother soon had the poor lady and her babe in a condition of safety and comfort. As Ralph returned to the dismantled and still smoking Fogg home he met a neighbor.

"Oh, Fairbanks," spoke this person, "you're in great demand up at the Foggs."

"How is that?"

"Fogg has come to. They told him about your saving his wife and child. He cried like a baby at first. Then he insisted on finding you. He's blessing you for your noble heroism, I tell you."

"I don't know about the noble heroism," returned Ralph with a smile. "Go back, will you, and tell him I'll see him in about an hour. Tell him to come down to our house at once. It's all arranged there to make him feel at home until he can make other arrangements."

"You're a mighty good fellow, Fairbanks" declared the man enthusiastically, "and everybody knows it!"

"Thank you," returned Ralph, and proceeded on his way. As he casually looked at his watch the young railroader quickened his steps with the half-murmured words:

"And now for a tussle with the master mechanic."

CHAPTER XI

THE MASTER MECHANIC

"Want to resign, do you?"

"That is what I came here for, sir," said the young engineer of No. 999.

"Well, you're too late," and the master mechanic of the Great Northern seemed to turn his back on Ralph, busying himself with some papers on his desk. He was a great, gruff fellow with the heart of a child, but he showed it rarely. A diamond in the rough, most of the employees of the road were afraid of him. Not so Ralph. The young railroader had won the respect and admiration of the official by his loyalty and close attention to duty. In fact, Ralph felt that the influence of the master mechanic had been considerable of an element in his promotion to No. 999. He stepped nearer to the desk, managing to face the would-be tyro.

"Too late, sir?" he repeated vaguely.

"Didn't I say so? Get out!"

The master mechanic waved his hand, and Ralph was a trifle surprised at what seemed a peremptory dismissal. The moving arm of the old railroader described a swoop, grasped the hand of Ralph in a fervent grip, and pulling the young engineer to almost an embrace, he said:

"Fairbanks, we had in our family a little boy who died. It's a pretty tender memory with us, but every time I look at you I think of the dear little fellow. He'd have been a railroader, too, if he had lived, and the fondest wish of my heart is that he might have been like you."

"Why--" murmured the astonished Ralph.

The master mechanic cleared his throat and his great hand swept the moisture from his eyes. Then in a more practical tone he resumed:

"I said you was too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Resigning. You are too late," observed the official, "because Lemuel Fogg has already been here."

"Then--"

"To tender his resignation, to tell the whole truthful story of the collision on the siding at Plympton. Fairbanks," continued the master mechanic very seriously, "you are a noble young fellow. I know your design to bear the whole brunt of the smash-up, in order that you might save your fireman and the station man down at Plympton. As I said, Fogg was here. I never saw a man so broken. He told me everything. He told me of your patience, of your kindness, your manliness. Lad, your treatment of Fogg under those circumstances shows the mettle in you that will make you a great man, and, what is better still, a good man."

"Thank you, sir," said Ralph in a subdued tone, deeply affected despite himself.

"For the first time in twenty years' service," continued the official, "I am going to take a serious responsibility on myself which should be rightly shouldered by the company. The Plympton incident is dead and buried. The three of us must hold always the secret close. The black mark is rubbed off the slate."

"You have done right—oh, believe me, sir!" declared Ralph earnestly. "I feel sure that Mr. Fogg has learned a lesson that he will never forget, and the blessings of his sick wife, of his ambitious young daughter, will be yours."

"In my desk yonder," continued the master mechanic, "I have his written pledge that drink is a thing of the past with him. I told Fogg that if ever he disappointed me in my belief that he was a changed man, a reformed man, I would leave the service feeling that my mistaken judgment did not do justice to my position with the Great Northern. As to you, ready to sacrifice yourself for the sake of others—you are a young man among thousands. Drop it now—get out!" ordered the master mechanic, with a vast show of authority. "It's all under seal of silence, and I expect to see you and Fogg make a great team."

"Mr. Fogg's house has just burned down," said Ralph. "It would have broken him down completely, if his discharge had been added to that misfortune."

"Burned down?" repeated the master mechanic, in surprise and with interest. "How was that?" and Ralph had to recite the story of the fire. He added that he had heard Fogg had but little insurance.

"Wait a minute," directed the official, and he went into the next office. Ralph heard him dictating something to his stenographer. Then the typewriter clicked, and shortly afterwards the master mechanic came into the office with a sheet of foolscap, which he handed to Ralph. A pleased flush came into the face of the young railroader as he read the typewritten heading of the sheet—it was a subscription list in behalf of Lemuel Fogg, and headed by the signature of the master mechanic, with "\$20" after it.

"You are a noble man!" cried Ralph irresistibly. "No wonder it's a joy to work for you."

"Down brakes there!" laughed the big-hearted fellow. "Don't draw it too strong, Fairbanks. Don't be more liberal than you can afford now," he directed, as Ralph placed the paper on the desk, and added to it his subscription for \$10. "You can tell Fogg we're rising a few pennies for him. I'll circulate the subscription among the officials, and if any plan to have the roundhouse crowd chip in a trifle comes to your mind, why, start it down the rails. Get out."

"All right," cried Ralph. "You've said that twice, so I guess it's time to go now."

"One minute, though," added the master mechanic. "You and Fogg will run No. 999 on the Tipton accommodation to-morrow. It's a shift berth, though. I don't want you to go dreaming quite yet, Fairbanks, that you're president of the Great Northern, and all that, but, under the hat, I will say that you can expect a boost. We are figuring on some big things, and I shouldn't wonder if a new train is soon to be announced that will wake up some of our rivals. Get out now for good, for I'm swamped with work here."

The young engineer left the office of the master mechanic with a very happy heart. Affairs had turned out to his entire satisfaction, and, too, for the benefit of those whose welfare he had considered beyond his own. Ralph was full of the good news he had to impart to Lemuel Fogg. As he left the vicinity of the depot, he began to formulate a plan in his mind for securing a subscription from his fellow workers to aid Fogg.

"I say," suddenly remarked Ralph to himself with a queer smile, and halting in his progress,

"talk about coincidences, here is one for certain. 'The Overland Limited,' why, I've got an idea!"

The "Overland Limited" had been in Ralph's mind ever since leaving the office of the master mechanic. There could be only one solution to the hint that official had given of "new trains that would wake up some of the rivals of the Great Northern." That road had recently bought up two connecting lines of railroad. The China & Japan Mail experiment—could it be a test as to the possibility of establishing an "Overland Special?" At all events, there was a pertinent suggestion in the words that met the gaze of the young engineer and caused him to halt calculatingly.

A newly-painted store front with clouded windows had a placard outside bearing the announcement: "Olympia Theatre, 10-cent show. Will open next Saturday evening with the following special scenes: 1—The Poor Artist. 2—London by Gaslight. 3—A Day on the Overland Limited." At the door of the store just being renovated for a picture show stood a man, tying some printed bills to an awning rod for passers by to take. Ralph approached this individual.

"Going to open a moving picture show?" he inquired in a friendly way.

"I am," responded the show man. "Interested?"

"Yes," answered Ralph.

"I hope the public will be. It's a sort of experiment, with two other shows in town. There's none in this locality, and they tell me I'll do well."

"I should think so," answered Ralph. "Bright, clean pictures will draw a good crowd."

"I'd like to get the railroad men in touch with me. They and their families could give me lots of business. There's that prime 'Overland' scene. It's a new and fine film."

"And it has suggested something to me that you may be glad to follow out," spoke Ralph.

"And what's that, neighbor?" inquired the showman curiously.

"I'll tell you," responded Ralph. "There was a fire in town to-day—one of the best-known firemen on the road was burned out. It's a big blow to him, for he's lost about all he had. There isn't a railroad man in Stanley Junction who would not be glad to help him get on his feet again. The big fellows of the road will subscribe in a good way, but the workers can't spare a great deal."

"I see," nodded the man. "What are you getting at, though?"

"Just this," explained Ralph. "You get out some special dodgers and announce your opening night as a benefit for Lemuel Fogg, fireman. Offer to donate fifty per cent. of the proceeds to Fogg, and I'll guarantee to crowd your house to the doors."

"Say!" enthused the man, slapping Ralph boisterously on the shoulder, "you're a natural showman. Write me the dodger, will you, and I'll have it over the streets inside of twenty-four hours."

"I'm better at filling in time schedules than composing show bills," said Ralph, "but I'll have a try at this one for my friend's sake."

Ralph went inside and was soon busy with blank paper and pencil, which the showman provided. His composition was a very creditable piece of literary work, and the showman chuckled immensely, and told Ralph that he could consider himself on the free list—"with all his family."

Ralph made a start for home again, but his fixed plans were scheduled for frequent changes, it seemed. An engineer friend, on his way to the roundhouse, met him, and Ralph turned and walked that way with him. He broached the subject nearest to his heart, and soon had his companion interested in the subscription for Lemuel Fogg. When he parted with the man at the end of the depot platform the latter had promised to be responsible for great results among his fellow-workmen.

The young engineer now proceeded in the direction of home. The whistle of the western accommodation, however, just arriving, held him stationary for a few moments, and he stood watching the train roll into the depot with the interest ever present with a railroader.

The last coach was a chair car. As the coaches jolted to a halt, there crawled or rather rolled from under the chair car a forlorn figure, weakened, tattered, a stowaway delivered from a perilous stolen ride on the trucks.

It was a boy; Ralph saw that at a glance. As the depot watchman ran forward to nab this juvenile offender against the law, the boy sat up on the board plankway where he had landed, and Ralph caught a sight of his face.

In an instant the young railroader recognized this new arrival. It was "Wheels," otherwise Archie Graham, the boy inventor.

CHAPTER XII

A GOOD FRIEND

RALPH could not repress a smile at a sight of the erratic youth. The young inventor, it seemed, was always coming to light in some original way. His last sensational appearance fitted in naturally to his usual eccentric methods.

"Hey, there! trying to beat the railroad, eh?" shouted the depot official officer, rushing forward to nab the culprit.

"Don't arrest him, Mr. Brooks," spoke Ralph quickly. "I know him; I'm interested in him. He is no professional ride-stealer, and I am perfectly satisfied that he never went to all that risk and discomfort because he didn't have the money to pay his fare."

The watchman was an old-time friend of Ralph. He looked puzzled, but he halted in his original intention of arresting the stowaway. Young Graham paid no attention to anything going on about him. He seemed occupied as usual with his own thoughts solely. First he dug cinders out of his blinking eyes. Then he rubbed the coating of grime and soot from his face, and began groping in his pockets. Very ruefully he turned out one particular inside coat pocket. He shook his head in a doleful way.

"Gone!" he remarked. "Lost my pocket book. Friend—a pencil, quick."

These words he spoke to Ralph, beckoning him earnestly to approach nearer.

"And a card, a piece of paper, anything I can write on. Don't delay—hurry, before I forget it."

Ralph found a stub of a pencil and some railroad blanks in his pocket, and gave them to the young inventor. Then the latter set at work, becoming utterly oblivious of his surroundings. For nearly two minutes he was occupied in making memoranda and drawing small sections of curves and lines.

"All right, got it, good!" he voiced exultantly, as he returned the pencil to Ralph and carefully stowed the slips of paper in his pocket. Then he arose to his feet. He smiled queerly as he gazed down at his tattered garments and grimed and blistered hands.

"Pretty looking sight, ain't it?" he propounded to the young engineer. "Had to do it, though. Glad I did it. Got the actual details, see?"

"What of, may I ask?" inquired Ralph.

"New idea. Save fuel, make the engine go faster. Been figuring on it for months," explained the strange boy. "I live at Bridgeport."

"Yes, I know," nodded Ralph. "I saw you there."

"Did? Glad of that, too. If you feel friendly enough, maybe you'll advise me what to do in my distressing plight. Stranger here, and lost my pocketbook. It fell out of my pocket while I was hanging on to the trucks. Not a cent."

"That can be fixed all right, I think," said Ralph.

"Clothes all riddled—need a bath."

"You had better come with me to the hotel, Mr. Graham," spoke Ralph. "I know enough about you to be interested in you. I will vouch for you to the hotel keeper, who will take care of you until you hear from home."

"Yes. Got money in the bank at Bridgeport," said Archie Graham. "As I was telling you, I've struck a new idea. You know I've been trying to invent something for a number of years."

"Yes, I've heard about that, and sincerely hope you will figure out a success."

"Stick at it, anyway," declared Archie. "Well, at Bridgeport they take me as a joke, see? That's all right; I'll show them, some day. They voted me a nuisance at the shops and shut me out. Wouldn't let me come near their engines. I had to find out some things necessary to my inventions, so I came on to Stanley Junction. Rode in a coach like any other civilized being until I got about ten miles from here—last stop."

"Yes," nodded Ralph.

"Well, there I stepped out of the coach and under it. Whew! but it was an experience I'll never try again. All the same, I got what I was after. I wanted to learn how many revolutions an axle made in so many minutes. I wanted to know, too, how a belt could be attached under a coach. I've got the outlines of the facts, how to work out my invention: 'Graham's Automatic Bellows Gearing.'"

Ralph did not ask for further details as to the device his companion had in mind. He led a pleasant conversation the way from the depot, and when they reached the hotel introduced Archie to its proprietor.

"This friend of mine will be all right for what he orders, Mr. Lane," said Ralph.

"Yes, I'm going to stay here some days, perhaps a week or two," explained the young inventor, "so, if you'll give me a blank check I'll fill it for what cash I may need. You put it through your bank and the funds will be here to-morrow."

Everything was arranged in a satisfactory way, even to Archie ordering a new suit of clothes. The youth came out temporarily from his usual profundity, and had a real, natural boyish talk with Ralph. The latter recited the incident of the adventure with Billy Bouncer's crowd at

Bridgeport.

"Oh, that Jim Scroggins fellow," said Archie, with a smile. "Yes, I remember—'kick him Scroggins.' You see, he had broken into my workshop, destroyed some devices I was working on and stole a lot of my tools. So you're Mr. Fairbanks? I've heard of you."

"Ralph, you mean, Mr. Graham," observed the young railroader pleasantly.

"Then Archie, you mean," added his eccentric companion. "I'd like to be friends with you, for I can see you are the right sort. You've done a good deal for me."

"Oh, don't notice that."

"And you can do a good deal more."

"Indeed? How?"

"By getting me free range of your roundhouse here. Can you?"

"I will be glad to do it," answered Ralph.

"I hope you will," said Archie gratefully. "They don't know me here, and they won't poke fun at me or hinder me. I'm not going to steal any of their locomotives. I just want to study them."

"That's all right," said Ralph, "I'll see you to-morrow and fix things for you, so you will be welcome among my railroad friends."

"You're a royal good fellow, Mr. Ralph," declared the young inventor with enthusiasm, "and I don't know how to thank you enough."

"Well, I've tried to do something for humanity to-day," reflected the young engineer brightly, as he wended his way homewards. "It comes easy and natural, too, when a fellow's trying to do his level best."

Ralph found his mother bustling about at a great rate when he reached home. The excitement over the fire had died down. Fogg was up at the ruins getting his rescued household belongings to a neighborly shelter. The string of excited friends to condole with Mrs. Fogg had dwindled away, and the poor lady lay in comfort and peace in the best bedroom of the house.

"She seems so grateful to you for having saved her life," Mrs. Fairbanks told Ralph, "and so glad, she told me, that her husband had signed the pledge, that she takes the fire quite reasonably."

"Yes," remarked Ralph, "I heard about the pledge, and it is a blessed thing. I have other grand news, too. There's a lot of good fellows in Stanley Junction, and the Fogg's won't be long without a shelter over their heads," and Ralph told his mother all about the subscription list and the moving picture show benefit.

"You are a grand manager, Ralph," said the fond mother. "I am only too glad to do my share in making these people welcome and comfortable."

"You know how to do it, mother," declared Ralph, "that's sure."

"It seems as if things came about just right to take in the Fogg's," spoke Mrs. Fairbanks. "Limpy Joe went back to his restaurant on the Short Line yesterday, and Zeph Dallas has left, looking for a new job, he says, so we have plenty of spare rooms for our guests."

Ralph started for the ruined Fogg homestead to see if he could be of any use there. He came upon Fogg moving some furniture to the barn of a neighbor on a hand-cart. The fireman dropped the handles as he saw Ralph. His face worked with vivid emotion as he grasped the hand of the young railroader.

"Fairbanks," he said, "what can I say to you except that you have been the best friend I have ever known!"

"Nothing, except to make up your mind that the friendship will last if you want to suit me."

"Honest—honest?" urged Fogg, the tears in his eyes, earnestly regarding Ralph's face. "You don't despise me?"

"Oh, yes, we all dislike you, Mr. Fogg!" railed Ralph, with a hearty laugh. "The master mechanic has such bitter animosity for you, that he's taking his revenge by circulating a subscription list to help build you a new home."

"Never!" gasped Fogg, overcome.

"What's more," proceeded Ralph, in the same ironical tone, "the men down at the roundhouse have such a deep grudge against you, that they are following his example."

"I don't deserve it—I don't deserve it!" murmured the fireman.

"Why, even the new moving picture showman is so anxious to throw you down, that he's going to give you a benefit Saturday evening."

"I guess I'm the wickedest and happiest man in the world," said Fogg, in a subdued tone.

"You ought to be the happiest, after that little memoranda you gave to the master mechanic," suggested Ralph.

"The pledge? Yes!" cried the fireman, "and I mean to keep it, too. He told you about it?"

"And everything else necessary to tell," replied Ralph. "It's all settled. He says you and I ought to make a strong team. Let's try, hard, Mr. Fogg."

"Lad, I'll show you!" declared Fogg solemnly.

"All right, then say no more about it, and let us get these traps under cover, and get home to enjoy a famous meal my mother is preparing for all hands."

Activity and excitement around the Fairbanks home did not die down until long after dark. All the afternoon and evening people came to the house to see Fogg, to offer sympathy and practical assistance. If the fireman needed encouragement, he got plenty of it. He seemed to have grown into a new man under the chastening, and yet hopeful influences of that eventful day in his life. Before his very eyes Ralph fancied he saw his fireman grow in new manliness, courage and earnestness of purpose.

All hands were tired enough to sleep soundly that night. When Ralph came down stairs in the morning, his mother told him that Fogg was up and about already. She believed he had gone up to the ruins to look over things in a general way. Ralph went out to hunt up the stroller for breakfast.

Scarcely started from the house, he halted abruptly, for the object of his quest was in view. Ralph saw the fireman about half a block away. He was facing two men whom Ralph recognized as Hall and Wilson, two blacklisters who had been prominent in the railroad strike.

One of them was gesticulating vigorously and telling something to Fogg, while his companion chipped in a word now and then. Suddenly something appeared to be said that roused up the fireman. His hand went up in the air with an angry menacing motion. He shouted out some words that Ralph could not hear at the distance he was from the scene.

The two men seemed to remonstrate. One of them raised his own fist menacingly. The other crowded towards Fogg in a stealthy, suspicious way.

In a flash the climax came. Swinging out his giant hand, the fireman of No. 999 seized his nearest opponent and gave him a fling into the ditch. He then sprang at the other, and sent him whirling head over heels to join his companion.

CHAPTER XIII

THE "BLACK HAND"

Lemuel Fogg's opponents scrambled to their feet and sneaked off immediately. The fireman turned his back upon them, and strode down the sidewalk in the direction of the Fairbanks' home with a stormy and disturbed expression on his face.

"Trouble, Mr. Fogg?" intimated the young railroader, as the fireman approached him.

"No," dissented Fogg vigorously, "the end of trouble. I'm sorry to lose my temper, lad, but those ruffians were the limit. They know my sentiments now."

"They were Hall and Wilson, I noticed," suggested Ralph.

"Yes," returned the fireman, "and two worse unhung rascals never walked. They came about you. Say, Mr. Fairbanks," continued Fogg excitedly, "It wasn't so bad tackling me as a sort of comrade, considering that I had been foolish enough to train with them once, but when they mentioned you—I went wild. You—after what you've done for me and mine! Say--"

"Hold on—close the brakes," ordered Ralph, as his companion seemed inclined to run after his recent adversaries and seek them out for a further castigation. "You've made the brake with them—forget them."

"They had a new plot to get a black mark against you," went on the fireman. "I heard them half through their plans. Then I sailed into them."

"Well, breakfast is ready," said Ralph, "and after that, work, so we'd better get down to schedule."

The run to which No. 999 had been apportioned covered the Muddy Creek branch of the Great Northern to Riverton. The train was an accommodation and ran sixty miles. It was to leave Stanley Junction at 9:15 A. M., arrive at terminus at about noon, and start back for the Junction at two o'clock.

Ralph left the house about eight o'clock, after arranging to meet his fireman at the roundhouse. He went to the hotel to see Archie Graham, and found that youthful genius in his room figuring out some mathematical problem at a table.

"Well, how are you this morning?" inquired Ralph cheerily.

"First-rate, except that I'm a trifle sleepy," replied the young inventor. "Say, I was riding under the coaches all night long. It was dream after dream. I believe it tired me out more than the real thing."

"You haven't got your new clothes yet, I see," observed Ralph, with a glance at the tattered attire of his new acquaintance.

"They are ordered," explained Archie, "but they won't be here until late this afternoon."

"When they do," said Ralph, taking a card from his pocket and writing a few lines on it, "if you don't want to wait till I have some leisure, take this to Mr. Forgan, down at the roundhouse."

"Thank you," said Archie.

"He'll extend all the civilities to you. I hope you may discover something of advantage."

"I'll try," promised Archie.

Seeing the young inventor, reminded Ralph of Bridgeport, and naturally he thought of the boy he had known as Marvin Clark.

"He telegraphed that he would see me," ruminated Ralph. "I shall miss him if he comes to Stanley Junction to-day, but he will probably wait around for me—that is, if he comes at all. If he doesn't, in a day or two I shall start some kind of an investigation as to this strange case of double identity."

When Ralph got to the roundhouse he found Fogg in the doghouse chatting with his friends. He had to tell the story of the fire over and over again, it seemed, at each new arrival of an interested comrade, and Ralph's heroic share in the incident was fully exploited. The young railroader was overwhelmed by his loyal admirers with congratulations. Ralph felt glad to compare the anticipated trip with the starting out on the first record run of No. 999, when he had a half-mad sullen fireman for a helper.

As the wiper finished his work on the locomotive, engineer and fireman got into the cab.

"Hello!" exclaimed Fogg sharply.

"Hello!" echoed his cabmate.

A little square strip of paper was revealed to both, as they opened their bunkers. It was patent that some one had sneaked into the roundhouse and had pasted the papers there. Each slip bore a crude outline of a human hand, drawn in pencil.

"Bah!" spoke Fogg, with a brush of a chisel scraping the portraiture on his own box out of all semblance, and then doing the same with the picture on the reverse cover of Ralph's bunker.

"What is it, Fogg?" inquired the young railroader, to whom the ominous sketches were a new wrinkle.

"Black Hand," explained Fogg.

"Whose—why?" inquired Ralph.

"The outcast gang. It's one of their scare tricks. Humph! I'd like to get sight of the fellow who thought he was doing a smart trick. The Black Hands are supposed to warn us that we're doomed by the gang, see? It's a notification that the trouncing I gave those fellows Hall and Wilson is a declaration of war to the knife."

"Well, let it come. Aren't we equal to it, Mr. Fogg?"

"You are, for they can't hit you hard. You've made your mark," said the fireman, somewhat gloomily. "I'm not in the same class. I've had my weak spots. Besides, it's me they'll be after. Dunno, Fairbanks, maybe I'd better not be the cause of getting you into any more trouble. Perhaps I'd better slide for a bit into some switchyard job."

"What—scared?" cried Ralph.

"No, not scared," responded Fogg soberly, "only worried about you."

"Well," said Ralph, "the master mechanic said we were a strong team?"

"Ye-es."

"Let's prove to him that we are. Good-by to the Black Hands, Mr. Fogg, they aren't worth thinking about."

So the young railroader rallied and cheered his comrade, and they had got beyond the turn table and had quite forgotten the incident of the pasters, when John Griscom mounted the cab step. He nodded genially to both Ralph and the fireman. Griscom knew pretty much what was going on most of the time, and the master mechanic was a close friend of his.

"Just a word, Fairbanks," he began in a confidential tone, and the young engineer bent over towards him. "I don't want to be croaking all the time, but railroading isn't all fun and frolic."

"What's the matter now, Mr. Griscom?" inquired Ralph.

"The old strike gang is the trouble, and will be until they're laid out, ragtail and bobtail, dead cold. I have a friend in a certain department of the service here. He isn't giving away official business any, but he isn't in sympathy with Hall or Wilson. One of them sent a wire to Riverton an hour since. It was to some one the operator never heard of before, evidently a friend of theirs. It mentioned 999, your name, and Fogg. The rest of it was in cipher."

"We've just had a Black Hand warning, here in the cab," said Ralph.

"Oh, you have?" muttered Griscom. "Then there's new mischief afoot. Look out for snags at Riverton."

Ralph realized that it wasn't very pleasant working under the continual menace of enemies plotting in the dark and in a mean, desperate way. There was nothing for it, however, but to exercise patience, vigilance and courage.

"They shall never drive me from my post of duty," firmly decided the young railroader. "I shall neither tire out nor scare out."

Riverton was made on time and with no unpleasant incident to mar a schedule trip. No. 999 was run to a siding, and Ralph and Fogg had over two hours on their hands to spend as they chose. They had brought their lunch, and they dispatched the best part of it in the cab. Mrs. Fairbanks had put it up in a basket, and a two-quart fruit jar held the cold coffee. After the repast Fogg fixed the fire and they strolled down to the depot.

The station agent was an old acquaintance of Ralph. He knew Van Sherwin, Limpy Joe and the people up at the Short Line railroad, kept posted on their progress pretty closely, and he had a good deal of interesting railroad gossip to retail to Ralph.

"Oh, by the way," he observed incidentally, after they had conversed for some time, "there was a spruce young fellow here this morning asking very particularly about 999 and her movements. He mentioned your name too."

"Who was he?" inquired Ralph.

"I never saw him before. He was curious all about your run, hung around a while and then disappeared. I haven't seen him since."

"Describe him, won't you?" and the station agent did so. Ralph was sure that the stranger was the youth he had known as Marvin Clark. From that time on until the train got ready for the return trip, the young railroader kept his eyes open for a glimpse of his acquaintance with the double identity. The latter, however, up to the time No. 999 steamed out from Riverton, did not put in an appearance.

"Well, nobody tackled us at Riverton," observed Ralph, as he and Fogg settled down comfortably to their respective tasks.

"Better not," retorted the fireman keenly. "I just made a little purchase this morning, and I'm going to stand no fooling," and he touched his hip pocket meaningly. "Have a swig?" he inquired additionally, as he reached for the jar of coffee and took a drink.

"Oh, I could feast on my mother's coffee all day," observed Ralph as the jar was passed to him. "Now, then, you finish it up and hand me one of those doughnuts."

The little refectation seemed to add to the satisfaction of the moment. Their run was a slow one, and there was little to do besides keeping the machinery in motion. The day was warm, but the air was balmy. The landscape was interesting, and they seemed gliding along as in a pleasing dream.

Later, when he analyzed his sensations, the young railroader, recalling just these impressions, knew that they were caused by artificial conditions. Ralph relapsed into a dream—indeed, he was amazed, he was startled to find himself opening his eyes with difficulty, and of discovering his fireman doubled up in his seat, fast asleep. He tried to shout to Fogg, realizing that something was wrong. He could not utter a word, his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. Ralph barely managed to slip to his feet in an effort to arouse his cab mate.

"Something wrong!" ran through his mind. A vague thrill crossed his frame as, whirling by a landmark, a white-painted cattle guard, he realized that he must have gone five miles without noting distance.

The bridge was his next thought. Muddy Creek was less than a mile ahead. If the draw should be open! Wildly reaching towards the lever, the young engineer sank to the floor a senseless heap, while No. 999, without a guide, dashed down the shining rails!

CHAPTER XIV

A SERIOUS PLOT

"Who stopped this train—and why?"

Dreamily returning to consciousness, these were the first words that reached Ralph Fairbanks' rallying consciousness. They were spoken by the conductor of the accommodation train sharply. The locomotive was at a standstill, and, staring wonderingly, the conductor stood by the side of the tender.

"I did," answered a prompt voice, and removing his hand from the lever, the boy whom the young engineer had known as Marvin Clark drifted before his vision.

"Hello!" exclaimed the conductor, "I've seen you before. You're the fellow who caught the train

at Riverton just as she left—had a free pass.”

“Never mind me, Mr. Conductor,” responded the other rapidly. “I’m thinking they need some attention,” and he pointed to the fireman, lying doubled up in his seat, and then to Ralph, lying prone on the floor of the cab.

“Fairbanks—Fogg!” fairly shouted the conductor. “Why, what can this mean?”

“Foul play, if I’m a judge,” spoke Clark definitely. “Fairbanks! Fairbanks!” he shouted, stooping over and lifting Ralph in his strong arms. “Here, brace him in his seat.”

“Water!” gasped the young engineer in a choking tone. “My throat is on fire! What has happened?”

“Nothing alarming,” answered Clark reassuringly, “only—I’m glad I happened to be here.”

Ralph’s mouth and throat seemed burning up. The water he drank only partially allayed his frantic thirst. It was with great difficulty that he could arouse himself from a lethargy that seemed to completely paralyze both body and mind. As the moments passed, however, he succeeded in rallying into something like normal. But as yet he was unable to fully understand just what had happened.

“He needs something to stimulate him,” declared the conductor, and stepping into the cab he hastily ransacked the fireman’s bunker. “Aha!”

His tones announced a discovery—likewise a suspicion. He had unearthed two flasks of liquor, one only partly filled.

“Not for me,” said Ralph, waving back the conductor, who evidently was intent on administering a stimulant. “Liquor!” he cried, suddenly bracing up now. “Fogg never brought it aboard. It’s some plot! Why!” he exclaimed, in sudden enlightenment, “I see it all, clear as day.”

What Ralph saw, all hands in the cab soon realized within the ensuing ten minutes. When they had aroused Fogg, there followed animated theory, discovery and conviction. Not one of them doubted but that some enemy had sneaked aboard of the locomotive while it was sidetracked at noon at Riverton and had put some drug in the jar of coffee. They found a suspicious dark sediment at the bottom of the jar.

“Black Hands—mark it down,” observed Fogg. “Whoever did it, also placed those flasks of liquor in my bunker. See the label on them? They come from a place in Riverton I never was in. The scoundrels aimed to have us found in the cab, just as we have been, and a report go in that the heat and too much liquor had crippled us from making the run.”

“You’ve struck it, Fogg,” assented the conductor. “Just stow that jar and those two flasks in a safe place. I’ll have our special agent Adair, the road detective, find out who bought that liquor. No need of any blabbing to the general public. Are you able to complete the run, Fairbanks?”

“Certainly,” reported Ralph, exercising arms and feet vigorously to restore their circulation. Fogg was still dazed and weak. He had drunk more of the coffee than Ralph. Besides, being the older of the two, he did not shake off the effects of the narcotic so readily as the young engineer.

“I’ll help fire—I know how to,” declared Clark.

“You know how to stop an engine, too!” commented the conductor. “All right, Fairbanks, when you’re ready,” and he returned to the coaches. Ralph extended his hand to Clark. The latter met his glance frankly.

“I’ve been trying to get track of your movements by telegraph,” said Clark. “Located your run, and was waiting at Riverton for your train. Got there ahead of time, and came back to the depot just as 999 was pulling out, and caught the last car. First, I thought I’d not show myself until you got through with your trip. Things got dull in those humdrum coaches, though, and I sailed ahead to the tender, saw what was wrong, and checked up the locomotive just beyond the bridge. Say, if the draw had been open, we’d all have had a bath, eh?”

“The miscreants who played this diabolical trick ought to be severely punished,” said Ralph.

There was no evidence of strained relations between the two boys. Ralph recognized that Clark had sought him out to make an explanation. He wondered what it would be. The present was not, however, the time to broach the subject. There was something very manly and reassuring in Clark’s manner, and the young railroader believed that when he got ready to disclose his secret, the revelation would be an unusual and interesting one.

The train was started up, soon made up the lost time, and at 5:15 rolled into the depot at Stanley Junction. Ralph did not feel quite as well as usual and his fireman was pale and loggy, but the main effects of the drug had passed off.

“You go straight home, Mr. Fogg,” directed Ralph. “I will see that 999 is put to bed all right.”

“I think I’ll take advantage of your kind offer, Fairbanks,” responded Fogg. “I’m weak as a cat, and my head is going around like an electric turntable.”

Fogg started for home. Clark rode with Ralph on the locomotive to the roundhouse. The big engine was put into her stall. Then the boys left the place.

“I have something to say to you, Fairbanks,” began Clark.

“I suppose so,” replied Ralph. “It must be quite a long story, though.”

"It is," admitted his companion.

"Then suppose we leave its recital till we are rested a bit," suggested Ralph. "I want you to come up to the house and have supper. Then we'll adjourn to the garden and have a quiet, comfortable chat."

"That will be famous," declared Clark. "Say, you don't treat an imposter like myself courteous or anything, do you?"

"Are you really an imposter?" asked Ralph, with a faint smile.

"I am—and a rank one."

"Just one question—you are not the real Marvin Clark?"

"No more than yourself."

"And you are Fred Porter?"

"That's it."

"I thought so," said the young engineer.

CHAPTER XV

"THE SILVANDOS"

"I declare!" exclaimed Ralph Fairbanks.

"For mercy's sake!" echoed Fred Porter.

Both stood spellbound just within the grounds of the Fairbanks' home, where they had arrived. Over towards the dividing lot line of the next door neighbor, their eyes had lit upon an unusual and interesting scene.

Two figures were in action among the branches of the great oak tree. They were boys, and their natural appearance was enough to attract attention. They were leaping, springing, chasing one another from branch to branch, with a remarkable agility that made one think of monkeys and next trained athletes.

"Who are they, anyway?" demanded Fred.

"They are new to me," confessed the young engineer.

The two strangers were about of an age, under sixteen. It would puzzle one to figure out their nationality. Their faces were tawny, but delicate of profile, their forms exquisitely molded. They suggested Japanese boys. Then Ralph decided they more resembled lithe Malay children of whom he had seen photographs. At all events, they were natural tree climbers. They made the most daring leaps from frail branches. They sprang from twigs that broke in their deft grasp, but not until they had secured the purchase they aimed at in the act to send them flying through the air to some other perilous point in view. Their feats were fairly bewildering, and as one landed on the ground like a rubber ball and the other chased him out of sight in the next yard, Ralph conducted his companion into the house with these words:

"That's odd enough to investigate."

He did not announce his arrival to his mother, but led Fred up to his room. As he passed that now occupied by the Foggs, it made his heart glad to hear the fireman crowing at the baby to the accompaniment of a happy laugh from the fireman's wife.

"You can wash up and tidy up, Porter," he said to his friend. "I'll arrange for an extra plate, and take you down later to meet the best mother in the world."

"This is an imposition on you good people," declared Fred, but Ralph would not listen to him. He went downstairs and out the front way, and came around the house looking all about for some trace of the two remarkable creatures he had just seen. They had disappeared, however, as if they were veritable wood elves. Passing the kitchen window, the young engineer halted.

"Hello!" he uttered. "Zeph Dallas is back again," and then he listened casually, for Zeph was speaking to his mother.

"Yes, Mrs. Fairbanks," Ralph caught the words, "I'm the bad penny that turns up regularly, only I've got some good dollars this time. On the mantel is the money I owe Ralph for the clothes he got me."

"But can you spare the money?" spoke Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Sure I can, and the back board, too," declared Zeph, and glancing in through the open window Ralph noted the speaker, his fingers in his vest armholes, strutting around most grandly.

"I can't understand how you came to get so much money in two days," spoke the lady. "You

couldn't have earned it in that short space of time, Zeph."

"No, ma'am," admitted Zeph, "but I've got it, haven't I? It's honest money, Mrs. Fairbanks. It's an advance on my wages—expense money and such, don't you see?"

"Then you have secured work, Zeph?"

"Steady work, Mrs. Fairbanks."

"What at, Zeph?"

"Mrs. Fairbanks," answered the lad in a hushed, mysterious tone of voice, "I am hired as a detective."

"You're what?" fairly shouted Ralph through the window.

"Hello! you here, are you?" cried Zeph, and in a twinkling he had joined Ralph outside the house. "Yes, sir," he added, with an important air that somewhat amused Ralph, "I've landed this time. On both feet. Heart's desire at last—I'm a detective."

Ralph had to smile. He recalled the first arrival of honest but blundering Zeph Dallas at Stanley Junction, a raw country bumpkin. Even then the incipient detective fever had been manifested by the crude farmer boy. From the confident, self-assured tone in which Zeph now spoke, the young railroader was forced to believe that he had struck something tangible at last in his favorite line.

"What are you detecting, Zeph?" he inquired.

"That's a secret."

"Indeed—and what agency are you working for—the government?"

"That," observed Zeph gravely, "is also a secret—for the present. See here, Ralph Fairbanks, you're guying me. You needn't. Look at that."

With great pride Zeph threw back his coat. It was to reveal a star pinned to his vest.

"Yes," nodded Ralph, "I see it, but it doesn't tell who you are."

"Don't it say 'Special'?" demanded Zeph, with an offended air.

"Yes, I see the word."

"Well, then, that's me—special secret service, see? Of course, I don't look much like a detective, just common and ordinary now, but I'm going to buy a wig and a false beard, and then you'll see."

"Oh, Zeph!" exclaimed Ralph.

"All right, you keep right on laughing at me," said Zeph. "All the same, I'm hired. What's more, I'm paid. Look at that—I've got the job and I've got the goods. That shows something, I fancy," and Zeph waved a really imposing roll of bank notes before the sight of the young engineer.

"Your employers must think you a pretty good man to pay you in advance," suggested Ralph.

"They do, for a fact," declared Zeph. "They know they can depend upon me. Say, Ralph, it's funny the way I fell into the job. You never in your life heard of the slick and easy way I seemed to go rolling right against it. And the mystery, the deadly secrets, the—the—hold on, though, I'm violating the eth—eth—yes, ethics of the profession."

"No, no—go on and tell us something about it," urged Ralph. "I'm interested."

"Can't. I've gone too far already. Sworn to secrecy. Honestly, I'm not romancing, Ralph, I'm working on a case that reads like a story book. Some of the strange things going on—they fairly stagger me. I can't say another word just now, but just the minute I can, you just bet I'll tell you all about it, Ralph Fairbanks. Say, you haven't seen two boys around here, have you—two tiny fellows? I left them in the garden here. They're in my charge, and I mustn't lose sight of them," and Zeph began looking all around the place.

"Two human monkeys, who make no more of flying through the air than you or I do to run a race?" inquired Ralph.

"That's them," assented Zeph.

"They were here a few minutes ago," advised Ralph, "but I don't see them just now. I wondered who they were. The last I saw of them, they were chasing one another over our neighbors' lot over there."

"I must find them," said Zeph. "They are another of my responsibilities. I hear them."

As Zeph spoke, there proceeded from the alley a mellow and peculiar but very resonant whistle. It was followed by a responsive whistle, clear as a calliope note. Then into view dashed the two boys for whom Zeph was looking. They were still chasing one another, and the foremost of the twain was making for the house. As he passed a tree full tilt, without the least apparent exertion he leaped up lightly, seized a branch, coiled around it like a rubber band, and his pursuer passed under him at full speed.

"This way, Kara—hey, Karo," called out Zeph, and the two strange lads came up to him with a fawn-like docility, in keeping with the mild, timid expression of their faces.

"Sare," spoke one of them with a bow, and his companion repeated the word. They both bowed to Ralph next, and stood like obedient children awaiting orders. Ralph was silent for fully a

minute, studying their unfamiliar make-up. At that moment Fred Porter, having come down stairs the front way, strolled around the corner of the house.

"This is my friend, Fred Porter—Zeph—Zeph Dallas, Porter," introduced the young railroader, and the two boys shook hands. Porter became instantly interested in the two strange lads.

"I'm going to show you fellows something," said Zeph, "something mighty remarkable, something you never saw before, and it's going to beat anything you ever heard of. About those two boys. Kara!"

One of the two lads instantly moved to the side of Zeph, who beckoned to him to follow him. He led the boy ten feet away behind a thick large bush, his back to the others.

"Karo," he spoke again, and the other boy allowed him to turn him around where he stood, his back to the other boy.

"See here, Zeph," spoke Ralph with a broad smile, "are you going to give us a detective demonstration of some kind, or a sleight-of-hand demonstration?"

"Quit guying me, Ralph Fairbanks," said Zeph. "You're always at it, but I'm going to give you something this time that will make you sit up and take notice, I'll bet. Those boys came from a good many thousand miles away—from the other side of the world, in fact."

"They look it," observed Fred Porter.

"Gomera," exclaimed Zeph.

"Where's that now?" inquired Fred.

"It is the smallest of the Canary Islands."

"Oh, that's it!"

"And they talk without saying a word," was Zeph's next amazing announcement.

"Whew!" commented Fred dubiously.

"They do. It's that I'm going to show you. Perhaps those boys are the only two of their kind in the United States. They are Silvandos."

"What are Silvandos, Zeph?" inquired Ralph.

"Silvandos," replied Zeph, with manifest enjoyment of the fact that he was making a new and mystifying disclosure, "are persons who carry on a conversation through a whistling language."

CHAPTER XVI

ZEPH DALLAS AND HIS "MYSTERY"

"Whistling language?" repeated Fred Porter. "Is there one?"

"Aha! didn't I say I was going to show you something you never heard of before? You bet there is a whistling language!" chuckled Zeph—"and I'm now about to demonstrate it to you. You see these two boys? Well, they are natives of Gomera, the smallest of the Canary Islands. They were raised in a district where at times there is no living thing within sight, and the vast wilderness in the winding mountains is broken only by the crimson flower of the cactus growing in the cliffs of the rock."

"You talk like a literary showman, Zeph Dallas," declared Fred.

"Well, I'm telling the story as I get it, ain't I?" demanded Zeph in an injured tone and with a sharp look at Fred, as if he suspected that he was being guyed. "Anyhow, I want to explain things so you'll understand."

"Go right ahead, Zeph," insisted Ralph encouragingly, "we're interested."

"Well, up among those big stone terraces is the whistling race. They are able to converse with one another at a distance of three miles."

"That's pretty strong," observed Fred. "But make it three miles."

"A Silvando will signal a friend he knows to be in a certain distant locality. He does it by setting his fore fingers together at a right angle in his mouth, just as you'll see these two Canaries do in a minute or two. An arrow of piercing sounds shoots across the ravine."

"Arrow is good—shoots is good!" whispered Fred, nudging Ralph.

"There is a moment's pause—" continued Zeph.

"Oh, he's read all this in some book!" declared Fred.

"Then there comes a thin almost uncanny whistle from far away. Conversation begins, and as the sounds rise and fall, are shrill or drawn, so they are echoed. Then comes the ghostly reply,

and then question and answer follows. They talk—all right. Travelers say so, and a lot of scientific fellows are now on the track of this strange tribe to investigate them before civilization makes of their talk a dead language. Kara—ready!” called out Zeph to the boy at the bush. “Karo—attention!”

“Sare,” answered the little fellow, his bright twinkling eyes full of intelligence.

“Ask him how many!” said Zeph “—see?” and he touched himself, the boy and Ralph and Fred with his forefinger in turn.

Out rang a series of rising interrogatory sounds. There was a pause. Then from the boy stationed at the bush came quick responsive toots—one, two, three, four.

“Tell Kara to bring you this—see, this?” and Zeph stooped down and touched the sodded yard with his hand. Kara whistled again. Immediately Kara wheeled, stooped also, and was at their side in an instant, tendering a handful of grass.

“Say, this is odd all right,” confessed Fred thoughtfully.

“Tell Kara to climb a tree next,” spoke Zeph. More “whistle talk,” and agile as a monkey Kara was aloft, making dizzying whirls among the branches of an oak nearby. “I tell you, it would stun you to watch these little fellows at play. It’s like a piccolo or a calliope to hear them talk—yes, sir, talking just as knowingly as we do.”

“Who are they, anyway?” spoke Fred curiously?

“I’ve told you—Canaries.”

“Yes, but where did you pick them up?”

“That’s a secret. You see,” responded Zeph, looking duly wise and mysterious, “those boys were imported to this country by a peculiar old man, who wanted servants around him who weren’t gabbing about his affairs and asking him questions all the time. Well, he’s got them, hasn’t he? I’m working for that man, or rather for a friend of his. Detective work,” continued Zeph, rather proudly. “I’ve told Ralph. These two boys have been shut up in the house for two months. They just pined for fresh air, and trees—oh! trees are their stronghold. When I started out with them they made for the first tree like birds for a roost. I have taken them out for an airing, and I ran down here to report to Ralph how I was getting on, and brought them along with me for the novelty of the thing.”

“Do they live near here?” inquired Ralph.

“No,” answered Zeph, “we had to come by rail. I can’t tell you where they live, but it’s on a branch of the Great Northern. I’ve got to get back to-night. We’ve had our supper, Ralph. I just wanted to settle up the bills I owed you. I’ll say good-bye to your mother and get to the depot.”

Zeph and his charges trooped to the kitchen door. Zeph spoke a few words to Mrs. Fairbanks. His companions bowed her a polite and graceful adieu, and Ralph accompanied their former boarder to the street.

“See here, Ralph,” said Zeph to the young engineer in parting, “I don’t want you to think I wouldn’t tell you everything.”

“That’s all right, Zeph.”

“But honestly, I’ve solemnly agreed not to lisp a word about what I am really about or the people concerned in it.”

“That’s all right, too,” declared Ralph.

“I’ll say this, though,” resumed Zeph: “I’m working on a strange and serious case. It’s no play or fooling. I’m getting big pay. I may do a big thing in the end, and when I do, if I do, I’m coming straight to tell you all about it.”

Ralph watched Zeph and his charges disappear down the street with a great deal of curiosity and wonderment in his mind. A great many lively and unusual incidents were coming to the front recently, but this one was certainly enough out of the ordinary to give him food for profound thought.

Ralph rejoined Fred in the garden, and took him into the house and introduced him to his mother. Mrs. Fairbanks won the heart of the manly young fellow, as she did the love of all of her son’s friends.

It was a pleasant, happy little coterie, that which sat down at the table soon afterwards to enjoy one of Mrs. Fairbanks’ famous meals.

“I’m ashamed!” declared Fred, after his seventh hot biscuit with freshly churned butter that made his mouth water, “but eating houses and hotels, Mrs. Fairbanks, make a roving, homeless fellow like me desperate, and if a third helping of that exquisite apple sauce isn’t out of order, I’ll have another small fish.”

“I’m spoiled for regular cooking, Bessie,” declared Fogg to his wife. “Mrs. Fairbanks is fattening us till we’ll be of no use at all.”

“You are all flatterers,” said Mrs. Fairbanks warningly, but with a pleased smile.

“I’ll take another piece of cake, ma’am, providing you’ll promise me the little exercise of helping you wash the dishes afterwards,” spoke Fred.

He interested the widow with his animated, interested talk as he bustled around the kitchen,

wearing a big apron while drying the dishes. Then when this task was completed, he and Ralph went out to the little summer house and comfortably seated themselves.

"Now then," remarked the young railroader with a pleasant smile, "now for your confession, Fred."

"No, sir," objected his comrade vociferously, "I've done nothing that's wrong to confess. It will be an explanation."

"All right," agreed Ralph, "open the throttle and start the train."

At that moment there was an interruption. A chubby, undersized boy came swiftly through the gateway. He was advancing up the steps of the house when Ralph halted him.

"Hi, there, Davis!" he challenged. "What's wanted?"

"Oh, you there, Fairbanks!" responded Ned Davis, the red-headed call boy for the roundhouse of the Great Northern, familiarly known as "Torchy." "Extra orders for you and Fogg—you're to take out a special to-night."

CHAPTER XVII

IN WIDENER'S GAP

There was always a spice of novelty and excitement for the young engineer in running a special. Besides that, extra orders meant pay and a half, sometimes double pay, with twenty-four hours' rest after it, if the special run came after midnight.

Ralph arose from his seat in the summer-house, telling Ned Davis that Fogg and himself would report at the roundhouse at once.

"You'll have to excuse me, Porter," he said to his guest. "We'll have to postpone our talk until tomorrow."

"Duty call, I see," returned Fred. "Well, there's no urgency, now that I've found out you don't consider me some hideous impostor of the old story book kind. I'll go as far with you as a hotel, and tell you what I have to say after this trip."

"You'll camp right here at the Fairbanks cottage until I return," peremptorily declared Ralph. "My mother would be lonesome if there wasn't a boy somewhere about the house. Zeph is gone and my other friends, and you will be good company."

"I'm only too willing, if it's entirely agreeable," said Fred, and so it was settled.

Fogg grumbled a good deal when Ralph told him of the extra call. He declared that he had just succeeded in teaching the baby to say "All aboard!" looked at the sky and predicted the biggest storm of the season, and was cross generally until he climbed aboard No. 999. Then Ralph heard him talking to the well-groomed steel steed as if it was some pet racer, and he anxious and glad to put it through its paces.

"What's the run, Fairbanks?" asked the fireman, as Ralph returned from the roundhouse office.

"Nothing very interesting. Special sleeper, some convention crowd for Bridgeport, came in on the north branch. We've got to pick our way on our own schedule."

"Huh! thought it must be a treasure train, or the pay car at the least!" snorted Fogg contemptuously, but thoroughly good-natured under the surface.

When they backed down to the depot, Ralph was handed his flimsy orders. No. 999 was given standard special lights, with the usual markers at the rear of the sleeping car, but no one on platform charge. The coach had a conductor, but he barely showed himself, and went inside, where all the curtains were drawn and passengers evidently gone to sleep.

"I told you it was going to rain," spoke Fogg, as they cleared the limits and got ready for a spurt. "All schedule cancelled where we can get clear tracks, I suppose? All right, let's see what 999 can do on slippery rails."

No. 999 did famously, as she always did under the guidance of the vigilant young engineer. Ralph was learning a good deal lately, and his mind was always strictly on the business of the moment when at the throttle. He was learning that there was a science in running a locomotive a good deal deeper than merely operating throttle, brake and lever automatically. There was a way to conserve the steam energy and reserve wide-open tactics for full pressure that he had found out, which enabled him to spurt when the chance came, at no cost of exhaustion later. He knew the gauges by heart, how to utilize the exhaust, and worked something along the line of the new superheated steam theory.

The night had set in very dark and very stormy. They had nothing to look out for, however, on the out track except an accommodation that had started two hours previous. No. 999 had a light load, and she sped along without a jar. The wires took care of her. By nine o'clock they were

twenty miles "to the good" on regular schedule basis.

After that it was slower progress. The wind had arisen to a hurricane, the rain came down in torrents, and as they passed Winston they began to get in among the hills, where there was a series of intricate and dangerous curves.

"It's nearly a waterspout," observed Fogg, as the rain swept against the cab as if driven from a full pressure hose, and they could feel the staunch locomotive quiver as it breasted great sweeps of the wind. "I don't like that," he muttered, as a great clump came against the cab curtain. And he and his engineer both knew what it was from past experience.

"One of those young landslides," spoke Ralph.

"The second in a half-an-hour," declared Fogg. "It's clear mud, but sometime in one of these storms we'll get a big drop of rock, and there'll be mischief afoot."

Ralph slowed as they entered a long stretch known as Widener's Gap. It was a pull up hill. Besides that, Widener was only two miles ahead, and the curves were so sharp and frequent that they could not catch the semaphore at any distance.

Both engineer and fireman were under an intense strain, and Ralph kept a keen lookout from his cab window. Fogg was doing the same. Suddenly he uttered a great shout. It was echoed by Ralph, for there was cause for excitement.

"A tree!" yelled Fogg.

Ralph set the air and pulled the lever in a flash. What the gleaming headlight of No. 999 had shown, however, they were upon in a leap. They could feel a grinding jar, but the pilot had evidently swept the obstacle aside. They could hear the branches sweep the top of the engine. Then there came a warning sound.

Bumpety-bump,-bump-bump! The tree, uprooted from the gap side by the rain and the wind, had descried half a circle, it seemed, when shifted by the pilot. Its big end had rolled under the coach. From the feeling the young engineer could guess what had happened.

"Shut her off!" shouted Fogg.

"The coach has jumped the track!" echoed Ralph quickly.

His heart was in his mouth as he made every exertion to bring the locomotive to a quick stop. No. 999 acted splendidly, but it was impossible to slow down under two hundred feet.

"Both trucks off—she's toppling!" yelled Fogg, with a backward glance.

Each instant Ralph waited for the crash that would announce a catastrophe. It did not come. The coach swayed and careened, pounding the sleepers set on a sharp angle and tugging to part the bumpers. Ralph closed the throttle and took a glance backwards for the first time.

"The coach is safe, Mr. Fogg," he spoke. "Get back and see how badly the passengers are mixed up."

"There's nothing coming behind us?" asked the fireman.

"No, but tell the conductor to set the light back as far as he can run."

"Alright."

"The Night Express!" gasped Ralph the next moment, in a hushed whisper, as he caught the faint echo of a signal whistle ahead of them in the distance.

An alarming thought came into his mind. Nothing could menace them ahead on the out track and nothing was due behind, but the coach attached to No. 999 stood on a tilt clear across the in track.

Along those rails in ten minutes' time, unaware of the obstruction, the night express would come thundering down the grade at a forty-mile clip around the sharp curves of Widener's Gap.

"It's 38. She's due, entering Widener," breathed Ralph. "Yes," with a glance at the cab clock, "and just on time. Mr. Fogg," he shouted after his fireman, leaping to the ground, "get the people out of that coach—38 is coming."

"The Night Express," cried Fogg hoarsely. "I never thought of it."

Ralph tore one of the rear red tender lights from its place. He started down the out rails on a dead run. His only hope now was of reaching the straight open stretch past the last curve in open view of Widener. To set the warning signal short of that would be of no avail. No. 38 could not possibly see it in time, coming at full speed, to avoid a smash-up.

In a single minute the young engineer was drenched to the skin. It was all that he could do to keep from being blown from his footing. He fairly counted the seconds as he shot forward, sprinting to the limit on that slippery, flooded roadbed. He could not restrain a shout of relief and hope as he turned the last curve.

"Widener—38!" he gasped.

The station lamps were visible, a mile distant. Somewhat nearer, a blur of white radiance amid the dashing rain, was the headlight of No. 38 showing that she was coming at momentarily increasing speed. Ralph aimed to run nearer to the air line stretch to plant the signal. Suddenly his feet tripped and he went headlong. The breath seemed knocked out of his body as he landed across the ties of the brief trestle reach, which he had forgotten all about in his excitement. The

lantern, flung wide from his grasp, struck one rail, smashed to pieces, and the lamp went out as it dropped with a flare into the deep gully beneath.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE SEMAPHORE

THE young engineer of No. 999 struggled to his feet appalled. The case seemed hopeless. He had matches in his pocket. In dry weather under the same circumstances he might to gather up enough dry grass and brush to build a fire between the rails, but now, with everything soaked and dripping this was impossible.

"The semaphore signal!" gasped Ralph. "Can I reach it in time?"

He crossed the remainder of the trestle in desperate leaps. Ralph calculated the distance to the semaphore, the distance of the train, and his heart failed him. Still he kept on. His eyes were fixed on the lantern aloft showing open tracks for the oncoming train. It was his star of hope. Then as he reached it he saw that he was too late.

To scale the slippery timber to the staple-runners without boot hooks would be no easy task. To get to the first rung and ascend would consume fully two minutes' time.

"What shall I do—what can I do?" panted the young railroader in desperation.

Just beyond the semaphore was a symmetrical heap of bleached blocks of rock comprising a landmark guide for engineers. Ralph ran to it. Groping among the gravel at its base, his fingers frantically grasped several loose stones. He glanced once at the glowering headlight of No. 38.

"If I can make it—if I can only make it!" he voiced, and the aspiration was a kind of a wail.

The young engineer of No. 999 had been the former leader of all boyish sports and exercises in Stanley Junction. Posed as he had posed many times in the past when he was firing at a mark, with all his skill, he calculated aim, distance and fling. The bull's eye target was the lantern pendant from the arm of the semaphore.

One—failed! the missile missed its intended mark.

Two—a ringing yell of delight, of hope, of triumph rang from the lips of the young engineer. The skillfully-aimed projectile had struck the glass of the signal, shivering it to atoms. The wind and rain did the rest. Out went the light.

A sharp whistle from No. 38, the hiss of the air brakes, and panting and exhausted, the young engineer of No. 999 watched the Night Express whiz by on a lessening run and come to a stop two hundred yards away.

Ralph dashed after the train, now halted beyond the trestle. He did not heed the shout of the brakeman already out on the tracks, but got up to the locomotive just as the conductor, lantern in hand, reached it.

"Hello!" shot out the engineer of No. 38, staring at the figure outlined within the halo of the conductor's light—"Fairbanks!"

"Why, so it is!" exclaimed the conductor, and it was easy for him to discern from Ralph's sudden appearance and breathless manner that he had some interest, if not an active part, in the mysterious disappearance of the semaphore signal. "What is it, Fairbanks?"

Very hurriedly Ralph explained. The engineer of No. 38 uttered a low whistle, meantime regarding the active young railroader, whom he well knew, with a glance of decided admiration. Then as hurried were the further movements of the conductor.

Within a very few minutes a brakeman was speeding back to Widener to inform the man on duty there of the condition of affairs. He returned to report the situation in safe official control all up and down the line. In the meantime No 38. had moved up to the scene of the wreck. This was done at the suggestion of Ralph, who did not know how the passengers in the special coach might have fared. Arrived at the scene, however, it was soon learned that two men only had been thrown from their beds and slightly bruised. The rest of the passengers were only shaken up.

The frightened passengers were huddled up, drenched to the skin, at the side of the gap, for Fogg had insisted on their taking no risk remaining in the derailed coach.

"We're stalled for three hours," decided the engineer of No. 38.

"Yes, and more than that, if the wrecking gang is not at Virden, as we suppose," added the conductor.

The passengers of the derailed coach were taken to shelter in a coach which backed to Widener. There was nothing to do now for the engineer and fireman of No. 999 but to await the arrival of the wrecking crew. Word came finally by messenger from the dispatcher at the station that the

same was on its way to the Gap. Inside of two hours the coach was back on the rails, and No. 999 moved ahead, took on transferred passengers from No. 38, and renewed the run to Bridgeport on a make-time schedule.

There had been a good many compliments for the young engineer from the crew of No. 38. The conductor had expressed some gratifying expressions of appreciation from the passengers who had heard of Ralph's thrilling feat at the semaphore. The conductor of the special coach attached to No. 999 had come up and shook hands with Ralph, a choking hoarseness in his throat as he remarked: "It's a honor to railroad with such fellows as you." Fogg had said little. There were many grim realities in railroading he knew well from experience. This was only one of them. After they started from Widener he had given his engineer a hearty slap of the shoulder, and with shining eyes made the remark:

"This is another boost for you, Fairbanks."

"For No. 999, you mean," smiled Ralph significantly. "We'll hope so, anyway, Mr. Fogg."

Wet, grimed, cinder-eyed, but supremely satisfied, they pulled into Bridgeport with a good record, considering the delay at the Gap. The conductor of the special coach laid off there. No. 999 was to get back to Stanley Junction as best she could and as quickly. As she cut loose from the coach its conductor came up with an envelope.

"My passengers made up a little donation, Fairbanks," the man said. "There's a newspaper man among them. He's correspondent for some daily press association. Been writing up 'the heroic dash—brave youth at the trestle—forn hope of an unerring marksman'—and all that."

"Oh, he's not writing for a newspaper," laughed Ralph; "he's making up a melodrama."

"Well, he'll make you famous, just the same, and here's some government photographs for you lucky fellows," added the conductor, tossing the envelope in his hand into the cab.

Fogg grinned over his share of the fifty-dollar donation and accepted it as a matter of course. Ralph said nothing, but he was somewhat affected. He was pleased at the recognition of his earnest services. At the same time the exploit of the night had shaken his nerves naturally, and reminded him of all the perils that accompanied a practical railroad career. A stern sense of responsibility made him thoughtful and grave, and he had in mind many a brave, loyal fellow whose fame had been unheralded and unsung, who had stuck to his post in time of danger and had given up his life to save others.

No. 999 was back at Stanley Junction by eight o'clock the next morning. When Ralph reached home he was so tired out he did not even wait for breakfast, but went straightway to his bed.

He came down the stairs in the morning bright as a dollar, to hear his mother humming a happy song in the dining-room, and Fred Porter softly accompanying with a low-toned whistle on the veranda. The latter, waving a newspaper in his hand, made a dash for Ralph.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing to some sensational headlines. "They've got you in print with a vengeance. A whole column about 'the last heroic exploit of our expert young railroader and rising townsman—Engineer Fairbanks.'"

CHAPTER XIX

THE BOY WHO WAS HAZED

"Well, Porter, proceed."

Ralph gave the direction. He and Fred were seated in the garden summer-house, settled comfortably on benches facing each other across a rustic table, after a good breakfast, a general restful feeling permeating them.

"All right," assented Fred. "Before I begin, though, I wish to make a remark. The way your mother and yourself have treated me has been just royal—I'll never forget it!"

"And never forget us," directed the young engineer with a warm, friendly smile. "You'll always find yourself welcome in this house."

"That's what gets me," said Fred, and there was a slight tremor and a suspicion of tears in his voice. "Most fellows would have little to do with an impostor, eh?"

"That's a pretty hard word, Porter," intimated Ralph. "Just the same, I believe in you. I have had confidence in you all along."

"And my story won't disturb it any," declared Fred. "Well, to begin—my name is not Marvin Clark."

"Of course, I know that already."

"It is Fred Porter."

"So you have told me."

"I am an orphan, homeless. As I said when I first came here, I have been a sort of a knockabout, a wanderer. I have been a poor boy. The real Marvin Clark, whose father is the real and genuine president of the Middletown & Western Railroad, is a rich boy. I have saved his life when he was drowning. He likes me for that, and there isn't much that he wouldn't do for me."

"You deserve it," said Ralph.

"Well, to make a long story short, he was a student at the Earlville Academy. He's a fine, manly fellow, nothing sneaking or mean about him. One night, though, he and his school chums got to cutting up. They raided the town and had a dozen fights with the village boys. One of them was taken prisoner, a lad named Ernest Gregg. The academy fellows decided to haze him. They put him through an awful course of sprouts. They ducked him in the river, scared him with mock gunpowder explosions, and wound up by tying him blindfolded to a switch near a railroad track. They left him there all night. The result was that when little Ernest was discovered the next morning, he was in a high fever and delirious."

"Too bad," murmured Ralph. "I don't think much of your Marvin Clark."

"Hold on, don't misjudge him. He helped to capture the enemy, as they called poor little Gregg, but he left the crowd right after that, supposing his chums would scare their captive a bit and let him go. Clark had no hand whatever in the downright persecution that sent the boy to the hospital. It seems that some of the gunpowder got into the eyes of the little fellow, and the douse in the river had given him a cold. The scare he got had nearly driven him out of his right mind, for he was a timid little fellow. A month later Ernest was discharged from the hospital nearly blind, thin, pale and weakly, a mere shadow of his former self."

"Of course the academy fellows tried to make up for all that," suggested Ralph.

"They didn't. Vacation came on, and they hied to their homes with not a thought of the great sorrow they had brought on their innocent victim. They say that Clark was just furious when he heard of it all. He laid out two of the ringleaders and shamed them in public. He sought out Ernest and took him to the best hotel in town. He hired doctors, and loaded the little fellow with comforts and luxuries."

"It must have cost him something," remarked Ralph.

"What did Clark care for that? His father was rich and gave him all the money he wanted. He had an account at a bank, and was heir to two aunts who doated on him and who were fabulously rich. I never saw a fellow take to heart the misfortunes of a poor little stranger as Clark did. The incident seemed to have changed his whole life. He sobered down wonderfully. He blamed himself for the whole thing, and took the whole responsibilities upon himself. Nearly all the time he was with Ernest, trying to cheer him up, hoping to find some way to make him well and strong and happy again."

"A royal good fellow, in fact, just as you said—I see that."

"Yes, sir," declared Fred staunchly. "Well, to continue: Clark's father and family were going to Europe. They had arranged for young Clark to go with them, but he wouldn't. Then there was a family council. Clark had not made much progress at school. He was fine at football, but no good at arithmetic. In fact, he was a disappointment to his father as a student. The old man, the academy professor, and the family lawyer, held a great consultation. Old man Clark came to a stern decision. It was planned out that young Clark should follow in the footsteps of his father and become a railroader. A regular arrangement was made. Clark was to have free passes everywhere. He was to spend his entire vacation traveling over different railroad systems, while his folks were in Europe. Twice a week he was to send to the family lawyer reports of his progress, accompanied by vouchers showing that he had not wasted the time."

"I see," nodded Ralph; "also where you come in."

"Yes, that's easy to guess," said Fred. "Just at that time I happened to be on a flying visit to Earlville, where one day I met Clark. He took me to the hotel, where I met Ernest. I had known young Gregg before, for he had come to Earlville a ragged, homeless lad before I first left, seeming to have no home or relatives, and going to work at odd jobs around the town. Clark told me of the fix he was in. While we were talking, a sudden idea came to him. He became very much excited and serious, and then made a very strange request of me."

"To assume his identity and go railroading in his stead?" inquired Ralph, anticipating what was coming.

"You've struck it," assented Fred; "just that."

"And you accepted?"

"And that is why you see me here," said Fred. "Don't think any the less of me, Fairbanks, for doing it. Don't find fault with me if I took up the imposture for all there was in it. It's my way—when I go at a thing, I do so with all my—nerves. I was Marvin Clark to the core. I took up his name, I played his part, and say, I tried not to disgrace his good name by one unmanly act. He taught me to imitate his handwriting perfectly one day. The next I was on the road, without a mishap until I met you."

"Which may not be a mishap after all," suggested the young engineer.

"I think as you do about that. I've come to you for advice, and I feel sure that it will be good advice. Now, then, to get to central motive of Clark's plan—a noble, grand act, a royal deed. It

was all for the sake of his little charge, Ernest Gregg.”

“I can imagine that,” said Ralph.

“Clark could not get the little fellow out of his mind. He had got, it seemed, a clew to some of his relatives. He told me that only for a wicked enemy, and if he had his rights, Ernest would be in a position of positive wealth. He said that he was determined to find a certain old man who could clear up the whole situation. He was going to start out with Ernest to solve the secret of his strange life, while his friends supposed that he was following out the plan that his father had arranged. Clark made a plan how we were to keep track of one another, writing to certain points we agreed upon. I started out from Earlville on my part of the arrangement, while Clark stole out of town with his young charge. For three weeks I wrote regularly to him and he replied. During the last month I have not received a word from him, and some of my letters have come back to me.”

“Then you are worried about him?” inquired Ralph.

“I am, very much. You see, he spoke of an enemy of Ernest. How do I know what may have happened to both of them? If Clark should disappear, see what a fix I am in, assuming his name, spending his money. I’d have a hard time explaining reasonably the wild, mad move Clark made me take.”

“It is certainly a singular situation,” admitted the young railroader thoughtfully.

“Isn’t it, now? I’ve come to you to have you help me solve the problem. Think it over, give me some advice. Or, one thing—you go to many places with your railroading. You might keep a watch out for Clark, just as I am doing. You might get a clew to him or run across him.”

“But how should I know him?” inquired Ralph.

“I’m going to give you his picture.”

“That will help.”

Fred drew out a memorandum book and selected from it a small photograph, which he presented to Ralph. The latter saw a bright, manly face portrayed in the picture.

“You keep that,” directed Fred.

Ralph reflected for a few moments. Then they discussed the situation in all its bearings. There was not much to suggest, however, on the part of the young engineer. The most they could hope for, he told Fred, was that one or the other of them might by some circumstance run across the missing Clark and his young charge.

“I’ve got an idea that I ought to run down a branch line of the road I have never been over,” suggested Fred, at the close of their animated colloquy. “If I do, I’ll have to catch a train in an hour. I’ll get word to you soon again, and if you hear of anything that interests me, I’ll arrange so that a letter or a wire will reach me if you address it to Marvin Clark, Lake Hotel, Wellsville.”

“All right,” agreed Ralph.

They strolled together down to the depot a little after that. A train from the west came in just as the one having Fred for a passenger steamed out. A familiar figure alighted from one of the coaches.

“Here I am again,” announced Zeph Dallas, coming up to Ralph.

“How are your little friends, the Canaries?” inquired the young engineer.

“Safe and snug at home,” replied Zeph. “Going up to the house?”

“Yes, just come in from a special trip, and I probably have a lay-over till to-morrow. I want to call and see a friend at the hotel for a few moments. Then I’m at your service.”

When they reached the hotel, Ralph sought out Archie Graham, to find the young inventor in his room, engrossed in putting together some kind of a mechanical model. The latter greeted Ralph with effusion.

“I’m having the prime chance of my life,” declared Archie. “That note of yours was the open sesame to the roundhouse and everything about it. The foreman made me as welcome as a friend. I say, Fairbanks, they think a lot of you, these railroad chums of yours.”

“Do they?” asked Ralph, with a modest smile. “I’m glad they do.”

“I’ll show you results in a few days,” declared Archie, with a show of more enthusiasm than Ralph had ever before seen him exhibit. “I’ve got up an invention that will just about revolutionize engineering.”

“You don’t say so!”

“Yes, I do. Only a day or two, and I’m going to try it—you’ll hear about it, all right.”

Ralph did, in fact, hear about it in a very sensational way, and within a few hours after the interview.

He rejoined Zeph and they proceeded homewards. Zeph was just as mysterious as ever about his new employment. Ralph knew that he was bubbling over from a pent-up lot of secrecy, but he did not encourage his quaint friend to violate an evident confidence reposed in him by his employer.

Zeph announced that he would like to stay over at the Fairbanks home until the next day, and

was made duly welcome. He amazed and amused Ralph by showing him his "detective outfit," as he called it. It was an incongruous mass, stored away in a flat leather case that he secreted in a great pocket made inside his coat—a wig, false whiskers, a pair of goggles, and a lot of other "secret service" paraphernalia, suggested to Zeph by reading some cheap and sensational detective stories.

"Well, I've got to get on the shadowy trail to-day," yawned Zeph, as he got out of bed the next morning.

"Where's the shadow, Zeph?" asked Ralph humorously.

"Let you know when I find my quarry."

"Ha, bad as that?" laughed Ralph.

"Oh, you can smile, Ralph Fairbanks," said Zeph resentfully. "I tell you, I'm on a mighty important case and—say, where did you get that?"

"What?"

"That picture!" exclaimed Zeph, picking up from the bureau the photograph of Marvin Clark, given to the young engineer by Fred Porter the day previous.

"Oh, that picture?" said Ralph. "A friend of mine gave it to me. He's trying to find its original, and hoped I could help him."

"Trying to find him?" repeated Zeph with big staring eyes. "Whew! I can do that for you."

"You can?" demanded Ralph.

"I should say so!"

"Do you know the original of that picture then?" inquired Ralph.

"Sure I do—why, he's the person who hired me to be a detective," was Zeph's remarkable reply.

CHAPTER XX

"LORD LIONEL MONTAGUE"

"You can't get on here!"

"But I've got a paus, don't you know."

"Paws? Yes, I see," said Lemuel Fogg. "Take 'em off the tender, son, or you'll get a jerk that will land you, for we're going to start up pretty soon."

"Hawdly—I have a right here, my man—I've got a paus, don't you know."

"See here, my friend, if you are bound for Hadley, this isn't the train."

"I didn't say Hadley, sir, I said 'hawdly.'"

"He means hardly, Mr. Fogg," put in Ralph, "and he is trying to tell you he has a pass."

"Why don't he talk English, then?" demanded the fireman of No. 999 contemptuously, while the person who had aroused his dislike looked indignant and affronted, and now, extending a card to Ralph, climbed up into the tender.

He was a stranger to the engineer—a man Ralph could not remember having seen before. His attire was that of a conventional tourist, and his face, words and bearing suggested the conventional foreigner. He wore a short, stubby black mustache and side whiskers, a monocle in one eye, and he had a vacuous expression on his face as of a person of immense profundity and "class."

Ralph, glancing over the card, saw that it was a pass from the master mechanic of the road, briefly explaining that the bearer was Lord Lionel Montague, studying up American railroad systems.

"We can't offer you a seat, Lord Montague," spoke Ralph politely. "It's rough work in cramped quarters aboard a locomotive."

"I have noticed it," replied "his ludship." "Not so abroad, by no means, my man. In fact, on the home lines in Lunnon, it is quite the thing, you know, for the quality to make a fad of locomotive parties, and the accommodations for their comfort are quite superior to this, don't you know."

"That so?" growled Fogg, with an unpleasant glance at the stranger. "Why, I've had Senators in my cab in my time, glad to chum with the crew and set back on the coal, jolly and homelike as could be—as you'll have to do, if you stay on this engine."

"Remawkably detestable person!" observed the stranger confidentially to Ralph. "I shall ride only a short distance—to the first stop, in fact."

"You are welcome," replied Ralph, "and if I can explain anything to you, I am at your service."

"Thawnks, thawnks," uttered the pretentious passenger, and fixed his monocled eye on space in a vapid way.

No. 999 was on schedule for the old accommodation run to Riverton. It was nearly a week after the interview between the young engineer and Fred Porter recited in the last chapter. Affairs had quieted down with Ralph, and railroad life had settled down to ordinary routine of the usual commonplace character.

There had at first been considerable interest for Ralph in the remarkable statement of Zeph Dallas that the original of the photograph of Marvin Clark, the son of the railroad president, was his mysterious employer. Further than that involuntary admission of his erratic friend, however, Ralph could not persuade Zeph to go. Zeph declared that he was bound by a compact of the greatest secrecy. He insisted that there could be no possibility of a mistake in his recognition of the picture.

Ralph told him that a friend was very anxious to find his employer, and told Zeph who his friend was. The latter became serious, and acted quite disturbed when he learned that it was Fred Porter, whom he had met several times.

"I'd like to tell you a whole lot, Ralph, but I can't do it!" Zeph had burst out. "Say, one thing, though; I'm going to tell my employer about Fred Porter being so anxious to see him, and you can write to Porter and tell him that his friend is all right and safe, if you want to. What's that address—I may get around to Porter myself."

Ralph told Zeph. That same evening the latter left Stanley Junction, and Ralph had not heard from him since, nor did he receive word from Fred. Temporarily, at least, Zeph, Fred and the railroad president's son, Marvin Clark, the "Canaries" and all the peculiar mystery surrounding them, seemed to have drifted out of the life of the young engineer.

No. 999 was about ready to start on her daily trip when the stranger designated as Lord Montague had appeared. As he stood against the tender bar and seemed to commune with himself on the crudity of American locomotive cabs, Ralph leaned from the window and hailed a friend.

"I say, Graham," he observed, "you seem particularly active and restless this morning."

Ralph had reason for the remark. The young inventor had been very little care to his sponsor and friend during the past week. Given free access to the roundhouse, Archie had just about lived there. Quiet and inoffensive, he at first had been a butt for the jokes of the wipers and the extras, but his good-natured patience disarmed those who harmlessly made fun of him, and those who maliciously persecuted him had one warning from his sledge-hammer fists, and left him alone afterwards.

On this especial morning Archie was stirred with an unusual animation. Ralph noticed this when he first came down to the roundhouse. The young inventor hung around the locomotive suspiciously. He even rode on the pilot of No. 999 to the depot, and for the past five minutes he had paced restlessly up and down the platform as though the locomotive held some peculiar fascination for him. As he now came up to the cab at Ralph's hail, his eye ran over the locomotive in the most interested way in the world, and Ralph wondered why.

"Call me, Fairbanks?" mumbled Archie, and Ralph could not catch his eye.

"I did, Graham," responded Ralph. "What's stirring you?"

"Why?"

"Chasing up 999."

"Am I?"

"It looks that way; it looks to me as if you were watching the locomotive."

"She's worth watching, isn't she?"

"Yes, but you act as if you expect her to do something."

"Ha! ha!—that's it, h'm—you see—say, wish I could run down the line with you this morning."

"We're crowded in the cab, as you see," explained Ralph, "but if you want the discomfort of balancing on the tank cover back there--"

"I'd dote on it—thanks, thanks," said Archie with a fervor that increased Ralph's curiosity as to his strange actions this particular morning.

"Got some new bee in his head?" suggested Fogg, as Archie scrambled up over the coal. "He'll have a new kind of locomotive built by the time we clear the limits—that is, in his mind."

Lord Lionel Montague warmed up to Ralph the next few minutes before starting time. He asked a few casual questions about the mechanisms of No. 999, and then seemed tremendously interested in the young engineer himself.

"I've taken a fawncy to you, Mr. Fairbanks, don't you know," he drawled out. "I'd like to cultivate you, quite. I must call on you at Stanley Junction. There's a great deal you might tell me of interest, don't you see."

"I shall be happy to be of service to you, Lord Montague," responded Ralph courteously.

He did not like the man. There was something untrue about his shifty eye. There was a lot of

“put on” that did not strike Ralph as natural. “His ludship” harped on the youth of Ralph. Only veterans were intrusted with important railroad positions in England—“didn’t he know.” He was asking many questions about Ralph’s juvenile friends, as if with some secret purpose, when the train started up.

“Hi, up there!” Fogg challenged Archie, seated on the tank tender top, “don’t get moving up there and tumble off.”

The young inventor certainly looked as if he was moving. His eyes were glued to the smokestack of the locomotive, as though it possessed a fascinating influence over him.

“Say, there’s some draft this morning,” observed the fireman, half-way to the crossing, as he threw some coal into the furnace.

“I should say so,” replied Ralph; “some sparks, too, I notice.”

“Humph! that new patent spark arrester don’t arrest particularly,” commented Fogg. “Queer,” he added, with a speculative eye on the smokestack.

That appendage of No. 999 was shooting out showers of sparks like a roman candle. As she slid the splits at the crossing and got down to real business, the display was very noticeable.

“I’d say that some of our old time enemies were doctoring the fuel, if it wasn’t that the crowd is off the job after that last drubbing I gave Hall and Wilson,” remarked the fireman. “I can’t understand it. That draft is pulling the coal up through the flues fast as I can shovel it in. Thunder!”

With a yell the fireman of No. 999, as he opened the furnace door to throw in more coal, leaped to one side.

A cyclonic stream, like the sudden blast of a volcano, poured out into the cab.

CHAPTER XXI

ARCHIE GRAHAM’S INVENTION

The cab was suddenly filled with smoke, ashes and steam. Something unusual had happened. Unable to determine it all in a minute, Ralph pulled the lever and set the air brakes.

Mingled with the jar and the hiss of steam there arose a great cry—it was a vast human roar, ringing, anguished, terrified. It proceeded from the lips of the self-dubbed Lord Montague, and glancing towards the tender Ralph witnessed a startling sight.

The monocled, languid-aired nobleman had struck a pose against the tender bar, and as Fogg opened the furnace door and the fire box suddenly belched out a sheet of flame and then a perfect cloud of ashes, the passenger of high degree was engulfed. Fogg, alert to his duty, after nimbly skipping aside, had kicked the furnace door shut. He was not quick enough, however, to prevent what seemed to be half the contents of the furnace from pouring out a great cascade of ashes as if shot from a cannon, taking the astounded and appalled Montague squarely down his front.

“Murder!” he yelled, and grasped his head in his hands to brush away the hot ashes that were searing his face.

As he did so he became a new personality. His mustache was brushed from his lip and fell to the bottom of the cab, while its former possessor made a mad dive to one side.

“Here, you chump!” cried Fogg; “do you want to kill yourself?” and grabbing the singed and frightened passenger, he pinned him against the coal and held him there. In doing this he brushed one whisker from the side of his captive’s face, and the latter lay panting and groaning with nearly all his fictitious make-up gone and quite all of his nerve collapsed.

“What’s happened?” asked Ralph, as they slowed down.

“It felt like a powder blast,” declared Fogg.

Archie Graham had uttered a cry of dismay—of discovery, too, it seemed to Ralph. The young engineer glanced at his friend perched on the top of the tender tank. The face of the young inventor was a study.

Archie acted less like a person startled than as one surprised. He appeared to be neither shocked nor particularly interested. His expression was that of one disappointed. It suddenly flashed across Ralph, he could scarcely have told why, that the young inventor had indeed been “inventing” something, that something had slipped a cog, and that he was responsible for the catastrophe of the moment. Now Archie looked about him in a stealthy, baffled way, as though he was anxious to sneak away from the scene.

Half-blinded, sputtering and a sight, “his ludship” struggled out of the grasp of the fireman. His monocle was gone. His face, divested of its hirsute appendages, Ralph observed, was a

decidedly evil face. As the train came to a halt the dismantled passenger stepped from the cab, and wrathfully tearing the remaining false whiskers from place, sneaked down the tracks, seeking cover from his discomfiture.

"Hi! you've left that nobleman face of yours behind you," shouted Fogg after him. "What's his game, Fairbanks?"

"It staggers me," confessed Ralph. "Hello, there, Graham!"

But the young inventor with due haste was disappearing over the rear of the tender, as though he was ashamed of a part in the puzzling occurrence at the moment.

"Something's wrong," muttered Fogg, and he opened the furnace door timidly. There was no further outburst of ashes. "Queer," he commented. "It couldn't have been powder. I noticed a draft soon as we started. What made it? Where is it now?"

"It was only when we were running fast," submitted Ralph.

The fireman leaped down to the tracks. He inspected the locomotive from end to end. Then he began ferretting under the engine. Ralph watched him climb between the drivers. Strange, muffled mutterings announced some discovery. In a moment or two Fogg crawled out again.

"I vum!" he shouted. "What is this contraption?"

He grasped a piece of wire-netted belting, and as he trailed out its other end, to it was attached a queer-looking device that resembled a bellows. Its frame was of iron, and it had a tube with a steel nozzle.

"I say," observed the young engineer, in a speculative tone, "where did that come from?"

"I found its nozzle end stuck in through one end of the draft holes in the fire box," answered Fogg. "This belt ran around two axles and worked it. Who put it there?"

"Graham," announced Ralph politely. "Well—well—I understand his queer actions now. Bring it up here," continued Ralph, as the fireman was about to throw it aside.

"The young fellow who thinks he is going to overturn the system with his inventions? Well, he must have done a lot of work, and it must have taken a heap of time to fix the thing so it worked. The belt was adjusted to a T. Say, you'd better keep him out of the roundhouse, or he'll experiment on us some day in a way that may lead to something serious."

Ralph put the contrivance under his seat for more leisurely inspection later on. He had to smile to think of the patience, the ingenuity and the eccentric operation of the well-meant project of his young inventor friend. The bellows principle of increasing the furnace draft might have been harmless in a stationary engine. Even on the locomotive it had shown some added suction power while the locomotive was going ahead, but the moment the furnace door was opened the current of air from below sought the nearest vent. That was why "his ludship" had retired under a decided cloud in more ways than one.

When they arrived at Riverton the young engineer made a search for both Archie and the disguised impostor. He located neither. From what he gathered from the conductor, Archie had left the train at the first station after the stop. The pretended English lord had been noticed footing it back towards Stanley Junction.

The return trip was uneventful. Archie did not put in an appearance, and Ralph fancied he might have gone back to Bridgeport. The next morning when Ralph reported for duty, little Torchy, the call boy, sidled up to him in a confidential way.

"Say, Mr. Fairbanks—I noticed a fellow was on your cab on your run yesterday that I have seen before--"

"Indeed," answered Ralph curiously; "what about him?"

"Nothing much, only he was around here a couple of days ago. He pretended that he wanted to see the inside of a roundhouse, and Mr. Forgan sent me with him to show him about. When he got me alone he began asking me all about you. Then he tried to pump me about all your boy friends. I didn't like his looks or his actions, so I thought I would tell you what I have."

"Thank you," said Ralph. "If you ever run against him again, tell me."

"I will, sure," responded the staunch little fellow, who had a genuine friendship for Ralph, who had encouraged him greatly, by initiating him into roundhouse duties when he first came to work for the Great Northern.

Ralph could not fathom the possible motive of the stranger, who apparently was somehow interested in his doings. When they started out on their regular run, he told Fogg what Torchy had imparted to him. The fireman reflected speculatively over the disclosure.

"I can't understand what the fellow is up to," he admitted, "unless one of the gangs is up to a new trick and has hired a stranger to work it on us."

There was a long wait at Riverton after arrival that day. Then they were sided, and Fogg strolled off to a restaurant. Ralph sat down on a pile of ties at the side of the track and enjoyed the lunch that he had brought with him from home. He had just finished it and was about to go to the cab and get a book on railroading to read, when a tall, farmer-appearing fellow came upon the scene.

"Say," he drawled, "is this 999—yes, I see it is."

"All right," nodded Ralph; "what about it?"

"I want to see the engineer."

"I am the engineer."

"Name Fairbanks?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm sent to you."

"By whom?"

"Don't know—never saw the boy before. He's a stranger in Riverton. Came up to me and gave me a half-a-dollar to come here and deliver a message to you."

"Let me know it," directed Ralph.

"Come out here on the tracks, and I'll show you where he said you was to come to see him. See that old shed over beyond those freights? Well, the boy said you was to come there."

"Oh, he did?" commented Ralph musingly.

"Yes, he said to come alone, as it was particular. He said you'd know when I said Martin—Martin, oh, yes, Clark, that's it."

"Marvin Clark," decided the young railroader at once, and as the messenger went his way Ralph ran to the engine cab, threw off his jacket and then walked down the tracks. He of course thought of Fred Porter at once. It looked as though that individual had turned up again and had sent for him, and Ralph was glad to hear from him at last.

The building that had been pointed out to him by the boy messenger was a storage shed for repair tools and supplies. Ralph passed a line of damaged freights, and reaching the shed, found its door open. He stepped across the threshold and peered around among the heaps of iron and steel.

"Is anybody here?" he inquired.

"Yes, two of us," promptly responded a harsh, familiar voice, that gave Ralph a start, for the next instant his arms were seized, drawn behind him, and the young engineer of No. 999 found himself a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXII

IKE SLUMP AGAIN

Ralph knew at once that he had fallen into a trap of some kind. He struggled violently, but it was of no avail. Two persons had slipped up behind him, two pairs of hands were holding him captive.

"Who are you?" demanded the young engineer sharply, over his shoulder.

There was no response, but he was forced forward clear back into the shed. The front door was kicked shut. Ralph was thrown roughly among a heap of junk. He recovered himself quickly and faced his assailants.

The light in the place was dim and uncertain. The only glazed aperture in the shed was a small window at the rear. With considerable interest Ralph strained his gaze in an endeavor to make out his captors. Then in immense surprise he recognized both.

"Ike Slump and Jim Evans," he spoke aloud involuntarily.

"You call the roll," observed Evans with a sneer.

Ralph reflected rapidly. The last he had heard of this precious brace of comrades, they had been sentenced to prison for a series of bold thefts from the railroad company. How they had gotten free he could not decide. He fancied that they had in some way escaped. At all events, they were here, and the mind of the young engineer instantly ran to one of two theories as to their plans: Either the gang at Stanley Junction had hired them to annoy or imperil him, or Slump and Evans were inspired by motives of personal revenge.

Ike Slump had been a trouble to Ralph when he first began his ambitious railroad career. It was Slump who had hated him from the start when Ralph began his apprenticeship with the Great Northern, as related in "Ralph of the Roundhouse." Ralph had detected Slump and others in a plot to rob the railroad company of a lot of brass journal fittings. From that time on through nearly every stage of Ralph's upward career, Slump had gone steadily down the easy slope of crime.

When he linked up with Evans, his superior in years and cunning, he had several times sought revenge against Ralph, and but for the vigilance and courage of the young engineer his life

might have paid the forfeit.

Evans acted promptly, wasting no words. He had drawn a weapon from his pocket, and this he handed to Slump. Then he turned a fierce, lowering visage upon Ralph.

"Fairbanks," he began, "you're to go with us—where, don't matter, nor why. We owe you one, as you've known for a long time, and if it wasn't that we're here for the money there is in it, and not revenge, I'd take pleasure in balancing the months you got us in jail by crippling you so you'd never pull another lever. This is business, though, pure and simple. If you get hurt, you can blame yourself. You've got to go with us."

"Why have I?" demanded Ralph.

"Because we say so. There's a man quite anxious to see you."

"Who is he?"

"That's telling. He wants to ask you just one question. A civil answer given, and you are free as the wind. Slump, take this pistol, get up on that pile of rails, and guard Fairbanks. If he starts to run, shoot—understand?"

"I guess I do!" snarled the graceless Ike, climbing to the top of the pile of rails. "When I think of what this fellow has done to down me, it makes my blood boil."

"I'll be back with a wagon in fifteen minutes," said Evans. "You take your medicine quietly, Fairbanks, and nobody will get hurt. Try any capers, and blame yourself."

The speaker proceeded to the door of the shed, opened it, and closed it after himself as if everything was settled his way. Ike Slump, regarding the captive with a venomous expression of face, sat poising his weapon with the manner of a person glad to have an occasion arise that would warrant its use under the instructions given by his partner.

Ralph summed up the situation and counted his chances. It was apparent to him that only a bold, reckless dash could avail him. There was no chance to pounce upon and disarm the enemy, however, and Ralph hesitated about seeking any risks with a fellow who held him so completely at his mercy.

"How does it seem?" jeered Ike, after a spell of silence, but Ralph did not answer at once. He had experienced no actual fear when so suddenly seized. Now, although he could not disregard a certain risk and menace in the custody of two of his worst enemies, a study of the face of the youth before him made the young railroader marvel as to what he could find enticing in doing wrong, and he actually felt sorrow and sympathy, instead of thinking of his own precarious situation.

"Slump," spoke Ralph finally, "I am sorry for you."

"That so? Ho! ho! truly?" gibed the graceless Ike. "What game are you up to? Don't try any, I warn you. You're clever, Ralph Fairbanks, but I'm slick. You see, the tables have turned. I knew they would, some time."

"What is it you fellows want of me, anyhow?" ventured Ralph, hoping to induce Ike to disclose something.

"Nothing to worry about," declared Slump carelessly. "You'll soon know. Say, though, Fairbanks, don't stir the lion, don't pull his tail."

"You seem to be talking about menageries," observed Ralph.

"You'll think you're in one, sure enough, if you rile Evans up. He won't stand any fooling, you hear me. Shut up, now. We'll leave discussing things till this job is over and done with. Then I may have something to tell you on my own personal account, see?" and Ike tried to look very fierce and dangerous. "I'll give you something to think of, though. You're going to tell a certain man all you know about a certain fellow, and you're going to fix it so that the certain man can find the certain fellow, or you don't run 999 for a time to come, I'll bet you."

"Who is this certain man?" inquired Ralph.

"I don't know his name. He's a stranger to me."

"And who is the certain fellow?"

"I know that one—I don't mind telling you. Then shut up. You've a way of worming things out of people, and I'm not going to help you any—it's Marvin Clark."

"I thought it was," nodded the young engineer reflectively; and then there was a spell of silence.

Ralph could only conjecture as to the significance of Ike's statement. There certainly was some vivid interest that centered about the missing son of the railroad president. That name, Marvin Clark, had been used to lure Ralph to the old shed. Now it was again employed. It took a far flight of fancy to discern what connection young Clark might have with these two outcasts—worse, criminals. Ralph decided that their only mission in any plot surrounding Clark was that of hired intermediaries. He did not know why, but somehow he came to the conclusion that Evans and Slump were acting in behalf of the pretended Lord Montague. Why and wherefore he could not imagine, but he believed that through circumstances now developing he would soon find out.

Slump shifted around on the pile of rails a good deal. They afforded anything but a comfortable resting place. Finally he seemed to decide that he would change his seat. He edged along with

the apparent intention of reaching a heap of spike kegs. He never, however, took his eye away from Ralph. Ike, too, held his weapon at a continual menace, and gave his captive no chance to act against him or run for the door.

Near the end of the pile of rails, Ike prepared to descend backwards to the spike kegs. He planned to do this without for an instant relaxing his vigilance. As he reached out one foot to touch the rails, there was an ominous grinding sound. He had thrown his weight on one rail. The contact pushed this out of place.

Once started, the whole heap began to shift. Ralph, quite awed, saw the pile twist out of shape, and, tumbling in their midst, was his watcher. A scream of mortal agony rang through the old shed, and Ike Slump landed on the floor with half a ton of rails pinioning his lower limbs.

CHAPTER XXIII

A CRITICAL MOMENT

If the rails under which Ike Slump lay had not caught at their ends with other rails, his limbs would have been crushed out of all semblance. Ralph noted this at once, and as well the extreme peril of the situation of the enemy who, a minute previous had been gloating over his helplessness.

"Don't move—for your life, don't move!" shouted Ralph, and he sprang forward in front of the pinioned Ike Slump.

"I'm killed, I'm crushed to death!" bellowed Ike. "Oh, help! help!"

The weapon had fallen from his hand. Both arms wildly sawing the air, Ike shivered and shrank like the arrant craven he was at heart.

"Do just as I say," ordered the young engineer breathlessly. "Don't stir—don't even breathe."

Ralph had jumped to the end of the pile of rails. His quick eye selected the one rail that was the key of the tangle, which, directed wrong, would sweep the mass with crushing force across the pinioned body of Ike. The rails were short lengths. But for this, Ralph, strong as he was, could have done little or nothing. He got a grasp upon the rail. Then he sung out.

"Slip when I lift."

"I can't,—I can't!" wailed Ike.

"You've got to—now!"

Ralph gave a tug at the rail. There was an ominous grind and quiver as the others interlocked. He made a tremendous lift, one which strained every sinew and started the perspiration from every pore.

"I'm numbed, I'm all crushed!" snivelled Ike; nevertheless he managed to crawl out, or rather slip out from under the uplifted rail. He rolled on the dirt floor of the shed, making a great ado. It was just in time, for Ralph felt his eyes starting from his head. He dropped the heavy mass he had sustained and staggered back, well-nigh overcome.

As his breath came back to him, Ralph glanced particularly at Ike. The latter was completely absorbed in his own sufferings. Ralph could discern from the movements of his limbs that neither of them was dislocated and apparently no bones were broken. Still, he realized that they must be badly bruised and that Ike was disabled, at least for a time.

"I'm going for help," he said simply, and darted from the shed. Ike yelled after him to protest against desertion, but Ralph paid no attention. He planned to get to friends while Evans was still away, and he determined to get back with friends by the time Evans returned.

Fogg was at the engine as Ralph ran along the tracks, and one of the brakemen of the accommodation was with him. Ralph rapidly apprized his fireman of the situation.

"Slump and Evans, eh!" muttered Fogg, a deep crinkle of belligerency crossing his forehead. "It was Slump who stole half my chickens. As to Evans, his mean treachery during the strike came near getting me discharged. I thought they were safe in jail."

"So did I," said Ralph. "They seem to have escaped, though. Mr. Fogg, they are bad people to have at large."

"Bad! they're of a dangerous breed, I tell you. Simmons, hustle along with us."

The fireman snatched up a furnace poker and put down the track after Ralph, on the run. He was the first to dart into the shed when they reached it, and ran up against the others following, after a swift glance about the place.

"No one here," he reported. "Gone—they've slipped us—there's no one in this shed."

"Ah, I see," spoke Ralph, with a look about the place outside. "Here are wagon wheels," and

then he cast his eye across the landscape.

It was so crowded with tracks, buildings and trees beyond that he could not look far in the distance. Ralph, however, was satisfied that Evans, returning with the wagon, had made haste to carry his helpless comrade to the vehicle and get beyond reach of capture.

Fogg was for starting a pursuit, but Ralph convinced him of the futility of this course, and they returned to the locomotive. Once there, the fireman went over the case in all its bearings. Ralph had heretofore told him little concerning Fred Porter and Marvin Clark. He had shown him the photograph of the latter some days previous, asking him to keep an eye out for its original. Now he felt that some confidence was due his loyal cab mate, and he recited the entire story of what he knew and his surmises.

"You've got a square head, Fairbanks," said Fogg, "and I'll rely on it every time. It's logic to think your way. Some fellow is mightily interested in this young Clark. None too good is the fellow, either, or he wouldn't have to beat around the bush. No, he's not straight, or he wouldn't hire such fellows as Evans and Ike Slump to help him out."

"I don't understand it all," confessed Ralph, "but I can see that a good deal of mysterious interest centers around this young Clark. I'm going to try and get some word to Porter—and to Zeph Dallas. They should know what's going on regarding Clark."

The incident did not depart from the young engineer's mind during the return trip to Stanley Junction, nor for several days later. With the escape of Evans and Ike Slump, however, the episode ended, at least for the time being. A week and more passed by, and that precious pair and their presumable employer, the pretended Lord Montague, seemed to have drifted out of existence quite as fully as had Zeph, Porter and young Clark.

One morning there was an animated discussion going on when Ralph entered the roundhouse. He was greatly interested in it, although he did not share in the general commotion.

The result of somebody's "confidential" talk with the division superintendent had leaked out—the Great Northern was figuring to soon announce its new train.

"As I get it," observed old John Griscom, "the road is in for a bid on the service the Midland Central is getting."

"You don't mean through business?" spoke an inquiring voice.

"Sure, that," assented the veteran railroader. "We've beat them on the China & Japan Mail run to Bridgeport, and now the scheme is to run the Overland Express in from the north, catch her up here, and cut out Bridgeport at a saving of fifty miles on the regular western run."

"Then they will have to take the Mountain Division from Stanley Junction."

"Just that, if they expect to make the time needed," assented Griscom. "Hey, Bill Somers," to a grizzled old fellow with one arm, who was shaking his head seriously at all this confab, "what you mooning about?"

"I wouldn't take that run," croaked Somers, "if they gave me a solid gold engine with the tender full of diamonds. I left an arm on that route. Say, Dave Little and I had a construction run over those sliding curves up and down the canyon grades. It lasted a month. There were snowslides, washouts, forest fires. There's a part of the road that's haunted. There's a hoodoo over one section, where they kill a man about once a week. Little lost his leg and his job there. My old arm is sleeping thereabouts in some ravine. No Mountain Division run for me, boys!"

"You won't get it, never fear," observed a voice.

"No, I know that," retorted Somers a little sadly, indicating his helplessness by moving his stump of an arm, "but I pity the fellow who does."

Day by day after that there were new additions to the fund of gossip concerning the new run. It all interested Ralph. Nothing definite, however, was as yet stated officially. Ralph and Fogg continued on the accommodation, and there was now little break in the regular routine of their railroad experience.

Ralph had made a short cut across the switch yards one morning, when a stirring episode occurred that he was not soon to forget, nor others. It took an expert to thread the maze of cars in motion, trains stalled on sidings, and trains arriving and departing.

It was the busiest hour of the day, and Ralph kept his eye out sharply. He had paused for a moment in a clear triangle formed by diverging rails, to allow an outward bound train to clear the switch, when a man on the lower step of the last car waved his hand and hailed him.

It was the master mechanic, and Ralph was pleased at the notice taken of him, and interested to learn what the official wanted of him. The master mechanic, alighting, started across the tracks to join Ralph.

A train was backing on the one track between them. Another train was moving out on the rails still nearer to Ralph.

It was a scene of noise, commotion and confusion. If the master mechanic had been a novice in railroad routine, Ralph could not have repressed a warning shout, for with his usual coolness that official, timing all train movements about him with his practiced eye, made a quick run to clear the train backing in to the depot. He calculated then, Ralph foresaw, to cross the tracks along which the outgoing train was coming.

"He's taking a risk—it's a graze," murmured the young engineer in some trepidation.

The master mechanic was alert and nimble, though past middle age. He took the chances of a spry jump across the rails, his eye fixed on the outgoing train, aiming to get across to Ralph before it passed. In landing, however, he miscalculated. The run and jump brought him to a dead halt against a split switch. His foot drove into the jaws of the frog as if wedged there by the blow of a sledge-hammer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NEW RUN

The young engineer stood shocked and motionless—only, however, for the minutest fraction of a moment. A railroad man's life is full of sudden surprises and situations calling for prompt, decisive and effective action. Ralph had learned this from experience.

The master mechanic was in the direct path of the train backing into the depot. The one he had just left and the one proceeding in the same direction shut him in where there was no flagman or switches. The train bearing down upon him was on a rounding bend of rails, the locomotive not in view, and there was no possible chance of signalling the engineer.

As Ralph started forward the engine of the outbound train passed him. He waited for one car only to pass him. How he skimmed its rear platform he never knew. It was a daring, reckless spring, and he landed on the planking beyond the rails on a dizzying slide. The next instant he was at the side of the imperilled railroad official.

"I'm caught!" gasped the master mechanic, with a white but set face, as he recognized Ralph.

"Swing down!" cried the young railroader. "It's your only chance."

The master mechanic barely suppressed a groan as he toppled sideways. The twist to his ankle made him wince. Ralph saw that his foot was held as in a vise. No amount of pulling could get him free. The train backing down was less than thirty feet away.

"Hold steady," breathed Ralph in a shaking tone, and his hand dove for his pocket. He recalled it all afterwards as a remarkable thing that, standing there, a great peril hovering, there seemed to flash through his mind a vivid photograph of Torchy.

The call boy at the roundhouse was a great friend of the young engineer. Ralph had been his model, as was he his friend. He had loaned the little fellow a book on railroading that had delighted Torchy, and observing Ralph sharpening a peg for his bumper with a decidedly blunted knife, he had begged the privilege of getting it sharpened for him.

When he had returned the knife to Ralph the day previous, Torchy declared that it was sharp as a razor and would cut a hair in two. Ralph found this to be no exaggeration. In addition Torchy had oiled the blade hinges. Now the young engineer thought of Torchy and of the knife as he drew it from his pocket, whipped open its big blade and made a dive rather than a swoop beside the body of the master mechanic.

"Pull back your foot!" cried Ralph, and made a swoop. The flanges of the near truck wheels were grinding on the edge of the rails not five feet away. Ralph's arm described a deft oval movement. In one swift stroke he slit the shoe from vamp to sole. He was conscious that the foot of the master mechanic came free. Then something struck Ralph, and he felt himself tossed aside inert and unconscious by some stunning force.

When he again opened his eyes Ralph caught the vague hum of a lingo of switch pidgin, smut-faced, blear-eyed men near by, himself stretched at full length on sleeping car cushions on the floor of the doghouse. He sat up promptly. There was a momentary blur to his sight, but this quickly passed away.

"Aha—only a bump—I told you so!" cried bluff-hearted Tim Forgan, the foreman, jumping from a bench and approaching Ralph.

"All right, Fairbanks?" questioned John Griscom, coming to his side.

"Right as a trivet," reported Ralph, getting to his feet. "What hit me?"

"The step of a coach, it seems," explained Forgan.

Ralph passed his hand over his head until it rested on a lump and a sore spot near one ear. It was wet and greasy where some liniment had been applied.

"The master mechanic?" he asked, with a quick memory of what had happened.

"Ankle wrenched," said Griscom. "We made him get to a surgeon on a litter. He minded nothing but you, till he was sure that you were all right."

Ralph uttered a vast sigh of relief and satisfaction. Forgan led him to his own special office armchair. Half-a-dozen crowded about him, curious for details of the accident no one of them

had witnessed.

Ralph gave them the particulars as he could remember them. He asked for a drink of water, felt of the bump again with a smiling grimace, and arose to his feet.

"Same schedule, I suppose?" he inquired, starting to go outside the doghouse and inspect the bulletin board on which daily orders were posted.

"You don't mean that you are going to make your run to-day, Fairbanks?" asked the foreman.

"Why not?"

"Used up."

"Am I?" queried Ralph with a smile. "Then I don't know it. I fancy it was a narrow escape, and I am grateful for it."

"The master mechanic was looking for you when he got frogged," observed Griscom.

"Yes, I thought he was," nodded Ralph.

"Here, Fairbanks," broke in the foreman of the roundhouse, "tack up this flimsy with the rest, will you?"

Ralph took the tissue sheet tendered, stepped through the open doorway into the roundhouse, and set the sheet upon two tacks on the bulletin board. He started to stroll over to No. 999 in her stall.

"Hold on," challenged Forgan; "that flimsy just came in. It's an important order. Better read it, Fairbanks."

"All right," assented Ralph, and turning, cast his eyes at the sheet. They distended wide, for this is what he read:

"No. 7, new train, Overland Express, Mountain Division, 6.12 p. m., beginning Monday, the 15th. Engineer: Fairbanks—Fireman: Fogg."

"My!" was all that Ralph could gasp out.

A great hearty hand, that of the old railroad veteran, John Griscom, landed on Ralph's shoulder with a resounding slap.

"Fairbanks!" he roared in the ear of the bewildered young engineer, "the top rung of the ladder at last!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE MOUNTAIN DIVISION

"Well, lad, you've passed muster and got to the head of the class!" proclaimed old John Griscom.

"Oh, no," dissented Ralph Fairbanks; "I'm just started in to learn what real railroading means."

"I'd call you a pretty apt student, then," put in Tim Forgan, foreman of the Stanley Junction roundhouse.

"If there's any man, boy or child in this doghouse who says that young Fairbanks isn't a crackerjack, let him step right up here and take his medicine!" vaunted Lemuel Fogg, playfully, but with a proud look of admiration at the expert young engineer.

"It's the best part of it to know that you fellows mean every word you say and believe in me," observed Ralph. "Your encouragement and influence have boosted me up to the Overland Express all right—I'll try and never make you ashamed of having backed me."

Ralph Fairbanks felt good and showed it. His friends shared in his emotions and sentiments, and that made the present occasion doubly glad and welcome. It was one of those rare moments, coming only once in a while, when Ralph and his comrades had an idle half hour to chat and compliment each other in the doghouse.

The Overland Express had become an established feature of the Great Northern—as little Torchy had phrased it, "a howling success." A week had gone by, and now, seated in the midst of his loyal friends, Ralph felt that he had made good on a promotion that placed him at the top notch of engineering service.

It was a big thing for a youth to gain that high distinction—engineer of the Overland Express. Looking back over the active, energetic career that had led up to this, however, Ralph realized that the climax had been reached a step at a time through patience, perseverance and genuine hard work. It was a proof to him that any person following discipline and having as a motto precision and finality, was bound to succeed. It was a most enjoyable breathing spell to realize that all the anxiety, dash and novelty of the experimental trips over the Mountain Division were past, and he now felt that he knew the route and all its details perfectly.

Ralph had found time to do some thinking about his friends the past day or two. He had seen two of them, for Van Sherwin and little Limpy Joe had come down from the Short Line, and had spent a pleasant day at the Fairbanks home. Archie Graham, too, had put in an appearance. The young inventor looked shamefaced and distressed when he admitted all that Ralph had guessed concerning the patent bellows—draft improvement for locomotives.

"It only worked the wrong way," explained Archie; "next time--"

"Next time try it on some other railroad, Archie," advised Ralph. "They're watching for you with rifles down at the Great Northern roundhouse."

"Huh!" snorted Archie contemptuously; "they'll be sorry when I strike some real big thing and another line gets it. Now then, I've got something brand new—the rocket danger signal."

"Go right ahead experimenting with it, only choose a spot where you won't hurt any one," advised Ralph. "You're all right, Archie," declared the young railroader, slapping his comrade appreciatively on the shoulder, "only you are too ambitious. I have no doubt that you will some day hit something tangible. It's a long, patient road, though—this inventing things."

"You bet it is," assented Archie with force.

"And you attempt too grand beginnings. Take something more simple and easy than trying to revolutionize railroad service all at once, and gradually work up to bigger things."

"Say, there's sense in that, an old inventor told me the same thing," said Archie; "but you see this rocket danger signal of mine is a new thing. I'm going to Bridgeport to-morrow to get some fixings I have in my workshop there. You'll hear from me later, Fairbanks."

Concerning Zeph, Fred Porter and Marvin Clark the young railroader had heard nothing since the last visit of Zeph to Stanley Junction. Many a time he wondered what had become of them. He had all kinds of theories as to their continued mysterious absence, but no solution offered as time wore on.

The Overland Express had not become an old thing with Ralph. He felt that the charm and novelty of running the crack train of the road could never wear out. With each trip, however, there came a feeling of growing strength and self-reliance. Ralph had learned to handle the proposition aptly, and he took a great pride in the time record so far.

"It's a lively run, and no mistake," he remarked to Fogg, as they started out from the depot that evening. "We haven't had any of the direful mishaps, though, that those old doghouse croakers predicted."

"No," admitted the fireman, but he accompanied the word with a serious shake of the head; "that's to come. I'm trained enough to guess that another frost or two will end in the season that every railroad man dreads. Wait till the whiskers get on the rails, lad, and a freshet or two strikes 999. There's some of those culverts make me quake when I think of the big ice gorges likely to form along Dolliver's Creek. Oh, we'll get them—storms, snowslides and blockades. The only way is to remember the usual winter warning, 'extra caution,' keep cool, and stick to the cab to the last."

Summer had faded into autumn, and one or two sharp frosts had announced the near approach of winter. The day before there had been a slight snow flurry. A typical fall day and a moonlit night had followed, however, and Ralph experienced the usual pleasure as they rolled back the miles under flying wheels. They took the sharp curves as they ran up into the hills with a scream of triumph from the locomotive whistle every time they made a new grade.

"Waste of steam, lad, that," observed Fogg, as they rounded a curve and struck down into a cut beyond which lay the town of Fordham.

"Better to be safe," responded Ralph. "There's a crossing right ahead where the old spur cuts in."

"Yes, but who ever crosses it?" demanded the fireman.

"Some one did two nights ago," insisted Ralph. "I'm positive that we just grazed a light wagon crossing the roadway leading into the cut."

"Then it was some stray farmer lost off his route," declared Fogg. "Why, that old spur has been rusting away for over five years, to my recollection. As to the old road beyond being a highway, that's nonsense. There's no thoroughfare beyond the end of the spur. The road ends at a dismantled, abandoned old factory, and nobody lives anywhere in this section."

"Is that so?" Toot! toot! toot!

The whistle screeched out sharply. The fireman stuck his head out of the window. Ralph had already looked ahead.

"I declare!" shouted Fogg, staring hard. "Swish—gone! But what was it we passed?"

Ralph did not speak. He sat still in a queer kind of realization of what they both had just seen, and in the retrospect. While he and his fireman had been conversing, just ahead in the white moonlight he had seen two human figures against the sky. It was a flashing glimpse only, for the train was making a forty mile clip, but, dangling from a tree overhanging the side of the cliff lining the tracks on one side, he had made out two boys.

"The Canaries!" he murmured to himself, in profound surprise and deep interest. "I even heard them whistle."

Ralph was so sure that the little swinging figures he had seen were the lithe, strange creatures who had been brought to Stanley Junction by Zeph Dallas, that he thought about it all the rest of the trip. He said nothing further to Fogg about the circumstance, but he resolved to investigate later on.

The young engineer tried to calculate ahead how some day soon he could arrange to visit the vicinity of the old Fordham spur. He was positive that he had seen the two Canaries. Their presence at the spur indicated that they must be denizens of its neighborhood. This being true, their presence might indicate the proximity of Zeph Dallas. At least the strange young foreigners might know what had become of the ardent young "detective."

Ralph made a good many inquiries of his fireman as to the Fordham spur. Fogg simply knew that it ran to an old ruined factory long since abandoned. On the return trip Ralph kept a sharp lookout as they neared the cut. There was no second appearance of the Canaries, however, nor the next night, nor that following. The young engineer found no opportunity of visiting the place, but he kept his plan to do so constantly in mind.

It was two days later as he made the short cut to the roundhouse about noon, that Ralph was greeted by a new discovery that fairly took his breath away. He had stepped aside to wait till a locomotive with one car attached passed the crossing. The peculiar oddness of the car at once attracted his attention.

It was an old tourist car, used only on far western railroads. He had seen its like only once or twice before. Its inside shades were all drawn. There was no sight of life about it. The locomotive belonged to the northern branch of the Great Northern, and had the right of way and was tracked for the Mountain Division.

"That's a queer layout," soliloquized Ralph, as the strange outfit flashed by. "Hello!"

The young engineer uttered a great shout. As the car passed him he naturally glanced at its rear platform.

Upon its step in solitary possession of the car sat his long-lost friend—Zeph Dallas.

CHAPTER XXVI

MYSTERY

Ralph Fairbanks saw Zeph Dallas distinctly and recognized him. The latter looked up as the young engineer uttered an irrepressible shout. He started to wave his hand. Then he shrank down on the car step as if seeking to hide himself.

Ralph stood gazing after the coach until it had disappeared from view. From the look of things he decided that Zeph was not casually stealing a ride. Something about him suggested a sense of proprietorship—a certain official aspect as if he had a right to be where Ralph had seen him, was, in fact, in charge of the car.

"A queer car—the queerest old relic I ever saw," mused Ralph. "I'm going to look into this affair."

"Say, Mr. Fairbanks," spoke little Torchy as the young engineer entered the roundhouse; "just saw an old friend of ours."

"Did you?" spoke Ralph. "You don't mean Zeph Dallas, do you?"

"That's who," nodded Torchy. "Big as life on a single car run—and, say, such a car!"

"Do you know where it came from, or where it was bound for?" inquired Ralph.

"No, but I heard one of the fellows here say it must have come over the north branch."

"I thought so, too," said Ralph, and after a stroll about the place he went down to the dispatcher's office. Ralph knew the railroad routine well, and he soon had a good friend working in his interest. He was one of the assistants in the office of the chief dispatcher. Ralph had loaned him a little sum of money once when he was off on the sick list. It had been paid back promptly, but the man was a grateful fellow, and, under the influence of a sense of obligation, was glad to return the favor in any way he could.

"I'll fix you out, Fairbanks," he promised, and he kept his word, for as Ralph sat in the doghouse two mornings later the man came to its doorway, peered in, and beckoned to his friend to come outside.

"All right, Fairbanks," he reported, holding a card in his hand bearing some memoranda; "I've got the tracer."

"Good!" applauded Ralph.

"Here's the dope—that engine and old tourist car was a kind of a special—the craziest special, though, that either you or I ever heard of."

"Is that so?" inquired Ralph.

"Listen, and see. She started on extra orders from Brampton, the yards up on the north division. Was chartered for a run via the Junction to Fordham spur."

"Indeed?" murmured Ralph thoughtfully.

"It was a plain twenty-four hours' charter, same as a picnic or an excursion special, but there was only one passenger, conductor, or whatever you might call him—a kid."

"Yes," nodded Ralph, "Zeph Dallas."

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when I found that out," went on the man from the dispatcher's office, "although I didn't find it out until later. Yes, the train had been rented and paid for by our old extra wiper here, that dreamer, kicker and would-be detective, Dallas. A pretty penny it must have cost. Where did he get the money? Skylarking around the country like a millionaire, and what did he pick out that antiquated curiosity of a relic car for? Well, it was the 'Dallas Special,' sure enough, and it made its run just the same as if he was a railroad president inspecting the lines."

"I'm interested," explained Ralph.

"I'm jiggergasted," added the dispatcher; "I got the line on their route by wire to Brampton. I found that the contract was to run to Fordham spur and back to Brampton."

"But what for?" inquired Ralph.

"To deliver some special freight presumably," said the dispatcher. "At first I wondered if things mightn't be stirring up in a new business way at the old factory. Thought maybe they were going to do some blasting, and Dallas had been hired to run through a load of giant powder. Well, I was off in my guess."

"How did you find that out?" asked Ralph.

"I caught the Brampton outfit on the return trip. She had to switch here for an hour to get the right of way north. I went over to the siding and happened to know the engineer."

"And where was Zeph?"

"They left him up at the spur."

"H'm," commented Ralph, feeling that Zeph was indeed enveloping himself in a dense mist of mystery.

"The engineer just grinned and haw-hawed when I asked him about his run. He said that Dallas had acted like a fellow on the most serious business, the whole run through. When they got to the spur he had them run in about two hundred feet. Then he sat down by the side of the track, watch in hand, solemnly waited for an hour to pass by, and then told the engineer the trip was ended and he was satisfied."

"He didn't explain--" began Ralph in wonderment.

"Not a word. He just waved his hand grandly good-by to the engineer, and passed out of sight. It was a queer go—wasn't it, now? The engineer and fireman were dumfounded. They looked into the car out of sheer curiosity."

"And found?" pressed Ralph.

"Nothing."

"What!"

"No—empty."

Ralph was bewildered, and said so. The dispatcher acknowledged the same sentiment, so had the engineer and the fireman, he said.

"There you have it," he remarked. "Queer go, eh?"

"The strangest I ever heard of," confessed Ralph.

"You see, there's no motive to trace," observed the dispatcher in a puzzled, baffled way. "Think of the cost of it! Think of the mystery about the whole affair! What is Dallas up to, and why the spur?"

"I don't know," admitted the young engineer, equally perplexed, "but I'm going to find out, make sure of that."

Things were certainly focusing around Fordham spur, there was no doubt of it. That point of the road was a decided point of interest to Ralph every time the Overland Express neared the spur on succeeding trips. He could only conjecture that Zeph and the Canaries and others in whom Zeph was interested, were located somewhere in the vicinity. However, he caught no sight of any person in the neighborhood of the spur as he passed it. The thing was getting to be a worry to the young engineer, but although he daily promised himself he would manage some way to visit the place, no favorable opportunity presented.

The run to Rockton and back had become harder as cold weather came on. There was a call for extra vigilance and close attention to routine. A snowstorm caught them one night on the out run, and Ralph found out that it was no trifle running with blurred signals among the deep mountain cuts. A great rain followed, then a freeze up, then another heavy fall of snow, and the crew of the Overland Express had a rigorous week of it.

They had made the run to Rockton four hours late on account of a broken bridge, and the next evening when they reported at the roundhouse, engineer and fireman found a cancelled trip instead of readiness for their regular return run to Stanley Junction. The foreman was busy in his office at the telephone, receiving continual instructions from the dispatcher. He was sending men and messengers in every direction. The exigencies of the hour required blockade and wrecking crews. The foreman looked bothered and worried, and nodded to Ralph and Fogg in a serious way as there was a lull at the 'phone.

"No run to-night, boys," he announced. "You'd better get back to your warm beds."

"Blockade on the Mountain Division?" inquired the fireman.

"Worse than that. The whole division is annulled this Side of Fordham, and that's over half the run. Two bridges down, a freight wreck at Wayne, and the mountain cuts are choked with drifts. I doubt if you will break through for a couple of nights."

"H'm," observed Fogg. "I fancied to-day's storm would shut up things."

"It has. We're half clear south, but west and north there isn't a wheel moving within fifty miles."

"We may as well make the best of it then, Fairbanks," said the fireman, "and get back to our boarding house."

The speaker started for the door and Ralph followed him. Just then with a sudden roar of the tempest outside the door was swept open. Two snow-covered forms came in.

They were men closely muffled up, and they paused for a moment to shake the snow from their heavy enveloping overcoats. The foreman stared curiously at the intruders. One of them threw his overcoat open. Fogg grasped Ralph's arm with a start as he seemed to recognize the man.

"Hello!" he ejaculated in a sharp half whisper. "What does this mean, Fairbanks? It's the president of the Great Northern."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RAILROAD PRESIDENT

As the person Fogg designated pushed back his storm cap and came under the light of a bracket lamp, Ralph observed that the fireman had been correct in his surmise—it was Mr. Robert Grant, president of the road. He busied himself removing the snow from his garments and taking in the warmth of the place, while his companion came forward to the doghouse.

Ralph and Fogg drew to one side, curious and interested. They now recognized the man who had entered the roundhouse with the president as Lane, superintendent of the Mountain Division of the Great Northern. His manner was hurried, worried and serious. A big load of responsibility rested on his official shoulders, and he realized it and showed it. He nodded brusquely to Ralph and Fogg, and then went up to the desk where the foreman sat.

"Get the dispatcher's office, Jones, and get it quick," he spoke tersely, and he added something in an undertone. The foreman gave a slight start. From the way he turned and stared at the companion of the superintendent, Ralph could trace that he had just been informed of his identity.

"Here you are," said the foreman, after a minute at the 'phone and handing the receiver to the superintendent. The latter, without seating himself, instantly called over the wire:

"This is Superintendent Lane. I want the chief dispatcher." A pause. "That you, Martin?—Yes?—Hold the wire. The president of the road wants to talk with you. Mr. Grant."

Ralph knew the railroad president quite well. It was a long time since he had seen him. That was at headquarters, after Ralph and some of his railroad friends had succeeded in rescuing a relative of the official from a band of blackmailers. Ralph did not believe that the president would remember him. He was both surprised and pleased when the official, glancing about in his keen, quick way, smiled and mentioned his name in greeting, nodded to Fogg, and then went up to the foreman's table.

Spread out upon this was an outline map of the great Northern and all its branches. The foreman had been utilizing it as an exigency chart. He had three pencils beside it—red, green and blue, and these he had used to designate by a sort of railroad signal system the condition of the lines running out of Rockton. Red signified a wreck or stalled train, green snow blockades, blue bridges down and culverts under water. The map was criss-crossed with other special marks, indicating obstructions, flood damage and the location of wrecking crews.

"As bad as that!" commented the president in a grave tone, with a comprehensive glance over the chart. Then he picked up the receiver.

"Martin, chief dispatcher," he spoke through the 'phone. "Give me the situation over the

Mountain Division in a nutshell.”

What followed took barely sixty seconds. The information must have been as distressing as it was definite, for Ralph noticed a deeper concern than ever come over the serious face of the official.

“How’s the South Branch?” he inquired next.

“It’s useless, Mr. Grant,” put in the superintendent, as the president dropped the receiver with a disappointed and anxious sigh. After receiving some further information he again swept his eye over the map on the table. His fingers mechanically followed the various divisions outlined there. The foreman came to his side.

“Excuse me, Mr. Grant,” he spoke respectfully, “but I’m in pretty close touch with conditions along the lines. If I can explain anything--”

“You can. That is the old Shelby division?” inquired the official, his finger point resting on a line on the chart running due southeast between the Mountain Division and the South Branch out of Rockton.

“Yes, sir,” assented the foreman proudly. “You know it has been practically abandoned except for coal freight, since the south line was completed. It’s used as a belt line now—transfer at Shelby Junction.”

“What’s the condition.”

“Risky. We sent a freight over this morning. It got through four hours late.”

“But it got through, you say?” spoke the official earnestly. “Get the dispatcher again. Ask for details on that division. Don’t lose any time.”

The foreman was busy at the ‘phone for some minutes. As he held the receiver suspended in his hand, he reported to the railroad president:

“Snow and drifting wind reported between here and Dunwood.”

“What else?”

“Look out for washouts and culverts and bridges damaged by running ice and water between Dunwood and Kingston.”

“That’s half the forty-five miles—go head.”

“Between Kingston and Shelby Junction water out over the bottoms and flood coming down the valley.”

“What’s on the schedule?”

“All schedules cancelled, not a wheel running except on instructions from this end.”

“Give them,” spoke the official sharply. “Tell the dispatcher to keep the line clear from end to end. Wire to the stations that a special is coming through, no stops.”

“Yes, sir,” assented the foreman in wonderment, and executed the order. The official stood by his side until he had completed the message. Then he said:

“Tell the dispatcher to get Clay City, and find out if the Midland Express over the Midland Central left on time.”

“On time, sir, and their road is not much hampered,” reported the foreman a few minutes later.

“All right,” nodded the official briskly. “Now then, get out your best locomotive. Give her a shallow caboose, and get her ready as speedily as you can.”

The foreman ran out into the roundhouse. The president took out his watch. To the infinite surprise of Ralph he called out:

“This way, Fairbanks.”

He placed a hand on the shoulder of the young engineer and looked him earnestly in the eye.

“I know you and your record,” he said. “Is that your regular fireman?” indicating Fogg.

“Yes, sir, Lemuel Fogg. We’re on No. 999, Overland Express.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” spoke Mr. Grant hurriedly. “Mr. Fogg!”

The fireman approached promptly.

“My friends,” continued the official rapidly to both. “I have got to reach Shelby station by 10.15. I must catch the Night Express on the Midland Central at that point—without fail,” added Mr. Grant with emphasis.

“Yes, sir,” nodded Fogg coolly.

“One minute late means the loss of a great big fortune to the Great Northern. The minute on time means anything in reason you two may ask, if you make the run.”

“We are here to make the run, Mr. Grant, if you say so,” observed Ralph.

“Sure,” supplemented Fogg, taking off his coat. “Is that the order, sir?”

“I haven’t the heart to order any man on a run a night like this,” responded the official, “but if you mean it--”

"Fairbanks," shot out the fireman, all fire and energy, "I'll get 999 ready for your orders," and he was out into the roundhouse after the foreman in a flash.

"Mr. Grant, you're taking a long chance," suggested the division superintendent, coming up to where the president and Ralph stood.

"Yes, and it must be any chances, Fairbanks," said the official. He was becoming more and more excited each succeeding minute. "I'm too old a railroader not to know what the run means. If you start, no flinching. It's life or death to the Mountain Division, what you do this night."

"The Mountain Division?" repeated Ralph, mystified.

"Yes. It's an official secret, but I trusted you once. I can trust you now." Mr. Grant drew a folded paper from his pocket. "The president of the Midland Central is on the Night Express, returning from the west. The document I show you must be signed before he reaches the city, before midnight, or we lose the right to run over the Mountain Division. If he once reaches the city, interests adverse to the Great Northern will influence him to repudiate the contract, which only awaits his signature to make it valid. He will sign it if I can intercept him. Can you make Shelby Junction, ninety miles away, in two hours and fifteen minutes?"

"I will make Shelby Junction ahead of the Night Express," replied Ralph calmly, but with his heart beating like a triphammer, "or I'll go down with 999."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A RACE AGAINST TIME

There was a thrill and fervor to the present situation that appealed to Ralph mightily. The brisk, animated procedure of the president of the Great Northern had been one of excitement and interest, and at its climax the young engineer found himself stirred up strongly.

Mr. Grant smiled slightly at Ralph's valiant declaration. He drew the division superintendent aside in confidential discourse, and Ralph went to the bulletin board and began studying the routeing of the Shelby division. Then he hurried out into the roundhouse.

No. 999 was steamed up quickly. Ralph put the cab in rapid order for a hard run. The foreman hurried back to his office and telephoned to the yards. When No. 999 ran out on the turntable it was the foreman himself who opened the ponderous outside doors.

"It's some weather," observed Fogg, as the giant locomotive swung out into the heart of a driving tempest.

The foreman directed their movements to a track where a plug engine had just backed in with a light caboose car. There was no air brake attachment and the coupling was done quickly.

"All ready," reported Ralph, as Mr. Grant came up with the division superintendent.

The railroad president stepped to the platform of the caboose, spoke a few words to his recent companion in parting, and waved his hand signal-like for the start.

Fogg had been over the Shelby division several times, only once, however, on duty. He knew its "bad spots," and he tried to tell his engineer about them as they steamed off the main track.

"There's just three stations the whole stretch," he reported, "and the tracks are clear—that's one good point."

"Yes, it is only obstruction and breakdowns we have to look out for," said Ralph. "Give us plenty of steam, Mr. Fogg."

"There's heaps of fuel—a good six tons," spoke the fireman. "My! but the stack pulls like a blast furnace."

The cab curtains were closely fastened. It was a terrible night. The snow came in sheets like birdshot, a half-sleet that stung like hail as it cut the face. The rails were crusted with ice and the sounds and shocks at curves and splits were ominous. At times when they breasted the wind full front it seemed as if a tornado was tugging at the forlorn messenger of the night, to blow the little train from the rails.

Fogg stoked the fire continuously, giving a superabundant power that made the exhaust pop off in a deafening hiss. They ran the first ten miles in twelve minutes and a half. Then as they rounded to the first station on the run, they were surprised to receive the stop signal.

"That's bad," muttered the fireman, as they slowed down. "Orders were for no stops, so this must mean some kind of trouble ahead."

"What's this?" spoke Mr. Grant sharply, appearing on the platform from the lighted caboose. He held his watch in his hand, and his pale face showed his anxiety and how he was evidently counting the minutes.

An operator ran out from the station and handed a tissue sheet to Ralph. The latter read it by the light of the cab lantern. Mr. Grant stepped down from the platform of the caboose.

"What is it, Fairbanks?" he asked somewhat impatiently.

"There's a great jam at the dam near Westbrook," reported Ralph. "Driftwood has crossed the tracks near there, and the operator beyond says it will be a blockade if the dam breaks."

"Are you willing to risk it?" inquired the official.

"That's what we are here for," asserted Ralph.

"Then don't delay."

"It's getting worse and worse!" exclaimed Fogg, after a half-hour's further running.

Ralph never forgot that vital hour in his young railroad experience. They were facing peril, they were grazing death, and both knew it. The wind was a hurricane. The snow came in great sheets that at times enveloped them in a whirling cloud. The wheels crunched and slid, and the pilot threw up ice and snow in a regular cascade.

There was a sickening slew to the great locomotive as they neared Westbrook. The track dropped here to take the bridge grade, and as they struck the trestle Fogg uttered a sharp yell and peered ahead.

"We can't stop now!" he shouted; "put on every pound of steam, Fairbanks."

Ralph was cool and collected. He gripped the lever, his nerves set like iron, but an awed look came into his eyes as they swept the expanse that the valley opened up.

The trestle was fully half a foot under water already, and the volume was increasing every moment. Fogg piled on the coal, which seemed to burn like tinder. Twice a great jar sent him sprawling back among the coal of the tender. The shocks were caused by great cakes of ice or stray timbers shooting down stream with the gathering flood, and sliding the rails.

"She's broke!" he panted in a hushed, hoarse whisper, as they caught sight of the dam. There was a hole in its center, and through this came pouring a vast towering mass fully fifteen feet high, crashing down on the bridge side of the obstruction, shooting mammoth bergs of ice into the air. As the sides of the dam gave way, they were fairly half-way over the trestle. It seemed that the roaring, swooping mass would overtake them before they could clear the bridge.

The light caboose was swinging after its groaning pilot like the tail of a kite. A whiplash sway and quiver caused Ralph to turn his head.

The door of the caboose was open, and the light streaming from within showed the railroad president clinging to the platform railing, swaying from side to side. He evidently realized the peril of the moment, and stood ready to jump if a crash came.

A sudden shock sent the fireman reeling back, and Ralph was nearly thrown from his seat. The locomotive was bumping over a floating piece of timber of unusual size, and toppling dangerously. Then there came a snap. The monster engine made a leap as if freed from some incubus.

"The caboose!" screamed Fogg, and Ralph felt a shudder cross his frame. He could only risk a flashing glance backward—the caboose was gone! It had broken couplings, and had made a dive down through the flood rack clear to the bottom of the river, out of sight. Then No. 999 struck the edge of the up grade in safety, past the danger line, gliding along on clear tracks now.

Fogg stood panting for breath, clinging to his seat, a wild horror in his eyes. Ralph uttered a groan. His hand gripped to pull to stop, a sharp shout thrilled through every nerve a message of gladness and joy.

"Good for you—we've made it!"

The railroad president came sliding down the diminished coal heap at the rear of the tender. He had grasped its rear end, and had climbed over it just as the caboose went hurtling to destruction. The glad delight and relief in the eyes of the young engineer revealed to the official fully his loyal friendship. Fogg, catching sight of him, helped him to his feet with a wild hurrah. The fireman's face shone with new life as he swung to his work at the coal heap.

"If we can only make it—oh, we've got to make it now!" he shouted at Ralph.

There was a sharp run of nearly an hour. It was along the lee side of a series of cuts, and the snow was mainly massed on the opposite set of rails. Ralph glanced at the clock.

"We're ahead of calculations," he spoke to Fogg.

"We're in for another struggle, though," announced the fireman. "When we strike the lowlands just beyond Lisle, we'll catch it harder than ever."

Ralph was reeking with perspiration, his eyes cinder-filled and glazed with the strain of continually watching ahead. There had not been a single minute of relief from duty all the way from Westbrook. They struck the lowlands. It was a ten-mile run. First it was a great snowdrift, then a dive across a trembling culvert. At one point the water and slush pounded up clear across the floor of the cab and nearly put out the fire. As No. 999 rounded to higher grade, a tree half blown down from the top of an embankment grazed the locomotive, smashing the headlight and cutting off half the smokestack clean as a knife stroke.

Ralph made no stop for either inspection or repairs. A few minutes later an incident occurred

which made the occasion fairly bristle with new animation and excitement.

Mr. Grant had sat quietly in the fireman's seat. Now he leaned over towards Ralph, pointing eagerly through the side window.

"I see," said Ralph above the deafening roar of the wind and the grinding wheels, "the Night Express."

They could see the lights of the train ever and anon across an open space where, about a mile distant, the tracks of the Midland Central paralleled those of the Shelby division of the Great Northern. The young engineer again glanced at the clock. His eye brightened, into his face came the most extravagant soul of hope. It was dashed somewhat as Fogg, feeding the furnace and closing the door, leaned towards him with the words:

"The last shovel full."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Ralph.

The fireman swept his hand towards the empty tender.

"Eight miles," said Ralph in an anxious tone. "With full steam we could have reached the Junction ten minutes ahead of the Express. Will the fire last out?"

"I'll mend it some," declared the fireman. "Fairbanks, we might lighten the load," he added.

"You mean--"

"The tender."

"Yes," said Ralph, "cut it loose," and a minute later the railroad president uttered a sudden cry as the tender shot into the distance, uncoupled. Then he understood, and smiled excitedly. And then, as Fogg reached under his seat, pulled out a great bundle of waste and two oil cans, and flung them into the furnace, he realized the desperate straits at which they had arrived and their forlorn plight.

Conserving every ounce of steam, all of his nerves on edge, the young engineer drove No. 999 forward like some trained steed. As they rounded a hill just outside of Shelby Junction, they could see the Night Express steaming down its tracks, one mile away.

"We've made it!" declared Ralph, as they came within whistling distance of the tower at the interlocking rails where the two lines crossed.

"Say," yelled Fogg suddenly, "they've given the Express the right of way."

This was true. Out flashed the stop signal for No. 999, and the white gave the "come on" to the Night Express. There was no time to get to the tower and try to influence the towerman to cancel system at the behest of a railroad president.

"You must stop that train!" rang out the tones of the official sharply.

"I'm going to," replied Fairbanks grimly.

He never eased up on No. 999. Past the tower she slid. Then a glowing let up, and then, disregarding the lowered gates, she crashed straight through them, reducing them to kindling wood.

Squarely across the tracks of the incoming train the giant engine, battered, ice-coated, the semblance of a brave wreck, was halted. There she stood, a barrier to the oncoming Express.

Ralph jumped from his seat, reached under it, pulled out a whole bunch of red fuses, lit them, and leaning out from the cab flared them towards the oncoming train, Roman-candle fashion.

The astonished towerman quickly changed the semaphore signals. Her nose almost touching No. 999, the Express locomotive panted down to a halt.

"You shall hear from me, my men," spoke the railroad president simply, but with a great quiver in his voice, as he leaped from the cab, ran to the first car of the halted express and climbed to its platform.

Ralph drove No. 999 across the switches. The Express started on its way again. In what was the proudest moment of his young life, the loyal engineer of staunch, faithful No. 999 saw the president of the Great Northern take off his hat and wave it towards himself and Fogg, as if with an enthusiastic cheer.

CHAPTER XXIX

ZEPH DALLAS AGAIN

"Say—Engineer Ralph—Mr. Fairbanks!"

A spluttering, breathless voice halted Ralph on his way from the depot to the roundhouse. It was

the call boy, Torchy, the young engineer ascertained, as he waited till the excited juvenile came up to him.

"What's the trouble, Torchy?" he inquired.

Torchy caught his breath, but the excited flare in his eyes did not diminish.

"Say!" he spluttered out; "I was looking for you. That car, the one they use out west in Calfrancisco, Francifornia, no, I mean Calfris—rot! out west, anyway—tourist car."

"I know, yes," nodded Ralph.

"Well, you remember the queer old fossil's special to Fordham spur? That fellow Zeph Dallas was on it."

"I remember distinctly; go ahead."

"There's another car just like that one in the yards now, right this minute."

"You don't say so? I didn't suppose that more than one antiquated relic of that kind was in existence," said Ralph.

"Come on and see," invited Torchy. "This last car must have come from the north this morning, just like the other one did. It's bunched up with a lot more of the blockade runners, delayed freight, you know, and they've made up a train of it and others for the Mountain Division."

Besides being intensely interested, Ralph had time to spare. It was nearly a week after the Shelby Junction incident. The great storm had crippled some of the lines of the great Northern to a fairly alarming extent. The Mountain Division had felt the full force of the blizzard and had suffered the most extensively. There were parts of the division where it took several days to repair culverts, strengthen trestles and replace weakened patches of track. The Overland Express missed several runs, but had got back on fair schedule two days before. A new storm had set in that very morning, and as Ralph followed Torchy there were places where the drifts were up to their knees.

"There you are," announced his companion, pausing and pointing over at a train on a siding. "Isn't that last car the very picture of the one that Dallas was on?"

"Remarkably so," assented Ralph.

"I've got to get to the roundhouse," explained the little fellow, turning back in his tracks. "Thought you'd want to know about that car, though."

"I do, most emphatically," declared Ralph, "and greatly obliged to you for thinking of it."

Ralph approached the train on the siding. It was one of the queerest he had ever seen. There was a motley gathering of every class of freight cars on the line. As he passed along he noted the destination of some of the cars. No two were marked for the same point of delivery. It was easy to surmise that they were victims of the recent blockade.

Ralph came up to the rear car of the incongruous train with a good deal of curiosity. It was not the car that had made that mysterious run to Fordham Spur with Zeph Dallas, although it looked exactly like it. The present car was newer and more staunch. A fresh discovery made Ralph think hard. The car was classified as "fast freight," and across one end was chalked its presumable destination.

"Fordham Spur," read the young engineer. "Queer—the same as the other car. I wonder what's aboard?"

Just like the other car, the curtains were closely drawn in this one. There was no sign of life about the present car, however. Smoke curled from a pipe coming up through its roof. No one was visible in the immediate vicinity except a flagman and some loiterers about a near switch shanty. Ralph stepped to the rear platform of the car. He placed his hand on the door knob, turned it, and to his surprise and satisfaction the door opened unresistingly.

He stepped inside, to find himself in a queer situation. Ralph stood in the rear partitioned-off end of the car. It resembled a homelike kitchen. An oil stove stood on a stand, and around two sides of the car were shelves full of canisters, boxes and cans, a goodly array of convenient eatables. Lying asleep across a bench was a young colored man, who wore the cap and apron of a dining-car cook.

Ralph felt that he was intruding, but his curiosity overcame him. He stepped to the door of the partition. Near its top was a small pane of glass, and through this Ralph peered.

"I declare!" he exclaimed under his breath, and with a great start.

A strange, vivid picture greeted the astonished vision of the young railroader. If the rear part of the tourist car had suggested a modern kitchen, the front portion was a well-appointed living room. It had a stove in its center, and surrounding this were all the comforts of a home. There was a bed, several couches, easy chairs, two illuminated lamps suspended from side brackets, and the floor was covered with soft, heavy rugs.

Upon one of the couches lay a second colored man, apparently a special car porter, and he, like the cook, was fast asleep. All that Ralph had so far seen, however, was nothing to what greeted his sight as his eyes rested on the extreme front of the car.

There, lying back in a great luxurious armchair, was a preternaturally thin and sallow-faced man. His pose and appearance suggested the invalid or the convalescent. He lay as if half

dozing, and from his lips ran a heavy tube, connected with a great glass tank at his side.

Such a picture the mystified Ralph had never seen before. He could not take in its full meaning all in a minute. His puzzled mind went groping for some reasonable solution of the enigma. Before he could think things out, however, there was a sound at the rear door of the car. Some one on the platform outside had turned the knob and held the door about an inch ajar, and Ralph glided towards it. Through the crack he could see three persons plainly. Ralph viewed them with wonderment.

He had half anticipated running across Zeph Dallas somewhere about the train, but never this trio—Ike Slump, Jim Evans and the man he had known as Lord Montague. The two latter were standing in the snow. Ike was on the platform. He was asking a question of the man who had posed as a member of the English nobility:

"Be quick, Morris; what am I to do?"

Lord Montague, *alias* Morris, with a keen glance about him, drew a heavy coupling pin from under his coat.

"Take it," he said hastily, "and get inside that car."

"Suppose there's somebody hinders me?"

"Didn't I tell you they were all asleep?" demanded Morris. "You'll find a man near a big glass tank."

"See here," demurred Ike; "I don't want to get into any more trouble. When it comes to striking a man with that murderous weapon--"

"Murderous fiddlesticks!" interrupted Morris. "You are to hurt nobody. Smash the tank, that's all—run out, join us, and it's a hundred dollars cash on the spot, and a thousand when I get my fortune."

"Here goes, then," announced Ike Slump, pushing open the door, "but what you want to go to all this risk and trouble for to smash an old glass tank, I can't imagine."

"You'll know later," muttered Morris grimly.

Ralph did not know what the three rascals were up to, but he realized that it must be something bad. Putting two and two together, thinking back a bit of all that had occurred concerning Zeph, the Clark boy, and the Slump crowd, he began to fancy that tourist cars played a big part in the programme, whatever that programme was. The smashing of the glass tank, Morris had announced, was worth a hundred dollars to Ike—might lead to a fortune, he had intimated.

"There's some wicked plot afoot," decided Ralph, "so—back you go, Ike Slump!"

As Ike stepped across the threshold of the car the young engineer acted. He had grabbed the coupling pin from Ike's hand, dropped it, grasped Ike next with both hands and pressed him backwards to the platform. Ike struggled and himself got a grip on Ralph. The latter kept forcing his opponent backwards. Ike slipped and went through the break in the platform railing where the guard chain was unset, and both toppled to the ground submerged in three feet of snow.

Ralph had landed on top of Ike and he held him down, but the cries of his adversary had brought Evans and Morris to his rescue. The former was pouncing down upon Ralph with vicious design in his evil face, when a new actor appeared on the scene.

It was Zeph Dallas. He came running to the spot with his arms full of packages, apparently some supplies for the tourist car which he had just purchased of some store on Railroad Street. These he dropped and his hand went to his coat pocket. The amateur detective was quite as practical and businesslike as did he appear heroic, as he drew out a weapon.

"Leave that fellow alone, stand still, or you're goners, both of you," panted Zeph. "Hi! hello! stop those men! They're conspirers, they're villains!"

Zeph's fierce shouts rang out like clarion notes. They attracted the attention of the crowd around the switch shanty, and as Evans and Morris started on a run three or four of the railroad loiterers started to check their flight. As Zeph helped Ralph yank Ike Slump to his feet and drag him along, the young engineer observed that Evans and Morris were in the custody of the switch shanty crowd.

Two men coming down the track hastened over to the crowd. Ralph was glad to recognize them as Bob Adair, the road detective, and one of the yards watchmen.

"What's the trouble here, Fairbanks?" inquired Adair, with whom the young engineer was a prime favorite and an old-time friend.

"Dallas will tell you," intimated Ralph.

"Yes," burst out Zeph excitedly; "I want these three fellows arrested, Mr. Adair. They must be locked up safe and sound, or they'll do great harm."

"Ah—Evans? Slump?" observed Adair, recognizing the twain who had caused the Great Northern a great deal of trouble in the past. "They'll do on general principles. Who's this other fellow?"

"He's the worst of the lot, the leader. He's an awful criminal," declared Zeph with bolting eyes and intense earnestness. "Mr. Adair, if you let that crowd go free, you'll do an awful wrong."

"But what's the charge?"

"Conspiracy. They're trying to--"

"Well, come up to the police station and give me something tangible to go on, and I'll see that they get what's coming to them," promised the road detective.

"I can't—say, see! my train. I've got to go with that train, Ralph," cried Zeph in frantic agitation. "Try and explain, don't let those fellows get loose for a few hours—vast fortune—Marvin Clark—Fred Porter—Fordham Cut—big plot!"

In a whirl of incoherency, Zeph dashed down the tracks, for the train with the tourist car had started up. He had just time enough to gather up his scattered bundles and reach the platform of the last car, as the mixed train moved out on the main line and out of sight, leaving his astonished auditors in a vast maze of mystery.

CHAPTER XXX

SNOWBOUND

Chug!

"A snowslide!" exclaimed Ralph, in dismay.

"An avalanche!" declared Fogg. "Dodge—something's coming!"

With a crash both cab windows were splintered to fragments. The young engineer of No. 999 was nearly swept from his seat as there poured in through the gap a volume of snow.

They had struck an immense snowdrift obliquely, but the fireman's side caught the brunt. As the powerful locomotive dove into the drift, the snow packed through the denuded window-frame at the fireman's seat like grain into a bin. A solid block of snow was formed under the terrific pressure of the compact. It lodged against the coal of the tender with a power that would probably have crushed the life out of a person standing in the way.

"Whew!" shouted Fogg. "Lucky I ducked."

Ralph stopped the engine, which had been going slower and slower each minute of the past hour. They had gotten about half the distance to Rockton. Long since, however, both engineer and fireman had fully decided that they would never make terminus that night.

They had left Stanley Junction under difficulties. The snow was deep and heavy, and there was a further fall as they cleared the limits. There was no wind, but the snow came down with blinding steadiness and volume, and at Vernon they got the stop signal.

The operator stated that the line ahead leading past Fordham Cut was impassable. The passenger was stalled ten miles away, and orders from Rockton were to the effect that the Overland Express should take the cut-off. This diverged into the foothills, where there were no such deep cuts as on the direct route, and where it was hoped the drifts would not be so heavy.

Neither Ralph nor Fogg was familiar with their new routing. For an hour they made fair progress. Then they began to encounter trouble. They did not run a yard that the pilot wheels were not sunk to the rims in snow. Landmarks were blotted out. As they found themselves blindly trusting to the power of the giant locomotive to forge ahead despite obstacles, they were practically a lost train.

It was now, as they dove bodily into a great drift choking up an embankment cut, that they realized that they had reached a definite angle in their experience of the run, and were halted for good.

No. 999 barely pushed her nose far enough out of the enveloping drift, to enable Ralph by the aid of the glaring headlight to discern other drifts further ahead.

"We're stalled, that's dead sure," declared Fogg. "Signal the conductor and see what the programme is."

It was some time after the tooting signal that the conductor put in an appearance. He did not come along the side track. That was fairly impossible, for it would have been sheer burrow progress. He came over the top of the next car to the tender, a blind baggage, and as he climbed over the coal in the tender his lantern smashed and he presented a pale and anxious face to the view of the cab crew.

"What's the prospects?" he inquired in a discouraged tone.

"It looks like an all-night lay-over," reported Ralph.

"There's nothing ahead, of course," said the conductor calculatingly. "There's a freight due on the in track. Behind us a freight was to come, provided No. 11 put out from Stanley Junction to-night."

"Which I doubt," said Fogg.

"If we could back to Vernon we'd be in better touch with something civilized," went on the conductor. "The wires are all down here."

"I can try it," replied Ralph, "but without a pilot the rear car will soon come to a bump."

"Give her a show, anyway," suggested the conductor.

Two minutes' effort resulted in a dead stop. The young engineer knew his business well enough to understand that they were in danger of running the train off the track.

"I'll send a signal back, if a man can get back," decided the conductor.

The backing-up had left a clear brief space before the train. Ralph took a lantern and left his fireman in charge of the locomotive. He was gone about ten minutes, and came back panting and loaded down with the heavy, clinging snow.

"May as well bunk in right here," ventured Fogg.

"That's it," answered Ralph definitely. "It's drift after drift ahead. No use disabling the locomotive, and we simply can't hope to dig our way out."

The conductor came forward again looking miserable. A red lantern had been planted as far down the tracks as the brakeman dared to go. The conductor and Ralph held a conversation. Fogg, a veteran in the service, was appealed to for a final decision.

"You've hit it," said the fireman sagely and with emphasis. "It's a permanent blockage, and our only chance is for the Great Northern to find us out or for us to wait until the snow melts."

"If this snow keeps up we'll be buried under," said the conductor.

"Well, we've got to make the best of it," advised Fogg. "If we can make it, build a big fire ahead there as a warning or signal, although I don't believe there's much stirring at either end. Then it's just a question of food and warmth."

"Food!" repeated the conductor, who was fat and hearty and looked as if he never willingly missed his meals; "where in the world are we to get food? They cut the diner off at the Junction, and there probably isn't a farmhouse or station along this dreary waste for miles."

"Well, I fancy we'll have to stand the hunger," said Ralph. "As to the heat, that's an essential we mustn't neglect. We had better shut off the steam pipes, keeping only a little fire in the furnace and starting the stoves in the coaches."

"Yes, we might last out on that plan," nodded the conductor, glancing over the tender.

Ralph pulled to a spot about two hundred feet ahead, where the advance and retreat of the train had cleared a space alongside the rails, and the conductor went back to the coaches.

Ralph adjusted the steam pipes so they would not freeze, and Fogg banked the fire. Then they got to the ground with rake and shovel, and skirmished around to see what investigation might develop.

Despite the terrible weather and the insecurity of their situation, the train crew were soon cheerily gathering wood up beyond the embankment. They had to dig deep for old logs, and they broke down tree branches. Then they cleared a space at the side of the track and started a great roaring fire that flared high and far.

"Nobody will run into that," observed Fogg with a satisfied chuckle.

"And it may lead a rescue party," suggested Ralph.

Some of the men passengers strolled up to the fire. Fear and anxiety had given way to a sense of the novelty of the situation. Ralph assured them that their comfort and safety would be looked after. He promised a foraging party at daylight in search of food supplies.

"They're talking about you back there in the coaches, Fairbanks," reported the conductor a little later. "They know about your arrangements for their comfort, and they're chatting and laughing, and taking it all in like a regular picnic."

"I suppose you've been giving me undue credit, you modest old hero!" laughed Ralph.

"Hello!" suddenly exclaimed Fogg; "now, what is that?"

All hands stared far to the west. A dim red flame lit the sky. Then it appeared in a new spot, still far away. This was duplicated until there were vague red pencils of light piercing the sky from various points of the compass.

"It's queer," commented the conductor. "Something's in action, but what, and how?"

"There!" exclaimed Fogg, as suddenly seemingly just beyond the heavy drift immediately in front of the train the same glare was seen.

"Yes, and here, too!" shouted out the conductor, jumping back.

Almost at his feet something dropped from midair like a rocket, a bomb. It instantly burst out in a vivid red flame. Ralph investigated, and while thus engaged two more of the colored messengers, projectiles, fireworks, whatever they were, rained down, one about half-way down the train, the other beyond it.

The young engineer was puzzled at first, but he soon made out all that theory and logic could suggest. There was no doubt but that some one at a distance had fired the queer little spheres,

which were made of the same material as the regular train fuse, only these burned twice as long as those used as railroad signals, or fully twenty minutes.

"I make it out," explained Ralph to the conductor, "that somebody with a new-fangled device like a Roman candle is sending out these bombs as signals."

"Then we're not alone in our misery," remarked Fogg.

"First they went west, then they came this way," continued Ralph. "I should say that it looks as if the signal is on a train stalled like us about a mile away. I'll soon know."

Ralph got into the cab. In a minute or two No. 999 began a series of challenge whistles that echoed far and wide.

"Hark!" ordered Fogg, as they waited for a reply.

"A mere peep," reported the conductor, as a faint whistle reached their strained hearing above the noise of the tempest.

"Yes," nodded Fogg, "I figure it out. There's a train somewhere near with the locomotive nigh dead."

"If it should be the east freight stalled," suggested Ralph to the conductor, "you needn't worry about those hungry children in the coaches, and that baby you told about wanting milk."

"No, the east freight is a regular provision train," put in the fireman. "If we could reach her, we'd have our pick of eatables."

It was two hours later, and things had quieted down about the snowed-in train, when a series of shouts greeted Ralph, Fogg and the conductor, seated on a broken log around the fire at the side of the tracks.

"What's this new windfall!" exclaimed Fogg.

"More signals," echoed the conductor, staring vaguely.

"Human signals, then," supplemented Ralph. "Well, here's a queer arrival."

Five persons came toppling down the side of the embankment, in a string. They were tied together at intervals along a rope. All in a mix-up, they landed helter-skelter in the snow of the cut. They resembled Alpine tourists, arrived on a landslide.

"Why, it's Burton, fireman of the east freight!" shouted the conductor, recognizing the first of the five who picked himself up from the snow.

"That's who!" answered the man addressed, panting hard. "We're stalled about a mile down the cut. Coal given out, no steam. Saw your fire, didn't want to freeze to death quite, so--"

"We guessed that you were the Overland," piped in a fresh, boyish voice. "Packed up some eatables, and here we are. How do you like my new railroad rocket signals, Engineer Fairbanks?" and Archie Graham, the young inventor, picked himself up from the snow.

CHAPTER XXXI

CONCLUSION

One hour after daybreak the vicinity of the snowbound Overland Express resembled a picture, rather than a forlorn blockade.

The lone adventurers who had made the trip from the stalled freight had been a relief party indeed. The engineer was a railroader of long experience, and he had thought out the dilemma of the refugees. He and his companions had broken open a freight car and had brought each a good load. There was coffee, sugar, crackers, canned meats, a ham, and, what was most welcome to anxious mothers and their babes, a whole crate of condensed milk.

There never was a more jolly breakfast than that aboard the snowbound coaches. There was plenty to eat and to spare all around, and plenty more at the stalled freight, everybody knew. In front of the engine many a merry jest went the rounds, as the train crews and some of the passengers broiled pieces of succulent ham on the end of pointed twigs.

"You see, it was this way," Archie Graham explained to the young engineer of No. 999. "I was just watching a chance for washouts or snowstorms to get on a train diving into the danger. Those red bombs are my invention. I shoot them from a gun. I can send them a mile or gauge them to go fifty feet. They ignite when they drop, and by sending out a lot of them they are bound to land somewhere near the train you aim at. The engineer is bound to take notice, just as you did, of the glare, and that's where they beat the fusees and save the running back of a brakeman."

"Archie," said Ralph honestly, "I believe you're going to hit some real invention some time."

"I helped out some with my patent rocket signals this time," declared Archie.

"You did, my lad," observed Fogg with enthusiasm, "and the passengers know all about it, and they've mentioned you in a letter they're getting up to the company saying how they appreciate the intelligence—that's Fairbanks—the courage, ahem! that's me, and the good-heartedness, that's all of us, of the two train crews."

By the middle of the afternoon a snow plow opened up the line from Rockton to the stalled train. It was not until two mornings later, however, that the main line was open and Ralph and Fogg got back to Stanley Junction.

Archie came on the same train. Ralph asked him up to the house, but the young inventor said he wanted the quiet of his hotel room to work on his signal rocket idea, which he declared would amount to something yet.

The young engineer had scarcely got in the house after the warm, cheerful greeting of his anxious mother, when Zeph Dallas put in an appearance.

Zeph was looking exceedingly prosperous. He wore a new, nicely-fitting suit of clothes, a modest watch and chain, and was quite dignified and subdued, for him.

"When you've had your breakfast, Ralph," he said, "I've got something to tell you."

"Yes," nodded Ralph, "I'm expecting to hear a pretty long story from you, Zeph."

The young engineer hurried his breakfast and soon joined Zeph in the sitting-room.

"Say, Ralph," at once observed his friend, "you've done some big things in your time, but the biggest thing you ever did was when you saw to it that Jim Evans and Ike Slump, and most of all, that fellow, Morris, were held as prisoners by Adair, the road detective."

"I fancied they deserved locking up," remarked Ralph.

"There would have been a murder if you hadn't seen to it," declared Zeph. "I've a story to tell that would make your hair stand on end, but it would take a book to tell it all."

"I'm here to listen, Zeph," intimated Ralph.

"Yes, but I'm due to meet Mr. Adair at the jail. He's sent Evans and Slump back to the prison they escaped from. I hurried on here from the Fordham cut purposely to tell him what I wanted done with Morris."

"I say, Zeph," rallied the young railroader, "you seem to have a big say in such things for a small boy."

"That's all right," declared Zeph good-naturedly; "I'm all here, just the same, and I'm here for a big purpose. In a word, not to mystify you, Ralph, for you know only half of the story, I was hired by Marvin Clark, the son of the Middletown & Western Railroad president, to do all I've done, and I have been royally paid for it."

"Then you must have done something effective," observed Ralph.

"Clark thought so, anyway. I'll try and be brief and to the point, so that you'll understand in a nutshell. You know Marvin Clark and Fred Porter and the two Canaries?"

The young engineer nodded assentingly.

"Well, as I say, I ran across Clark accidentally in my stray wanderings. He and a sickly boy named Ernest Gregg were living in a fixed-over building at Fordham Spur. I seemed to be just the person Clark was waiting for. He hired me to do some work for him. He was planning to get the poor boy, Gregg, his rights."

"Yes, I know about that," observed Ralph.

"Then if you do, I can hurry over things. It seems that when he began to look up Gregg's affairs, he found out that Ernest had a strange hermit of a grandfather, named Abijah Gregg. Ernest's father was an only son. About five years ago the old man discovered a terrible forgery in which he was robbed of over ten thousand dollars. He had reason to believe that Ernest's father and a man named Howard were responsible for it. He disowned his son and all his family, and a month later Ernest's father died, leaving his son a disowned and homeless outcast."

"And what became of Howard?" inquired the interested Ralph.

"He disappeared. Old Gregg became soured at all humanity after that," narrated Zeph; "the more so because he had a profligate nephew who turned out bad. This was the man in jail here now."

"Lord Lionel Montague—Morris?"

"Yes, Morris robbed the old man, who became afraid of him. The old man tried to hide away from everybody. In his wanderings he picked up the two Canaries and settled down at the lonely place at Fordham Cut. He was very rich, partly paralyzed, and intended to leave his fortune to the state, rather than have any relative benefit by it. Well, Marvin Clark, the splendid, unselfish fellow, got a clew to all this. He located old Abijah Gregg. He spent just loads of money following down points, until he discovered that the man Howard was a broken-down invalid in New Mexico. Clark was sick himself for a month, and that was why Fred Porter did not hear from him."

"And later?" asked Ralph.

"I ran across Porter and brought him to the Spur about a month ago. He is there now. Well, Clark found out positively that Ernest's father never had a thing to do with forgery. It had been really committed by Howard and this villain, Morris. He got in touch with Howard in New Mexico, who was a dying man. He found him anxious to make what reparation he could for a wicked deed. Old Gregg would not go to New Mexico. Howard could only live where the air was just right for him. The physicians said that if he ever went to any other climate, the change of atmosphere would kill him. With plenty of money at his command, Clark arranged it all. The New Mexico doctors got a tank that held an artificial air, and Clark arranged so that Howard could come east in a special car."

"And the first tourist car that you ran empty to the Spur?" inquired Ralph.

"Why, we knew that Morris was trying every way to locate and annoy his uncle. We thought that maybe he had got onto our plans about Howard. We ran the dummy car to see if we were being watched. Don't you see, that if Morris had succeeded in smashing the glass air tank, Howard would have died before he could tell his story to old Mr. Gregg."

"And now?" said Ralph.

"The story has been told. Old Mr. Gregg is convinced that his son was innocent of forgery. He will take care of his grandson and make him his heir, and young Clark, as you see, has done a grand thing."

"Yes, indeed," assented Ralph.

"Howard will return to New Mexico with a relieved conscience. I am going to the jail here now to see Morris. If he will agree to leave the country and never annoy his uncle again, I will give him a certain large sum of money, as directed by his uncle. If he doesn't, he will be prosecuted for the forgery."

"Zeph," observed the young railroader enthusiastically, "you have proven yourself not only a real detective, but a splendid lawyer, as well."

"Thank you," returned Zeph, and blushed modestly; "most everybody that gets in with you does some kind of good in the world."

It was two hours later when a messenger came to the Fairbanks home with a letter for Ralph.

The young engineer flushed with pleasure as he read a brief communication from the master mechanic, advising him that Mr. Robert Grant, president of the Great Northern, was at Stanley Junction, and wished to see him for a few minutes at the Waverly Hotel.

Ralph told his mother of the incident, and her eyes followed him fondly and proudly as, arrayed in his best, Ralph started out to keep his appointment.

It was a warm welcome that the young railroader received from the great railroad magnate. Mr. Grant went over their mutual experiences the night of the wild dash of the special from Rockton to Shelby Junction.

"You did a most important service for the road that night, Fairbanks," said the railroad president; "how much, is a secret in the archives of the company, but I can say to you confidentially that the Mountain Division would have passed to another line if we had not acted in time."

"I am very glad," said Ralph modestly.

"I want to acknowledge that service. I am only the president of the road," said Mr. Grant, smiling, and Ralph smiled, too, "so being a servant of the road, I must act under orders. I learned that, like all thrifty young men, you had a savings account at the bank here. I have deposited there the company's check for one thousand dollars to your account."

"Oh, Mr. Grant--" began Ralph, but the railroad president held up his hand to check the interruption.

"As to Fogg," went on Mr. Grant, "the road has closed up the subscription in his behalf, by giving him sufficient to rebuild his burned-down house."

Ralph's face was aglow with pride, pleasure and happiness.

"So, good-by for the present, Fairbanks," concluded the railroad president, grasping Ralph's hand warmly. "There are higher places for ambitious young men in the service of the road, as you know. I shall not try to influence your plans, for I know that sheer merit will put you forward when you decide to advance. As to my personal influence, that, you know, is yours to command. For the present, however, we should regret to see the Overland Express in other hands than those of the youngest and the best engineer on the Great Northern."

What Mr. Grant had to say about Ralph's advancement came true a little later, and those who care to follow our hero's future career may do so in the next story of this series, to be called, "Ralph, the Train Dispatcher; or, The Mystery of the Pay Car." In that volume we shall meet many of our old friends once more, and see what our hero did when new difficulties confronted him.

One day Ralph was surprised to receive a visit from Marvin Clark and Fred Porter. He received them both warmly, and soon learned that Clark had fixed up his trouble over railroad work, and with his parent, and had secured a good position for Fred, so that the latter would no longer need to lead a roving life.

"But I must have one more ride with you, Fairbanks," said Fred.

"And I'll go along," said the son of the railroad president.

"With pleasure!" cried Ralph. "Come on!" And he led the way to where No. 999 stood ready for the next run.

The trip was a grand success. And here we will, for the present, at least, say good-by to Ralph of the Overland Express.

THE END

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