

Chapman Allen

**Ralph, the Train Dispatcher: or,
The Mystery of the Pay
Car**



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CHAPTER I – THE OVERLAND EXPRESS

“Those men will bear watching-they are up to some mischief, Fairbanks.”

“I thought so myself, Mr. Fogg. I have been watching them for some time.”

“I thought you would notice them-you generally do notice things.”

The speaker with these words bestowed a glance of genuine pride and approbation upon his companion, Ralph Fairbanks.

They were a great pair, these two, a friendly, loyal pair, the grizzled old veteran fireman, Lemuel Fogg, and the clear-eyed, steady-handed young fellow who had risen from roundhouse wiper to switchtower service, then to fireman, then to engineer, and who now pulled the lever on the crack racer of the Great Northern Railroad, the Overland express.

Ralph sat with his hand on the throttle waiting for the signal to pull out of Boydsville Tracks. Ahead were clear, as he well knew, and his eyes were fixed on three men who had just passed down the platform with a scrutinizing glance at the locomotive and its crew.

Fogg had watched them for some few minutes with an ominous eye. He had snorted in his characteristic, suspicious way, as the trio lounged around the end of the little depot.

“Good day,” he now said with fine sarcasm in his tone, “hope I see you again-know I’ll see you again. They’re up to tricks, Fairbanks, and don’t you forget it.”

“Gone, have they?” piped in a new voice, and a brakeman craned his neck from his position on the reverse step of the locomotive. “Say, who are they, anyway?”

“Do you know?” inquired the fireman, facing the intruder sharply.

“I’d like to. They got on three stations back. The conductor spotted them as odd fish from the start. Two of them are disguised, that’s sure-the mustache of one of them went sideways. The old man, the mild-looking, placid old gentleman they had in tow, is a telegrapher.”

“How do you know that?” asked Ralph, becoming interested.

“That’s easy. I caught him strumming on the car window sill, and I have had an apprenticeship in the wire line long enough to guess what he was tapping out. On his mind, see-force of habit and all that. The two with him, though, looked like jail birds.”

“What struck me,” interposed Fogg, “was the way they snooked around the train at the two last stops. They looked us over as if they were planning a holdup.”

“Yes, and they pumped the train hands dry all about your schedule,” declared the brakeman. “Cottoned to me, but I cut them short. Seemed mightily interested in the pay car routine, by the way.”

“Did, eh,” bristled up Fogg. “Say, tell us about that.”

“Why, you see—There goes the starting signal. See you again.”

The brakeman dropped back to duty, and the depot and the three men who had caused a brief ripple in the monotony of a routine run were lost in the distance. For a few minutes the fireman had his hands full feeding the fire, and Ralph, eyes, ears and all his senses on the alert, got in perfect touch with throttle, air gauge and exhaust valve.

Ralph glanced at the clock and took an easy position on his cushioned seat. Everything was in order for a smooth run to twenty miles away. The Overland Express was on time, as she usually was, and everything was in trim for a safe delivery at terminus.

Fogg hustled about. He was a restless, ambitious being, always finding lots to do about cab and tender. His brows were knitted, however, and every once in a while he indulged in a fit of undertoned grumbling. Ralph watched him furtively with a slight smile. He knew that his companion railroader was stirred up about something. The young engineer had come to understand

the quirks and turns and moods of his eccentric helper, just as fully as those of his beloved engine.

“I say,” broke out Fogg finally, slamming down into his seat. “It’s about time for something to happen, Fairbanks.”

“Think so?” queried Ralph lightly.

“Been pretty smooth sailing lately, you see.”

“That’s the way it ought to be in a well-regulated family, isn’t it, Mr. Fogg?”

“Humph-maybe. All the same, I’m an old bird and know the signs.”

“What signs are you talking about, Mr. Fogg?”

“Our machine balked this morning when she took the turntable, didn’t she?”

“That was because the wiper was half asleep.”

“Thirteen blew out a cylinder head as we passed her-13, an unlucky number, see?”

“That’s an every-day occurrence since the high pressure system came in.”

“White cow crossed the track just back a bit.”

“Nonsense,” railed Ralph. “I thought you’d got rid of all those old superstitions since your promotion to the best job on the road.”

“That’s it, that’s just it,” declared the fireman with serious vehemence-“and I don’t want to lose it. Just as I say, since we knocked out the sorehead crew of strikers and made the big record on that famous snowstorm run on the Mountain Division,

we've been like ducks in clear water, smooth sailing and the best on earth none too good for us. It isn't natural. Why, old John Griscom, thirty years at the furnace, used to get scared to death if he ran two weeks without a broken driving wheel or a derail."

"Well, you see we're on a new order of things, Mr. Fogg," suggested Ralph brightly. "They've put us at the top-notch with a top-notch machine and a top-notch crew. We must stay there, and we'll do it if we keep our heads clear, eyes open and attend strictly to business."

The fireman shook his head fretfully and looked unconvinced. Ralph knew his stubborn ways and said nothing.

The young engineer of the Overland Express was in the heyday of satisfaction and contentment. He was proud of his present position, and was prouder still because he felt that he had earned it through sheer energy and merit. As Fogg had declared, the appearance of the three men noted had something sinister about it, but the fireman was always getting rattled about something or other, fussy as an old woman when the locomotive was balky. Ralph insisted upon enjoying to the limit the full measure of prosperity that had come to him.

Both had fought hard to secure the positions they now held, however, and the mere hint of a break in the pleasant programme set them up in arms instanter. They had chummed together and had learned to love the staunch, magnificent locomotive that pulled the Overland Express as if it was a fellow comrade, and would have had a pitched battle any time with the meddler

or enemy who plotted injury to the prize train of the Great Northern.

All this had not been accomplished without some pretty hard knocks. Looking back in retrospect now, Ralph could fancy his progress to date as veritable steps in the ladder of fortune. It had all rounded out so beautifully that it seemed like a dream. Now the thought of trouble or disaster reminded him gravely of the foes he had known in the past, and the difficult places he had battled through in his steadfast march to the front rank.

Ralph Fairbanks had taken to railroading as naturally as does a duck to water. His father had been one of the pioneer builders of the Great Northern. In the first volume of the present series, entitled "Ralph of the Roundhouse," the unworthy scheme of Gasper Farrington, a village magnate, to rob Ralph's widowed mother of her little home was depicted. That book, too, tells of how Ralph left school to work for a living and win laurels as the best engine wiper in the service.

Ralph's next step up the ladder, as told in the second volume of this series, called "Ralph in the Switch Tower," led to his promotion to the post of fireman. The third volume of the series, "Ralph on the Engine," showed the routine and adventures of an ambitious boy bound to reach the top notch in railroad service.

The proudest moment in the life of the young engineer, however, seemed to have arrived when Ralph was awarded the crack run of the road, as told in the fourth volume of this series entitled "Ralph on the Overland Express."

The reader who has followed the upward and onward course of the railroad boy through these volumes will remember how he made friends everywhere. They were all the better for his bright ways and good example. It was Ralph's great forbearance and patience that overcame the grumpiness and suspicion of the cross-grained Lemuel Fogg and made of him a first-class fireman. It was Ralph's kindly encouragement that brought out the inventive genius of a capital young fellow named Archie Graham, and helped Limpy Joe, a railroad cripple, to acquire a living as an eating house proprietor.

A poor waif named Van Sherwin owed his rise in life to the influence of the good-hearted young engineer, and Zeph Dallas, a would-be boy detective, was toned down and instructed by Ralph until his wild ideas had some practical coherency to them.

Ralph had his enemies. From time to time along his brisk railroad career they had bobbed up at inopportune junctures, but never to his final disaster, for they were in the wrong and right always prevails in the end. They had tried to upset his plans on many an occasion, they had tried to disgrace and discredit him, but vainly.

In "Ralph on the Overland Express" the young engineer did some pretty big things for a new man at the throttle. He carried a train load of passengers through a snowstorm experience that made old veterans on the road take notice in an astonished way, and he made some record runs over the Mountain Division that established the service of the Great Northern as a standard

model.

All this success not only ranked in the minds of his enemies, but roused the envy and dissatisfaction of rival roads. For some time vague hints had been rife that these rivals were forming a combination "to put the Great Northern out of business," if the feat were possible, so both Ralph and his loyal fireman kept their eyes wide open and felt that they were on their mettle all of the time.

Ralph's last exploit had won him a high place in the estimation of his superiors. With every train out of Rockton stalled, he and Fogg had made a terrifying hairbreadth special run to Shelby Junction, defying floods, drifts and washouts, landing the president of the road just in the nick of time to catch a train on a parallel rival line.

The event had enabled that official to close an advantageous arrangement, in which time was the essence of a contract which gave the Great Northern the supremacy over every line in the district having transcontinental connections.

The Great Northern had won the upper hand through this timely but not tricky operation. Naturally, baffled, rival roads had been upset by the same. A revengeful feeling had extended to the employees of those lines, and the warning had been spread broadcast to look out for squalls, as the other roads had given the quiet tip to its men, it was understood, to take down the Great Northern a peg or two whenever occasion offered.

Of all this Ralph was thinking as they passed the flag station at

Luce, and shot around the long curve guarded by a line of bluffs just beyond. The young engineer was thinking of home, and so was Fogg, for they were due in twenty-three minutes now.

Suddenly Ralph reached out for the lever lightning quick, and then his hand swept sand and air valves with the rapidity of an expert playing some instrument.

Crack!

Under the wheels of the big locomotive a detonating clamor rang out-always a vivid warning to the nerves of every wide-awake railroad man.

“A torpedo-something ahead,” spoke Ralph quickly.

“What did I tell you?” jerked out his fireman excitedly. “I felt it in my bones, I told you it was about time for something to happen.”

The young engineer steadied the locomotive down to a sliding halt like a trained jockey stopping a horse on the race track. The halt brought the nose of the locomotive just beyond the bluff line so that Ralph could sweep the tracks ahead with a clear glance.

“It’s a wreck,” announced the young engineer of the Overland Express.

CHAPTER II – THE WRECK

“A wreck, eh, – sure, I know it! Our turn next-you’ll see,” fumed Fogg, as the locomotive came to a stop.

“It’s a freight on the out track,” said Ralph, peering ahead. “Two cars over the embankment and-”

“For land’s sake!” interrupted the fireman, “whiff! whoo! what have we run into, anyway?”

A flying object came slam bang against the lookout window not two inches from Fogg’s nose. A dozen more sailed over the cab roof. With a great flutter half of these dropped down into the cab direct.

“Chickens!” roared Fogg in excitement and astonishment. “Say, did you ever see so many at one time? Where do they ever come from?”

“From the wreck. Look ahead,” directed Ralph.

It was hard to do this, for a second flock of fowls thronged down upon them. Of a sudden there seemed to be chickens everywhere. They scampered down the rails, crouched to the pilot, roosted on the steam chests, lined up on the coal of the tender, while three fat hens clucked and skirmished under the very feet of the fireman, who was hopping about to evade the bewildering inrush.

“I declare!” he ejaculated breathlessly.

Far as Ralph could see ahead, stray fowls were in evidence.

Feathers were flying, and a tremendous clatter and bustle was going on. They came limping, flying, rolling along the roadbed from the direction of a train standing stationary on the out track. In its center there was a gap. Thirty feet down the embankment, split in two, and a mere pile of kindling wood now, were two cars.

The trucks of one of these and some minor wreckage littered the in track. Freight hands were clearing it away, and it was this temporary obstruction that had been the cause of the warning torpedo.

A brakeman from the freight came to the passenger train to report what was doing.

“Palace chicken car and a gondola loaded with boxes in the ditch beyond,” he said. “We’ll be cleaned up for you in a few minutes.”

“That’s how the chickens come to be in evidence so numerous, it seems,” remarked Ralph.

“Say, see them among the wrecked wire netting, and putting for the timber!” exclaimed Fogg. “Fairbanks, there’s enough poultry running loose to stock an eating house for a year. I say, they’re nobody’s property now. Suppose—here’s two fat ones. I reckon I’ll take that much of the spoil while it’s going.”

With a vast chuckle the fireman grabbed two of the fowls under his feet and dumped them into his waste box, shutting down the cover. The conductor of the freight came up penciling a brief report. He handed it to the conductor of the Overland.

“We’ll wire from Luce,” he explained, “but we may be delayed

reaching there and you may get this to headquarters at the Junction first. Tell the claim agent there won't be salvage enough to fill a waybill. She's clear," with a glance down the track.

The Overland proceeded slowly past the wreck, affording the crew and the curious passengers a view of the demolished freight lying at the bottom of the embankment. Once past this, Ralph set full steam to make up for lost time.

It put Fogg in better humor to arrive on schedule. The thought of home comforts close by and the captured chickens occupied his mind and dissipated his superstitious forebodings.

When they reached the roundhouse the fireman started straight for home. Ralph lingered a few minutes to chat with the foreman, and was about to leave when Fry, the claim agent of the road, came into the doghouse in great haste.

"Just the man I want to see, Fairbanks," he said animatedly.

"That so?" smiled Ralph.

"Yes. Your conductor just notified me of the smashup beyond the limits. It looks clean cut enough, with the tracks cleared, but he says some of the stuff is perishable."

"If you list chickens in that class," responded Ralph, "I guess that's right."

"That's the bother of it," observed Fry. "Dead salvage could wait, and the wrecking crew could take care of it at their leisure, but-live stock!"

"It looked to me as if most of the chickens had got away," exclaimed Ralph. "The car was split and twisted from end to

end.”

“I reckon I had better get on the job instanter,” said the claim agent. “How about getting down to the bluff switch, Forgan?”

“Nothing moving but the regulars,” reported the roundhouse foreman. “You don’t need a special?”

“No, any dinky old machine will do.”

“Gravel pit dummy just came in.”

“Can’t you rig her up and give me clear tracks for an hour, till I make investigations?”

“Crew gone home.”

“No extras on hand?”

The foreman consulted his schedule and shook his head negatively.

Ralph thought of his home and mother, but a certain appealing glance from the claim agent and a natural disposition to be useful and accommodating influenced him to a kindly impulse.

“See here, Mr. Fry, I’ll be glad to help you out, if I can,” he said.

“You certainly can, Fairbanks, and I won’t forget the favor,” declared the claim agent warmly. “You see, I’m booked for a week’s vacation and a visit to my old invalid father down at Danley, beginning tomorrow. If I can untie all the red tape from this wreck affair, I’m free to get out, and my substitute can take up any fresh tangles that come up tomorrow.”

“Can you fire?” inquired Ralph.

“I can make a try at it.”

“Then I’ll see to the rest,” promised the young engineer briskly.

With the aid of wiper Ralph soon got the dummy ready for action. It was a long time since the young engineer had done roundhouse duty. He did it well now, and thanked the strict training of his early apprentice experience. The jerky spiteful little engine rolled over the turntable in a few minutes time, and the claim agent pulled off his coat and looked to Ralph for orders.

They took a switch and headed down the clear out track. At a crossing a man came tearing towards them, arms waving, long beard flying, and his face showing the greatest urgency and excitement.

“Mishter Fry! Mishter Fry!” he panted out, “I haf just heard-”

“Nothing for you, Cohen,” shouted the claim agent.

“I hear dere vas some boxes. Sthop! sthop! I’ve got the retty gash.”

“Ready-Cash Cohen,” exclaimed Fry to Ralph. “Always on hand when there’s any cheap wreck salvage lying around loose. That fellow seems to scent a wreck like a vulture.”

“I’ve heard of him,” remarked Ralph with a smile.

They had free swing on the out track until they neared the scene of the wreck. Here they took a siding and left the dummy, to walk to the spot where the two freight cars had gone over the embankment.

“Hello!” suddenly ejaculated the claim agent with tremendous surprise and emphasis.

“Excuse me, Mishter Fry, but that salvage-”

Ralph burst out into a hearty peal of laughter. Clinging to the little bobtail tender of the dummy was Ready-Cash Cohen.

“Well, you’re a good one, Cohen.”

“If I vas’nt, vould I be Chonny-on-de-spot, Mishter Fry?” chuckled Cohen cunningly.

He followed them as they walked down the tracks. When they reached the point where the two freights had gone over the embankment, Fry clambered down its slant and for some time poked about the tangled mass of wreckage below.

“Vill dere haf to be an appraisal, my tear friend?” anxiously inquired Cohen, pressing forward as the claim agent reappeared.

“No,” responded Fry shortly. “There’s a chicken car with live and dead mixed up in the tangle. Come, Cohen, how much for the lot?”

“Schickens?” repeated Cohen disgustedly-“not in my line, Mishter Fry. Schickens are an expense. Dey need feeding.”

“Won’t bid, eh?”

“Don’t vant dem at any price. But de boxes, Mishter Fry-vot’s in dose boxes?”

“See here,” observed Fry, “I’m not giving information to the enemy. There they are, badly shaken up but they look meaty, don’t they? If you want to bid unsight unseen, name your figure.”

“Fifty tollars.”

“Take them.”

The salvage dealer toppled down the embankment with a

greedy promptness. The claim agent winked blandly after him.

"I expected it," said Fry, as a minute later Cohen came toiling up the embankment his face a void of disappointed misery.

"Mishter Fry, Mishter Fry," he gasped, "dey are looking glasses!"

"Found that out, did you?" grinned the freight agent.

"Dey vos smashed, dey vas proken, every last one of dem. Dey are not even junk. My tear friend, I cannot take dem."

"A bargain's a bargain, Cohen," voiced Fry smoothly. "You've made enough out of your deals with the road to stand by your bid. If you don't, we're no longer your customer."

"I von't have dem. It was a trick," and the man went down the track tearing at his beard.

"There's kindling wood there for somebody free for the taking," remarked Fry. "The chicken smashup isn't so easy."

"Many down there?" inquired Ralph.

"Yes, most of them are crushed, but a good many alive are shut in the wire tangle. The best I can do is to send a section man to pry them free. It's heartless to leave them to suffer and to die."

"A lot of them got free," observed Ralph.

"They're somewhere around the diggings. It wouldn't be a bad speculation for some bright genius to round them up. Why, say, Fairbanks, you're an ambitious kind of a fellow. I'll offer you an investment."

"What's that, Mr. Fry?" inquired the young engineer.

"I'll sell you the whole kit and caboodle in the car and out of

it for twenty-five dollars.”

Ralph shook his head with a smile.

“If I had time to spare I’d jump at your offer, Mr. Fry,” he said. “As it is, what could I do with the proposition?”

“Do?” retorted the claim agent. “Hire some boys to gather in the bunch. There may be five hundred chicks in the round up.”

“Really, I couldn’t bother with it, Mr. Fry,” began Ralph, and then he turned abruptly.

Some one had pulled at his sleeve, and with a start the young engineer stared strangely at a boy about his own age.

CHAPTER III – TROUBLE BREWING

The strange boy appeared upon the scene so suddenly that Ralph decided he must have reached the roadbed from the other side of the embankment.

The young engineer faced him with a slight start. To his certain knowledge he had never seen the lad before. However, his face so strongly resembled that of some one he had met recently it puzzled Ralph. Whom did those features suggest? Ralph thought hard, but gave it up.

“Did you wish to see me?” he inquired.

The boy had a striking face. It was pale and thin, his clothes were neat but shabby. There was a sort of scared look in his eyes that appealed to Ralph, who was strongly sympathetic.

“I know you,” spoke the boy in a hesitating, embarrassed way. “You don’t know me, but I’ve had you pointed out to me.”

“That so?” and Ralph smiled.

“You are Ralph Fairbanks, the engineer of the Overland Express,” continued the lad in a hushed tone, as if the distinction awed him.

“That’s right,” nodded Ralph.

“Well, I’ve heard of you, and you’ve been a friend to a good many people. I hope I’m not over bold, but if you would be a

friend to me-”

Here the strange boy paused in a pitiful, longing way that appealed to Ralph.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“I heard this gentleman,” indicating Mr. Fry, “offer to sell the chickens down the embankment. I’m a poor boy, Mr. Fairbanks-dreadfully poor. There’s reasons why I can’t work in the towns like other boys. You can give me work, though-you can just set me on my feet.”

“How can I do that?” inquired Ralph, getting interested.

“By buying me those chickens. I’ve got the place for them, I’ve got the time to attend to them, and I know just how to handle them. Why,” continued the speaker excitedly, “there’s nearly two hundred in prime trim gathered in a little thicket over yonder, and there’s double that number among the wreckage, besides those that are hurt that I can nurse and mend up. If you will buy them for me, I’ll solemnly promise to return you the money in a week and double the amount of interest in two.”

“You talk clear and straight and earnest, my lad,” here broke in the claim agent. “What’s your name?”

“Glen Palmer.”

“Do you live near here?”

“Yes, sir-in an old abandoned farmhouse, rent free, about a mile north of here.”

“With your folks?”

“No, sir, I have no folks, only an old grandfather. He’s past

working, and, well, a-a little queer at times, and I have to keep close watch of him. That's what's the trouble."

The claim agent took out his note book.

"Look here," he spoke, "if Fairbanks will vouch for you, I'll tab off the chickens to you at fifteen dollars, due in thirty days."

"O-oh!" gasped the lad, clasping his hands in an ecstasy of hope and happiness. "I'll be sure to pay you- Why, with what I know I can do with those chickens, I could pay you ten times over inside of a month."

"Mr. Fry," said Ralph, studying the boy's face for a moment or two, "I'll go security for my friend here."

"Say-excuse me, but say, Mr. Fairbanks, I-I-"

The boy broke down, tears choking his utterance. He could only clasp and cling to Ralph's hand. The latter patted him on the shoulder with the encouraging words:

"You go ahead with your chicken farm, Glen, and if it needs more capital come to me."

"If you only knew what you've done for me-for me and my old grandfather!" faltered Glen Palmer, the deepest gratitude and feeling manifested in tone and manner.

Ralph felt sure that the lad had a history. He did not, however, embarrass him with any questioning. He liked the way that young Palmer talked and bustled about as soon as the word was given that his proposition was accepted. With an eager face he announced that he had a plan for getting the chickens to his home, and darted off at breakneck speed, waving his hand gratefully

back at Ralph a dozen times.

Ralph and the claim agent reached the dummy to find Cohen hanging around it in great mental distress. Fry invited him to ride in the cab, and tormented him by talking about his bargain clear back to the roundhouse. Then he relieved Cohen's distress, which bordered on positive distraction, by releasing him from his contract.

Mrs. Fairbanks greeted Ralph with her usual loving, kindly welcome when he reached home. The old family cottage was a veritable nest of comfort, and the young engineer enjoyed it to the utmost. There was always some special favorite dainty awaiting Ralph on his return from a trip, and he had a fine appetizing meal.

"We had a visitor today, Ralph," said Mrs. Fairbanks, as they sat chatting in the cozy sitting room a little later.

"Who was that, mother?"

Mrs. Fairbanks with a smile handed her son a card that had been lying on the mantle. Ralph smiled, too, as he looked it over.

"H'm," he said. "Quite dignified, 'Mr. Dallas,' our old friend Zeph, eh? What's this mysterious monogram, cryptogram, or whatever it is, way down in the corner of the card?"

"It looks like two S's," suggested Mrs. Fairbanks.

"Oh, I can solve the enigma now," said Ralph with a broader smile than ever. "It is 'S. S.,' by which Zeph means and wants mystified others to half guess means 'Secret Service.' There's one thing about Zeph, with all his wild imaginings and ambition along the railroad line, he sticks to his idea of breaking in somewhere

as an active young sleuth.”

“We think a lot of Zeph, Ralph, and we mustn’t forget that he did some bright things in helping that poor little orphan, Ernest Gregg, to health and happiness.”

“Yes, Zeph deserves great credit for his patience and cleverness in that affair,” admitted Ralph warmly, “only the line he is so fascinated with doesn’t strike me as a regular business.”

“How about Mr. Adair, Ralph?” insinuated his mother.

“That’s so, Bob Adair is the finest railroad detective in the world. If Zeph could line up under his guidance, he might make something practical of himself.”

“I think he has really done just that.”

“I am delighted to hear it,” said Ralph, and watching the glowing embers in the grate in a dreamy fashion he mused pleasantly over his experience with the redoubtable Zeph, while his mother was busy tidying up the dining room.

It was a good deal of satisfaction for Ralph to recall Zeph Dallas to mind. Zeph, a raw country youth, had come to Stanley Junction in a whole peck of trouble. Ralph had always a helping hand for the unlucky or unfortunate. He became a good friend to Zeph and got him a place in the roundhouse. Zeph made a miserable failure of the job. The height of his ambition was to be a detective-like fellows he had read about.

Zeph finally landed, as he expressed it, with both feet. The son of a prominent railroad official became interested in hunting up the relatives of a forlorn little fellow named Gregg. He had plenty

of money, and he hired Zeph to assist him. The latter showed that he had something in him, for his wit and energy not only located the wealthy relative of the orphan outcast, but upset the plots of a wicked schemer who was planning to rob the friendless lad of his rights.

“What did Zeph say about Mr. Adair, mother?” inquired Ralph, as Mrs. Fairbanks again entered the sitting room.

“Nothing clear,” she explained. “You know how Zeph delights in cuddling up his ideas to himself and looking and acting mysterious. He was very important as he hinted that Mr. Adair depended on him to ‘save the day in a big case,’ and he said a great deal about a ‘rival railroad.’”

“Oh, did he, indeed?” murmured Ralph thoughtfully.

“Zeph told me to advise you, very secretly he put it, to look out for trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Particularly, he said, in the train dispatcher’s department.”

“Hm!” commented the young engineer simply, but his brow became furrowed with thought, and he reflected by spells quite seriously over the subject during the evening.

Fogg had forgotten all about his fears of the day previous when he reported at the roundhouse the next morning. He grinned at his young comrade with a particularly satisfied smirk on his face, and made the remark:

“You see before you, young man, a person full of the best chicken stew ever cooked in Stanley Junction. I say, Fairbanks,

if you'd kind of slow up going past Bluff Point we might grab off enough more of those chickens to do for Sunday dinner."

"We? Don't include me in your disreputable pilferings, Mr. Fogg," declared Ralph, "you may get a bill for the two fowls you so boastfully allude to."

"Hey."

"Yes, indeed. In fact," continued Ralph with mock seriousness, "I don't know but what I may have a certain interest in enforcing its collection."

The young engineer recited the episode of the salvage sale of the chickens to Glen Palmer.

"Quite a windfall, that," commented Fogg. "Another fellow to thank his lucky stars that he ran up against Ralph Fairbanks. Sort of interested in this proposition myself. I can hardly imagine a finer prospect than running a chicken farm. Some day-"

The rhapsody of Fireman Fogg was cut short by the arrival of the schedule minute for getting up steam on the Overland racer. The bustle and energy of starting out on their regular trip made engineer and helper forget everything except the duties of the occasion. As they cleared the limits, however, and approached Bluff Point, Ralph watched out with natural curiosity, and Fogg remarked:

"Hope a few more chickens drop into the cab this morning."

Ralph slowed up slightly, they struck the bluff curve, and as they neared the scene of the freight wreck of the previous day he had a good view of the embankment where the two abandoned

cars lay.

“Some one there,” commented Fogg, his keen glance fixed on the spot.

“Yes, our young friend Glen Palmer and an old man. That must be the grandfather he talked about. They are very industriously at work.”

The two persons whom Ralph designated were in the midst of the wreckage. The old man was prying apart the netted compartment of the car and into this the boy was reaching. Near at hand was an old hand cart. It carried a great coop made of laths, and was half filled with fowls.

As the train circled the spot the boy below suspended his work and looked up. He seemed to recognize Ralph-or at least he knew his locomotive.

Ralph nodded and smiled and sounded three quick low toots from the whistle. This attracted the attention of the old man, who, standing upright, stared up at the train, posed like some heroic figure in plain view.

“I say!” ejaculated Fogg with a great start.

The young engineer was similarly moved. In a flash he now traced the source of the puzzling suggestiveness of something familiar in the face of Glen Palmer the day before.

“Did you see him?” demanded Fogg.

“Yes,” nodded Ralph.

“The old man-he’s the one we saw with those two suspicious jailbird-looking fellows down the line yesterday.”

CHAPTER IV – THE WIRE TAPPERS

“I don’t like it,” spoke Fogg with emphasis.

“Neither do I,” concurred Ralph, “but I fancy the sensible thing to do is to make the best of it.”

“While somebody else is making the worst of it!” grumbled the old fireman. “What brought up the confab with the old man at the terminus, anyway?”

“He just called me into the office and gave me the warning I have told you about.”

“Queer-and pestiferous,” said Fogg with vehemence. “I don’t mind a fair and square fight with any man, but this stabbing in the back, tumbling into man traps in the dark and the like, roils me.”

The Overland Express was on its return trip to Stanley Junction. Outside of the incident of the recognition of the old grandfather of Glen Palmer at the bluff curve, nothing had occurred to disturb a smooth, satisfactory run. Ralph and Fogg had discussed the first incident for quite some time after it had come up.

“I don’t like the lineup,” Fogg had asserted. “Here one day you run across that old man in the company of two fellows we’d put in jail on mere suspicion. The next day we find the same old man cleaning up a wreck. Is that part of some villainous programme?”

Did some fine play send that chicken car down into the ditch, say?"

"Decidedly not," answered Ralph. "It doesn't look that way at all. Even if it did, I would vouch for young Palmer. He had no hand in it. I'll look this business up, though, when we get back home."

"H'm, you'd better," growled Fogg, and the fireman was back in his old surly suspicious mood all of the rest of the run.

Now, on the return trip, Fogg was brought up to a positive pitch of frenzy. It was just after their layover at Rockton when a messenger had come from the assistant superintendent to the roundhouse. The waiting hands there knew him. He approached Ralph, addressed him in a low confidential tone, and the two proceeded to headquarters together. It was the sentiment of the majority that the young engineer of the Overland Express was "on the carpet for a call down."

Ralph came back from the interview with the railway official with a serious but by no means downcast face. He parried the good natured raillery of his fellow workmen. It was not until he and his fireman were well out of Rockton on their return trip that he told Fogg what had taken place in the private office of the assistant superintendent.

There was not much to tell, but there was lots left to surmise, and worry over, according to Fogg's way of thinking. The railroad official had pledged Ralph to treat the interview as strictly confidential, except so far as his fireman was concerned.

There was trouble brewing unmistakably, he told Ralph. The latter had weathered some pretty hard experiences with personal enemies and strikers in the past. The official wished to prepare him to battle some more of it in the future.

Bluntly he informed Ralph that two rival roads were “after the scalp” of the Great Northern. They could not reach the Overland schedule of the latter line by fair means, and they might try to break it by foul ones. The official gravely announced that he felt sure of this. He would have later specific information for Ralph. In the meantime, he wished him to exercise unusual vigilance and efficiency in overcoming obstacles that might arise to delay or cripple the Overland Express.

Two things rather startled the young engineer, for they seemed to confirm hints and suspicions already in the wind. In a guarded way the official had referred to “harmony in the train dispatcher’s office.” He had next made an allusion to the fact that if competitive rivalry grew fierce, it might attract under cover a lot of disreputable criminals, and he spoke of extra precaution when the pay trips of the line were made, tallying precisely with suspicions already entertained by Ralph.

It was a very cold night when the train started out on its return trip. It was clear starlight, however, and once on the free swing down the glistening rails, the exhilarating swirl of progress drove away all shadows of care and fear. The magnificent locomotive did her duty well and puffed down to the regular stop beyond The Barrens an hour after daylight fresh as a daisy, and just as

pretty as one, Fogg declared.

“They’re going to miss us this time, I reckon,” spoke the fireman with hilarity and relief, as they later covered the first fifty miles beyond the Mountain Division.

“If any one was laying for us, yes, it seems so,” joined in Ralph. “We are pretty well on our way, it’s daytime, and likely we’ll get through safe this trip.”

Both were congratulating themselves on the outlook as they struck the first series of curves that led through the long stretch of bluffs at the end of which they had encountered the torpedo warning just seventy-two hours previous. There was no indication of any obstruction ahead, and the locomotive was going at good speed.

It was almost a zigzag progress on a six per cent. grade for a stretch of over ten miles, and five of the distance it was a blind swift whiz, shut in by great towering bluffs without a break.

Suddenly at a sharp turn Fogg uttered a shout and Ralph grasped the lever with a quick clutch.

“What was that?” gasped Fogg.

“Maybe a flying rock,” suggested Ralph. He spoke calmly enough, but every nerve was on the jump. The crisis of the vigilance since the run commenced had reached its climax of excitement and strain.

“Something busted,” added Fogg a trifle hoarsely, “something struck the headlight and splintered it. See here,” and he picked up and showed to Ralph a splinter of glass that had blown in through

the open window on his side of the cab.

“Whatever it was it’s past now and no damage done,” declared Ralph. “There’s something twisted around the steam chest, Mr. Fogg.”

“So there is,” assented Fogg, peering ahead. “Guess I’ll see what it means.”

Ralph did not have to let down speed to accommodate his expert helper. Fogg was as much at home on the running board with the train going a mile a minute pace as a house painter on a first-floor scaffold. He crept out through his window.

Ralph lost sight of him beyond the bulge of the boiler and while watching ahead from his own side of the cab. Fogg was nearly three minutes on his tour of investigation.

“There’s something to think about,” he declared emphatically as he dropped two objects on the floor of the cab.

“What is it?” inquired Ralph with a curious stare.

“Wait till I mend the fire and I’ll show you something,” said the fireman. Then, this duty attended to, he took from the floor a long piece of wire wound around a part of a device that resembled a telegraph instrument.

“See here,” explained the fireman excitedly, “I’ve got it in a word.”

“And what is that, Mr. Fogg?”

“Wire tappers.”

“Or line repairers,” suggested Ralph.

“I said wire tappers,” insisted Fogg convincingly, “and I stick

to it. They were at work back there in the cut. Their line must have sagged where they strung it too low. Our smokestack struck it, whipped the outfit free, stand and all, and that metal jigger there swung around and struck the headlight.”

“What stand-was there a stand, then?” inquired Ralph.

“Must have been, for pieces of it are out on the pilot. Say, something else, too! The whole business came that way. Look at that.”

Fogg lifted a small strap satchel from the floor of the cab as he spoke. This was pretty well riddled. In the general swing of the outfit its side must have come in contact with some sharp edged projection of the locomotive. Then, one side torn open from which there protruded some article of wearing apparel, it had landed on the pilot where Fogg had found it.

“Line repairers do not carry little dinky reticules like that,” scornfully declaimed the fireman. “There’s a dress shirt, a fancy vest and a pair of kid gloves in it. The old man at terminus was right. Some one is trying to do up the Great Northern.”

“Put these things away carefully,” directed Ralph, his face thoughtful, and as they ran on it grew anxious and serious.

When they passed the scene of the freight wreck three days previous, they found the debris cleared away and no sign of the boy and old man who had interested them. A wrecking crew had men at work and only a litter of kindling wood marked the scene of the tumble down the embankment.

When they reached their destination Ralph made a package

of the articles Fogg had found on the pilot and proceeded to the office of the general superintendent. That functionary he found to be absent. He followed the promptings of his own mind and proceeded to the office of the road detective, Bob Adair.

A bright young fellow named Dayton, the stenographer of the road detective, announced that Mr. Adair was off duty away from Stanley Junction.

“How soon can you reach him?” inquired Ralph.

“Oh, that’s easy,” replied Dayton.

Adair was a warm friend of Ralph. The latter knew the official reposed a good deal of confidence in young Dayton. He decided to tell him about the supposed discovery of the wire tapping outfit.

“Good for you,” commended Dayton. “You’ve hit a subject of big importance just at present, Mr. Fairbanks.”

“Is that so.”

“Very much so. I’ll get word to Mr. Adair at once. He happens to be in call this side of the Mountain Division. This discovery of yours fits in—that is, Mr. Adair will be glad to get this bit of news.”

“I understand,” returned Ralph meaningly. He was a trifle surprised to see Dayton begin a message in cypher to his chief.

“It looks as if Mr. Adair doesn’t even trust the wires just now,” soliloquized Ralph as he started for home.

The first thing he did after supper was to undo the parcel containing the telegraphic device and the satchel.

The latter, as Fogg had stated, contained a shirt, a fancy vest

and a pair of gloves. These bore no initial or other marks of identification. They were pretty badly riddled from their forcible collision with some sharp corner of the locomotive—so much so, that a pocket, ripped clear out of place, revealed a folded slip of paper. This had suffered in the mix-up, like the garments. Ralph opened it carefully.

It was tattered and torn, sections were gouged out of it here and there, but Ralph devoted to its perusal a thorough inspection.

His face was both startled and thoughtful as he looked up from his desk. For nearly five minutes the young railroader sat staring into space, his mind wrestling with a mighty problem.

Ralph arose from his chair at last, put on his cap and went to the kitchen where Mrs. Fairbanks was tidying up things.

“I’m going away for an hour or two, mother,” he announced.

“Nothing wrong, I hope, Ralph,” spoke Mrs. Fairbanks, the serious manner of her son arousing her mothering anxiety at once.

“I don’t know,” answered Ralph. “It’s something pretty important. I’ve got to see the paymaster of the road.”

CHAPTER V – IKE SLUMP

“Things are narrowing down and closing in,” said the young engineer to himself as he left the Fairbanks cottage.

Ralph started away at a brisk pace. As he had told his mother, he was anxious to see the paymaster of the Great Northern. The general offices were now closed, and Ralph had the home of the paymaster in view as his present destination.

A vivid memory of what the torn sheet found in the riddled vest pocket revealed engrossed his mind. That sheet was a scrawl, a letter, or rather what was left of it. Enough of it was there to cause the young railroader to believe that he had made a most important and startling discovery.

The screeed was from one scamp in the city to another scamp on the road. Judging from the scrawl, a regular set of scamps had been hired to do some work for high-up, respectable fellows. This work was the securing of certain secret information, the private property of the Great Northern, nothing more-for the present at least.

It seemed, however, that “Jem,” in the city, had advised “Rivers,” on the road, that now was the great opportunity to work personal graft on the side-as he designated it. He advised Rivers to keep the regular job going, as five dollars a day was pretty good picking. He, however, added that he must keep close tab on the paymaster deal. It meant a big bag of game. It might not be

according to orders, but the other railroad fellows wouldn't lose any sleep if the Great Northern turned up with an empty pay car some fine morning.

The hint was given also that the way to do things right was to get close to the paymaster's system. Such suggestive words as "watching," "papers," appeared in the last lines of the riddled sheet of paper.

"The precious set of rascals," commented Ralph indignantly. "The assistant superintendent knew what he was talking about, it seems. It's all as plain as day to me. Our rivals have employed an irresponsible gang to spy on and cripple our service. Their hirelings are plotting to make a great steal on their own account. Hi, there-mind yourself, will you!"

Ralph was suddenly nearly knocked off his feet. At the moment he was passing along the side of a building used as a restaurant. It was a great lounging place for young loafers, and second class and discharged railroad men.

Its side door had opened forcibly and the big bouncing proprietor of the place was wrathfully chasing a lithe young fellow from the place. His foot barely grazed the latter, who pirouetted on the disturbed Ralph and went sliding across the pavement to the gutter.

"Get out, I tell you, get out!" roared the irate restaurant man. "We don't want the likes of you about here."

"I'm out, ain't I?" pertly demanded the intruder.

"And stay out."

“Yah!”

The man slammed the door, muttered something about stolen tableware and changed eating checks. Ralph did not pause to challenge the ousted intruder further. One glance he had cast at the ugly, leering face of the lad. Then, his lips puckered to an inaudible whistle of surprise and dislike, he hurried his steps.

“Ike Slump!” uttered the young railroader under his breath.

It only needed the presence of the detestable owner of that name to momentarily cause Ralph to feel that the situation was working down to one of absolute peril and intense seriousness. Ike Slump had been a name to conjure by in the past-with the very worst juvenile element in Stanley Junction.

Way back in his first active railroad work, about the first repellant and obnoxious element Ralph had come up against was Ike Slump. When Ralph was given a job in the roundhouse, he had found Ike Slump in the harness. From the very start the latter had made trouble for the new hand.

Ike had tried to direct Ralph wrong, to slight work, to aid him in pulling the wool over the eyes of their superiors in doing poor work. Ralph had manfully refused to be a party to such deception.

A pitched battle had ensued in which Slump was worsted. Later he was discharged, still later he was detected in stealing metal fittings from the roundhouse. After that Ike Slump joined a crowd of regular yard thieves. As Ralph went up the ladder of fortune, Ike went down. He was arrested, escaped, made many

attempts to “get even,” as he called it, with the boy who had never done him a wrong, and the last Ralph had heard of him he was serving a term in some jail for train wrecking.

How he had got free was a present mystery to Ralph. That he had been pardoned or his sentence remitted through some influence or other was evident, for here was Slump, back in Stanley Junction, where Adair, the road detective, would pick him up in a jiffy, if he was a fugitive from justice.

Ralph had no wish to come in contact with the fellow. On the contrary, so distasteful was Slump and his many ways and his low companions to Ralph, that he was desirous of strictly evading him. Ralph, however, could not help experiencing a new distrust at coming upon Slump at a time when presumptive villainy was in the air.

“Hey!”

Ralph did not pause at the challenge. He realized that Slump had seen and recognized him. He kept straight on, paying no attention to the hail, repeated, but at the corner of two streets, under a lamplight, he halted, for Slump was at his side.

“Well, what do you want?” demanded Ralph bluntly, and with no welcome in his voice.

“I-want to speak to you,” stammered Slump, breathless from his run. “I suppose it tickled you nearly to death to see me kicked out of the restaurant back yonder, hey?”

“Why should it?” inquired Ralph.

“That’s all right, Fairbanks; natural, too, I suppose, for you

never liked me.”

“Did you ever give me a chance to try.”

“Eh? Well, let that pass. Don’t be huffy now. See here.”

As Slump spoke, he extended his hands. They were coarse and grimy. With a smirk he inquired:

“See them?”

“See what?” demanded Ralph.

“Clean hands.”

“Are they-I didn’t understand.”

“Yes, sir,” declared the young rowdy volubly. “They’ve worked out the sentence on the stoke pile, and I owe the state nothing. I’m as free in Stanley Junction as any goody-goody boy in the burg, and I want you to know it.”

“All right, Ike,” said Ralph, pleasantly enough, “hope you’ll improve the chance to make good, now you’ve got the opportunity.”

“You bet I will,” retorted Slump, with a strangely jubilant chuckle.

“That’s good.”

“Don’t go, I’ve got something else to say to you.”

“I’m pressed for time, Slump-”

“Oh, you can spare me a minute. It may do you some good. Say, you’ve managed to climb up some while I’ve been locked up, haven’t you?”

“I’ve had good steady work, yes.”

“I’d give an arm for just one run on that dandy Overland

Express of yours," observed Slump.

"Why don't you work for it, then," questioned Ralph. "It's in any boy who will attend strictly to business."

"Oh, I don't want the glory," explained Slump.

"What, then?"

"Just one chance to spurt her up till she rattled her old boiler into smithereens and run the whole train into the ditch. That's how much I love the Great Northern!"

Ralph was disgusted. He started down the walk, but Slump was persistent. The latter caught his arm. Ralph allowed himself to be brought to a halt, but determined to break away very shortly.

"Just a word, Fairbanks, before you go," said Slump. "You're going to come across me once in a while, and I want a pleasant understanding, see? You won't see me getting into any more scrapes by holding the bags for others. I'm after the real velvet now, and I'm going to get it, see? I know a heap of what's going on, and something is. I'll give you one tip. I can get you a small fortune to resign your position on the Great Northern."

The way Ike Slump pronounced these words, looking squarely into the eyes of Ralph, could not fail to impress the latter with the conviction that there was some sinister meaning in the proposition. Ralph, however, laughed lightly.

"Thinking of starting a railroad of your own, Slump?" he asked.

"No, I ain't," dissented Slump. "All the same-you see, do you?"

Slump smartly put out one hand curved up like a cup.

“Yes, you told me before,” nodded Ralph-“clean hands this time.”

“Now, this is a different deal.”

“Well?”

“Hollow of my hand-see?”

“I don’t.”

“Maybe it holds a big railroad system, maybe it don’t. Maybe I know a turn or two on the programme where the tap of a finger blows things up, maybe I don’t. I only say this: I can fix you right with the right parties-for a consideration. Think it over, see? When you see me again have a little chat with me. It will pay you-see?”

Ralph walked on more slowly after a long wondering stare at Ike Slump. He had never been afraid of the young knave either in a square fight or in a battle of wits. There was something ominous, however, in this new attitude of Slump. He had told just enough to show that something antagonistic to the Great Northern was stirring, and that he was mixed up with it.

The home of the paymaster was located over near the railroad, quite away from the business centre of the town. Ralph reached it after a brisk walk. He found the place dark and apparently untenanted. It looked as if Mr. Little and his family were away, probably at some neighbor’s house. Then going around to the side of the house and glancing up at the windows, Ralph discovered something that startled him.

“Hello!” he exclaimed involuntarily, and every sense was on the alert in an instant.

Two flashes inside the downstairs wing of the house, which Ralph knew Mr. Little used as a library, had glinted across the panes of an uncurtained window. Somebody inside the room had scratched a match which went out, then another which stayed lighted.

Its flickerings for a moment illuminated the apartment and revealed two men standing near a desk at one side of the room.

“Why,” exclaimed the young railroader—“those mysterious men again!”

CHAPTER VI – IN THE TUNNEL

Ralph pressed close to the window pane of Mr. Little's library room but he did not succeed in seeing much. The last match struck revealed to his sight the two men who had acted so suspiciously the day he had seen them hanging around the Overland Express train with Glen Palmer's grandfather.

If all that he had surmised and discovered was true, it was quite natural that he should come upon them again. Ralph was less startled than surprised. He wondered what their motive could be in visiting the paymaster's house.

"They are not up to burglary," the idea ran through his mind. "It must be they are searching among the paymaster's papers to find out what they can about his system and methods. Yes, that is it."

Ralph saw the man who had struck the matches draw from his pocket a tallow candle, evidently intending to light it. His companion had pulled up the sliding top of a desk and was reaching out toward some pigeon holes to inspect their contents. Just then an unexpected climax came.

The foot of the young railroader slipped on a patch of frozen grass as he pressed too close to the window. Ralph fell up against this with a slight clatter. The man with the match turned very sharply and suddenly. He glared hard at the source of the commotion. He must have caught sight of Ralph's face before the

latter had time to draw back, for he uttered a startled ejaculation.

With a bang the desk top fell back in place, the match went out, and the man with the candle fired it wildly at the form at the window with sufficient force to penetrate the pane with a slight crash.

Ralph drew back, some fine splinters of glass striking his face. It was totally dark now in the room into which he had peered. He could catch the heavy tramping of feet in flight and a door slammed somewhere in the house.

“Hey, there-what are you up to,” challenged Ralph, sharply, as he stood in a puzzled way debating what was best to do. He turned about, to face a powerfully-built man, cane in hand, storming down upon him from the front of the house.

“It is you, Mr. Little?” inquired Ralph quickly.

“Yes, it’s me. Who are you? Oh, young Fairbanks,” spoke the paymaster, peering closely at Ralph.

“Yes, sir.”

“I thought I heard a pane of glass smash-”

“You did. Hurry to the rear, Mr. Little.”

“What for?”

“I’ll cover the front.”

“Why-”

“Two men are in your house. They were just at your desk when I discovered them.”

“Two men in the house!”

“I can’t explain now, but it is very important that we prevent

their escape.”

“Burglars! We were all over to supper at wife’s folks-”

“Spies, fits the case better, sir-some rival road spite work, maybe. It’s serious, as I shall explain to you later.”

“There they are. Hey, stop!”

Two figures had cut across the lawn from the rear of the house.

“They are the same men,” declared Ralph, and both he and the paymaster put after them.

The fugitives paid no attention to the repeated demands of the paymaster to halt. They crossed a vacant field and suddenly went clear out of sight.

“They’ve dropped over the wall guarding the north tracks,” said Ralph.

“And we’ll follow!” declared Mr. Little dauntlessly.

At this point the north branch of the road ran down a steep grade and was walled in for over a thousand feet. Ralph dropped onto the cindered roadbed. Mr. Little more clumsily followed him.

“Where now?” he puffed, as he scrambled to his feet.

“There they go,” said Ralph, pointing towards two forms quite plainly revealed in the night light.

“I see them,” spoke the paymaster. “They’re caged in.”

“Unless they take to the tunnel.”

“Then we’ll take to it, too,” insisted Mr. Little. “I’m bound to get those men.”

Ralph admired the pluck and persistency of his companion.

The paymaster was a big man and a brave one. He had the reputation of generally putting through any job he started on. The young railroader did not entirely share the hopes of his companion, as he saw the two fugitives reach the mouth of the tunnel, and its gloom and darkness swallowed them up like a cloud.

“The mischief!” roared the paymaster, going headlong, his cane hurtling through space as he stumbled over a tie brace. “I’ve sprained my ankle, I guess, Fairbanks. Don’t stop for me. Run those fellows down. There’s bound to be a guard at the other end of the tunnel. Call in his help.”

Ralph grabbed up the cane where it had fallen and put sturdily after the fugitives. The tunnel slanted quite steeply at its start. It was about an eighth of a mile in length, and single tracked only. Ralph was not entirely familiar with running details on this branch of the Great Northern, but he felt pretty sure that there were no regular trains for several hours after six o’clock.

The men he was pursuing had quite some start of him, and unless he could overtake them before they reached the other end of the tunnel they were as good as lost for the time being. Ralph’s thought was that when he had passed the dip of the tunnel, he would be able to make out the forms of the fugitives against the glare of the numerous lights in the switchyards beyond the other entrance.

The young railroader retained possession of the paymaster’s cane as a weapon that might come in handy for attack or defense,

as the occasion might arise.

It was as black as night in the tunnel, once he got beyond the entrance, and he had to make a blind run of it. The roadbed was none too smooth, and he had to be careful how he picked his steps. The air was close and smoky, and he paused as he went down the sharp grade with no indication whatever through sight or sound of the proximity of the men he was after.

It had occurred to him more than once that the men in advance, if they should happen to glance back, would be able to catch the outlines of his figure against the tunnel outlet. As they did not wish at all to be overhauled, however, Ralph believed they would plan less to attack him than to strain every effort to get into hiding as speedily as possible.

Headed forward at quite a brisk pace, the young railroader came suddenly up against an obstruction. It was human, he felt that. In fact, as he ran into a yielding object he knew the same to be a barrier composed of joined hands of the two fugitives. They had noted or guessed his sharp pursuit of them, had joined each a hand, and spreading out the others practically barricaded the narrow tunnel roadbed so he could in no manner get past them.

"Got him!" spoke a harsh voice in the darkness. Ralph receded and struck out with the cane. He felt that it landed with tremendous force on some one, for a sharp cry ensued. The next instant one of the fugitives pinioned one wrist and the other his remaining wrist.

Ralph swayed and swung to and fro, struggling actively to

break away from his captors.

“What now?” rang out at his ear.

“Run him forward.”

“He won’t run.”

“Then give him his quietus.”

Ralph felt that a cowardly blow in the dark was pending. He had retained hold of the cane. He tried to use this as a weapon, but the clasp on either wrist was like that of steel. He could only sway the walking stick aimlessly.

A hard fist blow grazed one ear, bringing the blood. Ralph gave an old training ground twist to his supple body, at the same time deftly throwing out one foot. He had succeeded in tripping up his captor on the left, but though the fellow fell he preserved a tenacious grip on the wrist of the plucky young railroader.

“Keep your clutch!” panted the other man. “I’ll have him fixed in a jiffy. Thunder! what’s coming?”

“A train!”

“Break loose—we’re lost!”

Ralph was released suddenly. The man on the right, however, had delivered the blow he had started to deal. It took Ralph across the temple and for a moment dazed and stunned him. He fell directly between the rails.

The two men had darted ahead. He heard one of them call out to hug the wall closely. Then a sharp grinding roar assailed Ralph’s ears and he tried to trace out its cause.

“Something is coming,” he murmured. His skilled hearing

soon determined that it was no locomotive or train, but he was certain that some rail vehicle of light construction was bearing down upon him.

Ralph was so dazed that he could barely collect wit and strength in an endeavor to crawl out of the roadbed. With a swishing grind the approaching car, or whatever it was, tore down the sharp incline.

His sheer helplessness of the instant appalled and amazed Ralph. It seemed minutes instead of seconds before he rolled, crept, crawled over the outside rail. As he did so, with a whang stinging his nerves like needles of fire, one end of the descending object met his suspended foot full force, bending it up under him like a hinge.

Ralph was driven, lifted against the tunnel wall with harsh force. His head struck the wet slimy masonry, causing his brain to whirl anew.

Something swept by him on seeming wings of fleetness. There was a rush of wind that almost took his breath away. Then there sounded out upon the clammy blackness of the tunnel an appalling, unearthly scream.

CHAPTER VII – DANGER SIGNALS

The danger seemed gone, with the passage of the whirling object on wheels that had so narrowly grazed the young railroader, but mystery and vagueness remained in its trail.

“What was it?” Ralph heard one of his late assailants ask.

“A hand car,” was the prompt reply. “She must have struck somebody. Did you hear that yell?”

“Yes—run for it. We don’t know what may have happened, and we don’t want to be caught here if anybody comes to find out what is up.”

Ralph was in no condition to follow the fugitives. For a moment he stood trying to rally his scattered senses. The situation was a puzzling and distrustful one. Abruptly he crouched against the wall of the tunnel.

“The hand car,” he breathed—“it is coming back!”

As if to emphasize this discovery, a second time and surely nearing him that alarming cry of fright rang out. Again reversed, the hand car whizzed by him. Then in less than twenty seconds it shot forward in the opposite direction once more. Twice it thus passed him, and on each occasion more slowly, and Ralph was able to reason out what was going on.

The hand car was unguided. Someone was aboard, however,

but helpless or unable to operate it. Unmistakable demonstrations of its occupancy were furnished in the repetition of the cries that had at first pierced the air, though less frenzied and vivid now than at the start.

Finally seeking and finding the dead level at the exact centre of the tunnel, the hand car appeared to have come to a stop. Ralph shook himself together and proceeded for some little distance forward. He was guided by the sound of low wailings and sobs. He landed finally against the end of the hand car.

“Hello, there!” he challenged.

“O-oh! who is it?” was blubbered out wildly. “O-oh, mister! I did not do it. Teddy Nolan gave it a shove, and away it went-boo-hoo!”

Ralph read the enigma promptly. Mischievous boys at play beyond the north end of the tunnel had been responsible for the sensational descent of the hand car. He groped about it now and discovered a tiny form clinging to the boxed-up gearing in the centre of the car.

“You stay right still where you are,” ordered Ralph, as he located the handles of the car and began pumping for speed.

“Oh, yes, sir, I will.”

“It’s probably too late to think of heading off or overtaking those fellows,” decided Ralph, “but I’ve got to get this hand car out of harm’s way.”

It was no easy work, single handed working the car up the slant, but Ralph made it finally. He found a watchman dozing

in the little shanty near the entrance to the tunnel. The man was oblivious to the fact of the hand car episode, and of course the same as to the two men who had doubtless long since escaped from the tunnel and were now safe from pursuit. Ralph did not waste any time questioning him. As he was ditching the hand car the ragged urchin who had made a slide for life into the tunnel took to his heels and scampered away.

The young railroader thought next of the paymaster. Ralph made a sharp run of it on foot through the tunnel. He did not find Mr. Little where he had left him, but came across him sitting on a bench at the first flagman's crossing, evidently patiently waiting for his return.

"Well, what luck," challenged Mr. Little.

"None at all," reported Ralph, and recited the events of the past fifteen or twenty minutes.

"That's pretty lively going," commented Mr. Little, looking Ralph over with an approving and interested glance. "I managed to limp this far. I've wrenched my foot. I don't think it amounts to much, but it is quite painful. I'll rest here a bit and see if it doesn't mend."

"Shall I help you to the house, Mr. Little?" suggested Ralph.

"Maybe-a little later. I want to know about this business first—the smashed window and those burglars. Come, sit down here on the bench with me and tell me all about it, Fairbanks."

"They are not burglars," asserted Ralph.

"What are they, then?"

“What I hurriedly hinted to you some time back-spies.”

“Spies?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I had better tell you the whole story, Mr. Little.”

“That’s it, Fairbanks.”

Ralph began with the queer-acting trio who had first attracted his suspicions several days previous. He did not leave out the details of his interview with the assistant superintendent at Rockton.

“Why, Fairbanks,” exclaimed the paymaster, arising to his feet in positive excitement, “this is a pretty serious business.”

“It strikes me that way, sir.”

“If these two men were not incidental burglars, and nothing is missing at the house, they were after information.”

“Instead of booty, exactly,” responded Ralph, in a tone of conviction.

“And if that is true,” continued the paymaster, still more wrought up, “they show a system of operation that means some big design in their mind. Give me the help of your shoulder, Fairbanks. I’ve got to get to the house and to my telephone right away.”

A detour of the walled-in runway was necessary in order that they might reach Mr. Little’s home. The paymaster limped painfully. Ralph himself winced under the weight of his hand placed upon his shoulder, but he made no complaint. His right

arm was growing stiff and the fingers of that hand he had noticed were covered with blood.

By the time they reached the paymaster's home, his family had returned. Mr. Little led Ralph at once to the library and sank into his armchair at the desk.

"Why," he exclaimed after a glance at Ralph, "you are hurt, too."

"Oh, a mere trifle," declared the young engineer with apparent carelessness.

"No, it's something serious-worth attending to right away," insisted the paymaster, and he called to his wife, introduced Ralph, and Mrs. Little led him out to the kitchen.

In true motherly fashion she seated him on a splint bottomed chair at the sink, got a basin of hot water and some towels, some lint and a bottle of liniment, and proceeded to attend to his needs like an expert surgeon.

Where Ralph's hand had swept the steel rail when his assailant in the tunnel had knocked him off his footing, one arm had doubled up under him, his fingers sweeping a bunch of metal splinters. These had criss-crossed the entire back of his hand. Once mended up, Ralph was most solicitous, however, to work his arm freely, fearing a wrench or injury that might temporarily disable him from road duty.

"I've got the superintendent over the 'phone," said Mr. Little, as Ralph reëntered the library. "He's due at an important lodge meeting, and can't get here until after nine o'clock. See here,

Fairbanks,” with a glance at the injured hand which Ralph kept to his side in an awkward way, “you’d better get home and put that arm in a sling.”

“I think myself I’d better have a look at it,” acknowledged Ralph. “It feels pretty sore around the shoulder.”

“You have a telephone at your house?” inquired the paymaster.

“Yes, sir.”

“I may want to call you up. If I don’t, I feel pretty sure the superintendent will, when we have talked over affairs.”

Mr. Little insisted on his hired man hitching up the family horse to drive Ralph home. Mrs. Fairbanks at a glance read pain and discomfort in her son’s face as he entered the sitting room. Ralph set her fears at rest with a hasty explanation. Then after resting a little he told her all about his adventures of the evening.

“It seems as if a railroader must take a double risk all the time,” she said in a somewhat regretful tone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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