

# Whispering Rails

Gilbert A. Lathrop

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# Whispering Rails

*By*

GILBERT A. LATHROP



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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Affectionately Dedicated to My Dad*

LEWIS R. LATHROP

A Locomotive Engineer

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# Whispering Rails

## CHAPTER I

### *Box Car Pilfering*

Now that the train was getting closer to Maroon, his destination, Jerry Twyman was remembering. Impressions buried these past eight years were crowding to the front of his mind. Almost every mountain side, every rocky gulch, every towering, snow-clad peak brought a clearly etched memory with it. Jerry kept wondering if he were not dreaming. But he knew this was real. The railroad had been bred into his bones. At school he had thought to get away from it. Yet every Saturday had found him wandering through the different roundhouses of the different railroads running in and out of Denver.

His heritage was of the railroad. His father had gone to his death on the high iron. Jerry held the memory of his quiet, keen-eyed father as something sacred. His father had been a fighter for the right. Irish, still carrying a trace of brogue in his speech. Three terms as state representative. There was little doubt that he would have been reelected had he not lost his life. Even today the old-time railroaders talked with bated breath about that wreck. Forty-seven cars loaded with ice, a three per cent grade and frozen automatic air. From the moment the long, heavy train tipped over the sag at Granite every man of the crew had known they were doomed. The train had rocketed against the locomotive. Not one of the crew had tried to save his life by jumping to safety. Each of them had gone stoically about trying to check that plunging runaway.

Jerry knew his train was approaching the rocky point where eight years before that screaming, out-of-control ice train had crashed from the rails. Twenty-seven cars had been splintered to kindling wood in the canyon. Three men, his father among them, had been buried in the wreckage. By some freak of chance the locomotive had snapped free of her train, run half a mile farther and halted, still on the rails. If his father had only stayed in the cab instead of going back to help set hand brakes. . . .

Jerry looked out the car window on his side. They were passing the rocky point now, flanged wheels beneath the coach screaming to the grinding restraint of the rails. Only a litter of splintered oak, of bent and twisted steel rods scattered among the granite rubble mutely told of the tragedy.

Now that they had passed the point Jerry sighed sadly. His memory was still keenly alert, but new impressions were forming in his mind. These new impressions would be lasting ones. The canyon through which the train wound like a long snake was oppressive. The sunlight was shut out. Always, near the rim, two thousand feet above, hung a brownish, black pall of smoke. The automobile highway wound around up there on the rim. Jerry had traveled that highway a number of times in the past. From the top trains rumbling through the canyon looked like toys.

Chance had been responsible for bringing Jerry back to Maroon, to the town where he was born. If chance had not been responsible why would he have been admiring the lines of a massive new freight engine recently purchased by the B. & L. Railroad—his railroad? His clear, blue eyes had been shining, lips half parted. Every feature of his deeply tanned face denoted intense admiration. He had removed his cap and his thatch of red hair stood out like a patch of fire.

If it had not been chance why should John Mason, General Manager, have discovered him there? John Mason was a railroader of the old school, heavy-fisted, rough-talking, a student of men and the stuff that goes to make men.

“Quite a pile of steel and iron, isn’t she?” remarked Mason pleasantly, nodding toward the softly hissing locomotive.

Jerry started, eyed the official speculatively. “She’s a beauty,” he admitted.

“And she’s powerful. Seventy-five thousand pounds of tractive effort in those wheels. Speed up to seventy miles an hour. We purchased ten just like her for general utility purposes. We’ll work them on our mountain grades, over Tennessee Pass.”

“I know that country,” said Jerry quietly, his eyes growing reminiscent.

John Mason intently appraised the youth. “What’s your name?” he suddenly demanded.

“Twyman. Jerry Twyman.”

Mason frowned and looked off into space. “Not a common name,” he muttered. “Twyman. Jerry Twyman. It rings familiar——” then his eyes lighted. “You’re not by any chance related to Jerry Twyman who ran a locomotive over Tennessee Pass several years ago?” he asked.

“He was my father.” Jerry spoke quietly, but his voice quivered with pride.



John Mason thrust out his right hand. "I'm mighty glad to meet you, Jerry Twyman. Your father was one of our best men." He grew silent and Jerry could tell that his mind was weighing a new thought. Then Mason bored his gaze straight into Jerry's eyes. "Jerry," he spoke slowly as though carefully picking each word, "what are you doing towards making a living?"

"Nothing. I only finished school last spring."

"I'd be willing to bet that you're the same fighting Irish stock as your father," smiled John Mason.

Jerry flushed. He had been able to take care of himself at school, had graduated with honors, been president of his class during the four years at college and had left behind him a reputation for fearlessness and square play.

"So you're not working at present?" John Mason shot the question.

"No, sir."

"Looking for a job?"

Jerry hadn't given that much thought. He had been undecided. No particular occupation had carried the right appeal. But now. . . .

"Yes," he replied.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Have you a guardian?"

"Yes, sir. Tom Bently, a lawyer here in Denver."

"Would he sign a minor's release for you?"

"I'm sure he would."

"Let's go into my office. I want to talk with you."

Jerry followed, wondering what John Mason wanted. The smell of the railroad hung on the close air of the roundhouse, an odor which smacked of adventure, thrill, massive weight and power. Something inside him seemed to call to those softly hissing mountains of animate steel which set over each pit. He felt an affection for them which swelled from his heart.

In his office John Mason seated himself and motioned Jerry to do likewise.

"During the years your father worked for this railroad company," began John Mason, an unlighted cigar between his forefinger and thumb, "we had

very little trouble on our line around Maroon. Your father was always a fighter for the right. He tolerated no lawlessness. Maroon, as you already know, is one of our largest helper towns. We work from eight to twelve engine crews in helper service out of there.” The official suddenly jumped to his feet and began pacing rapidly back and forth across the office.

“During the past year,” he resumed angrily, “this mountain section of our railroad has been giving us increasing trouble. We are losing many valuable shipments of merchandise through a systematic pilfering of cars while en route over Tennessee Pass. We have kept half a dozen of our railroad detectives working around there, but to date they have accomplished exactly nothing. It is more than possible that some of our employees are mixed up in this box car pilfering, because each job seems to be an inside one. Now I’m not going to offer you work as a detective. You’d be spotted the moment you arrived in Maroon. But we are very short of firemen at that point. As a fireman you would have much more chance of getting an inside viewpoint on the whole thing. Of course, you’re pretty young, almost too young, but youth often accomplishes what older heads fail in doing. How about it?” John Mason barked the question.

Jerry’s heart was thumping like a trip hammer. Here was a chance to get on the railroad as a fireman! Opportunity was knocking. But how would those railroaders over in Maroon feel toward him were they to discover that he was prying into their affairs? Jerry knew that the honest ones would stand on his side. The dishonest ones, he didn’t want on his side.

Face wreathed in a smile of joy he leaped to his feet. “You mean you’ll give me a job as a fireman?” he blurted.

“I do. And I can add that you’ll find yourself working around a gang of heavy-fisted, elemental men; but you’ll also find that in the breast of every one of them beats a heart bigger than he is. Of course, there will be danger connected with the work, stark, unseen danger. Those who are pilfering our cars stop at nothing, not even murder.” John Mason lowered his voice.

“They have——?” breathed Jerry.

The official nodded grimly. “Twice,” he said.

“In that case a stop should be put to them, and I’d like to be the one to do it!”

John Mason resumed his pacing. As he strode to and fro he spoke jerkily. “Perhaps I should reconsider my proposition to you, Jerry. It would be a terrible thing were you to go over there and meet with foul play——”

“But I want to go,” interrupted Jerry.

John Mason halted. For almost ten seconds he gazed fixedly at the youth. Finally a half smile crept over his thin face. “You’ve the features of a fighter, Jerry,” he said. “I can tell that you’re fearless, and you seem to have a mind keen enough to cope with almost any kind of danger. I’m tempted to go through with it.”

“When do I leave for Maroon?” asked Jerry eagerly.

“That’s optional with you. When you get your minor’s release, and I have a talk with your guardian I’ll give you transportation to Maroon. Regarding this box car pilfering keep in direct touch with me all the time. Advise me of every suspicious move on the part of any one, any time. And be careful. You’re going into mighty grave danger——”

Jerry started toward the door. “I’ll be back with that release and my guardian within the next hour,” he said.

All that had been yesterday. Jerry’s guardian had objected strongly at first and had been won over only after much pleading. In the end he had given his consent, signed the release and now Jerry was almost at his destination. This time the day before yesterday, had any one told him he would be heading toward a railroad job and high adventure within forty-eight hours he would have laughed in his face.

Over ahead the engineer blew a long, mournful blast on his chime whistle, a blast which rolled and echoed toward the snow-capped spine of the continental divide.

A brakeman came into the car. “Maroon, next stop!” he shouted.

Jerry took up his valise packed with new overalls, gloves, a book of railroad rules and his other belongings. High-speed brakes beneath the coach ground against the wheels. The train slowed to a halt before the combined depot and railroad eating house in Maroon.

Jerry walked toward the entrance of the coach. Suddenly his brow furrowed. Was it a premonition of danger which swept over him suddenly? He shrugged it aside and was the first one to step down to the platform. Then he halted while he filled his lungs with the crisp, sparkling air of those high mountains. Maroon was unchanged as he remembered it. On the other side of the depot was the short main street which terminated abruptly when it bumped into a steep mountain side. On the other side of the train were the railroad yards gouged out of another hill. The roundhouse was backed against an almost precipitous cliff. To the east the open space closed to the canyon

with its towering walls and its snake-like main lines following each side of the turbulent, roaring river. Everything was grimy. The mountain sides were a soiled maroon with sooty pinion-pine and spruce trees thickly covering them.

Jerry brought his gaze back to his immediate surroundings. A dozen men were lined up against the tubed railing which enclosed the dried-out lawn around the depot and eating house. Railroaders, all of them. Jerry could tell that by their dark blue shirts with white polka dots, their gold watch chains conspicuously displayed across their deep breasts, their rakish caps. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### *Meet Tom Bender, Fireman*

Jerry stood there looking at the group of railroaders. He must find a room, make arrangements for his meals and gain some insight into his new environment. All of the railroaders bore the same stamp. Heavily muscled shoulders and arms, narrow hips and thin legs. Their work was all done with the upper parts of their bodies.

Jerry felt the eyes of one of them regarding him owlshly. This one was on the end of the string. He was tall, barrel-chested, small-waisted. The narrow blue serge trousers which covered his legs showed that the limbs beneath them were mere pipe stems. But it was the countenance of this man which drew Jerry's attention. He was no beauty. His brown eyes twinkled as though they had discovered life to be a huge joke. A mop of uncombed, curly black hair hung down below his cap. His nose was large, too large, but it was not sharp. His mouth was wide. It was a good natured mouth, the corners crinkled in an amused grin. His stubbled chin was heavy and blunt.

Jerry approached him. "I'm a stranger here," he began. "It's been eight years since I left. I recently got a job firing an engine out of here."

"All of which bein' th' case," said the stranger in a deep voice, and grinning widely, "you probably want me to tell you where you can find a boar's nest, an' likewise a nose bag."

Jerry was puzzled. "I wondered if you could direct me to a good rooming house, and hotel," he said.

"That's just what I was remarkin'," chuckled the man. "You're eddicated, ain't you?"

"Yes. I've been through college."

"Me, I'm a ig'erant stiff. I c'n write my name so a feller can tell what I'm hittin' at, but that's about all. An' now, to get back to that first question you asked. Rooms is scarce. In fact they ain't any. But I got a good one with Ma Kennedy, an' if you ain't too particular you can move in with me. As to a boardin' place, all us railroaders eat at th' greasy spoon, which is what we call th' railroad eatin' house. An' my name's Tom Bender an' I'm a fireman workin' over Tennessee Pass."

“I’ll be tickled to death to move in with you, Tom. And I’ll eat at the ‘greasy spoon.’ And my name’s Jerry Twyman.”

“Twyman? Say now, I know that name. I worked here back in nineteen twenty an’ they had a hogger called Jerry Twyman. Fired for him a lot. Fine, square shootin’ feller he was——”

“He was my father,” said Jerry quietly.

“I’d knowed it! You got th’ same kind of a chin, th’ same stocky build, th’ same eyes. Well, well. An’ you’re firin’ out of here?”

“I will be,” said Jerry, “after I fill out an examination book and make a student trip.”

“Then come with me. I’ll make you acquainted with Ma Kennedy. Then I’ll take you over to th’ roundhouse so you can meet Valve Oil Scotty, th’ foreman. When you make that student trip try to do it with me. I’ll teach you all I know about heavin’ coal into a workin’ bulgine.” Tom led the way down the platform, greeting each railroader as he passed.

Ma Kennedy’s rooming house was a clapboard, weather beaten, two story affair which seemed to lean toward the mountain in perpetual fear that it would topple over. But inside it was clean and comfortable.

“Ma, this is Jerry Twyman’s son. He’s gonna fire out of here, an’ he wants to move in with me,” introduced Tom.

Ma Kennedy, a buxom, good natured woman who was quite grey greeted Jerry warmly.

“Sure, an’ it’s glad to know ye, I am,” she beamed. “I knew yer father well, admired him for wan av th’ finest men I iver met.”

Jerry thanked her, warming to her friendliness.

“I’ll take him up to th’ room,” interrupted Tom and led the way down a narrow, dimly lighted hallway.

In the room, a clean, well lighted one, Tom motioned around it with possessive satisfaction. “Here she is,” he said. “Good room, good place to stay, good landlady. Ma is one of them motherin’ souls who think every roomer is under her personal care. She’ll keep your sox mended, try to make you wear rubbers when it rains——” he lowered his voice and glanced nervously toward the door. “An’ in th’ spring she’ll make you take sulphur an’ molasses whether you like it or not. Ever try to swaller sulphur an’ molasses?”

Jerry shook his head.

“Horrible stuff to take. Sulphur is dry an’ won’t go down your wind pipe, or what ever it is you swaller with.”

Jerry laughed. He placed his valise in a corner where it would be out of the way. “I expect I’d better go down and meet the roundhouse foreman,” he said then.

“All right. We call ’im Valve Oil Scotty because he’d just as soon give a engineer a extra pint of Valve Oil as he would his right eye,” said Tom opening the door.

As they walked toward the roundhouse Jerry concluded that he was becoming genuinely fond of this big fellow. Tom Bender was a typical railroader. Carefree, happy-go-lucky, big hearted, staunch in his friendships.

The roundhouse was a grimy, smoky place. Five wheezing locomotives, all of them heavy, with small wheels, built for pulling soggy tonnage trains over the mountain, sat out on the sand track. A hostler and his helper were filling the dome of one of them with sand. Near the gangway lay a smoking pile of clinkers which had been shoveled there when the fire was cleaned. Below the roundhouse near the lower end of the yards a slow moving engine switched cars, making up a train for its journey east. Two engineers were oiling around two of the engines on the sand track in readiness to help this train to Tennessee Pass.

Tom led the way into the roundhouse. He headed for a door which set alongside a blackboard on which were written the names of the men and the numbers of the engines they were taking out next trip.

They entered a room filled with tobacco smoke. A fat, round faced man sat with both feet on his makeshift desk. He dropped the feet with a dull thud as they entered.

“Howdy, McTavish,” greeted Tom boisterously. “I’m here to borrow a pint of valve oil.”

Valve Oil Scotty McTavish grinned broadly. “Hoch, Mon,” he boomed with a decided Scotch accent, “away with yer jokes. I’m puttin’ out no Valve Oil. It’s the dumb firemen like you that make this place a mad house!”

“Meet Jerry Twyman, your newest fireman,” Tom changed the subject.

McTavish leaped to his feet, hamlike right hand thrust out. “Jerry Twyman, I’m glad to know ye. I’ve already had instructions to give ye a job. I knew your father. Are ye ready to write out the book of rules?”

“Yes, Sir.”

McTavish opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a thin book. “Sit ye down here at my desk. Ye’ll find pencils an’ paper on top. Anything ye don’t quite know ask me an’ I’ll tell ye.”

Jerry thanked him and seated himself. Since he had practically memorized the book of rules on the trip over he wrote rapidly and was not forced to ask McTavish a single question. Jerry was almost finished with the examination when McTavish and Tom went out into the roundhouse arguing over the merits of something about a locomotive. It seemed that proof of the argument lay in the locomotive itself.

Jerry was through before they returned. He shoved back his chair and let his gaze turn toward the dirty-paned window which looked toward the canyon. He was wondering whether he should ask Tom about the things told him by Mr. Mason yesterday. Tom would know whether box car pilfering was taking place around here. He might even know some of the men implicated in it. But would he give them away? He was a railroader, loyal to his fellow railroaders. . . .

Then Tom and McTavish came back into the office.

“Ye was right, Tom. Funny how such a dumb cluck as ye are could ever be right, but you win. It was a nickel cigar we bet, wasn’t it?” asked McTavish anxiously.

“No siree. It was a ten center!” stated Tom.

“All right,” with a wry face, “Ten center it is.” McTavish turned toward Jerry. “All done, huh?” he said. “That comes of havin’ education. Fillin’ out th’ fireman’s examination in little over an hour. Ye can have th’ company doctor examine ye an’ I’ll fix ye up for a student trip.”

Jerry and Tom left the office. For a short distance they walked in silence. Then Tom abruptly said: “Now that it’s all fixed up so you can be a fireman I’d better warn you. I ain’t askin’ how you stand, or why you’re here except to do a honest job of firin’ engines for honest wages. But they’s things happenin’ that it don’t pay to poke your nose into. It’s claimed that box cars is robbed hereabouts. Maybe they are. One thing to remember is this: a fireman works from his neck down. If you do that you’ll get along. If you get nosey you won’t get along because they’s a flock of hell-raisin’, rip snortin’, would-be bad hombres hangin’ around here. They’s railroaders workin’ out of here that would be at home in penitentiaries. But close your eyes to them. Don’t see nothin’ except rocks on th’ track, or wash-outs, or stuff like that.”



“Thanks, Tom,” said Jerry quietly. He knew the fireman had told him everything he intended telling him. Tom had warned him. Now it was up to Jerry.

But Jerry wanted to ask one question: “Are you in favor of box car pilfering, Tom?”

“I ain’t! But I got sense enough to keep my hide in one chunk by keepin’ my ideas to myself!”

Jerry had turned Tom’s words over and over in his mind while they headed toward the company doctor’s.

Thirty minutes later the doctor came from his office, a fatherly hand on Jerry’s shoulder. He told Tom: “This young fellow is one hundred percent perfect physically in every test.”

“An’ I’m beginnin’ to believe he’s a hundred percent on brains, too,” grinned Tom.

By this time it was almost five thirty. Jerry was beginning to feel hungry. Tom was talking about how “my inside is so empty my back bone is rubbin’ against my stomick.”

As they came to the “greasy spoon” Tom halted. “Listen, Jerry,” he said. “I’m gonna go in an’ order up two T-bone steaks medium cooked. By th’ time you take your doctor’s certificate to McTavish an’ get back to th’ eatin’ house we’ll be ready to eat.”

Jerry nodded. “Good idea, Tom,” he said and hurried across the yards.

McTavish was just getting ready to leave his office when Jerry came bursting in. “I passed the doctor,” he announced, extending the certificate.

“Good. I’ll leave word for ye to be called to make a student trip up th’ hill. An’ here’s a letter. Get th’ engineer ye make your student trip with to Okeh it. Then bring it back to me.” McTavish hastily scribbled on a sheet of paper and handed it to Jerry.

“I’d like to make the trip with Tom Bender,” suggested Jerry.

“That’s who it’ll be with. He gets out on th’ next drag.”

Jerry retraced his footsteps across the maze of box and coal car littered tracks. He came to the depot platform near the lower end. He didn’t pay any attention to the two men who stood conversing in low voices until one of them stepped directly in front of him.

“That ain’t th’ bird, Luke, He’s only a kid,” the other man gruffly warned.

Jerry snapped his eyes up so he could survey the pair. The man called Luke was a tall, bony fellow whose clothes hung on his frame in folds. One side of his face was twisted and contorted from an ancient scar which extended down across the cheek and ended at the corner of his mouth. It gave him the appearance of constantly squinting his left eye.

The other man was small and fat, well dressed, but with a pair of snapping black eyes which were very close together and a mouth the corners of which hung down in a constant sneer.

“There’s one sure way of findin’ out, Descombs,” said Luke without turning his head. He looked down from his six feet four. “Who are yuh?” he asked Jerry.

“Name’s Jerry Twyman. I’m a new fireman working on Tennessee Pass.”

“Yuh see, Descombs,” said Luke, facing the fat man.

“Yeah. But he’s just a punk kid.”

“Kid or no kid, I’m gonna give him a little fatherly advice,” snapped Luke. He scowled fiercely at Jerry. “Listen Punk,” he went on. “Them that work on th’ railroad out of here keeps their mouths shut to things they sees, an’ things they sees that don’t look good to ’em, they close their eyes. Is that plain?”

“Strikingly so,” said Jerry quietly.

“An’ if they don’t keep their mouths shut an’ their eyes closed they don’t last but a day or so. They leave here in a pine box.”

“Which from the viewpoint of certain individuals, should be fitting and proper,” said Jerry with edged sarcasm.

“How’s that?” barked Luke with a puzzled expression.

Jerry shrugged.

“Let ’im alone, Luke. We’ve warned him. I knowed his dad. Old Twyman was one of these law an’ order fellers. He was killed in a ice run away a few years back,” cautioned the fat man.

Jerry felt a wave of anger sweep over him but he bit his lips and started to pass. Luke stepped to one side with an admonishment: “Remember what I’ve told yuh!”

Jerry made no answer. He did not look back but continued slowly to the dining room and entered.

In silence he seated himself beside Tom. On the other side of Tom were several other railroaders, all of them busy shovelling food into hungry mouths and trying to keep a lively conversation going at the same time.

Tom noted the flush which still mantled Jerry's face. "What's up, kid?" he asked soberly.

"Do you know a fellow by the name of Luke, and another by the name of Descombs?" asked Jerry softly.

"Luke Beezley an' 'Doc' Descombs!" breathed Tom. "Yeah I know 'em. Why?"

Jerry hurriedly explained what had happened, told Tom about the warning he had received.

"An' Jerry," said Tom more soberly than he had spoken to Jerry thus far. "Take their advice an' follow it!"

## CHAPTER III

### *Steam and Steel*

As Tom finished his warning a waitress brought their T-bone steaks and set them on the counter. “Coffee?” she asked, jaws working overtime on a wad of chewing gum.

“Yeah,” said Tom without consulting Jerry. Jerry let it pass. Maybe a cup of hot coffee would settle his nerves which had become jumpy in the past ten minutes.

While Tom cut his steak into large pieces he called to the man next to him. “Windy, this young bucko with me is a new fireman, a student. Name’s Jerry Twyman. His dad was killed in th’ ice runaway.”

“Windy” leaned forward so he could see Jerry around Tom’s body. He was an older man with quiet eyes, and a thin lipped mouth. He impressed Jerry strangely, puzzled him. Heretofore Jerry had had no trouble in reading the characters of the different men he had met, but Windy baffled him. It seemed that a transparent wall of ice enclosed Windy in its heart.

“Glad to know you, Jerry. I fired many a trip for your father. Glad you’re going to work out of here.” Windy spoke in a brittle tone which excluded any friendliness. His last statement was uttered as though he did not mean it, but must add it anyhow.

“I’m mighty glad to know you, Mr. Windy——” Jerry was doubtful as to the man’s title.

Tom guffawed. “Mr. Windy!” he repeated with relish at what he thought a huge joke. “Mr. Windy. Windy’s name is Trickle. Joe Trickle, but we call him Windy because he’s been known to make twenty trips an’ never speak a word. I fire for him, an’ you’ll make your student trip with ’im.”

So “Windy” was an engineer, a silent lipped one?

Jerry began eating his meal. Railroading was the common topic of conversation. Each man lined up at the counter reviewed his last few trips, guffawed over some funny happening he had witnessed.

Some of the things they thought funny chilled Jerry’s blood. One of the men near the other end of the counter was telling about a near accident he’d witnessed that morning. His telling was punctuated with laughter, and the others all joined in.

“Th’ Parson made a jump at th’ bottom stirrup on one of them old wooden dump cars when we was settin’ our train out at Tennessee Pass. You all know how them old dump cars got th’ bottom stirrup set off to one side of th’ hand holds? Well, Parson made a pass at it an’ his foot missed. There he was draggin’ along, both legs slidin’ on top of th’ rail square in front of th’ wheels, an’ him squallin’ bloody murder. We got th’ hogger stopped ’fore any damage was done, but Parson took it to heart. Why? Because draggin’ on th’ rail that way wore a hole through his new pants!”

“Parson is th’ conductor on th’ hill crew,” whispered Tom when the laughter had died away.

Jerry nodded.

“Lives on his caboose, does Parson. Got lace curtains up to th’ winders, an’ carpets on th’ floor. Don’t allow no dogs in his caboose, an’ that includes firemen an’ engineers.”

Jerry tingled all over. For the first time in his life he was a part of the railroad, admitted to the craft as an equal. He contrasted this meal with other meals when he was going to school in Denver. He had picked out eating houses where he knew railroaders congregated, had tried to hear some railroad yarns, but his presence had always served as an effective damper.

The screened doors at the entrance smashed open noisily and a shrill-whistling youth about Jerry’s age came bursting in. He sauntered up to the lunch counter, eyed the line of men with insolence and cleared his throat.

“All right, you bake heads, hog heads, shacks an’ brains, if there’s any of th’ latter present. Jay Gould has decided that th’ wheels of commerce will again revolve! You are about to shuffle cars up th’ mountain so th’ B. & L. can declare another dividend. I want three engine crews an’ th’ hill crew for seven forty-five. An’ which one of you braves is Jerry Twyman?” he ended in a shrill voice.

“I’m he?”

The caller eyed Jerry attentively. “Yuh mean you’re him, huh? All right, yuh make a student trip with Tom Bender an’ Windy Trickle, th’ constant talker. Engine ’leven seventy-six.” He turned toward the others, calling each in turn.

Jerry knew that never again would he feel the thrill he was feeling in this, his first call. He stood to receive no pay from the trip, but he was an employee, and he had been called for work!

“An’ right here’s where I make a full fledged tallowpot out of you, Jerry,” grinned Tom as he got to his feet and brushed the crumbs from his trousers.

Dressed in overalls and ready for work Jerry and Tom found Windy Trickle already at the roundhouse oiling his massive charge around. Although it was still daylight Windy carried a smoking, flaring oil torch.

“Windy’s worked nights so many years he’s got to have a light to see even in th’ day time,” chuckled Tom as he reached up and grasped the hand holds at the side of the cab.

Jerry followed him. He watched Tom pull his well worn leather gloves from his hip pocket, slip them on and step on the lever which opened the air doors. There came a strident hiss and the doors parted, exposing a sluggishly burning fire which covered a dining room sized firebox.

Tom left the firebox door open by the simple expedient of closing the air valve. Then he reached for his long handled scoop shovel. He began heaving coal into the back corners and under the door of the fire box. Jerry watched him, marvelling that it was possible to throw as much coal on the fire and not completely smother it. When Tom had moved a full half ton of fuel he straightened and closed the firebox door.

“Th’ first duty of a tallowpot,” he explained, “is buildin’ up a fire. Then you turn on your steam blower—” suiting the action of his words by opening a convenient valve which caused an ear splitting roar in the cab. Then he opened the firebox door again. “See,” he shouted.

Jerry saw. The steam blower had already fanned the fire to molten, raging heat.

“Next you make sure you got torpedoes an’ fuzees, red flag an’ lantern for flaggin’ purposes. Then see that th’ tender is full of water. After that you can put on your injector which shoots water into th’ boiler, an’ then wet down your deck an’ coal pile,” Tom went on. He reached ahead and jerked a lever. A tiny whine filled the cab, sounding above the roar of the blower. That was the injector forcing water into the boiler against a hundred and twenty pounds of steam pressure. Now he took up a short length of rubber hose and opened another valve. Scalding hot water spurted from the end of the hose.

With this Tom began wetting down the deck, spraying the water back over the coal pile until the coal oozed through the opening in the bottom of the coal gates like black mud.

“Th’ fireman works th’ injector after he learns th’ game,” Tom said as he sprayed water over the deck again.

By this time the needle on the steam gage showed the boiler had full two hundred pounds pressure. Tom closed the steam blower and shut off his injector.

“Just crawl up there on th’ brakeman’s seat box,” he instructed. “Watch me. You’ll learn more that way than you will by tryin’ to do my work.”

Windy Trickle climbed up into the deck. He carefully wiped off his long oiler with a chunk of grimy waste and set the oiler on the steel shelf over the firebox door. Then he eyed Jerry. Without opening his lips he nodded, a gesture to come over to him.

Jerry dropped down and crossed the deck.

“Got a letter for me to okeh?” asked Windy.

Jerry pulled it out. Windy took it and fished the stub of a pencil from his pocket. Then he wrote “O. K.” and signed his name under it.

“But how do you know I’ll be okeh?” asked Jerry.

“Don’t. Got to take chances.” Windy slipped up on his seat box and poked his head out his window to signify that the conversation was ended.

For the next thirty minutes they sat there making no move. Windy leaned against the back of the cab, his feet resting on the reverse lever. Tom dozed between getting down and throwing in more fuel. In the lower yards Jerry heard the chuffing of a locomotive as it switched cars together.

“We’ll take th’ head end tonight,” Tom grunted after a long, monotonous silence.

Jerry moved about nervously. Finally he leaned down so he could peer through the back window. The sky was overcast and a wind which wailed from the west had blown up. The air which blew into the cab felt uncomfortably warm.

“Gonna rain,” decided Tom when he saw Jerry squinting at the sky.

“Looks like it,” said Jerry.

As though to prove it a few drops spattered on the cab roof. Others slashed across the cab windows making little daggers of moisture. From the west a flickering tongue of lightning crackled and was gone.

Some one came up into the cab with a lantern hanging over his right arm. He grunted, jerked off his black felt hat which carried a shiny brakeman’s badge on the front and spattered water over the deck.

“Good night for ducks,” he snarled angrily.

Jerry turned on his seat box to survey the newcomer who had already crossed the deck and was standing beside Windy. The brakeman had not eaten with the balance of the crew that evening. He was a slender man with a lean, hungry face, little eyes which seemed to flick with buried fire and a mouth so thin lipped that it was but a line.

The brakeman turned and eyed Jerry for almost thirty seconds. Then he touched Windy on the arm and when Windy leaned down the brakeman whispered in his ear, casting furtive glances toward Jerry as he did so. Jerry knew they were discussing him, and wished he knew what they were saying. The brakeman did most of the talking, Windy only grunting monosyllables.

“That’s Dee Sommers, head shack,” whispered Tom nodding across the cab.

Jerry made no reply. He was studying the brakeman, appraising him, trying to form an impression. Something about this Dee Sommers caused him a feeling of distrust. It was a different feeling from that he felt toward Windy. Windy was a big question mark, but Dee Sommers was not to be trusted.

“We’re ready to get on our train,” rasped Dee as he stepped toward the gangway. He leaned forward to look outside. Jerry saw that his right hip bulged with something beneath his overalls, something that looked very like a revolver. Then Dee slid down the handholds, into the rain which was hissing in a steady fall by this time.

Windy shoved his reverse lever in forward motion and tugged at his throttle. The heavy engine moved off sluggishly with hissing cylinder cocks, and wet, soggy exhausts.

Again Jerry felt a thrill surge over him. Something about the massive weight, the power and might of this steel monster seemed to creep into his flesh and bone, to swell from his heart up into his throat so his throat stung and his eyes watered.

Now they were out on the main line. Tom had dropped into the deck. Jerry slipped back to his place and stuck his head from the window. He ignored the pelting drops of rain and gloried with the feel of sitting up here high above the ground, a part of the great romance of railroading.

He saw Dee stoop and raise the lever of a switch stand. Dee tugged at the lever, then his lantern described short complete circles, seeming to flit through the air of its own accord.

“Back up!” shouted Jerry.



Windy grunted as he tugged his reverse lever across the quadrant. Dee had disappeared, was probably on Windy's side of the engine now. They moved back slowly. Jerry saw they were approaching the dimmed headlight of another engine a short distance away. Then Windy slipped his engine brake valve around. The brakes danced and clashed against steel-tired drive wheels as the 1176 coupled into this other engine with a jangling of draft rigging.

Another man came climbing up into the deck carrying a handful of yellow, blue and red tissues, lantern hanging over his arm. This man was dressed in a long, black frock coat. He wore a wide brimmed felt hat. Jerry grinned to himself. The newcomer looked like one of those old fashioned "sky pilots."

"Parson Evans," said Tom with a nod toward the newcomer. "He's our conductor."

Jerry watched Parson speak to Windy. Parson's face wore a look of utter solemnity. His eyes drew down at the corners, his nose was long and thin, his mouth seemed puckered from all around. Jerry formed an immediate liking for this man. Parson was a new and a different character. He seemed a man who would always tend strictly to his own business.

Now Parson and Windy were comparing orders. They both pulled out their watches and nodded when they found the hands were exactly together. Windy folded his orders into a narrow strip and slipped them in a slot cut into the throttle stand.

"We're running light, tonight, Tom," Parson called across the cab. "That will give you a chance to ride your seat box and keep a close watch for rock slides. This rain should bring them down."

"I got a eagle eyed student to do that for me," grinned Tom pointing to Jerry.

Parson eyed Jerry unblinkingly. Then he very solemnly nodded and turned to slip from sight down the hand holds on Windy's side.

Windy reached up and grasped his whistle cord. He let his arm hang from it without pulling it open. The locomotive directly behind blew two short blasts which caused Jerry to jump. Then Windy answered with the same number. They seemed to lift the top from Jerry's head. His ears tickled and itched inside. From the locomotive coupled behind the caboose came two more answering blasts.

Jerry watched Windy unconcernedly kick his automatic air valve around to full release, hold it there a second, then pull it over to running position.

Next Windy shoved and grunted his reverse lever far into the front corner and reached for his throttle. The 1176 seemed to bunch herself together. From her stubby smoke stack came a deep-throated blasting exhaust followed by another, and still another. Shrieking steam hissed from the still open cylinder cocks. Jerry leaned far out the window. Windy had snapped on his headlight but its glow was smothered in blanketing steam which danced wraith-like across the track ahead.

The heavy train slowly gained momentum. Windy leaned forward and tugged at a short lever. The blowing cylinder cocks closed with a dull plop. Now Jerry could see the track clear to the mouth of Granite Canyon. That piercing beam of light slashed through the rain, silvered the black ballast of the road bed and glinted from the tops of sparkling steel rails.

Tom stepped up on his side and jerked on his injector. Then he swung down and stepped on the air lever which controlled the firebox doors. They opened like a hungry mouth. Jerry was blinded by a white hot, molten glare which leaped back over the coal gates. Like a well oiled machine, Tom bent almost double and heaved a dozen full scoops of coal into the firebox.

The train with its three blasting steel mountains of animate power roared into the canyon. Jerry kept his head far out the window, facing the pelting raindrops which stung when they struck his face. The cinders were not bad here, being too close to the stack as he was. The locomotive was past them before they dropped back. But Jerry knew the fireman on the following engine was getting his full share of them.

No great speed was made. The track climbed the canyon on a steady, unrelenting three percent grade. Three feet upward to each hundred feet of main line. The 1176 had settled to a steady, grinding tug against reluctant cars behind.

They rounded sharp curves where complaining flanges slashed fire from steel rails. There was a blasting, ear splitting noise, too great to be overcome by screaming human voices unless shouted directly into the ear.

Windy sat on his side like a graven image, moving only to try his gauge cocks, or to squint up at his lubricator feeds.

The track ahead dripped with moisture. Little trickles of rain water ran down over the granite cliffs on the right side. Once Jerry saw a west bound passenger sliding silently along across the roaring, muddy river. It shot into the darkness and disappeared.

Now they were across from the point on which his father had lost his life. They passed it, smashed through the rain which had settled to a steady drizzle

and continued their battle with the continental divide.

To the west a pale moon suddenly glinted through torn storm clouds. Jerry looked back at it, let his gaze traverse the top of the train. Suddenly he blinked, sure that his eyes were playing him tricks. No, there was no mistake. Two shadowy figures were moving along the top of the train near the locomotives. He caught but a glimpse of them because the moment they became aware of the moon at their backs they flattened themselves against the roof of the car.

While Jerry watched he saw Dee, the head brakeman who must have been riding the second engine scramble back over the top of the head car, his lantern bobbing through the darkness. Suddenly the lantern disappeared as though it had been snapped out by a quick thrust. He could still see Dee who made his way along the slippery runway on the top. Then he too disappeared as though he had flattened himself against the roof.

Jerry switched his eyes ahead again. What had it meant? Were these men going to pilfer some of the cars in their train?

Tom stepped up beside Jerry, leaned across him and gulped lungfulls of air.

Jerry stooped so he could scream in Tom's ear: "Is there a great deal of box car pilfering going on around here?"

"Just about every train up th' mountain. Why?"

Should Jerry tell Tom what he had seen? He decided not to. Tom would only warn him to keep his eyes closed and his mouth shut. He shrugged and let his gaze switch ahead again. They were coming out into the hole in the mountains which cupped the town of Granite in its hollow. The automobile highway had descended from the rim of the canyon and wound through the small opening, crossed the railroad and followed a dry gulch. The headlight glinted on large, square ponds with timbered slides leading down to the edge of the water, and loading chutes which ended at the edges of spur tracks.

This was where the railroad company secured ice in the winter to fill the bunkers of their many ice houses. Now Granite was practically deserted save for a solitary telegraph operator who had come from his office with a white lantern and a willow hoop over his arm.

"Got pick-up orders for us. I'll get 'em," yelled Tom when his eyes fell on the operator. He let himself down from the gangway so he stood on the bottom step. The engine roared past. Jerry saw him snatch at something, then

Tom came into the deck clutching a hoop with a blue train order stuck in a fork of it. Tom pulled out the order and handed it to Windy.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Wrecked!*

Through Granite the three per cent grade gave way to a mile long level. Many deserted buildings, old, tumble down ones lined both sides of the track. Several spurs led off from both east and west bound main lines.

The freight train picked up speed, and passed those deserted buildings with hollow roars. Jerry had stuck his head from the window again and was idly watching the deserted town slide past the cab when a pair of automobile lights off a short distance from the track snapped on. They glowed for a second, then snapped off, came on again and then off to remain. From the top of the train came a flash of light as though someone had struck a match, let it flare and blow out.

Jerry was positive that this was some kind of a signal. He was equally positive that one of the cars contained merchandise well worth looting. The looting would be done above here, probably near the place where the highway crossed the main line again, some eight miles farther on.

Jerry became conscious that someone in the cab was shouting. He pulled his head inside. Windy was motioning him across the deck.

Jerry crossed, placed his ear close to Windy's lips.

"Take th' scoop an' throw in a fire!" shouted Windy.

Jerry nodded. He moved back to his side. Tom extended his scoop shovel. Jerry did exactly as he had seen Tom do. He stepped on the air lever and as the doors opened had a scoop full of coal ready. The molten glare of the firebox blinded him. He dropped the first scoop under the door, saw black chunks of fuel snatched upward and carried ahead by the blasting draft. Placing coal in the two back corners was a more difficult task. It took a clever twist of the blade of the scoop so the fuel would flip far to the right or to the left. And yet when Jerry finally finished putting in his first fire he felt that he had done well. He was sure he had when Tom grinned broadly, nodded with admiration and slapped him on the back. Windy looked on with impassive features, then stuck his head far out the window again.

Jerry fired the engine the next three miles. He began to wonder if Windy had deliberately called on him to go to work here so he would see nothing that was taking place on the train. If Windy kept him at the task until they

passed the highway cross-over Jerry would be sure that such had been his intentions.

Occasionally Windy glanced down as though wanting to make sure Jerry was still in the gangway. Tom had climbed up on his seat box and was leaning far out the window. The rain had stopped, and the sky showed patches of star flecked indigo.

They were on the three per cent grade again blasting along slowly. The canyon had given way to timbered mountain sides, with occasional rocky cuts. It still followed the right side of the river. Jerry stepped up to snatch a breath of fresh air. He was blinded from facing the glare of the fire box. But he saw the auto highway approaching the main line.

Windy reached up and pulled a long blast on his whistle. He followed it with another long, then a short, and just when the pilot of the 1176 was about to roar over the crossing planks another long, warning blast.

Was it a shadowy car Jerry saw as they passed the crossing? He was almost sure it was, and the doubt grew to certainty when he saw lights flash on for a fleeting instant, then disappear again.

The train rumbled slowly along here, being on one of the stiffest pulls on the mountain. Jerry could have dropped off and kept up with it by running. An ideal place to dump valuable loot from an open car of merchandise, and an ideal place to pick up such loot with a truck!

When they had left the crossing Windy pulled his head and shoulders into the cab. He beckoned Jerry across to him. "That's good!" he shouted into Jerry's ear. "Give th' scoop to Tom."

Jerry was really sorry to relinquish the scoop shovel. The fascination of feeding this working monster was growing on him. The needle on the steam gauge quivered on two hundred pounds and a squirrel tail of steam oozed from the safety valves on top of the boiler.

But he touched Tom's arm and told him that Windy wanted him to take the scoop again. Tom grinned and dropped into the deck. Jerry took his place at the window.

Toward the east the sky was heavily overcast and lightning still flickered over Tennessee Pass. It was still raining up there. At his side the river was swollen and muddy.

They were nearing Snowdon where the double track main line joined in a single track for the final climb to the mile long tunnel which pierced the

granite spine of the continental divide at Tennessee Pass over eleven thousand feet above sea level.

Tom stayed down in the deck throwing scoop after scoop of coal into the hungry maw of the firebox. Jerry studied his broad back, watched the ripple of well trained muscles beneath his tight fitting jumper and wondered if he would ever be as perfect a physical specimen as this big, good natured fireman. Then he craned his neck out the window again. The track here curved sharply to the left on a rocky side hill. Windy could see but a short distance ahead, but Jerry could see clear to the end of the curve. A little let up of the grade had given the throbbing locomotives a chance to whip their heavy train to a rapid clip again.

As Jerry's gaze slid along the track his lips suddenly opened. He raised his hand and brushed at his eyes. The entire mountain side seemed to be moving toward the river. In frozen horror he saw the black main line disappear beneath tons and tons of piled up mud mixed rocks and boulders!

Jerry leaped to his feet. His face was like a white sheet of paper in the dim light of the cab.

“Jump!” he screamed the single word.

He saw Windy's left hand grasp the handle of his automatic air valve and twist it into emergency position. Windy's right shoved the throttle home. Then Windy leaped to his feet. An instant later he jumped through his cab window looking like a gigantic bat when his jumper opened out.

Tom had straightened, a look of doubt in his eyes.

“Jump!” screamed Jerry again.

As the word left his lips he felt the front end of the locomotive raise from the rails. Behind came blasting exhausts as the second engine surged against them. Jerry hesitated no longer. With a last smothered warning on his lips he dove bodily from the cab window. Cold water closed over him. He found himself fighting a sucking, evil current which pulled him down. He struggled to the surface, trying to locate the nearest bank in the darkness. An undertow caught him, pulled him under and again he fought grimly for his life.

When it seemed that his bursting lungs could stand it no longer his face shot to the surface. He filled his lungs with sweet, life giving air. The undertow was behind now. He struggled against a current which tried to carry him toward the center of the river. He caught the barest glimpse of a single dancing blob of light on his left. He turned in that direction and swam with every ounce of strength in his body. Finally his feet touched against a rocky

bottom. An instant later he had pulled himself to the shore. Directly above his head loomed the shadowy bulk of a box car. Jerry scrambled up the slippery, muddy embankment until he stood beside the train. Then crouched forward he ran rapidly toward the head end, breathing a silent prayer that Tom Bender had leaped in time to save himself.



## CHAPTER V

### *Floodwater*

The river had carried Jerry almost a quarter of a mile down stream. He hurried past car after car of the long freight, his goal a tiny cluster of lights ahead. His breathing was labored and his heart pounded with the unusual exertion. The edge of the embankment was slippery and caved off beneath his feet time after time causing him to struggle to keep his balance.

After what seemed miles of tortuous going Jerry came to the second locomotive which hissed noisily and pounded to the exhausts of a double cross compound air pump. Jerry glanced hurriedly at her as he passed. All of her wheels were still on the rails and she seemed undamaged.

Now he found himself blocked by the blunt end of the tender of the engine he had been riding. The tender was turned on its side and angled toward the river. Jerry finally found a foothold by using the ladder which ran up the end. He pulled himself to this, then by exerting his muscles managed to slide to the smooth, painted surface of the side. He saw the lights he had followed were to the left of the track. They reflected on sullen, oily water and were grouped about a central point. Jerry wished it were day so he could see the full extent of the damage. The engine was on her side, several feet from the shore, her massive boiler half submerged.

Those lights were grouped together on the side of the cab, above the window! One man was sprawled on his stomach peering through the opening. Bender must be down there, pinned under the wreckage.

“Can’t move your legs, huh?” That was Windy’s voice.

“Naw. Stuck tight.” Tom’s words seemed to come from a confined space.

Then Jerry was beside the little group of men. Dee Sommers, the head brakeman, raised his lantern and held it so its light fell on his face.

“Here’s that student yuh thought was under her,” he said.

Windy got to his feet. He had been kneeling, peering below in the torn, battered cab. “Jumped after all, huh?” he asked in a flat voice.

“Yes. Lit in the river and was washed down quite a distance,” panted Jerry. “Where’s Tom?”

Windy pointed through the black opening which had been the cab window. "Pinned down there," he said.

Jerry moved past him, and knelt on the edge of the opening. Boiling, muddy water surged around the pipes which littered the boiler head. It was over halfway up.

"Tom!" His voice quivered with anxiety.

"Right down here below you. You could spit in my eye if you wanted," said Tom from the darkness.

Jerry saw his face then, a white patch against the oily water.

"Been tryin' to get them nimble wits up there to hand me down a smoke, but they act like a flock of chickens when a hawk swoops down," grumbled Tom disgustedly.

Dee knelt across from Jerry. He was lighting a cigarette. He handed it down and Tom raised a dripping arm to take it. Its red end glowed as Tom puffed with sighs of satisfaction.

What manner of man was this Tom Bender? He was pinned in the wreckage, only his head and shoulders above the surface of water which tried to drown him, and he asked for a cigarette! For almost a minute that glow brightened and faded, then Jerry saw it drop to the water. It hissed as it blinked out.

Tom muttered something in a tone of anger. Then his head slumped forward and disappeared beneath the water.

Jerry was through the window like a flash. He dove under, felt the limp form of the fireman and grasped him under the arms. He pulled him to the surface, holding his head clear of the flood.

"He's hurt worse than he'll let on," said one of those gathered above.

"Yeah. An' it's lookin' mighty black for him, too. It'll be a couple of hours before th' big hook gets here," answered Dee.

"Can one of you fellows reach down and hold him above the water? I'll see if I can locate what's holding his feet," called Jerry. Every trace of nervousness was gone from him now. He felt as cold as ice all through his body. He was the fighting Irishman, ready to do battle with any kind of odds to save the life of his new friend.

Windy stretched his body flat on the side of the cab. His arms came down, curved beneath Tom's shoulders and held his head above the surface.

Jerry took a deep breath and submerged. He felt down over Tom's body, past his waist, his hips, knees, then solid unmoving steel halted his groping fingers. Steel was on both sides of Tom's legs, forming a trap from which there was no escape. He tried to pull Tom's legs free, tried to move them a little, but they were held rigidly.

Unable to hold his breath longer Jerry rose to the surface. He took another deep breath and went under again, feeling below the steel trap. Tom's feet were loose. He was held between his ankles and his knees.

Jerry came to the surface again.

"His legs are pinched between two steel bars," he called above.

"Cab side an' a cab brace," snapped Windy.

"Is the wrecker ordered?" asked Jerry, voice shrill and trembling.

"Quite a while ago," Windy assured him.

Dee, the brakeman, grunted something to himself. Then Jerry heard him moving along the cab and out on the boiler. The balance of the men conversed in low tones, trying to figure some manner of freeing the imprisoned man.

"Th' big hook is our only hope," Windy finally said.

Jerry had braced his feet so he was in as comfortable a position as possible. He called up to Windy; "I'll hold him a while. You rest your arms."

Windy grunted agreement. Jerry took the still unconscious fireman beneath his shoulders to hold him above the boiling water. Finally Tom squirmed and moved a little. Then he gave vent to an ejaculation.

"Ugh!" he said, shaking his head and raising his right arm from the water to rub his eye. "Ain't I one brave bake head?" his voice was filled with disgust toward himself. "Faintin' like any woman! Why didn't yuh let me stay under an' drown?" he asked angrily.

Jerry laughed reassuringly. "You're too good a fireman to lose, yet, Tom," he said. "We'll have you out of here in a little while now."

"But faintin'! I never keeled over in my life before. My legs got to hurtin' so bad I couldn't stand it any longer I guess. They feel better now, seem to be asleep."

"The big hook is on its way. They'll run fast and be here before long," said Jerry hopefully.

Tom grunted.

“Why didn’t you jump when I shouted?” asked Jerry.

“I heard yuh holler, but my mind was out in Nebraska where th’ Prairie Dogs bark at th’ cyotes,” said Tom rapidly regaining his usual droll humor.

“That was your home?” Jerry wanted to take Tom’s mind from his present position.

“Yeah. Born in Nebraska on a farm. Wind blowed twenty-four hours every day of th’ year. Never did like wind so pulled out when I was twelve. Went railroadin’ as call boy an’ been railroadin’ ever since.”

One of the men above had hung his lantern through the window so its glow fell on the water and the pair below. Jerry had been watching the edge of the water as it lapped against the roof of the cab. When the lantern was first hung through the water had been halfway up on an opening in the roof. Now it was two-thirds.

Someone scrambled along the boiler. His feet thumped on the steel side of the cab above. Then Dee Sommer’s voice came to the pair below.

“I was right. Th’ river’s raised almost a foot in th’ past thirty minutes, an’ it’s still raisin’.”

Jerry felt beads of cold sweat break out on his face. Only too well did he know what that meant. If the water kept rising at that rate it would cover Tom Bender long before the big hook arrived at the wreck!

## CHAPTER VI

### *Headwork*

During the next thirty minutes Jerry became convinced the river was still rising. In that time it had come up until the water lapped around Tom's chin.

"Climb out of here, Jerry," Tom commanded. "Let me drown. No use prolongin' th' agony."

But Jerry was not going to desert his friend while a spark of hope remained. He knew the terrible odds he faced. The wrecker would not arrive for another hour. It was still raining near Tennessee Pass. All the fighting blood handed down from his father was beating through his veins. He was ready to defy the elements, ready to face death if necessary.

Suddenly Jerry raised his freckled face. The pupils of his eyes had contracted to pin points of fire. His freckles stood out boldly.

"Listen!" he snapped. "Is the conductor up there?"

"Yes, I'm here," answered Parson Evans.

"Have you a long chain on your caboose?"

"There's chains on the caboose, but not long ones. We use them for chaining up cars," said Parson hopelessly.

"Haven't you anything we could use to pull this cab out of the water a little—even a few inches—"

"By goodness!" ejaculated Parson, his voice shrill pitched with new born hope. "There's a fifty foot steel cable back there with a hook on one end and a link on the other!"

"Get it, quick!" Jerry was shouting now.

Footsteps pattered on the steel side of the cab over head. Then save for Windy who sprawled face downward above, watching those below in the glow of the lantern, every one was gone.

"Windy," cried Jerry. "While they go for that cable will you back the train up and then cut off the engine which was coupled behind this one?"

"Yes." Windy got up and was gone, leaving the lantern hanging above.

“It’s hopeless, Jerry,” mumbled Tom. His face was drawn with pain. He sagged heavily and Jerry had to exert every ounce of his strength to hold him above the water.

“Courage, Tom. We’ll get you out of here alive!”

Tom shook his head. “You’ve done your part, Jerry, an’ you’re a fit son for that fightin’ Dad of yours. He’s proud of you tonight up there—” Tom raised his white face and blinked at the sky.

Jerry heard the train engine whistle three resounding blasts. She was answered by the rear helper. Brake shoes clanked against the wheels and draw bars jangled as the train moved back. Then they halted. Later the train engine chuffed rapidly forward and halted, her snub pilot against the overturned tender of the 1176.

Time dragged on leaden wings. The water was up so Tom was having to keep his head tipped back to breathe. Windy clambered to the side of the cab.

“Let me hold him up a while,” he called, reaching down his arms.

Jerry appreciated the relief. His own arms ached and throbbed from the strain. Would the men never come up with that length of cable? It seemed hours since they left.

Now Windy was holding Tom above the surface of the water by dragging heavily at his body, stretching it out. Tom groaned with pain. Jerry was crowded against the side of the cab, a scant eighteen inches of breathing space left. He knew he could climb to safety in a flash, but hated to leave Tom alone down here.

Then sounds came from the bank. Men shouted instructions. Parson Evans called to Windy:

“You’ll have to move th’ engine, Windy, an’ for God’s sake do it easy!” he yelled.

Something clattered on the tender. Jerry could hear metal scraping across metal.

“It ain’t gonna reach, is it?” Parson yelled in a tone of agony.

A nerve wracking silence punctuated by the grunts of straining men. Then: “Yeah. She’ll reach, but where will we hook it?”

Jerry was holding Tom again. Windy had gone back to run the engine. “One of you men come here and hold Tom up,” he yelled. “I’ll hook the cable.”

Parson threw himself flat on the cab and reaching his bony arms down, grasped Tom firmly. Only Tom's nose protruded from the flood. He was choking and strangling.

Jerry grasped the edges of the window and pulled himself through. "Where's the cable?" he demanded.

Someone shoved a steel hook into his hands. Grasping this firmly he slipped down along the outside edge of the roof, letting his body into the flood. Fortunately the current here was not swift, but boiled around in little whirlpools.

Jerry knew that he must dive so he could fasten the hook on the lower edge of the roof where it fastened to the submerged side of the cab. In this manner a locomotive pulling steadily on the cable would raise the cab upward.

Jerry took a deep breath and let himself under. He held the hook with one hand and pulled himself toward the bottom with the other. After what seemed an age the groping fingers of his free hand felt the bulge where the steel roof fastened to the side. He slipped the hook over this, tugging at it to make sure it held. Then he plunged toward the surface.

"All right!" he shouted in an agony of excitement. "I've made the hook fast."

"High time. Tom's about covered with water," snapped Parson Evans. "Back him up, Dee," he continued as he tugged at Tom's body.

Dee's lantern began to describe a circle. Three short blasts from the whistle and the cable tightened, stretched and hummed with the strain. For a tense moment nothing happened. The cab merely quivered as though cemented to the rocky bottom of the river. Then with a clashing of metal, the swish of water, and the singing of the steel cable it raised almost three inches.

"Hold everything!" screamed Parson.

Dee's lantern swung a violent stop signal. Windy blasted a short whistle.

"Tom's head is above th' water now," yelled Parson.

Jerry felt his throat tighten. Hot, stinging tears of joy burned his eyes and he unashamedly reached up and wiped them away. He pulled himself back to the side of the cab and crawled to the window. Tom grinned reassuringly up at him.

"Great head work, Jerry," he said quietly.

Windy had set the brakes on the engine and she was holding the cable to fiddle-string tightness.

“Maybe the river has raised all it’s going to,” suggested Jerry hopefully.

“No chance,” snapped Dee. “I’ve seen these cloudbursts too many times to swallow that.”

Jerry flushed with anger. Dee seemed deliberately pessimistic. There was a remote chance that the water had raised all it was going to.

“One more pound pullin’ on that cable would snap it like a piece of string,” murmured Parson Evans in a low voice.

Another thirty minutes dragged past with the water slowly rising. It was around Tom’s chin and he was again having to tip his head back to breathe. The men took turns holding him up. Tom had been silent for a long time. Now he spoke in a rumble, but his words carried a trace of hope.

“Seems my legs ain’t bein’ held so tight since you took that pull on th’ cab.”

“Can you move them!” cried Jerry.

“Not much, but th’ pressure on ’em seems relieved.”

Jerry quickly slipped through the window and dove under the water. He felt for the steel which pressed against Tom’s legs, found it, grasped Tom’s feet and heaved upward. The pinioned legs slipped almost two inches.

Jerry was forced to come up then for more breath, but immediately dove again. This time he was able to raise Tom so that instead of pressing against his calves the steel held about his ankles. But that was as far as he would go. His feet still kept him prisoner.

When Jerry came up the second time Tom’s head and shoulders were above the water. Tom was grinning. “Just when I get ready to die resigned, you work th’ old bean an’ give me new hope,” he said quietly.

“We’re going to save your life yet, Tom,” said Jerry in a quivering voice.

“I begin to believe it,” said Tom.

Parson pulled out his watch and stooped so the light of a lantern illuminated the dial. “The wrecker left Easton an hour an’ ten minutes ago,” he said hopefully. “With ’em turning a high wheel they should show here in th’ next thirty minutes.”



Thirty minutes! At the rate the water was rising Tom would be under again before then. Jerry climbed outside and crawled over to the cable. He pulled at it gently with his fingers. It was like a chunk of solid steel. He took out his knife and tapped it with the metal back. It rang like the highest note on a piano string. It was stretched to the breaking point as Parson had said.

And yet Jerry felt that they would have to risk another pull on it before the wrecker arrived if they were to save Tom's life. If the cable broke during that pull the cab would settle down under two or three feet of water. Tom would drown like a rat in a trap!

It seemed that the water was rising more rapidly now, making a last effort to snatch the life of Tom Bender. With tight lips and burning eyes the men watched it creep upward, cover Tom's shoulders again, curl around his chin relentlessly.

Parson moved uneasily and wet his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. His bloodshot eyes turned toward the cable and gazed fixedly at it. Then: "I'm afraid we'll have to make another pull—"

Jerry heard the words and they fell like the knell of doom on his ears. The cable would not stand it. And yet, the water by this time was up so Tom again had his head thrown far back and was gasping for breath.

Jerry turned his stinging eyes to the east, hoping for the welcome sight of the approaching wrecker. The mountains were black, shadowy.

"Yes, we'll have to risk another pull," he said flatly.

Windy leaped toward the boiler. "I'll take it slow an' gently," he said as he faded into the darkness.

Dee stepped toward the shore where he could signal. Parson moved over near the cable and crouched beside it as though he would hold it together by the strength of his gaze. Jerry threw himself flat on the side of the cab and relieved an engineman who had been holding Tom. He clutched him tightly beneath the armpits, gritted his teeth and called:

"All right!"

The cable tightened, snapped and popped. The cab quivered. From the track came a single blasting exhaust as the engine strained. The cable stretched a few inches more but the cab remained rigid. With eyes of horror Jerry saw the water swirl over the upturned face of Tom. Windy was still doggedly moving the engine at a snail's pace. Every man held his breath and prayed.

Then the cab heaved suddenly. It raised a full twelve inches. Jerry heard Tom gulping the sweet air again.

“Hold everything!” screamed Parson.

As though to mock his words there came a sharp report. One end of the cable hissed through the air like an angry snake, slapped the water a resounding blow and sank from sight. The other end smashed against the front end of the engine. Like a rock the cab plunged beneath the water.

Jerry was jerked down still clinging to Tom Bender. His body slipped half through the window. He fought, letting Tom loose with one hand and freezing his fingers around the edge of the window.

Gritting his teeth he heaved upward, felt Tom come toward him. Then he threw himself back on the side of the cab, dragging the fireman with him.

Almost six inches of water covered the side of the cab. Never releasing his grasp on the fireman Jerry dragged him toward the boiler. Tom was groaning with pain, but was still conscious.

Willing hands reached for them as they struggled along the submerged side of the boiler. They were helped to solid earth where Jerry sank down utterly exhausted.

Jerry did not lie there but a few seconds. He struggled to a sitting posture. Close beside him Windy and Parson worked over Tom Bender. Parson was carefully cutting away Tom’s trouser legs with a pocket knife.

“When th’ cab heaved up I felt my legs loosen for just a split second, but that split second saved my life. If Jerry hadn’t been pullin’ up on me I’d never jerked free,” Tom was telling them.

“Neither of your legs seem broken, Tom,” announced Parson.

“Which is th’ best news I’ve had tonight,” said Tom.

“An’ here comes th’ wrecker!” yelled Dee.

“Tell ’em they got here too late. Jerry Twyman can do more good work in a minute than th’ big hook could in a week!” snorted Tom Bender.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Special Agent Blunko*

Tom Bender had been carried back to one of the wrecking cars where a company doctor was bandaging his crushed legs. Jerry had refused to seek warmth and shelter. He had never seen a wrecking crane, or a “big hook” in action and was not going to miss the chance now. Grey dawn was breaking in the east when the wrecking crew finally got the big hook placed and blocked so it would withstand the pull of the wrecked engine. Jerry admired these silent mouthed men of the wrecker crew. Each man knew his work and went about it without a word of instruction from the foreman.

Like a steel angler after worthy fish the wrecker boom swung around, dangling heavy cables with hooks on the end. Massive linked chains were dragged up. The tender was picked up first. It was lifted bodily, swung like a massive pendulum across the main line, and finally let down on the rails. The freight engine which had done such noble work toward saving Tom’s life quickly snatched the tender out of the way.

A small army of men bored into the slide which covered the track, digging into it like gophers.

Jerry sat on the end of a tie, his teeth chattering in the crisp mountain breeze which heralded the day, but unwilling to miss any of the scene.

Grouped about him were Parson Evans, Dee Sommers, the engine crew from the freight engine and several other men. Someone came up in the background, an important looking fellow who wore a neat dress suit and had cheeks which hung down like jowls.

“Which one of you men is Jerry Twyman?” the newcomer asked officiously.

“I am,” Jerry said.

“I’d like to talk to you alone,” said the stranger.

Although Jerry wanted to refuse to leave the big hook which was now engaged in righting the overturned locomotive, he reluctantly got to his feet.

“Come on,” said the stranger, nodding toward the bunk cars coupled behind the wrecker engine.

Jerry followed him. The stranger led the way into one of the bunk cars which was deserted. A hot fire burned in a stove at one end. Its heat was grateful to Jerry who stepped close to it and began warming his hands, watching the stranger the while.

“I’m Henry Blunko, special agent,” introduced the man.

Special agent? Railroad detective. Jerry nodded, wondering inwardly what the men with him were going to think about the way Blunko had come up and called him out of their circle. It seemed a mighty poor play to Jerry. It was certain to prove an added handicap. Half angrily he regarded Blunko.

“John Mason, general manager, told me yesterday that you’d been sent over here to try to locate the bunch who’ve been pilfering our merchandise cars. When I heard about this wreck, an’ that you were one of the crew I came on to see if you’d found out anything,” went on Blunko.

Jerry shook his head. “I’ve found out very little,” he said at last. “I expect you’ll find a quantity of merchandise was stolen from our freight train last night,” he said quietly.

“You sure?”

“No. Just playing a hunch, and things I saw.”

“What were they?”

Jerry smiled grimly. “Mr. Blunko,” he said, “I only arrived in Maroon yesterday. In that short time no man could find out much. I’m not going to say another word until I know definitely where I stand. Perhaps some of the men I suspect are innocent. Perhaps some of those I believe innocent are guilty. So I won’t make any kind of a statement other than that I believe some of the cars in our train were pilfered last night.”

Blunko began pacing the floor. Suddenly he halted and frowned at Jerry. “Don’t you know definitely?” he snapped in disgust.

“No. I did receive some threatening advice from two men who are not railroaders since I arrived in Maroon.”

“Who were they?”

“Luke Beezley, and Doc Descombs.”

“I know that pair are mixed in it!” grunted Blunko, “but I’ve never been able to get any definite proof, nor a thing to take ’em on. We can’t arrest men simply because we’re suspicious of them. I’ll go farther. I’m convinced in my own mind that they killed Hal Speer, one of our special agents last winter.”

“You mean they’ve gone so far as to commit murder?” asked Jerry unbelievably.

“Yes. Didn’t John Mason tell you about that?”

“He did mention something about it,” recollected Jerry.

“Well, Hal Speer was shot and thrown from a west bound freight train last December. A light engine found him lying in the snow beside the track. Hal probably surprised some of the gang at their pilfering, and was killed for his pains.”

Jerry began to realize the sinister forces at work on this mountain railroad.

“I want to ask you to do something for me,” said Blunko.

“What?”

“Wire me the first thing you find out definitely.”

“I’ll do that,” agreed Jerry.

Blunko turned toward the door. “I’m going back and get the conductor’s way bills on the merchandise cars in your train and check those cars,” he announced.

Jerry muttered something. His eyes were growing heavy lidded and he was nodding. Blunko let himself out, closing the door carefully behind.

Jerry jerked upright, grinning foolishly. He had been asleep. Through a window at his side he saw a mountain world bathed in bright sunlight. Blobs of rain sparkled on every blade of grass and the leaves of the sagebrush. He leaped to his feet with a mutter of disgust at himself. The engine was probably picked up and placed back on the rails by now, and he had missed seeing it!

He hurried to the door and went outside. His clothes were almost dry from the heat of the stove. The 1176 was suspended in the air swinging slowly directly over the rails. Even as Jerry watched she was let down on them. The slide which had caused the wreck, was almost cleared away.

Jerry turned back toward the wrecking cars. Tom was in one of them and he must learn how badly he was injured. He opened the door of the one near the caboose and looked in. Tom was sitting near a stove, his face wreathed in blue clouds of tobacco smoke.

Jerry entered. “How are you, Tom?” he asked.

“Kickin’ around mighty spry, thanks to you, Jerry, ole timer.”

“Your legs?”

“Ain’t gonna be able to use ’em much for a week or so, but they ain’t broke.”

A grey haired doctor got to his feet and advanced, right hand out-thrust. “I want to shake with the young fellow who used his head last night and saved the life of this man,” he said quietly.

Jerry flushed, felt his hand grasped tightly. He had done nothing to make a hero out of himself.

“You’re feeling quite all right?” asked the doctor.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Take care of yourself. If you feel a cold coming on from being soaked to the skin most of the night, go straight to your company doctor in Maroon, will you?”

“Yes, Sir. I will.”

“Doc here says I can go back to Maroon with you Jerry. Ma Kennedy will take care of me.”

“And I’ll help her, Tom,” smiled Jerry.

“Are you hungry?” interrupted the doctor.

Jerry hadn’t thought about that. Now he discovered that he was, ravenously hungry.

“You’ll find a good meal in the car next to this. Tell the cook who you are. He’ll throw a feed into you,” instructed the doctor.

Jerry thanked him and entered the next car. He was given a meal that he mentally decided the best he had ever eaten. It was coarse fare, but it stuck to his ribs and made a new man out of him. When he finally finished he thanked the cook and headed toward the scene of the wreck once more.

The shovel gang were removing the last of the slide. A small group of trackmen were repairing the torn, twisted rails, getting ready for traffic to move again.

Blunko was not in sight but Dee Sommers and Parson Evans were lounging around, watching the big hook. Dee eyed Jerry with a cold stare and his lips twisted into an open sneer. Parson did not change expression.

So Blunko's boneheaded play was beginning to bear fruit already? It caused Jerry a feeling of worry. He wanted to try to explain to the two men the truth of the whole thing, but knew they would not believe him.

The freight engine and the 1176 were nowhere in sight. Jerry knew they had probably returned to Maroon. The wrecking foreman came over to him. "We're going down to Maroon as soon as the main line is safe to use," he said. "You can ride down with us."

Jerry nodded and moved toward the wrecking cars again. He went in and seated himself near Tom Bender. Neither spoke, each being deep in his own thoughts. After a long time Blunko came wheezing into the car. He singled Jerry out with his glittering eyes.

"Almost a thousand dollars worth of merchandise missing from two cars in your train," he snapped.

Tom looked up at him with an impassive face.

Jerry kept his lips silent.

Blunko grunted angrily, then walked forward and entered the cook car, slamming the door behind.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *A Warning!*

Over ahead the wrecker locomotive called in the flagman and after a long pause blasted two shorts. The bunk cars shuffled slowly forward, rocked over the newly repaired track and gradually picked up speed toward Maroon.

Jerry rode close to a window where he could watch the passing scenery. Granite was deserted this morning, and the wrecking train did not pause there.

At Maroon Tom was lifted on a cot regardless of his protests and carried toward Ma Kennedy's. Jerry got off and walked over to the roundhouse to give McTavish the letter Windy had okehed. The letter was almost illegible from its long immersion in the water, but Jerry was sure McTavish would be able to read enough of it to put him on as a fireman.

"Hello, Jerry," boomed McTavish when Jerry entered, "made a hero out of yourself first trip. An' did ye get Windy to okeh your letter?"

Jerry smiled uncomfortably and extended it. McTavish unfolded it. "Good!" he said when he had deciphered it. He scratched through his mop of grey hair. "Let's see, Bender bein' laid up for a few days will probably give ye his job firin' for Windy. I'll mark ye up." McTavish picked a short length of chalk from his desk top and went out the door.

"Ye'll probably be called for a cattle extra that's gettin' here sometime after ten o'clock tonight. Ye ain't hurt or anything, are ye?" he asked as an afterthought.

"No, Sir. I'm ready to be called any time."

"Good. Then ye better get to your room an' snatch some sleep."

Jerry followed his advice. He stopped at the eating house long enough to get dinner, then went to his room.

Tom was sitting up laboriously reading through the pages of a tattered magazine. His bandaged legs rested on a chair and a pair of crutches leaned against the wall where he could reach them.

"What do you think of my crutches?" he greeted as Jerry came in.

"Where did you get them?"



“Doctor rustled ’em someplace. Gonna get some shut eye?” Tom changed the subject.

“I thought I’d lie down for a while,” said Jerry.

“Go ahead. I’ll wander down town an’ see how I navigate on these crutches. An’ listen, Ma Kennedy has been waitin’ with a tub full of hot mustard water an’ some salve to grease you with. She says you’ll catch cold if she don’t take care of you. So you better crawl in quick an’ I’ll tell her you slipped in when she didn’t see you, an’ are asleep now. Then she won’t make you set for an hour with your feet toastin’ in mustard water.”

Jerry chuckled as he began pulling off his clothes.

Ma Kennedy was a great old lady, and her little token of wanting to take care of him touched him deeply. Jerry had never known his mother. She had died when he was a baby.

Jerry fell asleep almost the instant he pulled the covers up around his chin. He slept through the balance of the day. Even Tom’s thumping in did not disturb him.

It was about ten o’clock when the caller entered and shook Jerry by the shoulder.

“All right, sleepin’ beauty, th’ second. Recover consciousness so high iron can again be pounded! You’re paged to heave coal for Windy Trickle on engine 1199 for eleven-thirty. Understand?”

Jerry sat up rubbing his eyes. “I understand,” he grinned.

The caller went out whistling. Tom closed a magazine which he was again reading by the light of an oil lamp and got to his feet.

“Good luck to you, Jerry,” he said softly.

Jerry noticed then that Tom regarded him in a peculiar manner. It seemed that there was even a shadow of mistrust in his eyes. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask Tom the trouble, but he choked it back and began pulling on his clothes.

Tom said no more, but sat there deep in thought, his forehead puckered. Jerry finished getting into his clothes and walked briskly toward the door. As he started out Tom looked up suddenly.

“An’ listen, Jerry,” he said soberly, as though he had been speaking all the while, “when you pass Granite tonight you’d better kind of squat behind th’ side of th’ cab. Will you?”

Jerry frowned. “What do you mean, Tom?” he asked.

“Nothin’ much. I just asked you as a personal favor to me, to kinda squat back of the side of th’ cab when you go through Granite.”

Jerry hesitated. No use asking Tom for explanations. He had said all he intended. “Okeh, Tom,” he laughed, closing the door behind him and walking rapidly down the hallway.

But what had Tom meant? He had warned him of some impending danger. “Squat behind the side of the cab going through Granite.” Why? Was there danger of stray bullets flying around there as they went through? Jerry wore a very sober look as he let himself out the front door and headed toward the eating house.

Windy, Dee, Parson and several others were lined up at the long counter waiting to be served. Jerry smiled a greeting to them, as he entered but none returned it. Windy was sitting next to a vacant stool so Jerry crossed and took a place beside him. Windy made no comment. His expression did not change, but with a stabbing feeling in his breast Jerry saw Windy deliberately pick up his silver, his glass of water and get from his stool. Windy walked around the men and took a vacant place at the far end.

Face burning with embarrassment Jerry kept his eyes straight in front of him. Windy had silently given him to understand exactly how he stood with these railroaders. It was all Blunko’s fault, too. Blunko should have had sense enough to be halfway secret about his business.

“What’ll you eat?”

Jerry jerked his eyes up to find the gum-chewing waitress regarding him.

“A steak.”

“What kind?”

“Any kind, just so it’s tender.”

Jerry again held his eyes straight in front. He heard some of the men whispering but could not catch their words—did not want to hear them for that matter.

As soon as he had eaten his meal he got to his feet and walked outside. He found the 1199 wheezing over the cinder pit, the hostler in the cab pouring valve oil into the lubricator. The hostler greeted him pleasantly enough. Jerry took off the coat he had slipped over his jumper and dropped it on his seat box. Then, as he had seen Tom do, he stepped down in the deck

and began building up his fire. That accomplished he turned on the injector so he could wet down the coal pile.

While he was thus engaged Windy came up into the cab. He gave Jerry the barest glance, then took off his coat and threw it in his seat box. He spoke civilly enough to the hostler who was through with his task by now. The hostler dropped to the cinders and disappeared. Windy took out his torch and ignited it in the firebox. Then with his long oiler in his hand he dropped down to oil around.

Tonight their engine switched out the train. Jerry caught each signal given on his side and shouted them across to Windy. When their train was finally put together and the helpers coupled on, Dee climbed into the deck. He openly sneered at Jerry as he stepped across and began talking to Windy.

Jerry watched them, wondering what they were saying. Parson finally came over with their orders and after comparing them, dropped to the cinders again. Windy whistled off, was answered by the other two engines and the long train clanked toward Tennessee Pass.

Tonight Jerry had little time to watch the scenery. Windy worked his engine savagely. Jerry was forced to stay in the deck, back bowed, reaching for scoop after scoop of coal which he threw in the white-hot firebox. He tingled with satisfaction when he saw that he was keeping the steam pressure at maximum. Windy could not complain about his work.

As they neared Granite the warning given by Tom came back to him. Should he follow it? He had promised. So when they struck the sag and picked up speed Jerry suddenly stooped so the wall of the cab protected him. He made as though he had dropped something, but glanced sidelong toward Windy.

Windy was watching him impassively. Did Windy know that danger for Jerry lurked along here?

When the hollow boom of the buildings they passed died away in the distance Jerry straightened up and bent to his task again. Then he stepped to his side for a breath of cool air. Something his eyes saw caused his lips to warp into a grin and his eyes to glint. Right above his seat box was a small, round dent, as though a bullet had struck there!

Nothing further happened between Granite and Tennessee Pass. Jerry kept his engine hot all the way. At Tennessee Pass they roared through the tunnel and halted on the other side. Here their train was set out on a long side track. Windy coupled to Parson's caboose and took it around the wye with him.

Going down the heavy grade was where the fireman took things easy. One slug of coal would last several miles. Only enough steam was needed to run the air compressor and the electric dynamo. Jerry rode with his head and shoulders out the window. He was wondering whether he should duck down when they went through Granite this time. If this thing were chronic it was going to make it bad. He would have to squat every time the engine he fired went through the town.

“It’s going to get mighty tiresome,” Jerry said to himself.

He decided that he would wait until they went through Granite before putting in another fire. Then he would have an excuse for being down in the deck. So when the 1199 roared past the buildings he was shovelling in more coal. But nothing happened.

The trip had only consumed about five hours. When Jerry reached their room he found Tom soundly sleeping. He quietly undressed and crawled into bed with the fireman.

It was almost ten o’clock before Jerry woke up. Tom was dressed and gone. Jerry lay there relaxed, reviewing his first pay trip as a fireman. It was a life which he knew would grow more fascinating each day. No wonder those grizzled railroaders never turned to any other kind of work. Once in the game they were there for life. Jerry smiled. He was convinced that in the railroad game were more opportunities for advancement than in almost any other line.

Finally he got up and dressed. Then he washed and started downstairs. Ma Kennedy met him this morning.

“Jerry, lad, how are ye feelin’?” she asked anxiously.

“Just fine, thank you,” smiled Jerry.

“An’ to think ye might have catched pneumonia, an’ me wid mustard wather waitin’ for ye to soak your feet in. ’Tis a wonder ye ain’t flat of your back, poor child.”

“I’m tough enough to stand a little wetting,” he laughed.

“Well, I’m here to take care of yez, an’ when there’s anything wrong wid ye, let me know.”

“I will, Mother,” said Jerry. Then he was gone leaving Ma Kennedy looking after him with moist eyes. “Callin’ me mother,” she said softly, dabbing at her eyes with an apron-corner. “Poor little orphan who niver knew what a mother meant. . . .”

Jerry found Tom Bender seated at the lunch counter in the eating house. From the stack of empty dishes in front of him his injuries had not impaired his appetite.

“Howdy, Jerry,” greeted Tom boisterously as Jerry entered.

“How are your legs?” asked Jerry, sitting down beside Tom.

“Gettin’ better every minute. Takes more than a engine rollin’ on a hard-headed fireman to put him out,” grinned Tom.

Jerry ordered his breakfast. Then when the waitress was gone with the order to the kitchen:

“Have a good trip?” asked Tom.

“Yes. Made it in less than five hours.”

“How did you do?”

“Two hundred pounds of steam showed on the gauge every foot of the way,” said Jerry with pride.

“Great work. That’s what Windy was tellin’ me when he was in to breakfast a while ago.”

“Did he?” Jerry blurted the question. After the way Windy had treated him the night before it was hard to believe.

“Sure did. Windy’s a funny kind of a bird. . . .” Tom grew silent while he blew at his third cup of coffee.

“Yes. Funny, and puzzling——”

Tom changed the subject. “Did you squat when you went through Granite?” he asked softly.

“I did.”

“Good.”

“Yes. Good is right. When we were through there was a dent right above my seat box in the side of the cab. It looked as though made by a bullet.”

Tom frowned blackly and his whole face twisted with anger. “Th’ scurvy rats!” he gritted.

“Who?” asked Jerry quickly.

Tom grunted. “Forget it, Kid,” he said in a rumbling tone.

Jerry began eating his meal which was brought to him then. Neither of them spoke until he had finished. Tom was through but he waited patiently. When Jerry got to his feet Tom grabbed his crutches and swung himself upright. They walked slowly toward the door.

Tom seemed lost in thought again as they walked up toward Ma Kennedy's. He did not say a word. Once Jerry asked him a question but he ignored it.

In their room Tom seated himself on a chair while Jerry sat down on the edge of the bed. Tom seemed trying to come to some resolution. He pulled a knife and a match from his pocket and began whittling. Then he snapped the knife closed and looked at his watch.

Jerry watched him, waiting for him to begin.

"Jerry." Tom had made up his mind. He was looking closely into the face of the youth.

"What is it?"

"I got to ask you a question an' it's hard to do it."

"Go ahead, Tom. We're friends, aren't we?"

"We are. Regardless how you answer my question I'm still your friend. Tell me this. Are you a spotter?"

"A spotter?" Jerry did not understand.

"Yeah. Are you a gum shoe, a railroad detective?"

"No."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Tom in a tone which showed that a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"But what ever made you think that?" asked Jerry.

"There's talk about how Blunko called you out at th' wreck yesterday mornin', an' took you off to one side for a chin fest. Then your father was always a square shooter, fightin' for law an' order an' that stuff——."

"Blunko did take me off to one side, Tom. He asked me if I'd seen anything suspicious during the trip. I told him that I believed some of our cars of merchandise had been pilfered between Granite and the highway crossing above."

"You did?" Tom was leaning forward, elbows on knees.

“Yes. And you heard what he told me when he came from inspecting those cars?”

“I did.”

“Are you in favor of this box car pilfering, Tom?”

“No. I ain’t in favor of stealin’ of any kind, but it’s none of my business. As long as I keep my mouth shut I’ll be able to do a job of firin’ out of here.”

“And when you begin to talk?” asked Jerry softly.

“I’ll leave here in a pine box.”

“I guess that’s the way most of the men feel about it, isn’t it?”

“It’s th’ way we all feel about it. There’s some of th’ railroaders who are playin’ in with ’em. They’re th’ ones we got to be careful of because they don’t mind bumpin’ off anybody.”

“But they should be stopped in their robbing and their murdering!” blazed Jerry.

“Agreed. But let th’ gum shoes do it, Jerry.”

Jerry was silent. Tom fidgeted around on his chair for another space. Then he took a deep breath as though getting ready to dive beneath water.

“Listen, Jerry,” he said. “You got a good idea that I’m your friend by now, ain’t you?”

“Yes, I have.”

“An’ you know I owe my life to you, don’t you?”

“No. You don’t owe your life to me, Tom. I was glad to do it——”

“Anyhow,” interrupted Tom, determined to finish what he had started. “I think enough of you to want to kinda look out for you. So I’m gonna ask you to do somethin’ for me.”

“If it’s humanly possible I will, Tom.”

“Then,” said Tom slowly, and speaking in a tone just above a whisper. “Quit this job here an’ go back where you came from!”

Jerry leaped to his feet, face going white.

“I mean it. Your life ain’t worth two cents if you remain,” added Tom.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Gang Show Their Teeth*

Dragging minutes passed while Jerry stood there in silence, trying to understand the meaning back of Tom's words. Tom was warning him, trying to tell him that unless he quit his job here his life was in danger. He had become a menace to those law breakers, a menace which must be removed.

Then Jerry began to smile and his eyes to glow. He was the Irishman, fighting his battle. There was no fear on his features now. Only a grim defiance which grew steadily more pronounced. His blazing thatch of hair was accented by the light wall paper at his back. His chin was up, breast swelled out.

"So my life is in danger if I remain, Tom?" he laughed softly.

"Yes. I'm warnin' you, Jerry."

"And I'm thanking you, Tom."

"You'll go then?" asked Tom eagerly.

Jerry shook his head slowly. "No. You see, John Mason, the general manager——" and Jerry told Tom how he had come to be hired, "So I didn't come here as a spotter——" using Tom's term—"but as one who hates outlawry. This railroad company is paying thousands of dollars damages on pilfered freight shipments every month. The men who are doing these things are enemies not only to the railroad company but to society. With them in power every honest man working on this railroad is under suspicion."

Tom nodded. "I hadn't looked at it in that light. You see, Jerry, to us fellows a railroad detective is just a gum shoe. We figure he's after our scalps. If we make a little mistake he's ready to report us. If we violate any of th' book of rules an' he finds it out, bingo, an' th' axe falls. So all gum shoes is natural enemies."

"I know. But you're facing greater natural enemies than gum shoes, Tom. Would these bandits hesitate to kill you if you got in their way?"

"No. They'd bump me off just like they did Hal Speer last winter."

"Do you know who killed him?" Jerry asked sharply.

Tom nodded, then hastened to add—"but I ain't no squealer."



Again his long years of prejudice leaped up and froze Tom Bender's lips. Jerry was broad minded enough to know that Tom was acting honorably from his viewpoints. Some of his fellow railroaders had probably been mixed up in that killing and he must protect them.

A spasm of futile anger toward Blunko rushed through Jerry's veins. Blunko had certainly bungled things up in the proper manner.

"An' you refuse to leave here?" Tom was speaking again.

"I do. I'm going to stick it out, Tom. Maybe I'll be carried away in a wooden box, but I'll go out fighting for the right."

Tom was silent for a long time. Finally he got to his feet, ignoring his crutches. His right hand came out. "Put 'er there, Jerry," he boomed, "I want to shake hands with a mighty brave scout." Their hands met. "An' I'm gonna throw in with you!"

"You mean you'll help me?"

"Not that, but I'll be in th' background keepin' a mighty close eye on you."

"Thanks, Tom." Their hands fell apart. Jerry sat down on the edge of the bed. He took up one of Tom's well thumbed magazines and began turning its pages. He found a story which looked interesting and shortly after was deep in it, following a hero who surmounted greater obstacles than he faced.

Toward mid-afternoon Jerry decided to go to the roundhouse and find when he was getting out. He threw down the magazine.

"Where you goin'?" asked Tom abruptly.

"Roundhouse. I want to find when I get out again."

Tom nodded and turned back to his reading.

At the roundhouse Jerry found his name chalked up with Windy. They were not ordered yet, but their engine when they did get out would be the 1400, one of the newer locomotives.

Jerry entered McTavish's office and was greeted warmly.

"Done yourself up proud last night, Jerry," boomed the foreman. "Windy told me you're a natural when it comes to firin' a engine."

Jerry laughed. It made him feel good to know that he was able to do the work creditably.

"Ever see an automatic stoker?" asked McTavish abruptly.

“No.”

“Then I’ll take ye out an’ show ye all about one of ’em. Next trip ye draw engine 1400 an’ she’s got a stoker.” He led the way down the long line of stalls, finally halting in front of the pilot of a massive mountain of steel and iron which bubbled and simmered softly to herself.

Up in the cab Jerry stood appalled at the mass of valves and levers which adorned the fireman’s side of the boiler head. The floor of the deck was cut in a grated square, beneath which a steel worm extended from the coal pit to the firebox.

“That worm’s th’ coal feed,” explained McTavish. “An’ these valves are what ye feed coal to th’ firebox with. This one is th’ stoker throttle, an’ these five valves control th’ steam jets that boost th’ coal over th’ grades.” McTavish carefully explained how each one was adjusted. In less than ten minutes Jerry had mastered the workings of it.

“Quick around machinery like your father was before ye,” commended McTavish. “Ye’ll get out around eight tonight. Got a drag of dead stuff comin’ from th’ west about then.”

Jerry smiled and headed back toward town. Rounding a string of cars Jerry saw Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs lounging on the depot platform. There was no way of avoiding them except by showing he feared them. Since such was not the case Jerry held to his course and drew straight toward them. He intended passing without halting if they said nothing. But he was disappointed.

“Listen, Twyman,” Luke stepped squarely in front of the lad, “I been lookin’ all over for yuh.”

Jerry looked defiantly up at the gangling man.

“Since th’ other day I’ve learned that yuh came here as a spotter,” accused Luke.

“Which is not the truth,” blazed Jerry. “I came here as a fireman, intending to make an honest living.”

Luke laughed raspily. “Tell that to th’ birds. Now us fellers all hate spotters, but we also hate to have to bump anybody off.”

Jerry remained silent, eyes questioning.

“You’re pretty young,” said Luke suggestively. “An’ we might talk turkey to yuh if yuh want to listen.”

Jerry waited for him to resume.

“How would five hundred dollars look to yuh all in cash money?”

“In payment for what?” asked Jerry bluntly.

“Leavin’ here.”

“I’m not interested.” Jerry started to walk past him.

Luke halted him by placing a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Just a minute,” he rumbled angrily. “This is about th’ last an’ only chance we’re gonna give yuh.”

“And it’s about the last time I’m going to tell you that I’m not interested!” blazed Jerry.

Luke snarled an oath and his free hand dropped suggestively toward his hip. Doc who had stood in silence until now interrupted:

“Not too fast, Luke. We’re in plain sight of th’ eatin’ house. They’s better times an’ places——”

Luke released Jerry’s shoulder and grunted.

This time Jerry was allowed to go on his way unmolested. His face was very sober. They had offered him five hundred dollars to leave here! Then they must be playing in big money. And decidedly they figured him a real menace to their plans.

Convinced more than ever now that the leaders of the gang were Luke and Doc, Jerry headed for his room. Any of the railroaders mixed up in it were merely tools. They were probably being well paid for their part, but that was all.

Dee Sommers, Jerry felt certain, was one of the gang. He was openly hostile when in the presence of Jerry. Windy Trickle? Jerry only wished he knew. Windy was different. He was deep. One of the best engineers on the hill, silent lipped, cold as ice, he presented a real enigma.

If Windy were one of the gang it was funny he had complimented Jerry on his job firing last night. Yet if he were not one of them would he have moved his place at the lunch counter when Jerry sat down?

Then with a start Jerry realized that during his trip tonight he would have no good excuse for dropping down behind the side of the cab when they went through Granite. He would be working his stoker jets and throttle perched up in plain sight of any one hidden behind the buildings!

With a feeling of premonition he climbed the stairs in Ma Kennedy's and entered his room where he found Tom still reading.

Tom laid down his magazine and looked sharply at Jerry. "When you gettin' out?" he asked abruptly.

"Around eight this evening. I'll fire the 1400," said Jerry.

"Stokered engine," grunted Tom.

"McTavish showed me how to work the feeds."

"An' you'll be perched up in th' window when you go through Granite," Tom went on as though talking to himself.

"Will that be dangerous?"

"Yeah. Better keep out of sight along there."

"Thanks. I hoped you'd be able to advise me. I met Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs on the way back from the roundhouse."

Tom leaned forward intently. "Talked to you, did they?" he asked.

"Offered me five hundred dollars to get out of here," smiled Jerry.

Tom slapped his knees and his sober face warped into a grin of amusement. "Offered you money to leave here!" he exclaimed. "Hot stuff, Jerry. You've got 'em scared. If you was small fry like Hal Speer was you'd receive no offer like that. They must have got wind that John Mason sent you down here. I'm feelin' better already."

"You think the danger surrounding me is lessened?" asked Jerry.

"I wouldn't say that, but you've got 'em worried. You've got 'em scared. Keep 'em that way."

"I'll try."

"An' maybe it'd be just as well if you rustled a good six shooter some place. Guns is mighty handy to have around sometimes."

"But I know nothing about firearms. I've never shot a gun."

"That don't make no difference. Better get one anyhow."

Jerry shook his head. "With a gun in my possession I might be tempted to use it. No, I'll fight them square and above board."

Tom grunted, "Have it your own way."

Later they went down to supper. Jerry was called while they were eating. He left Tom still engaged with his meal and hurried back to his room for his clothes.

Windy was not in the dining room when he was called. The engineer was oiling around his engine when Jerry arrived. Jerry spoke to him pleasantly, but Windy ignored him. Jerry climbed into the deck and began getting his engine ready for the coming run. Tonight they would be cut in directly ahead of the caboose on the rear end of the train.

When Windy finally climbed into the deck he thumped his long oiler down on the steel shelf and faced Jerry.

“Ever work a stoker?” he asked coldly.

“McTavish showed me how today.”

“Good.” Windy climbed up on his seat box and faced toward the roundhouse. During the hour they sat there he never once changed position.

Tonight their train was built up on the main line in front of the eating house. When the rear brakeman finally came to get the 1400 she was backed through a long side track and headed against the rear of the train. The depot was on Jerry’s side and he sat up in the cab looking ahead. Suddenly he leaned forward, his face beginning to frown. Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs walked from the depot and stood on the platform talking together. Jerry did not let his gaze leave them when Parson Evans came into the deck with their running orders. Windy whistled off. Jerry saw the pair move toward the side of the train. They disappeared in the shadows. When the 1400 blasted past the depot they were nowhere in sight. Jerry was sure they had boarded the train. Why?

For the next two miles he was busily engaged in adjusting his stoker throttle and the feeds. It fascinated him to watch the worm carry fuel toward the firebox. This was the easiest job Jerry had ever had. Nothing to do save ride and look down at the worm occasionally to make sure it was filled with coal. When Windy opened his throttle wider, Jerry gave his stoker throttle another turn.

Once before they reached Granite Jerry saw shadowy figures moving along the top of a car near the center of the long freight but they instantly disappeared.

About a mile below Granite Jerry jerked to rigid attention, the hair prickling along his scalp. The coal in the pit rumbled down as someone clambered over it. He turned to find himself staring into glittering eyes which

reflected the glow from the peep hole in the firebox. The eyes approached until the deck light illuminated the man's face. It was Blunko! He dropped down into the deck brushing his clothes carefully to free them of clinging coal dust.

"I didn't know you were on this train," Jerry shouted to him in surprise.

"Nobody else does," snapped Blunko with a sidling glance toward Windy.

The engineer regarded Blunko with an impassive expression for a few seconds, then turned and poked his head and shoulders from his window.

"Let me take your place on that seat box," Blunko commanded.

The train was already picking up speed as the head engines roared to the sag through Granite. Jerry hesitated. No one must appear in his window while they passed through the deserted town!

He shook his head as he got to his feet.

Blunko frowned. "Quick!" he barked. "Let me take your place!"

"It's dangerous," cried Jerry excitedly. "No one must appear in the left window of this cab going through here."

Blunko snorted. He reached up angrily and grasped Jerry's arm. "I want to watch the train along here!" he barked.

Jerry tried to resist as Blunko pulled him roughly from his seat box, but the detective was a husky man. Windy watched it all with expressionless eyes.

"You're in danger of being shot!" screamed Jerry as Blunko slid up on the seat box.

Blunko snorted. The man was unreasonable. If the gang were laying for Jerry tonight the mere sight of a figure in the cab window was all they would need.

Jerry wondered if all the railroad detectives had shown the same boneheadedness in the past. If they had, no wonder they had had no success stopping the depredations of the pilferers.

Again Jerry tried to shout his warning, but it was hard to make oneself heard above the constant drumming roar of the cab. With a final snort of anger and disgust Blunko stuck his head far out the window just as the 1400 rattled over the first switch of the yards at Granite.

Windy had his head out his window again. The train was moving at almost thirty miles an hour. They drummed past the first of the deserted buildings. Jerry was watching in horrified silence while Blunko remained hanging far out the window. Then he saw Blunko's body jerk spasmodically. The man raised himself, face twisted with blank surprise. His right hand crept toward his left side and fingered at his shoulder. Then he was on his feet. He staggered down into the deck, lips working.

Jerry saw a growing stain of red color the fingers which pressed over Blunko's left shoulder.

## CHAPTER X

### *Jerry Meets the Superintendent*

In a flash Jerry had his arms around the special agent. He shoved him down on the raised platform at the left side of the deck. Then he leaped across to Windy who still had his head out his window. He touched Windy on the arm.

The engineer straightened and turned, a questioning gaze toward Blunko.

“Someone shot him as we went through Granite!” shouted Jerry.

Windy did not change expression. He got down from his seat box and crossed to Blunko. He knelt and began pulling off Blunko’s coat. The detective winced with pain. Finally the coat was removed. Then Windy undid the shirt so he could slip it down over Blunko’s shoulder.

A bleeding, red hole was exposed in the white flesh, high up. Windy felt around it.

“Broke his collar bone,” he shouted to Jerry.

“We’ll have to get him to a doctor,” said Jerry.

Windy nodded. He stepped back to his side and shut off his throttle. Then he cut in his air and pulled his brake valve over in a service application. The train slowed and finally stopped with a jangling of brake shoes.

Parson Evans came over before they could move Blunko back toward the caboose. He took in the whole situation at a glance. He did not seem particularly surprised.

“We’ll have to move him back to the caboose. I’ll dress his wound. I’ve got a medicine kit back there,” said Parson.

“I tried to warn him not to get up in the window,” blurted Jerry.

Windy grunted. Parson shook his head sympathetically.

Together they moved Blunko back to the caboose where Parson took charge of him. “Number four will catch us in the next few miles,” called Parson. “We’ll flag ’em an’ put him on that so he can be taken to th’ hospital over in Easton.”

Windy nodded. “Come on, Twyman,” he said shortly as he opened the door of the caboose.



Jerry followed him back to the engine. Windy called in the flagman and when the man highballed, whistled off. The long train clanked forward again.

Jerry felt that it would be safe enough for him to perch on his seat box past the highway crossing above Granite. The gang would realize that they had stirred up enough trouble for one night and would be on their guard. As the 1400 chuffed slowly over the crossing planks Jerry was looking across the cab, through Windy's window for a glimpse of the truck which should be waiting again. It was there as he had felt sure it would be, parked back far enough to remain unobserved, but visible to a pair of keen searching eyes.

The freight headed into a side track some three miles beyond the crossing so east bound number four could pass. Jerry made sure his fire was all right and the boiler contained plenty of water. Then he dropped off and hurried back to see how Blunko was coming along.

The special agent was pale, but sitting up on a locker. Parson Evans had bound his wound and fitted a sling around his left arm.

Blunko looked angry. He glared at Jerry as he entered. "Why didn't you tell me the danger of sitting up in that window?" he wanted to know.

"I tried to," said Jerry.

Blunko grunted admission to that. "Now I'm out of th' game," he grieved.

To himself Jerry thought: "Which is a mighty good thing for the railroad company," but shook his head solicitously. "You got the bullet which was meant for me," he said soberly.

"How do you know?" demanded Blunko.

Parson Evans who was writing in his train book looked up sharply but said nothing.

"That's the second attempt which has been made," said Jerry.

Outside of the caboose a red fuzee flared into a ball of red fire. Now the tinny exhausts of approaching number four came to their ears. The fuzee swung in an arc across the rails. The locomotive pulling the passenger answered the signal with two short blasts. Number four halted with the smoking car opposite the caboose.

Jerry helped move Blunko to the passenger train. Blunko grumbled with pain and Jerry was glad when he was finally propped in a seat near the front of the car and number four had blasted off again.

The balance of the trip was uneventful. This time the 1400 ran light from Tennessee Pass back to Maroon. As soon as the engine was put away Jerry hurried to his room where he undressed and crawled into bed to fall asleep almost at once. Tom did not awaken when Jerry entered.

The caller woke Jerry about nine o'clock the following morning.

"Get up an' come down to th' depot right away," instructed that worthy when Jerry sat up.

"What is wanted?" asked Jerry blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Super wants to find out all he can about that shootin' last night. His car sets opposite th' depot an' is th' B-2."

The caller hurried away. Jerry thumped his feet on the floor complainingly. Too bad they couldn't let a fellow get his sleep out before they pulled him from bed.

Tom sat up, stretching and yawning. "What's this about a shootin' last night?" he demanded.

"Blunko insisted on riding my seat box through Granite and was hit with a bullet," said Jerry, pulling on his socks.

"Shot?" asked Tom in a shrill voice.

"Yes. Through the shoulder. Broke his collar bone. I tried to warn him, but he knew more than I."

"So they tried it after all?" breathed Tom.

"Yes. I'm betting that bullet was meant for me. We were doing around thirty miles an hour. It was a snap shot. Who ever fired it couldn't tell but what the man in the window was I," said Jerry.

Tom slid out of bed and hobbled to the chair where his clothes were piled. "That's carryin' it too far!" he snapped angrily.

"Yes, it is. They demonstrate that they will not stop at murder!"

"Last night after you left th' greasy spoon but before you got out, Dee Sommers came in to eat. He told me I ought to move if I wanted to hold th' respect of th' rails around here."

Jerry frowned. "And you told him?" he asked softly.

Tom held up his right fist. The knuckles were bruised and swollen. "I just rapped him on th' jaw. Knocked him against th' counter an' he busted some dishes. I reckon I'll be called on th' carpet about that," grinned Tom.

“And what did he say?”

“Said somethin’ about havin’ a strange face on my job when I got back to work.”

“Dee’s playing in with that gang, isn’t he?”

“I couldn’t swear to nothin’,” said Tom, “but he’s usually got plenty of money to spend. An’ he’s hard to get along with.”

Jerry had not seen Dee during the trip last night. Dee usually stayed on the head engine. Jerry leaned toward Tom, “Tell me one thing more,” he said with shining eyes. “Is Windy in with them?”

Tom half got to his feet. “Windy?” he breathed. “If he is he keeps it mighty quiet.”

While Jerry finished getting into his clothes he told Tom how Windy had moved his place at the lunch counter when he sat down by him. Tom whistled a shrill blast when Jerry finished. “Hm,” he grunted. Then: “Windy’s a question mark.”

“Seconded and unanimously agreed,” said Jerry hand on the door knob.

Jerry had no trouble locating the superintendent’s private car when he reached the depot. It was setting across the maze of tracks, its number plainly written in gilt on the side.

He pulled himself up to the observation end and knocked on the door. Footsteps hurriedly approached and the door opened to expose a keen eyed man in his early fifties. His hair was liberally shot through with grey.

“You’re Twyman?” snapped the man.

“Yes, sir.”

“Come in. I’m Martz, superintendent.”

Jerry entered, was motioned to an overstuffed chair and seated himself in it. The B-2 was lavishly furnished, the observation end serving as an office. The balance of it was divided into compartments which included a bed room, a bath and the kitchen at the far end.

“I hated to pull you out of bed before you got your rest, Twyman, but I’m leaving on number six which goes through here in the next two hours. Have you had your breakfast?”

“No, sir. I didn’t stop to eat,” said Jerry.

Martz rang a small bell which set on his desk. A Philippine cook entered. “Kayo,” snapped Martz, “serve this man breakfast here at my desk.”

Kayo nodded and shuffled out where soon the aroma of frying bacon and eggs filled the car.

“And now to business. Mr. Mason tells me that you tentatively agreed to come over here and try to stamp out the lawlessness which has been going on at this point,” began Martz biting the end from a cigar.

“Mr. Mason explained the conditions the railroad company face at this point. He didn’t ask me to act as a detective, he told me that he had known and respected my father. Feeling that I was a chip off the old block, he asked me to come here as a fireman and use my own judgment,” explained Jerry.

“You distinguished yourself on your student trip by saving the life of a fireman, one Tom Bender. Is this man to be trusted?”

“Implicitly. Tom is as honest as the day is long.”

“Good. Are any of the railroaders working out of here mixed up in this ring? Before you answer I must tell you that we know some of them are. Information is relayed regarding every shipment of valuable merchandise moving over this division. If some of our men were not mixed in it this information could not be relayed.”

“I expect some of the railroaders are mixed up in it,” admitted Jerry, “but I could make no accusations.”

“Could you make any guesses?”

“No, sir. Guessing is dangerous business where a man’s honesty is concerned.”

Martz flicked the ash from his cigar.

Kayo brought a platter of steaming food and set it down in front of Jerry.

“Go ahead and eat. I’ll question you while you do,” commanded Martz.

Jerry needed no second invitation. He was hungry, having eaten nothing on his arrival the night before.

“I understand that it is pretty well agreed here in Maroon, among the employees, that you are a spotter,” Martz went on.

“I suppose it is,” said Jerry with a grimace. “You see, Mr. Blunko almost gave the wrong impression at the wreck that morning when he singled me out

of the men and asked to speak to me in private. That, coupled with the record left by my father damned me in every eye.”

“Blunko has balled up every chance he ever had to lay hands on these men,” snorted Martz angrily. “He’s a conscientious worker, honest as the day is long, but he has no judgment.”

Jerry made no answer because his mouth was full of food.

“Have you been warned to leave here since your arrival?”

“Yes, sir. Once by my best friend. The other time by an offer of money.”

Martz leaned forward attentively. “An offer of money, huh?”

“Yes, sir. I refused.”

“And then what?”

“Blunko was shot when he took my place in the window of engine 1400 last night while we were going through Granite.”

“Did you have any idea there was danger in exposing your body while going through Granite?”

“I did. The night before I ducked behind the side of the cab. When we were past I found a bullet dent on the steel wall above my seat box. I tried to warn Blunko, but he got up there anyhow.”

“Have you any idea who fired those shots?”

“No, sir. I saw none of them fired.”

“Have you any ideas how the ring of bandits go about their pilfering?” insisted Martz.

“Yes, sir. A truck waits at Granite, flashes a quick signal with their headlights. If loot worth taking is on the train they are answered with the flash of a lighted match. When the train has passed the truck pulls out, follows the highway which is shorter than the railroad, and is waiting at the crossing above Granite, where the loot is thrown from the cars along the track.”

Martz drummed on his desk with his fingers. Then: “It begins to look like you’ve learned more about their methods since your arrival than Blunko has learned in a year,” he snapped.

Jerry made no reply. He continued with his meal.

“And it appears that you are in genuine danger here in Maroon,” went on Martz.

“There’s not much danger so long as I keep my head, and watch,” laughed Jerry. “And I rather enjoy the excitement of it all,” he added.

Martz looked at Jerry’s thatch of flaming hair, his square, blunt chin, his widely spaced eyes. “You would,” he admitted.

“I believe that all we need now are some men to surprise the gang at their work,” Jerry ignored Martz’s compliments.

“I’ve wired for half a dozen special representatives to come at once. They won’t drop in here as strangers and excite caution among the gang. I’ve instructed them to ride these trains over Tennessee Pass as hobos.”

“That’s a dandy good idea!” exclaimed Jerry.

“And my advice to you is to leave here at once. I’ll arrange a transfer for you to the eastern slope where you will be in no danger.”

Jerry’s face fell. “But Mr. Martz,” he said soberly, “I can’t leave here now. I like this job. It’s home to me——”

“But the danger——” argued the Superintendent.

“I’ve always been able to take care of myself,” said Jerry quietly.

Mr. Martz got to his feet. His right hand thrust out. “You’re a real up and coming young American, Jerry, and I’m proud to have a man like you in our ranks. I feel that I should let you have your way. Yet, if anything happens to you——” he left the balance unsaid.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Menace*

In the succeeding ten days Jerry became genuinely worried. Dee Sommers took a sixty day lay-off and disappeared. Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs dropped from sight as though the earth had opened and swallowed them. An air of tenseness seemed to hang on the air. To Jerry it was as though the entire railroad were mined with high explosives and no man knew when they would go off. Only Windy Trickle seemed unmoved. Parson Evans was flighty. The least unexpected noise caused him to jump. Tom Bender, who was limping around without his crutches, shook his head ominously when Jerry asked him what he thought about the whole thing.

An increasing number of hobos began riding the trains. No freight train passed over Tennessee Pass without two or three knights of the rail riding empty box cars, refrigerators, or the back of the engine tenders. They were the most obliging hobos ever heard of on railroads, ready to pass coal for the firemen and seemingly anxious to earn their rides. All of them were apparently heavily armed. Hips bulged beneath jumpers, or tattered coats. Gleaming eyes saw everything going on around them.

Apparently Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs realized that they had stirred up a hornets' nest when they fired, or allowed to be fired, the shot which hit Blunko. They had overplayed their hand. Knowing which they had simply disappeared until the vigilance of the railroad company relaxed. They were safe enough from arrest. It takes proof to draw a man into the toils of the law. No one had anything on them that could be proven.

Those hobos fooled nobody. But they had a wonderfully beneficial effect on the division from the standpoint of law and order. No more box car pilfering was done. Jerry was able to ride in plain view in the window of the cab while he passed through Granite.

"Them bums who've been ridin' these trains make me wonder," he heard the head brakeman, a new one who had taken Dee's place, tell Windy Trickle one night when they were waiting for Parson to come over with the orders. "I've seen the same three ridin' east, then seen them ridin' west again. They must be roamers for fair."

Windy nodded without saying anything, but his lips warped into a derisive grin.

Jerry still walked between two conflicting forces when Tom Bender okehed for work. On the one hand were the officials, friendly enough toward him, but far removed. On the other the men, openly cold, and mistrustful.

With Tom's return to work Jerry was "bumped" from his regular job as Windy's fireman. He found himself "bucking the extra board," which meant catching a trip only when one of the regular firemen laid off. This was not as bad as it seems because the firemen did not work steadily, and when an engineer laid off that also gave Jerry a trip because one of the promoted firemen would take the right hand side.

Jerry entered McTavish's office one morning to find him poring over a long page filled with names.

McTavish looked up from reading it, motioned Jerry to sit down beside him and said: "This is th' new seniority list, Jerry. You're five times up from th' bottom which means that there's five younger firemen than you workin' on this division."

Jerry looked at the list. The engineers were at the top. The dates they had started working for the B. & L. railroad followed their names. Some of them had started in 1885, the year the line was built. Those men were holding passenger runs. But what caused Jerry to frown with surprise was the seniority held by Windy Trickle. He was the fifth oldest engineer on the division! Five younger men were holding passenger runs, the best and easiest jobs on the railroad. Most of them were daylight runs. Why was Windy bucking this helper job when he could be pulling passenger?

He asked McTavish about it.

"Windy Trickle's a hill-billy. Sure he could hold passenger, but he'd rather buck this night freight job over Tennessee Pass."

Jerry said nothing. But he was wondering what held Windy here. Certainly it was not the working conditions. These helper crews were called at all hours of the day and night. There were no regular hours to their work. Most of the trips were made after dark.

Although the hill engineers handled long strings of box and coal cars up Tennessee Pass each day it was rarely that they ever handled anything save Parson Evans' caboose down the hill. The trains they handled to the summit were set out on a long side track. The regular main line trains added the hill trains to theirs and continued on to Easton. This allowed the company a good showing of tonnage.



But occasionally the air pumps on one of the main line engines failed. Then a hill engineer was forced to handle the train from the pass down to Maroon.

Early in November Jerry was called to fire for a boisterous engineer named Mike Mills. Jerry had never caught a trip with Mike, but he knew before they left town that the man was one of those reckless runners who would learn caution only by hard, grim training. He slammed his engine around while they were making up the train, took signals from the brakemen exactly as they were given. If a brakeman asked for a “kick” Mike gave the cars a kick which sent them sailing up through the yards like a shot.

Several times Jerry heard kicked cars register with a dull boom when they smacked into others. Mike used very little judgment. Yet he succeeded in getting the train built up with no casualties.

Mike was on the train engine tonight. They pulled out at 7:15. Mike ran his engine exactly as he kicked box cars. He used no nice judgment toward his fireman. Jerry had learned that an engineer could make it mighty hard on his fireman, or he could favor him. Mike seemed determined to give Jerry the “works.”

His engine was the 1209, a heavy coal burner at all times. Tonight Jerry was forced to chain open the firebox door and bow his back while he listened to the blasting exhausts sing to him: “I’ll take this one, and you get another one,” repeated over and over again. His overalls smoked and scorched from the intense heat. Sweat poured from him in streams.

Mike sat with his hand on the throttle, tugging at it occasionally to see if there was a notch he had missed, and singing some boisterous song of the railroad.

When they finally blasted for Tennessee Pass Jerry was like a rag. But he had kept full pressure of steam on the boiler, and he had almost cleaned a full twenty ton tank of coal.

He draped himself on his seat box and panted while the sweat streamed from his face.

Mike looked across at him and guffawed. “Kinda took it out of yuh, didn’t I?” he shouted.

Jerry nodded. He felt no anger toward Mike. The man had run his engine according to his own judgment, which was like his switching. While they waited for the rear engine to shove their heavy train on the set-out track Jerry cooled off and got rested.

Parson Evans came climbing into the deck. “We meet extra 1002 west, here. Th’ 1002 hasn’t got double cross pumps on her and we got to take her train down to Maroon,” he said.

Mike grinned and nodded gleefully. “I’ll show some of these main line hog heads how to handle trains down this mountain,” he boomed.

“You’ll use some judgment or I’ll let Windy Trickle take us down. Th’ last time you handled a train down the mountain you ran away every foot to Maroon.”

“Ran away!” guffawed Mike, sarcastically. “I had ’em all th’ time. You birds don’t know a good run when yuh get one.”

“Just th’ same I’ve rode a couple of run-aways down this hill. And I’m not anxious to ride another;” grumbled Parson.

“I’ll see that yuh hit th’ bottom all in one piece,” Mike assured the conductor.

Parson dropped off muttering to himself. Their engine was turned and headed into the high end of the passing track where she would be ready to couple on the west bound freight when it arrived.

After a tedious thirty minute wait during which Mike spent his time between oiling around, tinkering on his charge with an eighteen inch monkey wrench and singing at the top of his lungs, the freight showed up far down the mountain.

Jerry watched them approach, thrilled to the glow of fire against the bottom of smoke columns from the toiling engines when the firemen opened their fire doors and throbbed to the blasting exhausts of them. This was to be his first trip down the mountain with a heavy train behind.

At last the freight drummed up the main line and halted with the head engines even with Mike’s engine. A brakeman cut the two engines from the freight and ran them ahead out of the way. Then Mike was backed against the train. The main line crew would turn here and take the drag Parson Evans had just set out back to Easton.

One of the air inspectors stationed at Tennessee Pass came up below Mike’s engine and stuck a blue flag to which hung a blue lantern on the bracket beneath the engineer. This blue flag is the only protection the air men have when they are working beneath the cars, taking up the brakes for the long drop down the mountain.

After almost twenty minutes Mike got a signal from the inspector near the caboose to release, then set the brakes over the train, while the inspectors looked them over. All that remained to be done was turn up the retainers so the brakes under the cars would remain set while Mike recharged the trainline on the drop down the hill.

Parson came into the cab with a handful of orders. "Number five is running twenty minutes late tonight," he told Mike.

"Then they'll never see our tail lights," grinned Mike.

"As I told you before, no fast running," cautioned Parson. "We've got plenty of time. If we can't keep out of five's way we'll take a side track and let them pass us."

Jerry knew that number five was the west bound passenger train made up of mail cars and Pullmans. She was the crack passenger train of the B. & L.

Finally a car man halted below the cab and removed his blue light. "Brakes look good," he called up to Mike. "You can go when you're ready."

Mike shoved his head out the window and looked back. He got a highball from near the caboose and blasted off. The heavy train got into motion with Mike beating his engine on the back to get the cars started down the three and one-half percent grade to Snowdon.

The track above Snowdon station where the single main branched to double track, followed the sides of the almost precipitous mountains. The line was very crooked which was in their favor. Trains are more easily held on steep grades where the track is heavily curved because the brake shoes bind on the wheels.

As the engine nosed out of the tunnel Mike made a service application of his air brakes. The drag of the train was immediately felt. He looked back until the caboose came from the tunnel. The brakeman back there waved a signal that the brakes were set over the entire length of the train, then faced ahead throwing his brake valve in full release.

With a derisive grin on his face Mike let his heavy train begin jogging rapidly. On heavy grades loaded freight cars must be held to a very nominal speed. If they are allowed to gather too much momentum no braking power on earth can stop them.

Jerry looked back on the first long left hand curve. Every wheel on the train was throwing sparks, showing that grinding brake shoes were biting into turning wheels. It was a sight which caused his heart to beat faster. Behind, so

far they looked like pin points of light, he saw the caboose markers glinting green.

Then they rounded a right hand curve and Jerry switched his gaze ahead again. The brakeman seated in front of him moved about uneasily when the steel apron clashed metallically and coal tumbled down from the motion. Jerry was enjoying the speed. He had no idea how fast trains were dropped down the mountain, and as a consequence did not realize that this one was exceeding the speed limit.

Mike hauled his automatic brake valve over in another reduction, held it there. The black needle on the train line gauge dropped back from one hundred, to ninety, eighty-five, seventy-five. Screaming brakes slowed their wild, plunging run.

Then Mike threw the brake valve over in full release. The freight was still travelling close to thirty miles an hour. As the valve stopped against the projecting shoulder it seemed that ten thousand tons of animate might smashed against the locomotive. The 1209 leaped forward, drivers clanking noisily. The boiler began to rock and roll. The tender took on a shimmy dance which shook clouds of coal dust into the air of the cab.

Mike had leaped to his feet when the train smashed down on them. His fist hauled the brake valve into emergency position and his other reached for the sander valve. With the sander valve open he pulled his reverse lever into back motion and opened his throttle. If Jerry had thought the engine rocking badly before, this last move of Mike's almost caused her to leave the rails. She seemed to jump up and down, groaning and pounding in every joint as dogged steam being fed into the cylinders fought to slacken their speed.

Mike gritted his teeth until his cheeks stood out in ridges of muscle. He jerked a single, short, pleading blast on his whistle cord. Set hand brakes! The brakeman ahead of Jerry leaped to his feet snatching up a pick handle. He tumbled over Jerry, almost knocking him from his seat box and was gone up over the coal pile, lantern swinging from his left hand.

From a clanking, rapidly moving train they became a howling, steel nosed meteor. Two lanterns bobbed up on top back near the caboose showing that the conductor and his rear brakeman had heard the signal for hand brakes.

But Mike had acted too late, had over played his hand. No power under the sky could halt that wild runaway now.

“Go back there an’ help th’ brakeman!” Mike yelled across to Jerry.

Jerry nodded and was gone, fighting against the slippery, caving coal. He gained the top and paused while he steadied himself on the rocking rear of the tender. Across a three foot gap, a slip into which meant certain death beneath the wheels, swayed a high furniture car. The head brakeman was doggedly twisting up on the brake wheel, using the pick handle for added purchase.

Jerry took a deep breath, timed himself and leaped wildly. His clawing fingers wrapped around a hand hold on the roof of the car and he pulled himself across the gap. He got to his feet, fighting a hurricane blast of wind which whistled about his ears. He staggered across to the brakeman.

“Let me help you,” he screamed, his words snatched from his lips.

“Grab hold,” yelled the brakeman nodding to his brake club.

Jerry clasped it, bracing himself. Together the pair swung on it. The brake tightened, and the brakeman fought a steel dog into the ratchet.

“That’s all we can get!” he shouted, heading back toward the next car. “Come on,” he called over his shoulder.

His lantern went out abruptly, leaving the pair fighting the darkness out there on the roof of that out-of-control train. They crossed to the second car, wound up on the brake wheel, then pulled viciously on the brake club.

The train howled toward Snowdon, end of the single track with screaming wide open whistle. All west bound trains were required to stop at Snowdon for a clearance before proceeding on the west bound main line. The signal at Snowdon was always set at danger, a red eye at night, a horizontal, fixed signal by day.

A wild eyed telegraph operator came out on the platform with a lantern, swung it violently across the rails in a stop signal, leaped back to safety before that avalanching monster of steel. A roar, and the train was past.

The operator reported the runaway: “Runaway engine and two cars went through Snowdon, 2:22 a.m.”

The train consisted of sixty-five cars!

That they reached Snowdon with every wheel still on the rails was a miracle. That the locomotive did not throw her side-rods was one of those freaks of chance. But neither happened.

“I’m gonna jump!” The brakeman screamed his intention when they were on the fifth car behind the engine.

“You’ll be killed,” Jerry warned him.

“We’ll all be killed if we stay on here.”

Jerry realized that too, but certain death awaited the man who leaped toward those jagged boulders lining the road bed. On the top they had a chance. Far back they could see the lanterns of Parson Evans and his brakeman as they waged their fight against momentum and gravity with the latter slowly but surely winning.

Steel rails could not hold the heavy train at the speed it travelled. It was too much for which to hope. And yet Jerry found himself facing the inevitable with a coldly reasoning brain, and no fear in his breast.

Below Snowdon the main lines dive into the canyon which gradually grows deeper from there to Maroon. Through here the tracks are laid high above the river. Curves are too sharp for safety at speeds over forty miles an hour. This freight train was doing better than seventy! Only one thing could result.

It came with startling abruptness. Jerry, who was trying to walk the length of a rocking refrigerator car looked back toward the engine just as it leaped into the air. He saw it sail out toward the river. It seemed to catapult a hundred feet before it landed with an ear splitting, grinding crash which was added to by the smashing of car after car which took that dive of death.

Jerry threw himself flat on the roof. His fingers curled about the runway. Something plucked at him, tore him loose and he felt himself thrown outward. It seemed that he sailed miles through the air before there came a bone crunching, nerve stunning crash, then utter blackness.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Railroad Investigation*

Jerry groaned. Every muscle and bone in his body throbbed with pain. He tried to open his eyes but the lids were glued shut. He raised his hand and mopped at them. His hand came away sticky. He sat up, crying out with the pain. Then it all flashed over him. The runaway, the wreck, number five following them! He finally got his eyes open.

Almost sobbing he got to his feet, horrified gaze thrusting all around. It halted on a piled up tangle below. He saw that he had been thrown to the right against the mountain side. And number five was coming behind them, making up time! His frenzied fingers felt for his watch, found the chain broken but the watch still in his pocket. He pulled it out. In the pale light of the stars overhead he read the time. 2:55. Number five was due through Snowdon at 2:45 when she was on time. But tonight she was running twenty minutes late. There was still a chance to stop her. Parson Evans and his rear brakeman were probably either dead or badly injured some place back there.

Jerry's throbbing head was working again now. He reasoned as coldly as a calculating machine. Their engine with fuzees and other flagging equipment was buried under many cars. But there were the journal boxes with greasy packing dope in them. He had matches in his pocket. What more simple than igniting some of the packing dope and swinging it across the rails?

Jerry staggered forward, every step torture. Breathing felt like little knives were driving into his lungs. Something kept running down into his eye and over his face. He raised his hand and rubbed it across his head. His cap was gone. His fingers felt a long gash which extended from his left ear upward almost to the middle of his crown.

Jerry laughed half hysterically at that. It didn't exactly hurt him, and even though it did he must flag number five. He stopped at the first overturned box car and snatched a handful of oily packing dope from the journal box. It was greasy, made his fingers feel sticky between, but he ignored that.

He was forced to make his way around the wreckage of jackknifed cars which formed gigantic "W's" on the mountain across the track and the river. But he doggedly moved back toward Snowdon.

When he finally reached the caboose which still sat on the rails, tilted at a crazy angle, he stopped long enough to shout. No answer came to him.

Now he was in the center of the track with nothing to impede his progress. He was breathing rapidly, was growing weak, and his brain was playing crazy tricks on him, but deep in his mind burned that one thought. He must flag number five.

He rounded a curve so he could no longer see the single red marker light which remained burning on the rear end of their caboose. He traversed a piece of tangent, rounded another curve, more tangent. He halted, wondering if he had come far enough so the engineer on number five could stop his train in time.

It was getting hard for him to keep on his feet. He was dizzy, and funny little fuzzy lights danced before his eyes. Mustn't go out now, got to keep the old feet until number five was halted, he kept telling himself.

Where was number five? Surely she should be showing up by now. Jerry remembered something he had done, years ago. The boys around Maroon used to place their ears against the rails to find out whether a train was approaching. Trains two miles away could be heard in this manner.

Jerry knelt and placed his ear on the cold ball of the rail. He held his breath. Then he caught it, a faint humming, the song of the steel. The approaching train was quite a distance away, but was moving rapidly.

Jerry grasped his waste more tightly and fished a match from his pocket. Now a faint chime whistle came to his straining ears. Everything went black before his eyes and he fought viciously to keep his senses. Number five must hurry or he would be out!

Now he could hear the whispering steel of the rails without placing his ears against them. When he straightened up this time the distant hum of turning wheels came to him plainly.

With careful deliberation Jerry squatted and drew his match along the rail. It flared into a feeble glow. He held the flame beneath the waste, watched the oil sputter and ignite. Just as it blazed into a flaring torch the headlight on number five's engine came around the curve and fell on him. The flames from the burning dope was scorching his hand, but that was superficial. Jerry felt no pain. He swung the flaming mass.

"Wha-a! Wha-a!" They had seen him. Jerry threw back his head and laughed a crazy, senseless laugh. Then he dropped the waste and staggered drunkenly around in the center of the track. What was it he must do? Something about stopping a train. Sure, number five was coming and he must stop it. He began to shout delirious words into the air. Running men came to surround him. Through a haze Jerry saw a face which looked familiar——



“Hold number five!” he screamed. “They’re coming and we’re wrecked, piled up in the canyon and five’s coming——” then he slumped, but gentle arms caught him before he fell.

Jerry was carried back to the smoking car. A group of passengers surrounded him, marvelling at his pluck. How he had managed to get back here and flag number five despite his injuries was little short of miraculous. Had the lad only known there was no necessity of his flagging them. The operator at Snowdon had notified them of the runaway train which had roared through. He had told them to keep a close watch for a bad wreck. He had called out the wrecker, ordered doctors and every medical attention for what he knew would happen someplace in the canyon below.

But Jerry was unaware of that. He did not know that John Mason, the general manager was one of those who had found him shouting in the center of the track, had picked him up and was now working over him.

Number five moved slowly ahead, feeling her way toward the wreck. The headlight of her engine finally picked up the twisted tangle which had been a freight train but a short time ago. Far over toward the head end of it a slender feather of steam plumed upward into the still night air. Box and coal cars were piled one on the other. Only a few of the rear cars were on the track, and they were badly damaged from smashing into those ahead when the head end piled up. It was impossible that any man of the crew was still alive. How Jerry had come through was a miracle.

A silent, white faced group of passengers started toward the wreckage. They found Parson Evans unconscious, but breathing. He was pinned beneath the wooden side of a box car. It was not until the following day that the battered body of the rear brakeman was discovered beneath the wreckage. He had apparently been killed instantly.

Both Mike and his fireman were alive. Mike was found between two large granite boulders with the tender of the engine forming a roof over the top. The boulders had protected him. Aside from a few superficial scratches he was unhurt. The head brakeman had not fared so well. Both his legs were broken and his skull was slightly fractured.

For four days the west bound main line was blocked by the wreckage. Almost a hundred thousand dollars’ damage had been sustained by the railroad company.

And Jerry was a hero once more.

All of which was not bothering the lad right then. He had been rushed to the hospital in Easton where his scalp wound was sewed up. Three ribs were

broken. It was unbelievable that the lad had managed to stagger up the track as he had and flag number five. Such devotion to duty caused a feeling of pride to pervade the entire ranks of the B. & L.

Youth and a perfect body worked wonders for Jerry. The third day after his arrival at the hospital he was chafing to get out. The doctors, wise to the ways of youth decided that Jerry would make a more speedy recovery in Maroon around his friends, and the noise of the railroad.

The day before he was to leave, John Mason, who had remained in constant attendance over him came into his ward and sat down near the head of his bed.

“Jerry,” he began, a light of admiration in his glinting eyes, “do you really want to return to Maroon?”

“Indeed I do!” Jerry was emphatic.

“But if I offer you another job, one that will make you more money and let you wear dress clothes instead of overalls——” hinted Mason.

“I’m obliged, Mr. Mason, but you see, I’m a railroader at heart. Some of the fascination of the work has got into the very marrow of my bones. I love it. And there are things yet remaining to be done in Maroon.”

“You mean——”

“I mean that every one of the gang who have been pilfering box cars are at large.”

“But I think they’re effectively driven away, thanks to you,” said Mason.

Jerry shook his head. “No they’re not,” he contradicted. “They’ve merely gone into hiding until things cool down. It is not reasonable to suppose that you can keep a small army of special agents patrolling the division in the guise of hobos as you’ve done. Eventually these men will relax. Then you’ll have a worse condition to contend with than before.”

John Mason knew that sound judgment was back of Jerry’s words. It was impossible to suppose the gang had withdrawn for good. They had tasted blood, and would be back after more. He fell into deep thought. At last he smiled and his gaze again bored into Jerry.

“So you think you’d ought to return?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s against my better judgment, but I’m going to give you your way. You’ve shown yourself to be a match for conditions against which you’ve

gone thus far. I see no reason why you should fall down now.”

Jerry’s eyes sparkled with joy. “I hoped you’d feel that way about it,” he said quietly.

“Tomorrow both of us will go over to Maroon. An investigation is to be held to fix the blame of that runaway where it belongs. I want to sit in on that investigation.” Mr. Mason got to his feet and walked out.

Jerry lay there, his gaze on the white paneled ceiling. “To fix the blame of that runaway where it belongs.” He knew where that would be. Mike Mills would have to shoulder it. It had been Mike’s fault. Mike had been too self confident, had used too little calm judgment. But Mike had learned a dear lesson. Jerry had been thinking about the engineer a great deal during the past few days. Mike was a capable railroader. He was quick witted. He had called for help in holding the train the instant he discovered it was out of control. Other men who had let a train get out of control would have tried to bring it back single handed. And Mike had stayed at his post of duty.

Suddenly Jerry’s face grew sober, and his eyes smoldered. Where would the blame have fallen had his father lived through that ice train runaway?

Together Jerry and John Mason boarded the west bound passenger the following morning. Save for a little soreness in the region of his broken ribs Jerry was as fit as ever. His scalp wound had nearly healed over. He would have to lie around for ten days or two weeks before going to work, but he would have Tom to talk to when Tom was in and he could go to the roundhouse and visit with McTavish. . . .

Jerry watched the place where the wreck had been across the canyon. It was not all cleaned up yet. All trains were still using the east bound main line.

The usual crowd of railroaders greeted the train when it halted at Maroon. Jerry followed John Mason from the car. Suddenly the lad halted in surprise. Dee Sommers was lounging against the pipe railing enclosing the parched lawn around the depot!

Mr. Martz, superintendent came up to Mr. Mason then. “I’ve held off that investigation until your arrival as you instructed in your telegram,” he said. “Now if you’re ready we’ll go ahead with it. This man, Mike Mills, engineer on that train is to blame and it’s pretty well cut and dried that we’ll ask for his discharge.”

“The man was apparently at fault. There is little excuse for letting his train get out of control,” agreed John Mason.

Jerry remained quiet, but that old light of coming battle began to glow in his eyes. Mike Mills might be at fault, but his lesson had been dearly learned. Behind him were almost twenty-five years of service on the B. & L. He was almost beyond the age where he could get another railroad job, and railroading was all he knew.

They entered the B-2 to find Mike Mills, face haggard with worry, Parson Evans, Windy Trickle and several other engine men in attendance. Jerry wondered why Windy Trickle was here, then remembered that Mike Mills was entitled to a representative, just like any lawbreaker is entitled to a lawyer to plead his case when he goes up for trial. This investigation was run along the same lines, save that no jury passed on the evidence. The superintendent acted as both judge and jury.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *Jerry to the Rescue*

Mr. Martz rapped for order when they were all seated. Then he faced Mike Mills.

“Mr. Mills,” he began severely, “you are here on a grave charge, on a matter which cost the life of one man, the injury of two other men, and the damage to thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment and merchandise.”

Mike Mills nodded dumbly. His gnarled hands moved one over the other nervously.

“A thorough investigation into the causes which brought about this runaway and the subsequent wrecking of the train has brought damning evidence in your disfavor. I want to ask you a question. Didn’t Parson Evans warn you to hold your train to a safe speed before you left Tennessee Pass that night?”

Windy Trickle grunted to his feet. “Just a minute, Mr. Martz,” he boomed. “Since when has the conductor had the privilege of tellin’ engineers how to run their engines?”

“That is immaterial,” snapped Mr. Martz. “The fact remains that Parson Evans did give him such advice. Am I right?”

Mike cleared his throat. “You’re right,” he answered.

“You utterly disregarded his warning from the time you tipped over the grade in the tunnel. When you came from the tunnel your train was running at better than thirty miles an hour,” accused Mr. Martz.

Mike looked up at the superintendent. “The first service application of the brakes that I made convinced me that I had a good holdin’ train. I got a high sign from th’ crummy tellin’ me they was holdin’. I’ve rode with engineers many times durin’ my firin’ days when we dropped faster than I dropped my train that night.”

“Those engineers probably had trains that were mixed with enough empty cars to make such speeds safe,” asserted Mr. Martz.

Mike made no reply. He knew his cause was hopeless. He was like the murderer who has already confessed his guilt and now awaits the sentence.

Mr. Martz drummed on his desk top for a few seconds. Then he coughed angrily. "Mr. Mills," he said, voice like chilled steel, "you are hereby pulled out of service. You will immediately turn over all your company property. I unhesitatingly recommend your immediate discharge on the grounds of rank inefficiency!"

Mike Mills seemed to wilt in his chair. Windy Trickle licked his dry lips and his countenance grew more granitelike, but he made no move to leap to the defense of his brother engineer. Years of railroading had shown Windy when a cause was irrevocably lost.

John Mason sat like a statue, no line of his face changing expression.

Not Jerry Twyman. Jerry leaped to his feet, kicking over his chair in his hurry. His eyes flashed, flaming hair stood in tousled curls accented by the white blob of adhesive tape which covered his scalp wound. His freckles looked very brown against the pallor of his skin.

"Just a minute, Mr. Martz, and you too, Mr. Mason," his clear young voice rang out. He turned to John Mason, eyes half accusing. "Mr. Mason, how many years have you worked for this railroad company?" he demanded.

Windy Trickle closed his eyes. That voice was one he remembered over a span of years. It carried the ring of another voice he had known and admired. Jerry Twyman, engineer, fighter for justice stood in the room again!

"Better than thirty years, Jerry," admitted John Mason with a smile.

"And in all of those thirty years haven't you let your self confidence get the better of you to an extent where you made mistakes?" Jerry went on doggedly.

"I expect I have," admitted Mason.

Jerry whirled to Mr. Martz. "And you, Mr. Martz, have you always been right in your every decision?"

Mr. Martz was taking it differently than John Mason. "That's immaterial and aside from the issue at hand. Mike Mills has confessed his guilt. There's no excuse for him!" he almost shouted.

"Granted," said Jerry softly. "But I can ask you another question. Do you, Mr. Martz, know anything aside from railroading?"

Martz leaped to his feet. His right hand raised in anger. "Sit down!" he bawled, his face livid.

Jerry blazed with anger.

“Just a minute, Mr. Martz,” interrupted John Mason quietly, but his voice carried a ring of command. “In the face of things Jerry Twyman has done since going to work on this railroad he is entitled, I think, to some consideration. Answer his questions. Go on, Jerry.”

Jerry faced Mr. Martz again.

“I’ve been a railroader all my life, worked up from the ranks,” said Mr. Martz doggedly.

“All right. Then, if you were suddenly fired for rank inefficiency, would it be an easy task for you to find another job of railroading, the only work you know?” asked Jerry.

“I’m too old to get another railroad job,” agreed Mr. Martz.

“And so is Mike Mills too old to get another railroad job. I was Mike Mills’ fireman the night of the runaway. I can honestly say that Mike Mills puts everything he has into the running of his locomotive. Perhaps he didn’t use any judgment. That fact doesn’t necessarily mean that he’ll *never* use any judgment, does it?”

Mr. Martz was silent. He bit at his lower lip.

“I’m asking you to reconsider your decision,” Jerry pressed his advantage. “I’ll stake my honor on Mike Mills and his ability to make you one of your very best engineers if he is given a chance. Yes, I’ll stake the honor of my father who went to his death on this railroad.”

John Mason slowly got to his feet. His face was sober, but his eyes glowed with a new light, as he faced Mike Mills.

“Mr. Mills,” he said, “you admit that you were grievously wrong on the night of the runaway?”

Mike Mills got to his feet. His eyes looked moist and he fought to keep his grief from showing. “I do, Mr. Mason. I made a mistake. I’d give anything I have to rectify that mistake——”

“It seems to me that when a man realizes he has made a grievous mistake, he is not apt to make the same mistake again,” said John Mason quietly.

“You mean you want me to reconsider my decision?” asked Mr. Martz unbelievably.

“I do. I feel as Jerry Twyman does, that Mike Mills should be given another chance.”

Mr. Martz picked up the recommendation he had made for the discharge of Mike Mills. He tore it into small pieces and dropped them fluttering into his waste basket. It seemed he heaved a sigh of relief as he did so.

“And what is your recommendation, Mr. Mason?” he asked, bluntly.

“That engineer Mike Mills be given another chance. We might put him on a sort of parole. If he comes through with a clean record after six months, then he’ll continue to come clean.”

Mike Mills leaped to his feet. This time there was no hiding his tears. They streamed down over his rugged, leathery countenance unrestrained. “Yuh mean—” he quavered.

“I mean that Jerry Twyman has convinced us hard-shelled old railroaders that you’re deserving of another chance, Mills. We’re going to give it to you,” said John Mason. He blew his nose and blinked his eyes rapidly.

Mr. Martz sat down and began hastily writing. Windy Trickle got to his feet, his face a question mark. His eyes bored into Jerry as though unable to believe what he had witnessed. Then Windy Trickle did a funny thing. He crossed the room and his right arm went across Jerry’s shoulders.

“Lad,” he said, in a new and strange voice which sounded fuzzy and choked up, “quite a while ago I insulted you. I hurt you deeper than I intended when I moved my place when you sat down beside me. I’m sorry \_\_\_\_\_”

Jerry laughed unsteadily. “Forget that, Mr. Trickle,” he said. “I want the friendship of every man I’m working with. I want to be one of you——”

“Then you ain’t holdin’ that against me?” asked Windy.

“My no. You had formed the wrong opinion of me. You see, Mr. Trickle, I’m not a spotter. I believe in honesty above all else. If I can unearth this gang who’ve been pilfering the freight shipments over this division I’ll do it! But I’m not spying on any one of your engine or train men!”

Mike Mills came between them then. His right hand was thrust out and it curled around Jerry’s. “Kid,” he said gruffly, “I rawhided you all th’ way to Tennessee Pass that night. You must have known I was rawhidin’, but you took your punishment like a hundred percenter. Like some of th’ other boys here I had you wrong. I figured you for a spotter. I’m sorry, an’ you’ll never know what th’ things you’ve done for me today mean——”

Again Jerry, laughed huskily. “I saw in you a mighty good railroad man, Mr. Mills,” he said.



The men filed out leaving Jerry, Mr. Mason and the superintendent alone in the car. John Mason gave Jerry a quizzical look, finally he laughed quietly.

“Jerry,” he said, “you’re quite a find!”

Jerry flushed.

“I’m going to pull you right up to the top whether you want to be pulled or not,” he went on.

“But not until we’ve put a stop to the lawlessness going on around here,” said Jerry quickly.

“Not until you’ve put a stop to the lawlessness going on around here,” amended John Mason.

Jerry found Tom Bender in their room. Tom had just come in from the street, and still had his coat on. He almost hugged Jerry as the lad entered.

“You old stiff!” he boomed in his hearty manner, “if you ain’t made yourself th’ most popular man on this railroad since I saw yuh last, I’m not a good tallowpot!”

“I simply tried to do the right thing,” smiled Jerry.

“Anyhow, every man on this hill is your friend from now on. I don’t mean that exactly. What I do mean is this: you’ll have no trouble tellin’ what men are on th’ right side of th’ fence from now on. Them that treat yuh like a brother is okeh. Them that don’t—watch ’em!”

Jerry smiled with satisfaction. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he said.

“Dee Sommers is back in town.” Tom made the statement with his usual abruptness.

“Yes, I saw him this morning when we got off the train.”

“Just thought I’d tell you.”

“Thanks.”

What had Tom meant? He had given Jerry a warning in his blunt way. Jerry knew he would go no further than that.

One thing made the lad mighty happy. He had seen Windy Trickle for the first time that morning as the man really was beneath his cloak of ice. Windy was honest. He was no man to make friends at random. He must know beyond a doubt before he thawed out in the least. And now that Jerry had penetrated his cloak of ice Windy Trickle was a great old hundred percenter!

“I’m glad you saved Mike Mills’ job for him, Jerry,” Tom changed the subject. “Mike is on th’ square, he’s one that always does his work, an’ he’s got a wife an’ five kids. It ’ud put him up against it to be fired.”

“I’m glad I was able to save it for him,” agreed Jerry quietly.

Since he was feeling tired he lay down on the bed and dozed off. He did not awaken until it was almost dark. Tom had been out someplace, and entered just as Jerry sat up yawning.

“How about some supper?” asked Tom. “I been waitin’ for you.”

Jerry got up. “I’m hungry as a cub bear,” he laughed.

A number of railroaders were lined up at the counter in the eating house when they entered. Windy Trickle was sitting near the center of them. He looked up, and his face wreathed into a smile. Then he turned to a fireman who had just sat down by him.

“Get up, Mercer,” he commanded, “an’ let Jerry Twyman set here by me!”

Mercer grumbled good naturedly as he got to his feet. Windy motioned to the place at his side. “Come on, Jerry,” he invited.

Jerry complied with a feeling of joy. He had finally convinced these men that he was one of them and they had taken him into their circle. All save two of those lined up at the counter greeted him warmly.

The next several days dragged slowly. Jerry hated the inaction occasioned by his broken ribs. He wanted to get back in the cab. He spent his time between his room, the eating house and McTavish’s office. Twice he rode to Tennessee Pass and back with Windy and Tom. These trips served to make the monotony bearable.

Dee Sommers had dropped from sight again. The hobos still rode the trains, but were not nearly so vigilant as they had been. Up near the tunnel the quaking aspens were putting on their fall coloring. The mountain sides showed yellows and reds. Thin skims of ice were freezing on the streams these nights. The fall round-up of cattle had commenced.

Soon now the stock rush would be in full swing with trainload after trainload of cattle and sheep going out of Maroon. The train and engine crews would be worked to the limit of their endurance. Every locomotive and idle car would be placed in service.

On Jerry’s last visit the railroad doctor had told him: “About a week more and you can get back in the harness.”

One more week of enforced idleness. The bandages were already removed from his broken ribs.

Three days before Jerry was ready to okeh for work again the first stock train was loaded out of Maroon. Thirty-five cars of fat two and three year old steers were herded through the loading chutes into waiting cars. On these trains no delay was allowed. Long before the loading was completed three waiting locomotives were lined up to take them to Tennessee Pass. When the last car was finally loaded and sealed the string was switched to the main line where the waiting engines coupled on.

Jerry decided to ride to Tennessee Pass with Windy and Tom who were on one of the helpers. The conductor had delivered their running orders before Jerry reached the engine and he had to run to avoid being left.

He took the brakeman's seat and watched this romance of the rail. Windy had his schedule opened on his knees, ready to compare time through each station. No working up speed slowly on this train. Minutes counted. Shrinkage on those prime steers went into heavy loss if they were not moved over the road.

By the time they passed the yard limit board they were making almost thirty miles an hour, each working engine blasting viciously, carrying full steam pressure and seeming to realize she must do her part.

Mike Mills was running the train engine. He had taken his lesson to heart. The men working around him were praising him to the skies these days.

Jerry got up and slid down into the deck. "Going back to ride with Mike," he yelled to Tom.

He climbed over the coal gates and scrambled across the piled up fuel, dropped to the cleared space near the manhole and let himself down on the pilot of the next engine. Her deep throated exhausts seemed to blast against the smoking hot front end. She weaved gently with each thrust of her side-rods.

Jerry squeezed in through the fireman's window and grinned across at Mike. Mike had changed. Gone from his face was that expression of recklessness. He was the born engineer now, measuring every ounce of power and speed in his charge, taking advantage of every let up on the mountain grade.

Two hours and the stock train was halted at Tennessee Pass where a main line crew waited to take them on to Easton. The three engines bringing them

this far were turned. Jerry returned to the engine in charge of Windy and Tom where he rode back to Maroon.

He waited until Tom was through with his work. Then they headed across toward the eating house. Tom, who was in the lead, snorted softly and halted abruptly as he entered the dining room. Jerry almost bumped into him. Then he too caught his breath sharply.

Luke Beezley, Doc Descombs and Dee Sommers were seated at the counter, talking together in whispers. They saw Jerry and Tom the same instant the pair saw them. Dee curled his mouth into a snarl and said something to Luke who smiled coldly and nodded.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Back In Harness*

The sight of Luke Beezley and Doc Descombs after their absence was quite a shock to Jerry. Here lately he had begun to hope that the pair had really left for good. Now they were back. The special agents had slackened their vigilance. Would there be time to warn them before the pair acted if they were going to act?

Jerry and Tom sat down at some distance from the trio and ordered their supper. The three paid no more attention to them.

But Jerry worried until he went to sleep that night. His first thought on waking was of them. He went down to the eating house with Tom where they had breakfast. Then while Tom crossed to the roundhouse to learn when he was getting out again Jerry walked into the depot.

Dee Sommers was there, idly going through the weigh bills which were pigeon-holed waiting for a train to take them out. They represented every car standing in the yards at Maroon, and showed their contents. What interest did Dee Sommers have in those bills? He was still supposed to be laying off.

Jerry said nothing but turned abruptly and walked out. He went to the shaded end of the depot and threw himself down on a bench. Something was up. The gang was back for no good purpose. Dee was fingering those bills through no idle curiosity.

He saw Tom coming across from the roundhouse and called him over. Tom threw himself beside Jerry and stretched.

“Utah sheep train buzzin’ in along toward night. They split their train here, an’ we take half to th’ top of th’ hill,” he announced.

“Dee Sommers was in the depot looking through the weigh bills,” said Jerry soberly.

Tom whistled. “So that’s th’ how, huh?”

“Yes. I’m trying to decide whether to wire general offices that I fear something is liable to happen.”

“Yeah. An’ if nothin’ happens, it’ll make a chump out of you,” scoffed Tom.

“Not necessarily. Big business believes in correcting faults before they become dangerous.”

“You’re right. Guess if I was you I’d drop ’em a line,” decided Tom.

Jerry got to his feet. He went back into the depot. Dee Sommers was not there for which Jerry was thankful.

He pulled a blank of telegraph pads toward him and wrote rapidly:

“Fear trouble in immediate future. Better round up special agents and have them closely watch all trains Maroon to Tennessee Pass. Jerry Twyman.” He addressed the message to John Mason.

“Will you send this at once?” he asked the operator.

“Yeah. I’m connected with general offices now.”

Jerry turned to leave and almost ran into Dee Sommers. The man eyed him malevolently, lounged past him with his hands in his pockets and entered the operator’s office. But he seemed in no wise curious as to what the operator was sending. Jerry consoled himself that perhaps Dee wouldn’t see the message after all. He returned to the bench where Tom was waiting.

He hurriedly explained what had happened. “But maybe Dee won’t see that message,” he ended.

Tom grunted. “I’d bet he’s readin’ it right now,” he said.

As though to answer Tom’s guess Dee came from the depot hurriedly. He stabbed a glance of hatred toward Jerry and rounded the corner to disappear in the direction of town.

“What did I tell you?” breathed Tom.

Always the optimist Jerry laughed: “If he saw that message he’ll know they are being watched and maybe decide it’s too hot around these parts for them.”

“You don’t know them birds like I do,” was all the answer Tom made.

Two more days and Jerry could go back to work. The doctor would release him then. Perhaps back in the game he’d have a chance to watch things more closely.

He and Tom had just entered their room when the caller came in. He handed Jerry a message in silence. Then he left whistling shrilly.

Jerry tore open the envelope with trembling fingers. The message was from John Mason.

“Have wired all special agents to concentrate at Maroon. They will arrive on number seven. Meet them.”

Jerry was at the depot when number seven halted. He watched the passengers detrain. Five men got off the smoker. Jerry knew them for the special agents, recognized two of them as hobos who had been riding the different freight trains.

He advanced to meet them.

The one who seemed to be in charge shook hands with him. Then: “And what’s all the excitement?” he asked softly.

Jerry explained his suspicions.

“Sounds bad,” agreed the man. “And you’ve done mighty well in warning us. We’ll be on our toes.”

“Is there anything more I can do?” asked Jerry.

“No, that’s all. We’ll handle everything.”

Jerry nodded and moved away. He had seen Dee Sommers loafing near the door of the depot, darting glances of hatred toward him and eyeing the special officers appraisingly.

Jerry sauntered past the eating house. The railroad car inspectors kept a cart in which they hauled ice sitting at the end in the shade. Instead of the cart was a long row of metal objects which resembled coal oil heaters. Each of these had a square paste board tag wired to the handle. Jerry lifted one of the tags. On it was written in large red letters:

“WARNING!”

Then in smaller print beneath:

“This is a charcoal heater. Do not enter any car in which one of these has been burning until the car has been thoroughly ventilated. The gas generated by these burners is deadly poisonous.”

Charcoal heaters. Jerry had never seen one of them before. One of the car inspectors came walking toward him. Jerry pointed to the heater and asked: “For what are these used?”

“Refrigerator cars,” replied the car man. “Now that freezin’ weather has set in all fruit an’ vegetable shipments are protected with charcoal burners in th’ ice bunkers. We have to renew ’em here on transcontinental shipments.”

“And they’re dangerous?” asked Jerry idly.

“Boy, if yuh want to commit suicide, just crawl in a car with one of ’em, an’ shut th’ doors. Plenty of hobos have been found dead since these went into use.”

Jerry walked on. He promptly forgot about those charcoal heaters now that he had found out all about them. Any man would be a fool to crawl into a car where one of them was burning. . . .

Tom was already called for the sheep train when Jerry got back to the room. Together they walked down and ate supper. Then Jerry went over to the railroad Y.M.C.A. where he spent the evening reading.

He was in bed by eleven o’clock but for almost an hour he lay there wide awake. He had thought that the premonition of impending danger was over after the runaway, but tonight it recurred more strongly than ever. He felt as though something deadly lay in wait for him just around the corner.

When he finally fell asleep he dreamed that he was pinned flat on his back, a gigantic weight slowly descending to crush him and he was powerless to move. He woke up with cold sweat streaming from every pore.

With morning the feeling was almost gone. The autumn sun glowed warmly over the town. A flock of migrating black birds sang in the trees around Ma Kennedy’s. Everything was peaceful.

Tom had not returned from his trip on the sheep train and Jerry felt slightly uneasy. Stock train trips were usually made quickly.

At the roundhouse he found McTavish serenely smoking at his black pipe, feet perched up on his desk.

“What happened to that sheep extra?” asked Jerry anxiously.

“Got some cars off th’ track above Snowdon. No damage, just delay gettin’ ’em back on. Th’ outfit will whistle in any minute now.” As though to answer his prophecy a whistle sounded from the canyon and soon the blunt nose of one of the helper engines rattled toward the roundhouse.

Jerry waited until Tom had washed, then accompanied him over to the eating house. Tom was tired and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Anythin’ happen down here last night?” he asked.

“No. Quiet and serene.”

“One of them calms that happen before a storm, huh?”

“I hope not.”



“Well, things was takin’ place up at Granite when we went east last night. I see a couple of trucks settin’ near them old barns. Trucks ain’t got a habit of loafin’ around Granite except when box car robbin’ is about to be pulled.”

“But there were no box cars in your train,” said Jerry.

“No. I don’t reckon none was robbed last night. Th’ gang was just pullin’ this stuff used by generals called reconnoiterin’ before a battle.”

Jerry grew silent. Perhaps Tom was right. If he was right the advent of the special agents had done nothing except make the gang more determined than ever to pull what they had planned.

That day Jerry noticed a number of strangers loafing around the depot and the main street. All of them bore the stamp of outlaws. All of them carried heavy six guns at their hips. They eyed him malevolently when he passed them. He decided to call the attention of the special agents to them.

The leader of the special agents listened intently. “I’ll investigate them at once and let you know,” he promised.

An hour later the special agent came to his room. “They’re a bunch of cowboys from some of the outfits around here. Tomorrow they load out one of the biggest cattle shipments of the fall and they’re just waiting for them is all.”

Jerry did not feel reassured. His ideas of cow punchers were of happy-go-lucky, open-faced fellows. This gang had none of those attributes. Still, the special agent probably was right. . . .

Tomorrow Jerry would be released by the doctor and could go back to work. Twenty-four hours and he would return to the game. He was feeling as fit as he had ever felt in his life.

While Tom was sleeping that afternoon Jerry went back to the roundhouse. McTavish had just received his line up for the trains which would run during the coming night. He tossed it over to Jerry.

“Plenty of business in th’ next twelve hours,” he snorted. “Gonna put me up against it for men. . . .”

Jerry read the line up:

“Stock special. About 5:50 p.m. Split. 3 engine crews, one train crew.

“Drag, dead stuff. About 7:30 p.m. 2 helpers.

“Red Ball hot shot about 8:00 p.m. 2 helpers.

“Red Ball hot shot about 9:30 p.m. 2 helpers.

“Stock special about 11:00 p.m. 3 helpers.

“Stock special about 12 m. Split. 5 helpers, train crew.”

“An’ ’tis such frenzied business that puts grey hairs in a roundhouse foreman’s head,” grieved McTavish.

“You won’t have enough engines or crews, will you?” asked Jerry.

“I will by doublin’ ’em right out again when they get back from their trips.”

Jerry returned to his room. Business was certainly picking up. Two red ball hot shots running a little better than two hours apart. Trains of valuable merchandise. He was glad the special agents were on the job tonight.

Tom was called for the drag of dead stuff which was arriving at 7:45, having fallen down a little on the first guess of the dispatcher.

“An’ tell that Windy hogger of yours to shake a mean driver so yuh can get back to help that stock special that’s runnin’ around eleven p.m.,” ended the caller.

“We’ll get back if th’ conductor don’t get to draggin’ his feet,” promised Tom with a wide grin.

Jerry went down to the eating house with Tom. On his way back to his room he met the leader of the special agents. The man appeared troubled. He halted Jerry, lowered his voice and said: “We’ve got a red hot tip that the first red ball hot shot tonight is going to be robbed.”

Jerry whistled. “They’re going to show their hands after all?” he said.

“Yes. And it means a gun fight if they do. We have orders to shoot to kill.”

Jerry went on, worried now. He wished he might fire one of those helpers which would assist the red ball. If there was going to be excitement he wanted to be in on it.

He spent the evening in his room reading a magazine he had bought down in the drug store. While he was still reading he heard the first red ball hot shot whistle out, and chuff toward Tennessee Pass.

About nine o’clock he put his book down and yawned. Might as well crawl into bed and get some sleep. This was the last night’s sleep he’d have in a long time, because tomorrow he could okeh for work.

He undressed and crawled between the cold, clean sheets. He was just dozing off when someone calling his name brought him out of bed in a single leap.

“Jerry! Jerry!” That was the voice of Ma Kennedy calling from the stairs.

He opened his door. “What is it?” he shouted.

“Telephone. Somebody wants ye on th’ telephone.”

“I’ll be right down,” he called. He hurriedly slipped into his trousers wondering who could be calling him this hour of the night.

He took the receiver from Ma Kennedy.

“Hello. This is Jerry Twyman,” he spoke into the transmitter.

“About time.” The voice sounded strange to him. “I just called th’ doctor an’ he released yuh. I’m stuck for a fireman to go out on that second red ball hot shot. You’re called for nine-forty. Only got twenty minutes to make it. Engine 1166. I’ll have her ready for yuh an’ coupled on th’ train.”

“Who is this?” asked Jerry more puzzled than ever.

“Yuh’re called, get me. No time to answer a lot of fool questions!” The receiver clicked on the other end.

Jerry faced Ma Kennedy. “I’m called for a trip,” he told her hurriedly. Then he raced back upstairs to get into his working clothes.

## CHAPTER XV

### *Creeping Death*

Jerry tingled with happiness as he thrust his feet into his shoes and began lacing them. He was back, a cog in this massive machine. He was glad of the emergency which had put him to work again. He was feeling utterly fit. No soreness was left in the region of his broken ribs.

Less than ten minutes later he let himself out of the front door and hurried toward the railroad yards where he could hear locomotives chuffing around, bells clanging and the rattle of draft rigging.

Jerry would have liked to stop in the beanery for a bite to eat before starting the trip but there was no time. Even now the train was being held for him. The yards were in dense shadows. Scurrying clouds overhead obscured the stars and made the night darker. As he passed the depot he saw two car inspectors working in the light of a flaring torch on top of a yellow refrigerator car. They were lifting out the charcoal burners, getting ready to replace them with freshly fueled ones. The side doors were both wide open to dispel the poisonous fumes.

Jerry crossed the main line and hurried around the front end of a string of cars. Another string stood on the next track. Since the end of it was not in sight he decided to go through. He scrambled up on the couplings, and dropped lightly to the cinders on the other side.

He thought he saw a moving, furtive shadow steal along through the darkness, but paid no attention to it. Another string of cars blocked the next track. Jerry grinned to himself. Business was certainly good! This was the first time he had ever seen every track blocked with cars.

Then he felt a presence close to him. He halted momentarily while his gaze thrust around through the darkness. No one was in sight. He decided to cross between the cars in the next string. He reached up and grasped the handholds to pull himself on the draw bars.

As he did so biting fingers clutched his throat cutting off his wind. He was jerked back to the cinders. He struggled with every ounce of his strength but could not break those clawing fingers. Hot breath fell on the back of his neck.

“It’s him, all right,” snarled a voice which sounded suspiciously like the one which had addressed him over the telephone.

“Yuh’re sure, huh?” rasped another.

“Yeah.” A match flared before Jerry’s swimming eyes, glowed a second and was shaken out.

“Yeah, it’s him, th’ lousy rat!” barked the first voice.

“Tie his hands,” the other man commanded.

Jerry felt biting cords wrapped about his wrists. They were pulled to flesh-cutting tightness. His throat was released but only momentarily. He had no chance to shout for help. A chunk of evil tasting rope was thrust between his teeth and pulled so tight it cut the corners of his mouth.

“We’ll wait ’til them car whackers get done with that reefer,” snarled the second speaker. “Then we’ll dump him in it. That’s Luke’s idea.”

“Good one too. Them charcoal burners are plenty dangerous. That car will be opened around New York. He’ll be croaked so stiff nobody will know who he was.”

Rough hands began a systematic search over Jerry’s person. Every bit of identifying evidence on him was taken.

“When they find him he’s just a bum who crawled in th’ car an’ got croaked,” rasped the man who had done the searching.

“Everybody lined up, okeh?” grunted the other.

“I’ll say. Th’ big job pulled, then we drop out. Granite bristles with guns like a army camp. Luke rustled one of them sub-machine babies. Never seen one of them used, but Luke knows all about ’em.”

“An’ Doc?”

“He’ll do th’ dirty work, like settin’ out them cars we want to unload. Silk dresses! Cigarettes, hardware, guns! Boy, there’s a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of stuff in them two vans, an’ we get it all!”

Jerry was icy cold. Doom was written across his horizon. He was going to be thrown into that refrigerator car with the burning charcoal stoves. The evil cleverness of the gang swept over him. They had tipped off the special agents that an attempt was to be made on the first red ball hot shot. The special agents had accompanied it out of Maroon. This red ball, the one carrying the valuable merchandise, was unguarded. And as a parting gesture Jerry was to be paid off by his enemies.

A new man sneaked up to the pair who held Jerry.

“Them car tonks is done with that reefer,” he said. Jerry recognized Dee Sommers’ voice.

“Let’s go. Th’ rattler will pull out pronto, an’ we want to be on it. Luke waitin’ for us at Granite?”

“Yeah. Owey’s gonna make th’ head end slow down when we go through so him an’ his gang can load on,” rasped Dee in a high pitched voice which showed the strain he was under.

Jerry was jerked free of the ground, slung like a sack of meal across wide shoulders and carried through the darkness.

Like ghosts the three men stole through the cinders toward the refrigerator car. Dee Sommers in the lead snatched the seal from the hasp and jerked the double doors open.

Jerry was tumbled unceremoniously into the dark, smothering interior. Crates of fruit loomed on either side of him.

“That is what comes of hornin’ in where yuh got no business, yuh white rat!” snarled Dee in a vicious tone as he stooped so his face was close to Jerry’s. “Maybe th’ next time one of you punk gum shoes come sneakin’ into a railroad town, yuh’ll think twice!”

“Come on, Dee,” rasped one of the others starting to swing the doors closed. “We got to get goin’.”

Dee cursed under his breath. With a muffled thud the double doors came together, were kicked closed, and Jerry heard the lever being jerked into place.

Jerry began a futile struggle against the cutting bonds which held his wrists. It seemed that the more he tugged the tighter they became. Sweat streamed from him in rivulets. He finally desisted and lay back panting. He wished he knew what the poison gas generated by those charcoal burners smelled like. He didn’t know how it took effect either. Would he gradually become sleepy, then pass out, or would he suffer? Thus far his head was clear as a bell and his strength had not weakened.

Now that he relaxed he knew the car was loaded with grapes from California. A solid car load of them, packed so air could circulate around every crate. He was imprisoned as effectively as though he were in a death cell in a real prison. The ice bunkers at the ends were separated from the body of the car by heavy oak strips placed two inches apart. The doors closed from

outside. They were double doors, filled with insulating material. The walls of the car were built the same. At both ends the ice bunkers opened to the air with thirty inch square hatches, plenty large enough for a man to squeeze through, but those oaken strips formed an impenetrable barrier.

Jerry was not panic stricken. He was more coldly calculating than he had ever been before. He knew that first he must free his hands—providing the poison gas didn't get him first. Then he could probably figure some way of releasing himself from his prison.

By rolling his body to either side Jerry could feel the piled up crates of grapes. The air was musty and thick. To his straining ears came dimly the whistles of the engines as the train blasted off. Dull, rumbling wheels turned beneath the car and the sides creaked and groaned.

Jerry raised his body to a sitting posture. Each of those crates had corners which might be used as saws. Then he got his bound wrists in a position where he could begin the slow process of severing his bonds. The wood scratched and cut his flesh but he doggedly kept on. The train was winding through the canyon now, he could tell that from the sudden lurches of the car. He wished he could see whether the sawing on his bonds was doing any good.

Hovering in the background was the fear of that poison gas which should be filtering in to him by now. The car had been thoroughly aired out in Maroon. It would probably take some time before the gas was generated again. In the meanwhile if he saved his life he must work fast.

Minutes dragged past with no loosening of his bonds. They held like steel cords. Jerry tried to sense the position of the train by the curves and found he could make a fairly close guess. They were on the big loop below Granite. It was three miles before the train would roar through, only from the words Dee Sommers had let drop they would not roar through tonight. Other desperate men were waiting to board it.

Wrists bleeding, fingers tingling from retarded circulation, lips burning from that rope which gagged him, Jerry heard the head engine whistle for Granite. Their speed picked up. Suddenly brakes ground under the car and there came the abrupt slowing down of the train.

For dragging minutes they moved at a snail's pace. Then the head engine whistled two short blasts, air hissed as the brakes were released. The other two engines took up the whistle and the red ball hot shot whipped up speed again.

The balance of the gang had boarded.

In the cab of the head engine a white faced engineer ran his engine according to snarled instructions of a masked man backed up by a blue barreled six gun. The fireman mechanically worked his stoker.

“An’ when yuh pull up th’ main line at th’ next sidin’ stop. We got some settin’ out we want to do,” snarled the bandit.

Another masked man rode at the shoulder of the train engineer who had received the same instructions.

Another masked man had boarded the caboose and was holding the conductor and his rear brakeman at bay with his gun while still another had taken command of the cab of the rear engine. The stage was set. The robbers had planned their coup with consummate evil. The side track where they were stopping the train was situated close to the automobile highway. Less than a mile away the highway branched into four roads. One went over Cottonwood Pass, another went via the Winslow tunnel, the third followed the abandoned right of way of the Midland railroad while the fourth followed the B. & L. The spot was well chosen. When they finally transferred their loot to waiting trucks who was going to say which road they had taken?

In the refrigerator car Jerry still sawed at his bonds. It seemed that he was accomplishing something now as his wrists had loosened a little. The cords were beginning to fray. He doggedly continued, clenching his teeth against the pain. Now he could smell the sweet, acrid odor of the deadly gas. It was very faint, just a whisper, but it was creeping toward him.

With startling abruptness the train halted. Jerry heard the clap of a gun almost directly above his head. Then there came the riveting of a machine gun which stuttered for almost ten seconds. More shots came from farther away. Someone must be contesting the gang!

Muffled shouts of instruction came to his straining ears. The rear helper blasted rapidly. Jerry could hear them moving away from the balance of the train. They halted, then chuffed more slowly. Later he heard cars clanking past the side of his refrigerator. The gang were setting out some of the cars here!

Jerry renewed his efforts on the bonds. While the gang were cutting off the cars they had ordered set out here his arms came free. He was on his feet in a second, rubbing at his chafed, bloody wrists. Then he went to work on the gag. This was easily removed now that he had the use of his hands.

He gulped great breaths of air. The air was sickeningly sweet by this time and Jerry felt a drowsy lassitude steal through his body. The gas! It was working back rapidly now.



His hands were free, but what was he to do next? It was going to be impossible to break from the car. He was just as much a prisoner as ever. There was no chance of forcing the doors, and piles of fruit separated him from the oaken strips over the ice bunkers.

He fished a match from his pocket. Its feeble flame burned sluggishly showing that the oxygen was becoming exhausted. But he saw that the grape crates were piled only half way up the wall! Across them he could see the oaken strips. He felt that none of these wooden bars were loose, but it was worth a trial. As the match fluttered and died he threw it down and crawled to the tops of the crates. He began worming himself along toward the front end of the car.

At last he reached the wooden bars, head dizzy and flaring lights dancing before his eyes. His groping fingers felt along them, tugged at each. Then he was sure his mind was playing him tricks. One of the oaken strips was loose on the bottom!

Jerry waited a second and tried the strip again. It moved readily away from the bottom. His strength rapidly leaving him he dropped from the crates into an eighteen inch aisle between them and the end of the car. A vicious tug and the oaken strip was torn loose.

As he held it in his hands he heard the string of cars on the siding move. He stood there wondering what was taking place. The blazing guns had grown silent. Only an occasional raucous voiced command came from outside.

The bandits must be going to let the train proceed. They knew they ran no chances by this move. The nearest open telegraph office was Snowdon, twelve miles away. It would take the train thirty minutes to reach it. By that time they would have the trucks loaded and be roaring to freedom.

Jerry turned back to the task of freeing himself from his deadly prison. The zinc ice container did not extend to the roof on the other side of those oaken pieces. It extended to within about eighteen inches. If he could just loosen the oaken strip next to the one he had torn away, he could crawl up and squirm over. Then he would be in the ice bunker with two hatches overhead which might be shoved open.

He used the piece of wood already loosened as a bar and swung every ounce of his weight against it. There was a reluctant snap and the second broke about three feet from the top. Almost frenzied, Jerry tore it loose. There was a sixteen inch space through which he could force his body.

The refrigerator car clattered as the portion of the train which had been on the siding coupled onto the balance. Blasting whistles announced that the train was ready to proceed. They started roughly.

Jerry realized that if he did not hurry he could not get off the train, and he had urgent business around the cars left on the side track.

He hauled himself up so his body teetered on the sharp zinc edge of the ice bunker. He retained the piece of oak he had removed last. Below his eyes glowed one of the charcoal burners. He held his breath now. A good whiff of that deadly poison would knock him out for good.

Then he was down in the bunker sprawled so close to the heater that its warmth almost burned him. His nose was directly over a drainage pipe which extended down to pure, sweet air.

He lay there gulping the air, feeling his head clear and his listless muscles tense again. Then he took a final deep breath and straightened to his feet, feeling above him with the piece of oak he had retained. The oak thudded against one of the closed hatches. He gritted his teeth and heaved upward with every ounce of his strength. By a streak of luck the hatch had not been driven down tightly and fastened. It came out. Only a thin, board door separated him from freedom. This was probably sealed closed. If the hasp was also closed he would be unable to force it open.

He shoved the oak between the side of the hatch and the opening. It prodded against the wood door. Jerry shoved up on this, felt it raise. It was held only by a slender tin seal!

By this time the gas was beginning to get him again. He dropped flat and gulped the pure air once more. Already the train had whipped up speed and was lumbering toward Snowdon. Jerry scrambled to his feet. This time his efforts were rewarded. Pale, cold stars glittered down at him through a thirty inch square hole above his head.

He dragged the burner over, leaped to its hot top and pulled himself to the roof of the car. It took but a second to drive the hatch down, then close the other door. Still carrying the oaken piece he leaped to the side ladder, dropped down and only poised an instant before throwing himself into the darkness. He lit on his feet, but did not remain upright. The speed of the train rolled him over and over. Fortunately he was unhurt, and had not lost the piece of oak. His prayer now was that the gang were still working around the cars they had caused to be set out of the train.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Conclusion*

The train had carried him almost a half mile above the side track. Jerry picked the smooth shoulder between the rails and began running rapidly back. He had no plan of action. Sight of him would bring a hail of bullets about his ears and he knew it. The gang had already demonstrated their willingness to use their guns.

When he finally rounded the last curve above the side track he saw the glow of automobile headlights close to the siding. The gang were working as quietly as possible, but an occasional grunted oath came to his ears. He left the center of the track here and dropped down over the embankment where he would be out of sight in the denser shadows.

Now he was even with the car in which they worked. He crawled up so he could see over the tops of the rails. They had apparently finished unloading the lower car and were concentrating their forces on the upper one. In the light which filtered beneath the car and around the ends he saw that this one was refrigerator.

A large truck was backed up almost to the doors and merchandise was being rapidly loaded on it by panting men.

“Got everything covered with that sub-machine gun, ain’t yuh, Doc?” called Luke Beezley from the refrigerator.

“Sure have,” Doc answered from the hillside above.

Jerry could see shadowy outlines of more trucks which had already been loaded and moved away from the track. He began squirming toward the refrigerator car. He reached the side unnoticed and got to his feet. Then he carefully felt to make sure the doors were closed. The seal was unbroken on them.

Inside one of the men was grunting as he tugged at a heavy object. He halted his efforts and snarled: “How about this machine in here, want it?”

“We want everything in this car,” barked Luke who seemed to be directing operations.

“Then I’m gonna have to have help,” grunted the man.

Dee Sommer's voice interrupted as he called from the open doorways: "Come on you birds, give a lift here while we roll this chunk of machinery in th' truck."

Grunting truck drivers dropped from their seats and hurried to crawl into the car. Jerry's heart began to beat like a trip hammer. If every one of them save Doc entered the car and he could close the doors. . . .

He dropped to his hands and knees and started crawling under the car. The truck on the other side effectively concealed his movements. Now he was so close he could reach out and touch one of the heavy rear tires. Jerry had been afraid it was backed too close to the side of the car to enable him to close the doors, but it was almost four feet away. The embankment was steep here and the driver had been unable to back any closer.

Jerry cautiously reached up. One of his hands grasped the bottom of each door. Closing them was going to be his greatest risk. He would have to expose his body. But the unexpectedness of his move should freeze Doc long enough for him to drop back to the shelter of the truck. It was worth a trial.

Taking a deep breath he slowly moved the doors. When they were standing at right angles to the side of the car he took another deep breath.

Inside the men tugged and lifted on the heavy piece of machinery. They were rolling it. It thumped against the floor so hard the car rocked.

Now was the time! Jerry heaved violently. The double doors thudded together and closed. His quivering fingers jerked the lever down. The pins dropped home on the top and bottom.

A howl of anger came from inside the car. It was answered by a savage burst from the sub-machine gun. Lead thudded into the sides of the car above Jerry's head. He dropped flat behind the truck.

A roar of gunfire sounded inside of the car, but no bullet came through those thick, insulated walls. He heard Luke cursing luridly. Then Luke began calling for Doc.

Doc wasted several hundred rounds of ammunition in a useless fusilade before he tumbled to the fact that his bullets were doing no damage. The sub-machine gun grew silent.

Jerry heard Doc scrambling along the hillside. A few dislodged rocks rolled down. Doc cursed softly to himself. Jerry knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to get into a position where the truck would not protect his hidden enemy. Jerry grinned. This bid fair to develop into the old game of the man, the tree, and the squirrel. As the man walked around the tree waiting for

a shot at the squirrel, the squirrel kept the tree between them. That's what Jerry would do. Maybe he could keep Doc hunting him until help arrived from Snowdon.

One sight of him and he knew it would be over. Doc would riddle him with bullets.

Now began a game of death with Doc and his machine gun against Jerry Twyman and his oak club.

"I'll blow yuh full of holes if yuh don't open them doors!" blazed Doc in a gigantic bluff.

Jerry kept his lips closed. Doc couldn't know who his unseen enemy was, and he must not find out—now. Five minutes passed while that silent, deadly maneuvering went on. Then Doc fired another savage burst from his machine gun. The cinders at Jerry's feet were torn up as bullets ripped beneath the truck. Jerry moved so a wheel protected him.

Again that tense, waiting game. In a few minutes now Doc was going to find out that his unseen enemy was unarmed. Then he could advance with his six gun and end the encounter. Jerry had no hope of winning. If he could just delay them until help came from up the mountain. . . .

Doc showed himself for an instant, probably to tempt Jerry to risk a shot at him. He exposed himself again, this time a little longer. Jerry heard him cursing disgustedly when he ducked from sight the last time. Doc was tumbling to the fact that his foe was unarmed.

The commotion inside the car had intensified. Jerry could hear them beating against the doors, pounding on the two by fours which partitioned off the ice bunkers. Given time they would break out.

Doc had dropped his machine gun now. He advanced with a gleaming six shooter in each hand, keeping behind what scanty covering the hillside afforded. Doc was playing safe. He was not going to step into a trap. Jerry grasped the piece of oak tightly and waited with tensed muscles. He must not let Doc get a shot at him, and still he must keep Doc away from those doors.

Now Doc was less than fifty feet the other side of the truck. Jerry could see his gleaming eyes. Doc fired a single shot which clipped four inches over Jerry's head. Jerry suddenly grew erect. He leaped forward. His hand streaked into the driver's cab and snapped off the headlights. Jerry held his breath, every muscle tensed. He was sure Doc could not see him now. He raised his oaken club.

"I'll get yuh!" snarled Doc hoarsely.

As he rounded the corner of the truck Jerry stood his ground, club raised in readiness to bring it down. With a roar of defiance Doc leaped, his six gun blazed thunderously. Jerry felt bullets cut through his clothes, but none of them struck his body. With every ounce of his strength he brought the club whistling down. Doc saw his danger in time to jerk his head to one side, but not in time to avoid the blow. The club thudded against his shoulder. He roared with the pain and staggered to his knees dropping his gun.

Jerry leaped toward the gun. He was too slow. Doc pulled himself together and his clawing right hand closed around the butt. Jerry saw him raise the gun. He leaped toward a place of safety, a realization sweeping over him that he had lost the battle. Doc was the victor. He stood within reaching distance of the refrigerator doors. He had his gun. . . .

Jerry had jumped back in the dark. His foot struck something solid and he felt himself falling backward. He threw out his arms to save himself, but was too late. He went down. His back struck a solid, edged object and ten thousand dancing lights flickered before his eyes. His whole body went limp. He did not lose consciousness, but he was powerless to move a muscle of his body.

Doc ignored him. He turned, hand reaching for the lever which would lift the steel pins holding the doors closed. He groaned as he did so. His right arm was useless. He cursed with pain.

He lifted the metal handle and jerked upward. The pegs were driven into their holes solidly, and did not come free. Clenching his teeth he jerked on the bar again. Then he stepped back and with a full-lunged roar shouted:

“You blasted idiots inside there, stop shovin’ on these doors so I can open ’em!”

The men heard him because the tumult inside of the car died away.

Doc pulled down on the handle again so he could get every ounce of leverage possible.

From above came a clicking roar accompanied by the hissing of steam. Something was coming down the railroad, running at a crazy, reckless speed! The stabbing sliver of a headlight slashed over the scene, glinted on Doc’s white face, illuminated Jerry’s prone body. Shrieking flanges hissed against the rails. Grinding, dogged brakes bit into the wheels. A solitary locomotive which bristled with men had rounded the curve above.

Doc took one look at it and renewed his efforts to open the doors. A rattle of gunfire came from the locomotive. Doc clutched his left arm and spun half

around. Then he fell in a writhing heap.

Tom Bender, face white, lips drawn to a thin line of insane anger, leaped from the running board of the engine before she halted, and ran toward the refrigerator car. Senseless, crazy words tumbled from his lips. Jerry's paralysis was leaving him and he raised his head so he could watch the scene.

Tom's burning eyes fell on him. The next instant the fireman was stooped over him, helping him to get to his feet.

"What are you doin' here, Jerry?" shouted Tom. "If you're hurt I'll kill that bird layin' there with my bare hands!"

"I'm not hurt, Tom. And the whole gang are locked in that refrigerator car." Jerry laughed half hysterically.

Windy Trickle accompanied by three special agents were grouped around Jerry and Tom by this time. All of them were heavily armed. The leader of the special agents took charge.

"You, Tom," he rapped, "disarm that fellow on th' ground and keep him prisoner. We'll take care of these birds in the car." He faced the closed doors. "You fellows are at our mercy. I'll give you one of two alternatives," he shouted so his voice would carry to them. "Either drop your guns and come out one at a time with your hands in the air or we'll smoke you out with packing dope!"

A silence while those in the car conferred. Then: "We'll give up," came from inside.

One at a time the gang stepped through the narrow opening between the doors, hands held high over head. In all there were nine of them. As they came out they were quickly handcuffed by one of the special agents.

When they were all lined up and guarded by Windy Trickle one of the special agents went over to inspect the loaded trucks. He soon returned, smiling, eyes filled with admiration when he directed them toward Jerry.

"The most perfect take I've ever seen!" he exclaimed. "We've got every one of them. Not a single piece of merchandise is missing."

"But for that little rat—" grated Luke with a malevolent glare toward Jerry.

"Yes," agreed the special agent in charge. "But for Jerry—tell me," he asked turning to Jerry, "how did you do it?"

Jerry told what had happened to him since he received the bogus call that night. In the end every face surrounding him was filled with wonder.

“Tell me how you got here in the nick of time,” Jerry asked then.

“Well,” began Tom with a broad grin, “like happens in all these perfect crimes th’ gang overlooked a few bets. When that first Red Ball hot shot reached Tennessee Pass with no trouble th’ special agents knowed they’d been given a bum steer. So they piled on our engine an’ we dropped off th’ mountain. We saw th’ second Red Ball hot shot across th’ canyon about nine miles above here. When they seen us they decorated th’ whole train with red fuzees. We stopped an’ learned what had happened down here. When we reached th’ first cross-over we took it an’ used this east-bound main line. I reckon we made th’ fastest run ever made down th’ mountain. We was just seven minutes comin’ th’ last nine miles, an’ every minute of ’em expectin’ our engine to jump th’ track. Two of th’ special agents waited to ride th’ second Red Ball hot shot, but they was messed up some by th’ gang. They’re bein’ rushed to th’ hospital in Easton now.”

“I’ll leave two of you men to guard this stuff in the trucks until we can load it back in the box cars,” instructed the leader of the special agents. “We’ll take the gang down to Maroon where they will find a nice jail waiting for them, and a long term in the state penitentiary to end up with.”

The men were loaded in the cab of Windy’s engine where Jerry, Tom and the chief special agent stood guard over them until they arrived in Maroon where they were turned over to the sheriff.

John Mason arrived on the first passenger train, following the attempted robbery. He came straight to Jerry’s room where the lad was resting up a little before okehing for work. Tom Bender was with Jerry.

“Well, you fighting young Irishman!” greeted Mason with shining eyes as he grasped Jerry’s hand. “You fulfilled every hope I had in you!”

Jerry laughed. “I only did what anybody in my place would have done,” he said.

Mason waved that aside. “I’ve come over here to take you back to Denver with me. I need you in our general offices where I can commence training you for an official position on our lines.”

Jerry’s face fell. Tom looked unhappy all at once. “But I don’t want to work in the general offices,” said Jerry.



Mason regarded him closely. “Engine man at heart, huh?” he asked softly. Then: “All right, Jerry. If it’s engine service you insist on, how about staying here and firing for six more months? Then I’ll promote you to travelling fireman.”

“That will be exactly what I’d like to do!” said Jerry in a ringing tone.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Whispering Rails* by Gilbert A. Lathrop]