

Lynde Francis

The Wreckers



Francis Lynde

The Wreckers

«Public Domain»

Lynde F.

The Wreckers / F. Lynde — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	8
III	12
IV	17
V	22
VI	25
VII	27
VIII	30
IX	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

Lynde Francis

The Wreckers

I

At Sand Creek Siding

As a general proposition, I don't believe much in the things called "hunches." They are bad for the digestion, and as often as not are like those patent barometers that are always pointing to "Set Fair" when it is raining like Noah's flood. But there are exceptions to all rules, and we certainly uncovered the biggest one of the lot – the boss and I – the night we left Portland and the good old Pacific Coast.

It was this way. We had finished the construction work on the Oregon Midland; had quit, cleaned up the offices, drawn our last pay-checks, told everybody good-by, and were on our way to the train, when I had one of those queer little premonitory chills you hear so much about and knew just as well as could be that we were never going to pull through to Chicago without getting a jolt of some sort. The reason – if you'll call it a reason – was that, just before we came to the railroad station, the boss walked calmly under a ladder standing in front of a new building; and besides that, it was the thirteenth day of the month, a Friday, and raining like the very mischief.

Just to sort of toll us along, maybe, the fates didn't begin on us that night. They waited until the next day, and then proceeded to shove us in behind a freight-train wreck at Widner, Idaho, where we lost twelve hours. It looked as if that didn't amount to much, because we weren't due anywhere at any particular time. The boss was on his way home for a little visit with his folks in Illinois, and beyond that he was going to meet a bunch of Englishmen in Montreal, and maybe let them make him General Manager of one of the Canadian railroads.

So Mr. Norcross was in no special hurry, and neither was I. I wasn't under pay, but I expected to be when we reached Canada. I had been confidential clerk and shorthand man for the boss on the Midland construction, and he was taking me along partly because he knows a cracking good stenographer when he sees one, but mostly because I was dead anxious to go anywhere he was going.

But to come back to the Widner delay: if it hadn't been for that twelve-hour lay-out we would have caught the Saturday night train on the Pioneer Short Line, instead of the day train Sunday morning, and there would have been no meeting with Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann; no telegram from Mr. Chadwick, because it wouldn't have found us; no hold-up at Sand Creek Siding; in short, nothing would have happened that did happen. But I mustn't get ahead of my story.

It was on Sunday that the jolt began to get ready to land on us. Mr. Norcross had been a railroad man for so long that he had forgotten how to knock off on Sundays, and right soon after breakfast, with the help of a little Pullman berth table and me and my typewriter, he turned our section into a business office, saying that now we had a good quiet day, we'd clean up the million or so odds and ends of correspondence he'd been letting go while we were tussling for the Midland right-of-way through the Oregon mountains.

By this time, you will understand, we were rocketing along over the Pioneer Short Line, and were supposed to be due at Portal City at half-past seven that evening. From where he sat dictating to me the boss was facing forward and now and then an absent sort of look came into his eyes while he was talking off his letters, and it puzzled me because it wasn't like him. I may as well say here as anywhere that one of his strong points is to be always "at himself" under all sorts of conditions.

So, as I say, I was sort of puzzled; and one of the times after he had given me a full grist of letters and had gone off to smoke while I typed a few thousand lines from my notes to catch up, I made a discovery. There were two people in Section Five just ahead of us, a young woman and a girl

of maybe fifteen or so, and the Pullman was the old-fashioned kind, with low seat-backs. I put it up that in those absent-eyed intervals Mr. Norcross had been studying the back of the young woman's neck. I was measurably sure it wasn't the little girl's.

Along in the forenoon I made an excuse to go and get a drink of water out of the forward cooler, and on the way back I took a good square look at our neighbors in Number Five. At that I didn't wonder at the boss's temporary lapses any more whatever. The young woman was pretty enough to start a stopped clock – only "pretty" isn't just the word, either; there wasn't any word, when you come right down to it. And the little girl was simply a peach – a nice, downy, rosy peach; chunky, round-faced, sunny-haired, jolly; with a neat little turned-up nose and big sort of boyish laughing eyes that fairly dared the world.

I made a good half-dozen mistakes when I got in behind the old writing machine again and went on with the letters; but never mind about that. As I began to say, things rocked along until we had about worn the day out, and at the second call to dinner Mr. Norcross told me to strap up the machine and put the files away in the grips and we'd go eat. Though I was only his stenographer, and a kid at that, he was big enough and Western enough not to let the buck-private-to-officer gap make any difference, and always when we were knocking about together he made me sit at his table.

Sometimes, when it happened that way, he'd ditch the rank-and-file dignities and talk to me as if the thousand miles or so between his job and mine were wiped out. But this Sunday evening he was pretty quiet, breaking out once in the meat course to tell me that he'd just had a forwarded telegram from an old friend of his that would stop us off for a day or two in Portal City, the headquarters of the Pioneer Short Line. Farther along, pretty well into the ice-cream and black coffee, he came to life again to ask me if I had noticed the young lady and the girl in the Pullman section next to ours.

I told him I had, and then, because I had never known him to bother his head for two minutes in succession about any woman, he gave me a shock; said they were ticketed to Portal City – and to find that out he must have asked the train conductor – adding that when we reached Portal it would be the neighborly thing for me to do to help them off with their hand-bags and see that they got a cab if they wanted one.

"Sure I will," says I. "That is, if the lady's husband isn't there to meet them."

"What?" he snaps out. "You know her? She is married?"

"No, I don't exactly *know* her," I shuffled. "But she is married, all right."

"How can you tell if you don't know her?" he barked; just like that.

I had to make good, right quick, as everybody does who goes up against Mr. Graham Norcross. But it so happened that I was able to.

"Her suit case is standing in the aisle, and I saw the tag. It has her name, 'Mrs. Sheila Macrae,' on it."

The boss has a way of making two up-and-down wrinkles and a little curved horse-shoe line come between his eyes when he is going to reach for you.

"There are times, Jimmie, when you see altogether too much," he said, sort of gruff; and he ate straight through to the far side of his ice-cream pyramid before he began again.

"'Macrae,' you say: that is Scotch. And so is 'Sheila.' Most likely the names, both of them, are only hand-downs. She looks straight American to me."

"She is pretty enough to look anything," I threw in, just to see how he would take it.

"Right you are, Jimmie," he agreed. "I've been looking at the back of her neck all day. I don't know whether you've ever noticed it – you are only a boy and probably you haven't – but there are so many women who don't measure up to the promises they make when you see 'em from behind. You catch a glimpse of a pretty neck, and when you get around to the face you find out that the neck was only a bit of bluff."

If I had been eating anything in the world but ice-cream I believe it would have choked me. What he said led up to the admission that he had been making these face-and-neck comparisons for

goodness knows how long, and I couldn't surround that, all at once. You see, he was such a picture of a man's man in every sense of the word; a fighter and a hard-hitter, right from the jump. And for a man of that sort women are usually no more than fluffy little side-issues, as Eve said when they told her she was made out of Adam's rib.

That ended the dining-car part of it. The sure-enough, knock-out round was fought at the rear end of our Pullman, which happened to be the last car in the train. As we walked back after dinner Mr. Norcross gave me a cigar and said we'd go out to the observation platform to smoke, because the smoking-room was full up with apple-raisers, and sheep-feeders and cattlemen, all talking at once.

As we went down the aisle I noticed that Section Five was empty, and when we reached the door we found the young lady and the girl standing at the rear railing to watch the track unroll itself under the trucks and go sliding backwards into the starlight; or at least that was what they seemed to be doing. The young lady was wearing a coat with a storm collar, but the girl had a fur thing around her neck, and her stocky, chunky little arms were elbow deep in a big pillow muff to match, though the April night wasn't even half-way chilly.

The boss growled out something about waiting until the ladies should go in; and then, for pure safety's sake, he stepped out on the platform to close the side trap door which, with the railing gate on that side, had been left open by a careless rear flagman. Just then the big "Pacific type" that was pulling us let out a whistle screech that would have waked the dead, and the air-brakes went on with a jerk that showed how beautifully reckless the railroading was on the Pioneer Short Line.

Mr. Norcross was reaching for the catch on the floor trap and the jerk didn't throw him. But it snapped the young woman and the girl away from the railing so suddenly that the little one had to grab for hand-holds; and when she did that, of course the big muff went overboard.

At this, a bunch of things happened, all in an eye-wink. The train ground and jiggled to a stop; the girl squealed, "Oh, my muff!" and skipped down the steps to disappear in the general direction of the Pacific Coast; the young woman shrieked after her, "Maisie Ann! – come back here – you'll be left!" and then took her turn at disappearing by the same route; and, on top of it all, the boss jumped off and sprinted after both of them, leaving a string of large, man-sized comments on the foolishness of women as a sex trailing along behind him as he flew.

Right then it was my golden moment to play safe and sane. With three of them off and lost in the gathering night, somebody with at least a grain of sense ought to have stood by to pull the emergency cord if the train should start. But of course I had to take a chance and spill the gravy all over the tablecloth. The stop was at a blind siding in the edge of a mountain desert, and when I squinted up ahead and saw that the engine was taking water, it looked as if there were going to be plenty of time for a bit of a promenade under the stars. So I swung off and went to join the muff hunt.

Amongst them, they had found the pillow thing before I had a chance to horn in. They were coming up the track, and the boss had each of the two by an arm and was telling them that they'd be left to a dead moral certainty if they didn't run. They couldn't run because their skirts were too fashionably narrow, and there were still three or four car-lengths to go when the tank spout went up with a clang and a clatter of chains and the old "Pacific type" gave a couple of hisses and a snort.

"They're going!" gritted the boss, sort of between his teeth, and without another word he grabbed those two hobbled women folks up under his arms, just as if they'd been a couple of sacks of meal, and broke into a run.

It wasn't a morsel of use, you know. Mr. Norcross stands six feet two in his socks, and I've heard that he was the best all-around athlete in his college bunch. But old Hercules himself couldn't have run very far or very fast with the handicap the boss had taken on, and in less than half a minute the "Pacific type" had caught her stride and the red tail lights of the train were vanishing to pin points in the night. We were like the little tad that went out to the garden to eat worms. Nobody loved us, and we were beautifully and artistically left.

II

A Tank Party

When he saw that it was no manner of use, the boss quit on the handicap race and put his two armfuls down while he still had breath enough left to talk with.

"Well," he said, in his best rusty-hinge rasp, "you've done it! Why, in the name of common sense, couldn't you have let me go back after that muff thing?"

The young woman was panting as if she had been doing the running, and the girl was choking and making a noise that made me think that she was crying. If I had been as well acquainted with her as I got to be a little later on, I would have known that she was only trying to bottle up a laugh that was too beautifully big to be wasted upon just three people and a treeless desert.

It was the young woman who answered the boss.

"I – I didn't stop to think!" she fluttered, taking the blame as if she had been the one to head the procession. "Isn't there *any* way we can stop that train?"

The boss said there wasn't, and I know the only reason why he didn't say a lot of other things was because he was too much of a gentleman to say them in the presence of a couple of women.

"But what shall we do?" the young woman went on, gasping a little. "Isn't there any telegraph station, or – or anything?"

There wasn't. So far as we could see, the surroundings consisted of a short side-track, a spur running off into the hills, and the water tank. The siding switches had no lights, which argued that there wasn't even a pump-man at the tank – as there was not, the tank being filled automatically by a gravity pipe line running back to a natural reservoir in the mountains.

Before the boss had a chance to answer her question about the telegraph office he got his eye on me, and then I knew that he hadn't noticed me before.

"You here, too?" he ripped out, and I know it did him a lot of good to be able to unload on somebody in trousers. "Why in blue blazes didn't you stay on that train and keep it from running away from us?"

That's it: why didn't I? What made the dog stop before he caught the rabbit? I was trying to frame up some sort of an excuse that would sound just a few degrees less than plumb foolish, when the young woman took up for me. She'd had the clatter of my typewriter dinned into her pretty ears all day, and she knew who I was, even if it was dark.

"Don't take it out on the poor boy!" she said, kind of crisp, and yet sort of motherly. "If you feel obliged to bully some one, I'm the one who is to blame."

"Indeed, you're not!" chipped in the stocky little girl. "I was the one who jumped off first. And I don't care: I wasn't going to lose my perfectly good muff."

By this time the boss was beginning to get a little better grip on himself and he laughed.

"We've all earned the leather medal, I guess," he chuckled. "It's done now, and it can't be helped. We're stuck until another train comes along, and perhaps we ought to be thankful that we've got Jimmie Dodds along to chaperon us."

"But isn't there anything else we can do?" said the young woman. "Can't we walk somewhere to where there is a station or a town with people in it?"

I saw Mr. Norcross look down at her skirts and then at the girl's.

"You two couldn't walk very far or very fast in those things you are wearing," he grunted. "Besides, we are in one of the desert strips, and it is probably miles to a night wire station in either direction."

"And how long shall we have to wait for another train?" This time it was the little girl who wanted to know.

"I wish I could tell you, but I can't," said the boss. "I'm not familiar with the Short Line schedules." Then to the young woman: "Shall we go and sit under the water tank? That seems to be about the nearest approach to a waiting-room that the place affords."

We trailed off together up the track, two and two, the boss walking with the young woman. After we'd counted a few of the cross-ties, the girl said: "Is your name Jimmie Dodds?" And when I admitted it: "Mine is Maisie Ann. I'm Sheila's cousin on her mother's side. I think this is a great lark; don't you?"

"I can tell better after it's over," I said. "Maybe we'll have to stay here all night."

"I shouldn't mind," she came back airily. "I haven't been up all night since I was a little kiddie and our house burned down. You're just a boy, aren't you? You must excuse me; it's so dark that I can't see you very well."

I told her I had been shaving for three years and more, and she let out a little gurgling laugh, as though I had said something funny. By that time we had reached the big water tank, and the boss picked out one of the square footing timbers for a seat. It seemed as if he were finding it a good bit harder to get acquainted with his half of the combination than I was with mine, but after a little the young women thawed out a bit and made him talk – to help pass away the time, I took it – and the little girl and I sat and listened. When the young woman finally got him started, the boss told her all about himself, how he'd been railroading ever since he left college, and a lot of things that I'd never even dreamed of. It's curious how a pretty woman can make a man turn himself inside out that way, just for her amusement.

Maisie Ann and I sat on the end of the timber; not too near to be butt-ins, nor so far away that we couldn't hear all that was said. I still had the cigar the boss had given me, and I sure wanted to smoke mighty bad, only I thought it wouldn't look just right – me being the chaperon. Along in the middle of things, Mr. Norcross broke off short and begged the young woman's pardon for boring her with so much shop talk.

"Oh, you're not boring me at all; I like to hear it," she protested. And then: "You have been telling me the story of a man who has done things, Mr. Norcross. It has been my misfortune to have to associate chiefly with men who only play at doing things."

He switched off at that and asked her if she were warm enough, saying that if she were not, he and I would scrap up some sage-brush or something and make a fire. She replied that she didn't care for a fire, that the night wasn't at all cold – which it wasn't. Then she showed that she was human, clear down to the tips of her pretty fingers.

"You may smoke if you want to," she told the boss. "I sha'n't mind it in the least."

At that, my little girl turned on me and said, in exactly the same tone: "You may smoke if you want to, Mr. Dodds. I sha'n't mind it in the least." I heard a sort of smothered chuckle from the other end of the timber seat, and the boss lighted his cigar. Then there was more talk, in which it turned out that the young woman and her cousin were to have been met at Portal City by somebody she called "Cousin Basil," but there wouldn't be any scare, because she had written ahead to say that possibly they might stop over with some friends in one of the apple towns.

Then Mr. Norcross said *he* wouldn't miss anything by the drop-out but an appointment he had with an old friend, and he guessed that could wait. I listened, thinking maybe he would mention the name of the friend, and after a while he did. The forwarded Portal City telegram the boss had gotten just before we went to dinner in the dining-car was from "Uncle John" Chadwick, the Chicago wheat king, and that left me wondering what the mischief Mr. Chadwick was doing away out in the wild and woolly western country where they raise more apples than they do wheat, and more mining stock schemes than they do either.

There was another thing that I listened for, too, but it didn't come. That was some little side mention of the young woman's husband. So far as that under-the-tank talk went, there needn't have

been any "Mr. Macrae" at all, and I was puzzled. If she'd been wearing mourning – but she wasn't, so I told myself that she simply couldn't be a widow. Anyway, she was a lot too light-hearted for that.

We had been marooned for nearly an hour when I struck a match and looked at my watch. Mr. Norcross was still doing his best to kill time for the young woman, and he was just in the exciting part of another railroad story, telling about a right-of-way fight on the Midland, where we had to smuggle in a few cases of Winchesters and arm the track-layers to keep from being shut out of the only canyon there was by the P. & S. F., when the little girl grabbed my arm and said: "Listen!"

I did, and broke in promptly. "Excuse me," I called to the other two, "but I think there's a train coming."

The boss cut his story short and we all listened. It seemed that I was wrong. The noise we heard was more like an auto running with the cut-out open than a train rumbling.

"What do you make it, Jimmie?" came from the boss's end of the timber.

"Motor car. It's out that way," I said, pointing in the darkness toward the east.

My guess was right. In less than a minute we saw the lights of the car, which was turning in a wide circle to come up beside the main line track so it would head back to the east. It stopped a little way below the water tank and about a hundred yards north of the track, or maybe less; anyway, we could see it quite well even when the lamps were switched off and four men came tumbling out of it. If I had been alone on the job I should probably have called to the men as they came tramping over to the side-track. But Mr. Norcross had a different think coming.

"Out of sight – quick, Jimmie!" he whispered, and in another second he had whipped the young woman over the big footing timber to a standing place under the tank among the braces, and I had done the same for the girl.

What followed was as mysterious as a chapter out of an Anna Katherine Green detective story. After doing something to the switch of the unused spur track, the four men separated. One of them went back to the auto, and the other three walked down the main track to the lower switch of the short siding which was on the same side of the main line as the spur. Here the fourth man rejoined them, and the girl at my elbow told us what he had gone back to the car for.

"He has lighted a red lantern," she whispered. "I saw it when he took it out of the auto."

I guess it was pretty plain to all of us by this time that there was something decidedly crooked on the cards, but if we had known what it was, we couldn't very well have done anything to prevent it. There were only two of us men to their four; and, besides, there wasn't any time. The lantern-carrying man had barely reached the lower switch when we heard the whistle of a locomotive. There was a train coming from the west, and a few seconds later an electric headlight showed up on the long tangent beyond the siding.

It was a bandit hold-up, all right. We saw the four men at the switch stop the train, which seemed to be a special, since it had only the engine and one passenger car. One of the men stood on the track waving the red lantern; we could see him plainly in the glare of the headlight. There wasn't much of a scrap. There were two or three pistol shots, and then, as near as we could make out, the hold-up men, or some of them, climbed into the engine.

What they did next was as blind as a Chinese puzzle. Before you could count ten they had made a flying switch with the single car, kicking it in on the siding. Before the car had come fully to a stop, the engine was switched in behind it, coupled on, and the reversed train, with the engine pushing the car, rattled away on the old spur that led off into the hills; clattered away and was lost to sight and hearing in less than a minute.

It was not until after the train was switched and gone that we discovered that two of the bandits had been left behind. These two reset the switches for the main track, leaving everything as they had found it, and then crossed over to the auto. Pretty soon we saw match flares, and two little red dots that appeared told us that they were smoking.

"What are they doing, Jimmie?" asked the boss, under his breath.

"They are waiting for the other two to come back," I ventured, taking a chance shot at it. Then I asked him if he knew where the old spur track led to. He said he didn't; that there used to be some bauxite mines back in the hills, somewhere in this vicinity, but he understood they had been worked out and abandoned.

I was just thinking that all this mystery and kidnapping and gun play must be sort of hard on the young woman and the girl, but though my half of the allotment was shivering a little and snuggling up just a grain closer to me, she proved that she hadn't lost her nerve.

"Did you see the name on that car when the engine went past to get in behind it?" she asked, turning the whispered question loose for anybody to answer.

"No," said the boss; and I hadn't, either.

"I did," she asserted, showing that her eyes, or her wits, were quicker than ours. "I had just one little glimpse of it. The name is 'A-l-e-x-a,'" spelling it out.

Mr. Norcross started as if he had been shot.

"The *Alexa*? That is Mr. Chadwick's private car – they've kidnapped him!" Then he whirled short on me. "Jimmie, are you man enough to go with me and try a tackle on those fellows over there in that auto?"

I said I was; but I didn't add what I thought – that it would probably be a case of double suicide for us two to go up against a pair of armed thugs with our bare hands. The boss would have done it in the hollow half of a minute; he's built just that way. But now the young woman put in her word.

"You mustn't think of doing such a thing!" she protested; and she was still telling him all the different reasons why he mustn't, when we heard the creak and grind of the stolen engine coming back down the old spur.

After that there was nothing to do but to wait and see what was going to happen next. What did happen was as blind as all the rest. The engine was stopped somewhere in the gulch back of us and out of sight from our hiding-place, and pretty soon the two men who had gone with her came hurrying across out of the hill shadows, making straight for the auto. A minute or two later they had climbed into the machine, the motor had sputtered, and the car was gone.

III

Mr. Chadwick's Special

Of course, as soon as the skip-out of the four hold-up men gave us a free hand we knew it was up to us to get busy and do something. It was a safe bet that the *Alexa* was carrying her owner, and in that case Mr. John Chadwick and his train crew were somewhere back in the hills, without an engine, and with a good prospect of staying "put" until somebody should go and hunt them up.

Mr. Norcross had our part in the play figured out before the retreating auto had covered its first mile.

"We've got to find out what they've done with Mr. Chadwick," he broke out. And then: "It can't be very far to where they have left the engine, and if they haven't crippled it – " He stopped short and slung a question at the two women: "Will you two stay here with Jimmie while I go and see what I can find in that gulch?"

They both paid me the compliment of saying that they'd stay with me, but the young woman suggested that it might be just as well if we should all go up the gulch together. So we piked out in the dark, the boss helping Mrs. Sheila to hobo along over the cross-ties of the spur, and the little girl stumbling on behind with me. She had got over her scare, if she had any, and when I asked her if she didn't want an arm to grab at, she laughed and said, No, and that it was grand; that she wouldn't miss a single stumble for worlds.

"In all my life I've never had anything half as exciting as this happen to me," was the way she put it, and she sure acted as if she meant to make the most of it.

We had followed the spur track up the gulch for maybe a short quarter of a mile when we came to the engine. There was nobody on it, and the brigands had been good-natured enough to leave the fire-door open so that the steam would run down gently and let the boiler cool off by degrees. Luckily for us, the boss was an expert on engines, just as he is on everything else belonging to a railroad, and he struck matches and looked our find over carefully before he tried to move it. As we had feared it might be, the big machine was crippled. There was a key gone out of one of the connecting-rod crank-pin straps; one miserable little piece of steel, maybe eight inches long and tapering one way, and half an inch or so thick the other; but that was a-plenty. We couldn't make a move without it.

I thought we were done for, but Mr. Norcross chased me up into the cab for a lantern. With the light we began to hunt around in the short grass, all four of us down on our hands and knees doing the needle-in-the-haystack stunt. I had been sensible enough to show the little girl the other connecting-rod key, so she knew exactly what to look for, and it did me a heap of good when it turned out that she was the one who found the lost bit of steel.

"I've got it – I've got it!" she cried; and sure enough she had. The hold-up people had merely taken it out and thrown it aside on the extremely probable chance that nobody would be foolish enough to look for it so near at hand, or, looking, would be able to find it in the dark.

It didn't take more than a minute or two, with a wrench from the engineer's box, to put the key back in place. Then, with one to boost and the other to pull, we got our two passengers up into the high cab, and Mr. Norcross made them as comfortable as he could on the fireman's box, showing them how to brace and hang on when the machine should begin to bounce over the rough track of the old spur.

While he was doing this, I threw a few shovelfuls of coal into the firebox and put the blower on; and when we were all set, the boss opened the throttle and we went carefully nosing ahead over the old track, feeling our way up the gulch and keeping a sharp lookout for the *Alexa* as we ground and squealed around the curves.

It must have been four or five miles back in the hills to the place where we found the private car, and a little way short of it we picked up Mr. Chadwick's conductor, walking the ties to try to get in touch with the civilized world once more. He looked a trifle suspicious when he found the engine in the hands of still another bunch of strangers, and two of them women; but as soon as he heard Mr. Norcross's name he quit being offish and got suddenly respectful. Young as he was for a top-rounder, the boss had a "rep," and I guess there were not very many railroad men west of the Rockies who didn't know him, or know of him.

The conductor told us where we'd find the car, and we found it just as he said we would: pushed in on an old mine-loading track at the end of the spur. The other members of the crew were off and waiting for us; and standing out on the back platform, in the full glare of the headlight as we nosed up for a coupling, there was a big, gray-haired man, bareheaded and dressed in rough-looking old clothes like a mining prospector.

The big man was "Uncle John" Chadwick, and if he was properly astonished at seeing us turn up with his lost engine, he didn't let it interfere with our welcome when we took our passengers around to the car and lifted them one at a time over the railing and climbed up after them. Mr. Chadwick seemed to know Mrs. Sheila; at any rate, he shook hands with her and called her by name. Then he grabbed for the boss and fairly shouted at him: "Well, well, Graham! – of all the lucky things this side of Mesopotamia! How the dev – how in thunder did you manage to turn up here?" And all that, you know.

The explanations, such as they were, came later, after the young lady, confessing herself a bit excited and fussed up, had taken her cousin under her arm and they had both gone to lie down in one of the staterooms. With the women out of the way, the boss and Mr. Chadwick sat together in the open compartment while the train crew was trundling us back to the main line. Mr. Norcross had put me in right by telling the wheat king who I was, so they didn't pay any attention to me.

As a matter of course, the talk jumped first to the mysterious hold-up and kidnapping and the reason why. All either of them could say didn't serve to throw any light on the mystery, not a single ray. There had been no violence – the pistol shots had been merely meant to scare the trainmen – and there had been no attempt at robbery; for that matter, Mr. Chadwick hadn't even seen the kidnappers, and hadn't known what was going on until after it was all over.

Mr. Norcross told what we had seen, and how we had come to be where we were able to see it, but that didn't help out much, either. From any point of view it seemed perfectly foolish, and the boss made mention of that. If we hadn't happened to be there to bring the engine back, the worst that could have befallen Mr. Chadwick and the crew of the special would have been a few hours' bother and delay. In the course of time the conductor would have walked out and got to a wire station somewhere, though it might have taken him all night, and then some, to get another engine.

Naturally, Mr. Chadwick was red-hot about it, on general principles. I guess he wasn't used to being kidnapped. But, after all, the thing that bothered him most was the fact that he couldn't account for it.

"I can't help thinking that it is connected with what is due to happen to-morrow morning, Graham," he said, at the end of things. "There are some certain scoundrels in Portal City at the present moment who wouldn't stop at anything to gain their ends, and I am wondering now if Dawes wasn't mixed up in it."

The boss laughed and said:

"You'll have to begin at the beginning with me: I'm too new in this region to know even the names. Who is Dawes?"

"Dawes is a mining man in Portal City, and before I'd been an hour in town yesterday he hunted me up and wanted me to go over to Strathcona to look at some gold prospects he's trying to finance. I said 'No' at first, because I was expecting you, and thought you'd reach Portal City this morning. When you didn't show up, I knew I had twelve hours more on my hands, and as Dawes was still

hanging on, I had our trainmaster give me a special over to Strathcona, on a promise that I'd be brought back early this evening, ahead of the 'Flyer' from the west – the train you were on."

Mr. Norcross nodded. "And the promise wasn't kept."

"No promise is ever kept on the Pioneer Short Line," growled the big magnate. And then, with a beautiful disregard for the mixed figures of speech: "Once in a blue moon the chapter of accidents hits the bull's-eye whack in the middle, Graham. When Hardshaw wired me from Portland, I knew you couldn't reach Portal City before this morning, at the very earliest. That was going to cut my time pretty short, with the big gun due to be fired to-morrow morning, and you cut it still shorter by losing twelve hours somewhere along the road – they told me in the despatcher's office that your train was behind a wreck somewhere up in Oregon. But it has turned out all right, in spite of everything. You're here, and we've got the night before us."

Again Mr. Norcross said something about beginning at the beginning. "Just remember that I am entirely in the dark," he went on. "I didn't see Hardshaw at all before leaving Portland; he merely forwarded your wire, asking me to stop over in Portal City, to me on the train – and it was handed to me just before dinner this evening. Of course, that was enough – from anybody who has been as good a friend to me as you have."

"We'll see presently just how far that friendship rope is going to reach," returned the wheat king, and though my back was turned to them, I could easily imagine the quizzical twinkle of the shrewd old eyes that went with it. Then I suppose he nodded toward me, for the boss said:

"Oh, Jimmie's all right; he knew what I had for dinner this evening, and he'll know what I'm going to have for breakfast to-morrow morning."

With the bridle off, the big man went ahead abruptly, cutting out all the frills.

"You finished your building contract on the Oregon Midland, Graham, and after the road was opened for business you refused an offer of the general managership. Would you mind telling me why you did that?"

"Not in the least. I'm rather burnt out on trying to operate American railroads; at any rate, when it comes to trying to operate one of them for a legitimate profit. There is nothing in it. An operating head is now nothing more than a score-keeper for a national gambling game. The boss gamblers around the railroad post in the Stock Exchange tell him what he has to do and where he has to get off. Stock gambling, under whatever name it masquerades – boosting values, buying and selling margins, reorganizations, with their huge rake-offs for the underwriters – is the incubus which is crushing the life out of the nation's industries, especially in the railroad field. It makes me wish I'd never seen a railroad track."

"Yet it is your trade, isn't it?" asked the wheat king.

"It is; but luckily I can build railroads as well as operate them; and there are other countries besides the United States of America. I'm on my way home to Illinois for a little visit with my mother and sisters; and after that I think I shall close with an offer I've had from one of the Canadian companies."

"Good boy!" chuckled the Chicago magnate. "In due time we might hope to be reading your name in the newspapers – 'Sir Graham Norcross, D.S.O.,' or something of that sort." Then, with a sharp return to the sort of gritting seriousness: "You've been riding over the Pioneer Short Line since early this morning, Graham: what do you think of it?"

I couldn't see the boss's smile, but I could figure it pretty well when he said: "There may be worse managed, worse neglected pieces of railroad track in some of the great transcontinental lines, but if there are I haven't happened to notice them. I suppose it is capitalized to death, like many of the others."

"Fictitious values doubtless have something to do with it at the present stage of the game," Mr. Chadwick admitted. "The Pioneer Short Line is 'under suspicion' on the books of the commissions,

both State and Interstate, as a heavily 'watered' corporation – which it is. Do you know the history of the road?"

When I got up to get a match, Mr. Norcross was shaking his head and saying: "Not categorically; no."

"Then I'll brief it for you," said the big man in the stuffed wicker chair. "It has always been a good earning property, being largely, even yet, without much local competition. But from the day it was completed its securities have figured in the market only for their speculative values. The property itself has never been considered, save as a means to an end; the end being to enable one bunch of the Wall Street gamblers you speak of to make a 'killing' and unload on another bunch."

"The old story," said Mr. Norcross.

"We are bumping over the net result, right now," Mr. Chadwick went on. "The property is bled white; there is no money for betterments; we are tied hand and foot by all sorts of legal restrictions and regulations; and, worse than all, the people we are supposed to serve hate us until you can smell it and taste it in every town and hamlet on the right-of-way."

"So I have heard," put in the boss, calmly.

"That brings us down to the nub of the matter. Pioneer Short Line is practically in the last ditch. The stock has slumped to forty and worse; Shaffer, the general manager and the only able man we have had for years, has resigned in disgust; and if something isn't done to-morrow morning in Portal City, I know of at least one minority stockholder who is going to throw the whole mess into the courts and try for a receivership."

Mr. Norcross looked up quickly.

"Are you the minority stockholder, Uncle John?" he asked, letting himself use the name by which Mr. Chadwick was best known in the wheat pit.

"I am – more's the pity. I had a little lapse of sanity one fine morning a few years ago and bought in for an investment. I've done everything I could think of, Graham, to persuade Breck Dunton and his Wall Street accomplices to spend just one dollar in ten of their reorganization and recapitalization stealings on the road itself, but it's no good. All they want is to get one more rise out of the securities, so they can unload."

"Is there to be a stockholders' meeting in Portal City to-morrow morning?"

"No; a directors' meeting. Dunton has been making an inspection trip over the system with a dozen or so of his New York cronies. It's a junketing excursion, pure and simple, but while they're here they'll get together and go through the form of picking out a new general manager. I'm on the board and they had to send me notice, though it's an even bet they hoped I'd stay away. In fact, I think they scheduled the meeting out here on the chance that the distance from Chicago would keep me from attending it."

All this talk had taken up a good bit of time, and just as Mr. Chadwick said that about the "even bet," our engineer was whistling for Portal City. From where I was sitting I could see the electric lights dotting the wide valley between the two gateway buttes from which the city gets its name. Mr. Norcross was looking at the lights, too, when he said:

"Are you really going to spring the receivership on the Dunton people to-morrow?"

"I'm going to give Dunton his chance. He can appoint the man I want appointed as general manager, with full power to act, and ratify a little plan I've got up my sleeve for providing a bit of working capital for the road, or – he can turn me down."

"And if he does turn you down?"

"Then, by George, I'll see if I can't persuade the courts to put the property into bankruptcy and install my man as receiver!"

"I don't envy your man his job, either way around; not the least little morsel in the world," said the boss, quietly. And then: "Who is he, Uncle John?"

The wheat king gave a great laugh.

"Don't tell me you haven't guessed it," he chuckled. "You're the man, Graham."

But now Mr. Norcross had something to say for himself, sitting up straight and shaking his head sort of sorrowfully at the big man in the padded chair.

"No you don't, my good old friend; not in a thousand years! You'd lose out in the end, and I'd lose out; and besides, I'm not quite ready to commit suicide." And then to me: "Jimmie, suppose you go and tap on the door and tell the ladies we're pulling into Portal City."

IV

The Tipping of the Scale

After all, it wasn't so very late in the night when our special pulled up to the Portal City station platform and I turned myself into a messenger-boy escort for the lady and the little girl whose muff had been responsible for so many different flip-flaps in the short space of a few hours.

I hadn't hung around while the boss was telling Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann good-by. Our conductor had wired ahead from the first telegraph station we came to and had asked to have our dunnage – the two women's, the boss's, and mine – taken out of the "Flyer" Pullman and sent back to Portal City on a local, and I was in the baggage-room, digging up the put-off stuff, at the good-by minute. But I guess they didn't quarrel any – the boss and Mrs. Sheila. She was laughing a little to herself as I helped her down from the car, and when I asked her where she wanted to go, she said I might ask one of the porters to carry the traps, and we'd walk to the hotel, which was only a few blocks up the main street.

She took Maisie Ann on the other side of her and let two of the blocks go by without saying anything more, and then she gave that quiet little laugh again and said, "Your Mr. Norcross amuses me, Jimmie. He says I have no business to travel without a guardian. What do you think about it?"

I told her I hadn't any thinks coming, and she seemed to take that for a joke and laughed some more. Then she asked me if I'd ever been in New York, and I felt sort of small when I had to tell her that I had never been east of Omaha in all my life. With that, she told me not to worry; that if I stayed with Mr. Norcross I'd probably get to go anywhere I wanted to.

Something in the way she said it made it sound like a little slam on the boss, and of course I wasn't going to stand for that.

"There is one thing about it: the boss will make good wherever he goes," I hit back. "You can bet on that."

"I like your loyalty," she flashed out. "It is a fine thing in a day that is much too careless of such qualities. And I agree with you that your Mr. Norcross is likely to succeed; more than likely, if he will only learn to combine a little gentle cleverness with the heavy hand."

There was no doubt about it this time; she *was* slamming the boss, and I meant to get at the bottom of it, right there and then.

"I don't think you have any cause to blacklist Mr. Norcross," I said. "Hasn't he been right good and brotherly to both of you this evening?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that," she said real earnestly. "But in the stateroom in Mr. Chadwick's car: the ventilator was open, you know, until Maisie Ann got up and shut it, and we couldn't very well help hearing what was said about the kidnapping. Neither Mr. Chadwick nor Mr. Norcross seemed to be able to account for it."

"Can you account for it?" I asked, bluntly enough, I guess.

At this she smiled and said, "It would be rather presumptuous for me to try where Mr. Norcross and Mr. Chadwick failed, wouldn't it? But maybe I can give you just a wee little hint. If you are not well enough acquainted with Mr. Chadwick to ask him yourself, you might tell Mr. Norcross to ask him if there isn't some strong reason why somebody, or perhaps a number of somebodies, wanted to keep him out of Portal City over Sunday night and possibly a part of the Monday."

We were coming to the big electric sign that was winking out the letters to spell "Hotel Bullard," and I was bound to have it out with her before my chance was gone.

"See here," I put in; "you saw something more than I did, and more than Mr. Norcross did. What was it?"

This time she took the motherly tone with me again and told me I must learn not to be rude and masterful, like the boss. Then she gave me what I was reaching for.

"You saw the two men who went over to the auto and smoked while they were waiting for the other two to come back?"

I told her that I hadn't seen them very well; couldn't, with nothing but the starlight to help out.

"Neither did I," she admitted. "But if I am not mistaken, I have seen them many times before, and they are very well known here in Portal City. One of them, the smaller one with the derby hat and the short overcoat, was either Mr. Rufus Hatch or his double; and the other, the heavy-set one, might have been Mr. Gustave Henckel, Mr. Hatch's partner in the Red Tower Company."

This didn't help out much, but you can bet that I made a note of the two names. We were just going into the hotel, so I didn't have a chance to ask any more questions; and after I had paid the porter for lugging the grips, Mrs. Sheila had made whatever arrangement she wanted to with the clerk, and she and Maisie Ann were ready to take the elevator.

"You are going back to Mr. Chadwick's car?" she asked, when she was telling me good-by and thanking me for coming up to the hotel with them.

I told her I was, and then she came around to the kidnapping business again of her own accord.

"You may give Mr. Norcross the hint I gave you, if you wish," she said; "only you must be a good boy, Jimmie, and not drag me into it. I couldn't be positively certain, you know, that the two men were really Mr. Hatch and Mr. Henckel. But if there is any reason why those two wouldn't want Mr. Chadwick to reach the city at the time he was counting on – "

"I see," I nodded; "it just puts the weight of the inference over on that side. I'll tell the boss, when I get a good chance, and you can bet your last dollar he won't tangle you up in it – he isn't put together that way."

"Well, then, good-night," she smiled, giving me her hand. And then: "Mr. Norcross says you'll be going on East to-morrow, and in that case it may be a long time before we meet again. After a while, after he has forgotten all about it, you may tell him from me – " She stopped and gave me that funny little laugh again that made her look so pretty, and said: "No, I guess you needn't, either." And with that she sort of edged the little girl into the elevator before we could get a chance to shake hands, and I heard her tell the boy to take them up to the mezzanine landing.

Since I didn't have any reason to suppose that the boss was needing me, I took my own time about going back to hunt for Mr. Chadwick's car in the railroad yards, loafing for a while in the Bullard lobby to rubber and look on at the people coming and going. You can tell pretty well how a town stacks up for business if you hit it between ten and eleven o'clock of a Sunday night and hang around its best hotel. If the town is dead, there won't be anybody stirring around the hotel at that hour. But Portal City seemed to be good and alive. There were lots of people knocking about on the sidewalks and drifting in and out of the lobby.

By and by, I went down to the station and began to hunt for the *Alexa*. The yard crew had side-tracked it on a spur down by the freight-house, and when I had stumbled over to it the negro porter remembered me well enough to let me in.

The boss and Mr. Chadwick were facing each other across the table, which was all littered up with papers and maps and reports, and they hardly noticed me when I blew in and sat down a little to one side. I had known well enough, when Mr. Norcross had turned the new offer down, that Mr. Chadwick wasn't going to let it go at that. It seemed that he hadn't; he had got the boss sufficiently interested to go over the papers with him, anyhow.

But just after I broke in, Mr. Norcross jumped up and began to pace back and forth before the table, with his hands in his pockets.

"No, I can't see it, Uncle John," he said, still sort of stubborn and determined. "You are trying to make me believe that I ought to take the biggest job that has ever been set before the expert in any field: to demonstrate, on this rotten corpse of a railroad, the solution of a problem that has

the entire country guessing at the present time; namely, the winning of success, and public – and industrial – approval for a carrier corporation which had continuously and persistently broken every commandment in all the decalogues – of business; of fair-dealing with its employees; of common honesty with everybody."

Mr. Chadwick nodded. "That is about the size of it," he said.

"I wouldn't say that it can't be done," the boss went on. "Perhaps it is possible, for the right man. But I'm not the right man. You need somebody who can combine the qualities of a pretty brutal slugger with those of a fine-haired, all-things-to-all-men, diplomatic peacemaker. I can do the slugging; I've proved it a time or two in the past. But I'm no good at the other end of the game. When it comes to handling the fellow with a 'pull,' I've either got to smash him or quit."

At that Mr. Chadwick nodded again and said: "That is one of the reasons why I have reached out and picked you for the job. There will be a good bit of the slugging needed, at first, and I guess you can acquire the other things as you go along, can't you?"

"Not at this late day, I'm afraid. People who know me best call me a scrapper, and I've been living up to my reputation. Yesterday, when we were held up behind the freight wreck at Widner, I got off to see what we were in for. The conductor of our train had spotted me from seeing my pass, and I happened to hear him docketing me for the wrecking boss. He said I was known on the Midland as 'Hell-and-repeat' Norcross; that it was a habit with me to have a man for breakfast every morning."

"I can add a little something to that," Mr. Chadwick put in, quizzically. "Lepaige, your Oregon Midland president, says you need humanizing, and wonders why you haven't married some good woman who would knock the rough corners off. Why haven't you, Graham?"

The boss gave a short laugh. "Too busy," he said. "Past that, we might assume that the good woman hasn't presented herself. Let it go. The facts still stand. I am too heavy-handed for this job of yours. I should probably mix up with some of these grafters you've been telling me about and get a knife in my back. That would be all in the day's work, of course, but it would leave you right where you are now. And as for this other thing – the industrial side of it: that's a large order; a whaling big order. I'm not even prepared to say, off-hand, that it's the right thing to do."

"Right or wrong, it's a thing that is coming, Graham," was the sober reply. "If we don't meet it half-way – well, the time will come when we of the hiring-and-firing side won't be given any option in the matter. You may call it Utopian if you please, and add that I'm growing old and losing my grip. But that doesn't obliterate the fact that the days of the present master-and-man relations in the industries are numbered."

The boss shook his head. "As I say, I can't go that far with you, off-hand; and if I could, I should still doubt that I am the man to head your procession."

I thought that settled it, but that was because I didn't know Mr. Chadwick very well. The big wheat king just smiled up at the boss, sort of fatherly, and said:

"We'll let it rest until morning and give you a chance to sleep on it. You have spoken only of the difficulties and the responsibilities, Graham; but there is another side to it. In a way, it's an opportunity, carrying with it the promise of the biggest kind of a reward."

"I don't see it," said the boss, briefly.

"Don't you? I do. I have an idea rambling around in my head that it is about time some bright young fellow was demonstrating that problem you speak of – showing the people of the United States that a railroad needn't be regarded as an outlaw among the industries; needn't have the enmity of everybody it serves; needn't be the prey of a lot of disloyal and dissatisfied employees who are interested only in the figure of the pay-day check; needn't be shot at as a wolf with a bounty on its scalp. Let it rest at that for the present. Get your hat and we'll walk up-town to the hotel. I want to have a word with Dunton to-night, if I can shake him loose from his junketing bunch long enough to listen to it. Beyond that, I want to get hold of the sheriff and put him on the track of those hold-ups."

Here was a chance for me to butt in with the hint Mrs. Sheila had given me, but I didn't see how I was going to do it without giving her away. So I said the little end of nothing, just as hard as I could; and when we got out of the car, Mr. Norcross told me to go by the station and have our luggage sent to the hotel, and that killed whatever chance I might have had farther along.

It was some time after eleven o'clock when I got around to the hotel with the traps. The stir in the lobby had quieted down to make it seem a little more like Sunday night, but an automobile party had just come in, and some of the men were jawing at the clerk because the house wasn't serving a midnight theater supper in the café on the Sunday.

Mr. Chadwick had disappeared, but I saw the boss at the counter waiting for his chance at the clerk. The quarrelsome people melted away at last, all but one – a young swell who would have been handsome if he hadn't had the eyes of a maniac and a color that was sort of corpse-like with the pallor of a booze-fighter. He had his hat on the back of his head, and he was ripping it off at the clerk like a drunken hobo.

His ravings were so cluttered up with cuss-words that I couldn't get any more than the drift of them, but it seemed that he had caught a glimpse of somebody he knew – a woman, I took it, because he said "she" – looking down from the rail of the mezzanine, and he wanted to go up to her. And it appeared that the clerk had told the elevator man not to take him up in his present condition.

The boss was growing sort of impatient; I could tell it by the way the little side muscles on his jaw were working. When he got the ear of the clerk for a second or so between cusses, he asked what was the matter with the lunatic. I caught only broken bits of the clerk's half-whisper: "Young Collingwood ... President Dunton's nephew ... saw lady ... mezzanine ... wants to go up to her."

The boss scowled at the young fellow, who was now handing himself around the corner of the counter to get at the clerk again, and said: "Why don't you ring for an officer and have him run in?"

The night clerk was evidently scared of his job. "I wouldn't dare to do that," he chittered. "He's one of the New York crowd – the railroad people – President Dunton's nephew – guest of the house."

The young fellow had pulled himself around to our side of the counter by this time and was hooking his arm to make a pass at Mr. Norcross, trimming things up as he came with a lot more language. The boss said, right short and sharp, to the clerk, "Get his room key and give it to a boy who can show me the way," and the next thing we knew he had bashed that lunatic square in the face and was cuffing him along to the nearest elevator.

I guess it sort of surprised the clerk, and everybody else who happened to see it – but not me. It was just like the boss. He came back in a few minutes, looking as cool as a cucumber.

"What did you do with him?" asked the clerk, kind of awed and half scared.

"Got a couple of the corridor sweepers to put him in a bath and turn the cold water on him. That'll take the whiskey out of him. Now, if you have a minute to spare, I'd like to get my assignment."

We hadn't more than got our rooms marked off for us when I saw Mr. Chadwick coming across from the farther of the three elevators. He was smiling sort of grim, as if he'd made a killing of some sort with Mr. Dunton, and instead of heading back for his car he took the boss over to a corner of the lobby and sat down to smoke with him.

I circled around for a while, and after a bit Mr. Norcross held up a finger at me to bring him a match. They didn't seem to be talking anything private, so I sat down just beyond them, so sleepy that I could hardly see straight. Mr. Chadwick was telling about his early experiences in Portal City, how he blew in first on top of the Strathcona gold boom, and how he had known mighty near everybody in the region in those days.

While he was talking, a taxi drove up and one of the old residents came in from the street and crossed to the elevators; a mighty handsome, stately old gentleman, with fierce white mustaches and a goatee, and "Southern Colonel" written all over him.

"There's one of them now; Major Basil Kendrick – Kentucky born and raised, as you might guess," Mr. Chadwick was saying. "Old-school Southern 'quality,' and as fine as they make 'em. He

is a lawyer, but not in active practice: owns a mine or two in Strathcona Gulch, and is neither too rich nor too poor."

I grabbed at the name, "Basil," right away: it isn't such a very common name, and Mrs. Sheila had said something – under the water tank, you recollect – about a "Cousin Basil" who was to have met her at the train. I was putting two or three little private guesses of my own together, when one of the elevators came down and here came our two, the young lady and the chunky little girl, with the major chuckling and smiling and giving an arm to each. They had apparently stopped at the Bullard only to wait until he could come after them and take them home. Mrs. Sheila was looking just as pretty as ever, only now there wasn't a bit of color in her face, and her eyes seemed a good deal brighter, some way.

"Yes, indeed; the major is all right; as you'd find out for yourself if you'd make up your mind to stay in Portal City and get acquainted with him," Mr. Chadwick was going on; and by that time the major and the two pretty ones had come on to where the boss and Mr. Chadwick could see them.

I saw the boss sit up in his chair and stare at them. Then he said: "That's Mrs. Macrae with him now. Is she a member of his family?"

"A second cousin, or something of that sort," said Mr. Chadwick. "I met her once at the major's house out in the northern suburb last summer, and that's how I came to know her when you put her aboard of the *Alexa* back yonder in the gulch."

Mr. Norcross let the three of them get out and away, and we heard their taxi speed up and trundle off before he said, "She is married, I'm told. Where is her husband?"

Mr. Chadwick looked up as if he'd already forgotten the three who had just crossed the lobby.

"Who – Sheila Macrae? Yes, she has been married. But there isn't any husband – she's a widow."

For quite a while the boss sat staring at his cigar in a way he has when he is thinking right hard, and Mr. Chadwick let him alone, being busy, I guess, with his own little scrap that lay just ahead of him in the coming directors' meeting. Then, all of a sudden, the boss got up and shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

"I've changed my mind, Uncle John," he said, looking sort of absent-like out of the window to where the major's taxi had been standing. "If you can pull me into that deal to-morrow morning – with an absolutely free hand to do as I think best, mind you – I'll take the job."

V

The Directors' Meeting

I was up bright and early the next morning – that is, a good bit brighter and earlier than Mr. Norcross was – and after breakfast I took a little sashay down Nevada Avenue to have a look at *our* railroad. Of course, I knew, after what the boss had said to Mr. Chadwick the night before, just before we went to bed, that we weren't ever going to see Canada, or even Illinois.

I'll have to admit that the look I got didn't make me feel as if we'd found a Cullinan diamond. Down in the yards everything seemed to be at the loosest kind of loose ends. A switching crew was making up a freight, and the way they slammed the boxes together, regardless of broken drawheads and the like, was a sin and a shame. Then I saw some grain cars with the ends started and the wheat running out all along the track, and three or four more with the air hose hanging so it knocked along on the ties, and a lot of things like that – and nobody caring a hoot.

There was a big repair shop on the other side of the yard tracks, and though it was after seven o'clock, the men were still straggling over to go to work. Down at the round-house, a wiper was spotting a big freight-puller on the turn-table, and I'm blessed if he didn't actually run her forward pair of truck-wheels off the edge of the table, right while I was looking on, just as if it were all in the day's work.

In the course of time I drifted back to the office headquarters, which were at the end of the passenger station and in a part of the same building, down-stairs and up. A few clerks were dribbling in, and none of them seemed to have life enough to get out of the way of an ox-team. One fellow recognized me for a member of the big railroad family, I guess, for he stopped and asked me if I was looking for a job.

I told him I wasn't, and gave him a cigar – just on general principles. He took it, and right away he began to loosen up.

"If you should change your mind about the job, you just make it a case of 'move on, Joey,' and don't stay here and try to hit this agglomeration," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's a frost. I'm off of the Pennsy myself, and I'm ashamed to look in the looking-glass since I came out here. The P. S. L. isn't a railroad, at all; it's just making a bluff at being one. Besides, we're slated to have a new general manager, and if he's any good he'll fire the last living man of us."

"Maybe, if I change my mind, I might get a job with the new man," I said. "Who is he?"

"Search me! I don't believe they've found anybody yet. The big people from New York are all here now, and maybe they'll pick somebody before they go away. If I had the nerve of a rabbit, I'd take the next train back for Pittsburgh."

"What's your job?" I quizzed.

He grinned at me sort of good-naturedly. "You wouldn't think it to look at me, but I'm head stenographer in the general super's office."

"You haven't got much of a boss, if he can't command any more loyalty than you are giving him," I offered; and at that he spat on the platform and made a face like a kid that had been taking a dose of asaf[oe]tida.

"Yah!" he snorted. "We haven't a man in the outfit, on any job where the pay amounts to anything, that isn't somebody's cousin or nephew or brother-in-law or something. They shoot 'em out here from New York in bunches. You may be a spotter, for all I know, but I don't care a hang. I'm quitting at the end of the month, anyhow – if I don't get fired this side of that."

I grinned; I couldn't help it.

"Tell me," I broke in, "are there many more like you in the Pioneer Short Line service?"

"Scads of 'em," he retorted cheerfully. "I can round you up a couple of dozen fellows right here at headquarters who would go on a bat and paint this town a bright vermilion if the new G. M., whoever he is going to be, would clean out the whole rookery, cousins, nephews, and all."

"I think I'll have to take your name," I told him, fishing out a pencil and a notebook – just to see what he would do.

"Huh! so you *are* a spotter, after all, are you? All right, Mr. Spotter. My name's May, Frederic G. May. And when you want my head, you can find it just exactly where I told you – in the general super's office. You're a stranger and you took me in. So long."

Wouldn't that jar you? A man out of the general offices talking that way about his road and his own boss? I couldn't help seeing how rotten the thing must be if it smelled that way to the men on its own pay-rolls.

After a while, after I'd loafed through the shops and around the yard and got a few more whiffs of the decay, I strolled on back to the hotel. Seen by daylight, Portal City seemed to be a right bright little burg, with a cut-stone post-office and a new court house built out of pink lava, and three or four office buildings big enough to be called sky-scrappers anywhere outside of a real city like Portland or Seattle. The streets were paved, and on the main one, Nevada Avenue, there was plenty of business. Also, I tipped off a mining exchange and two pretty nice-looking club-houses right in sight from the Bullard entrance.

There wasn't much of a crowd in the lobby, and as I didn't see anything of Mr. Norcross or Mr. Chadwick, I sat down in a corner to wear out some more time. Though it was now after nine o'clock, there were still a good many people breakfasting in the café, the entrance to which was only a few feet away from my corner.

I was wondering a little what had become of the boss – who was generally the earliest riser on the job – when two men came bulging through the screen doors of the café, picking their teeth and feeling in their pockets for cigars. Right on the dot, and in the face of knowing that it couldn't reasonably be so, I had a feeling that I'd seen those men before. One of them was short and rather stocky, and his face had a sort of hard, hungry look; and the other was big and barrel-bodied. The short one was clean-shaven, but the other had a reddish-gray beard clipped close on his fat jaws and trimmed to a point at the chin.

After they had lighted up they came along and sat down three or four chairs away from me. They paid no attention to me, but for fear they might, I tried to look as sleepy as an all-night bell-hop in a busy hotel.

"The Dunton bunch got together in one of the committee rooms up-stairs a little after eight o'clock," said the short man, in a low, rasping voice that went through you like a buzz-saw, and it was evident that he was merely going on with a talk which had been begun over the breakfast-table. "Thanks to those infernal blunderers Clanahan sent us last night, Chadwick was with them."

"I think that was choost so," said the big man, speaking slowly and with something more than a hint of a German accent. "Beckler was choost what you call him – a tam blunderer."

Like a flash it came over me that I was "listening in" to a talk between the same two men who had sat in the auto at Sand Creek Siding and smoked while they were waiting for the actual kidnappers to return. You can bet high that I made myself mighty small and unobtrusive.

After a while the big man spoke again.

"What has Uncle Chon Chadwick up his sleeve got, do you think?"

"I don't think – I know!" was the snappy reply. "It's one of two things: a receivership – which will knock us into a cocked hat because we can't fool with an officer of the United States court – or a new deal all around in the management."

"Vich of the two will it be that will come out of that commiddee room up-stairs?"

"A new management. Dunton can't stand for a receivership, and Chadwick knows it. Apart from the fact that a court officer would turn up a lot of side deals that wouldn't look well for the New

York crowd if they got into the newspapers, the securities would be knocked out and the majority holders – Dunton and his bunch – couldn't unload. Chadwick has got him by the neck and can dictate his own terms."

"Vich will be?"

"That he will name the man who is to take Shaffer's place as general manager of the railroad outfit. We might have stood it off for a while, just as I said yesterday, if we could have kept Chadwick from attending this meeting."

"But now we don't could stand it off – what then?"

"We'll have to wait and see, and size up the new man when he blows in. He'll be only human, Henckel. And if we get right down to it we can pull him over to our side – or make him wish he'd never been born."

The big man got up ponderously and brushed the cigar ashes off of his bay-window. "You wait and see what comes mit the commiddee-room out. I go up to the ovvice."

When I was left alone in the row of lobby chairs with the snappy one I was scared stiff for fear, now that he didn't have anything else to think of, he'd catch on to the fact that I might have overheard. But apart from giving me one long stare that made my blood run cold, he didn't seem to notice me much, and after a little he got up and went to sit on the other side of the big rotunda where he could watch the elevators going and coming.

I guess he had lots of patience, for I had to have. It was after eleven o'clock, and I had been sitting in my corner for two full hours, when I saw the boss coming down the broad marble stair with Mr. Chadwick. I don't think the Hatch man saw them, or, if he did, he didn't let on.

Mr. Norcross held up a finger for me, and when I jumped up he gave me a sheet of paper; a Pioneer Short Line president's letter-head with a few lines written on it with a pen and a sort of crazy-looking signature under them.

"Take that to the *Mountaineer* job office and have five hundred of them printed," was the boss's order. "Tell the foreman it's a rush job and we want it to-day. Then make a copy and take it to Mr. Cantrell, the editor, and ask him to run it in to-morrow's paper as an item of news, if he feels like it. When you are through, come down to Mr. Chadwick's car."

Since the thing was going to be published, and I was going to make a copy of it, I didn't scruple to read it as I hurried out to begin a hunt for the *Mountaineer* office. It was the printer's copy for an official circular, dated at Portal City and addressed to all officers and employees of the Pioneer Short Line. It read:

"Effective at once, Mr. Graham Norcross is appointed General Manager of the Pioneer Short Line System, with headquarters at Portal City, and his orders will be respected accordingly.

"*Breckenridge Dunton,*

"*President.*"

We had got our jolt, all right; and leaving the ladder and the Friday start out of the question, I grinned and told myself that the one other thing that counted for most was the fact that Mrs. Sheila Macrae was a widow.

VI

The *Alexa* Goes East

I chased like the dickens on the printing job, because, apart from wanting to absorb all the dope I could as I went along on the new job, I knew I would be needed every minute right at Mr. Norcross's elbow, now that the actual work was beginning.

He and Mr. Chadwick were deep in reports and figures and plans of all sorts when I got back to the *Alexa*. Luncheon was served in the car, and they kept the business talk going like a house afire while they were eating, the hurry being that Mr. Chadwick wanted to start back for Chicago the minute he could find out if our connecting line east would run him special.

I could tell by the way the boss's eyes were snapping that he was soaking up the details at the rate of a mile a minute; not that he could go much deeper than the totals into anything, of course, in such a gallop, but these were enough to give him his hand-holds. At two o'clock a boy came down from the headquarters with a wire saying that the private car could go east as a special at two-thirty, if Mr. Chadwick were ready, and he put his O.K. on the message and sent it back.

"Now for a few unofficial things, Graham, and we'll call it a go," he said, after the boy had gone. "You are to have an absolutely free hand, not only in the management and the operating, but also in dictating the policy of the company. What you say goes as it lies, and Dunton has promised me that there shall be no appeal, not even to him."

"I imagine he didn't say that willingly," the boss put in, which was the first intimation I had had that he wasn't present at the directors' meeting in the Bullard.

"No, indeed; nothing was done willingly. I had to swing the big stick and swing it hard. But I had them where they couldn't wiggle. They had to swallow you whole or take the consequences – and the consequences were going to cost them money. Dunton got down when he had to, and he pulled the others into line. You are to set your own pace, and you are to have some money for betterments. I offered to float a new loan on short-time notes with the Chicago banks, and the board authorized it."

The boss pushed that part of it aside abruptly, as he always does when he has got hold of the gist of a thing.

"Now, about my staff," he said. "It's open gossip all over the West that the P. S. L. is officered by a lot of dummies and place-hunters and relatives. I'll have to clean house."

"Go to it; that is a part of your 'free hand.' Have you the material to draw from?"

"I know a few good men, if I can get them," said the boss thoughtfully. "There is Upton Van Britt; he was the only millionaire in my college, and he is simply a born operating chief. If I can persuade him to store his autos and lay up his yacht and sell off his polo ponies – I'll try it, anyhow. Then there is Charlie Hornack, who is the best all-around traffic man this side of the Missouri – only his present employers don't seem to have discovered it. I can get Hornack. The one man I can't place at sight is a good corporation counsel. I'm obliged to have a good lawyer, Uncle John."

"I have the man for you, if you'll take him on my say so; a young fellow, named Ripley who has done some corking good work for me in Chicago. I'll wire him, if you like. Now a word or two about this local graft we touched upon last night. I don't know the ins and outs of it, but people here will tell you that a sort of holding corporation, called Red Tower Consolidated, has a strangle grip on this entire region. Its subsidiary companies control the grain elevators, the fruit packeries, the coal mines and distributing yards, the timber supply and the lumber yards, and even have a finger on the so-called independent smelters."

The boss nodded. "I've heard of Red Tower. Also, I have heard that the railroad stands in with it to pinch the producers and consumers."

A road engine was backing down the spur to take the *Alexa* in tow for the eastward run, and what was said had to be said in a hurry.

"Dig it out," barked the wheat king. "If you find that we are in on it, it's your privilege to cut loose. The two men who will give you the most trouble are right here in Portal City: Hatch, the president of Red Tower, and Henckel, its vice-president. They say either of them would commit murder for a ten-dollar bill, and they stand in with Pete Clanahan, the city boss, and his gang of political thugs. That's all, Graham; all but one thing. Write me after you've climbed into the saddle and have found out just what you're in for. If you say you can make it go, I'll back you, if it takes half of next year's wheat crop."

A minute or so later the boss and I stood out in the yard and watched the *Alexa* roll away toward the sunrise country, and perhaps we both felt a little bit lonesome, just for a second or two. At least, I know I did. But when the special had become a black smudge of coal smoke in the distance, Mr. Norcross turned on me with the grim little smile that goes with his fighting mood.

"You are private secretary to the new general manager of the Pioneer Short Line, Jimmie, and your salary begins to-day," he said, briskly. "Now let's go up to the hotel and get our fighting clothes on."

VII

"Heads Off, Gentlemen!"

Gosh all Friday – say! but the next few days did see a tear-up to beat the band on the old Short Line! With the printing of his appointment circular, Mr. Norcross took the offices in the headquarters building lately vacated by Mr. Shaffer, and it was something awful to see the way the heads went into the basket. One by one he called the Duntonites in; the traffic manager, the general superintendent, the roadmaster, the master-mechanic – clear on down to the round-house foreman and the division heads.

Some few of them were allowed to take the oath of allegiance and stay, but the place-fillers and pay-roll parasites, the cousins and the nephews and the brothers-in-law, every last man of them had to walk under the axe. One instance will be enough to show how it went. Van Burgh, great-great-grandnephew of some Revolutionary big-wig and our figurehead general superintendent, was the first man called in, and Mr. Norcross shot him dead in half a minute.

"Mr. Van Burgh, what railroad experience did you have before you came to the P. S. L.?" was the first bullet.

Mr. Van Burgh, a heavy-faced, youngish man with sort of world-tired eyes, looked at his fingernails.

"I was in the president's office in New York for a time after I left Harvard," he drawled, a good deal as if the question bored him.

"And how long have you been here?"

"I came out lawst October."

"H'm; only six months' actual experience, eh? I'm sorry, but you can't learn operative railroading at the expense of this management on the Pioneer Short Line. Your resignation, to take effect at once, will be accepted. Good-day."

Van Burgh turned red in the face, but he had his nerve.

"You're an entirely new kind of a brute," he remarked calmly. "I was appointed by President Dunton, and I don't resign until he tells me to."

"Then you're fired!" snapped the boss, whirling his chair back to his desk. And that was all there was to it.

Three days later, when the whole town was talking about the new "Jack, the ripper," as they called him, Kirgan, who had been our head machinery man on the Midland construction, tumbled in in answer to a wire. Mr. Norcross slammed him into place ten minutes after he hit the town.

"Your office is across the tracks, Kirgan," he told him. "I've begun the house-cleaning over there by firing your predecessor and three or four of his pet foremen. Get in the hole and dig to the bottom. You have a lot of soreheads to handle, here and at the division shops, and it isn't all their fault, not by a long shot. I'll give you six months in which to make good as a model superintendent of motive power. Get busy."

"That's me," said Kirgan, who knew the boss up one side and down the other. "You give me the engines, and I'll keep 'em out of the shop." And with that he went across the yard and took hold, before he had even hunted up a place to sleep in.

Mr. Van Britt was the next man to show up. He was fine; a square-built, stocky little gentleman who looked as if he's always had the world by the ear and never meant to let go. Though it was a time when most men went clean-shaven, he wore a stubby little mustache, closely clipped, and while his jaw looked as if he could bite a nail in two, he had a pair of twinkling, good-natured eyes that sort of took the edge off the hard jaw.

"Well, I'm here," he said, dropping into a chair and sitting with his legs wide apart. And then, ignoring me as if I hadn't been there: "Graham, what the devil have you got against me, that you should drag me out here on the edge of nowhere and make me go to work for a living?"

The boss just grinned at him and said: "It's for the good of your soul, Upton. You've too much money. Your office is up at the end of the corridor and your chair is empty and waiting for you. Your appointment circular has already been mailed out."

Mr. Hornack was the last of the new office staff to fall in, though he didn't have nearly as far to come as some of the others. He was red-headed and wore glasses. They used to say of him on the Overland Central that he fired his chief clerk regularly twice a week, and then hired him over again, which was merely a roundabout way of saying that he had a sort of meat-axe temper to go with his red hair. But they also used to say that he could make business grow where none ever grew before, and that's what a traffic man lives for.

When the new staff was made up, Mr. Norcross gathered all the department heads together in his office and laid down the lines of the new policy. He put it in just eight words: "Clean house, and make friends for the company." Then he gave them a little talk on the conditions as he had found them, and told them that he wanted all these conditions reversed. It was a large order, and both Mr. Van Britt and Mr. Hornack said as much, but the boss said it had to go just that way. There would be a little money for betterments, but it must be spent as if every dollar were ten.

Naturally, the big turn-over brought all sorts of disturbances at the send-off. Some of the relieved cousins and nephews stayed in town and jumped in to stir up trouble for the new management. The *Herald*, which was the other morning paper, took up for the down-and-outs, and there wasn't anything too mean for it to say about the boss and his new appointees. Then the employees got busy and the grievance committees began to pour in. Mr. Norcross never denied himself to anybody. The office-door stood wide open and the kickers were welcomed, as you might say, with open arms.

"You men are going to get the squarest deal you have ever had, and a still squarer one a little farther along, if you will only stay on the job and keep your clothes on," was the way the boss went at the trainmen's committee. "We are out to make the P. S. L. the best line for service, and the best company to work for, this side of the Missouri River. I want your loyalty; the loyalty of every man in the service. I'll go further and say that the new management will stand if you and the other pay-roll men stand by it in good faith, or it will fall if you don't."

"You'll meet the grievance committees and talk things over with them when there's a kick coming?" said old Tom McClure, the passenger conductor who was acting as spokesman.

"Sure I will – every time. More than that, I'll take a leaf out of Colonel Goethal's book and keep open house here in this office every Sunday morning. Any man in the service who thinks he has a grievance may come here and state it, and if he has a case, he'll get justice."

Naturally, a few little talks like this, face to face with the men themselves, soon began to put new life into the rank and file. Mr. Norcross's old pet name of "Hell-and-repeat" had followed him down from Oregon, as it was bound to, but now it began to be used in the sense that most railroad men use the phrase, "The Old Man," in speaking of a big boss that they like.

This winning of the service *esprit de corps* – if that's the word – commenced to show results right away. The first time Mr. Norcross's special went over the line anybody could see with half an eye that the pay-roll men were taking a brace. Trains were running on better time, there was less slamming and more civility, and at one place we actually found a section foreman going along and picking up the spikes and bolts and fish-plates that the wasters ahead of him had strewn all along the right-of-way.

There was so much crowded into these first few weeks that I've forgotten half of it. The work we did, pulling and hauling things into shape, was a fright, and my end of the job got so big that the boss had to give me help. Following out his own policy, he let me pick my man, and after I'd had a little talk with Mr. Van Britt, I picked May, the young fellow who had been so disgusted with his

job under Van Burgh. Frederic of Pittsburgh was all right; a little too tonguey, perhaps, but a worker from away back, and that was what we were looking for.

Out of this frantic hustle to get things started and moving right, anybody could have pulled a couple of conclusions that stuck up higher than any of the rest. The boss and Mr. Van Britt were steadily winning the rank and file over to something like loyalty on the one hand, and on the other, wherever we went, we found the people who were paying the freight a solid unit against us, hating us like blazes and entirely unwilling to believe that any good thing could come out of the Nazareth of the Pioneer Short Line.

This hatred manifested itself in a million different ways, and all of them saw-toothed. On that first trip over the line I heard a Lesterburg banker tell the boss, flat-footed, that the country at large would never believe that any measure of reform undertaken by the Dunton management would be accepted as sincere.

"You talk like an honest man, Mr. Norcross," he said, and he was saying it right in the boss's own private car, too, mind you, "but this region has suffered too long and too bitterly under Wall Street methods to be won over now by a little shoulder-patting in the way of better train schedules and things of that sort. You'll have to dig a good bit deeper, and that you won't be allowed to do."

The boss just smiled at this, and offered the banker man a cigar – which he took.

"When the time comes, Mr. Bigelow, I'm going to show you that I can dig as deep as the next fellow. Where shall I begin?"

The banker laughed. "If you had a spade with a handle a mile long you might begin on the Red Tower people," he suggested. "But, of course, you can't do that: your New York people won't let you. There is the real nib of the thing, Mr. Norcross. What we need is a railroad line that will stick to its own proper business – the carrying of freight and passengers. What we have is a gigantic holding corporation which fathers every extortionate side-issue that can pay it a royalty!"

"Excuse me," said the boss, still as pleasant as a basket of chips, "that may be what you have had in the past; we won't try to go behind the returns. But it is not what you have now. From this time on, the Short Line proposes to be just what you said it should be – a carrier corporation, pure and simple."

"Do you mean to say that you are going to cut loose from Hatch and Henckel and their thousand-and-one robber subsidiary companies?" demanded the banker.

At this the boss stood up and looked the big banker gentleman squarely in the eye.

"Mr. Bigelow, at the present moment I represent Pioneer Short Line, in management and in its policy, as it stands to-day. I can assure you emphatically that the railroad management has nothing whatever to do with Red Tower Consolidated or any of its subsidiaries."

"Then you've broken with Hatch?"

"No; simply because there hasn't been anything to break, so far as I am concerned."

The banker man dropped into the nearest chair.

"But, man alive! you can't stay here if you don't pull with the Hatch crowd," he exclaimed; and then: "Somebody ought to have tipped you off beforehand and not let you come here to commit suicide!"

After that they went out together; up-town to Mr. Bigelow's bank, I guess, and as they pushed the corridor door open I heard the banker say: "You don't know what you are up against, Mr. Norcross. That outfit will get you, one way or another, as sure as the devil's a hog. If it can't break you, it will hire a gang of gunmen – I wouldn't put it an inch beyond Rufus Hatch; not a single inch."

There it was again; but as he went out the boss was laughing easily and saying that he was raised in a gun country, and that the fear of a fight was the least of his troubles at the present moment.

VIII

With the Strings Off

As soon as we returned from the inspection trip, the boss pulled off his coat – figuratively speaking – and rolled up his sleeves. It wasn't his way to talk much about what he was going to do: he'd jump in and do it first, and then talk about it afterward – if anybody insisted on knowing the reason why.

Mr. Van Britt was given swift orders to fill up his engineering staff and get busy laying new steel, building new bridges and modernizing the permanent way generally. Mr. Hornack was told to put on an extra office force to ransack the traffic records and make reports showing the fairness or unfairness of existing tariffs and rates, and a widespread invitation was given to shippers to come in and air their grievances – which you bet they did!

Sandwiched in between, there were long private conferences with Mr. Ripley, the bright young lawyer Mr. Chadwick had sent us from Chicago, and with a young fellow named Juneman, an ex-newspaper man who was on the pay-rolls as "Advertising Manager," but whose real business seemed to be to keep the Short Line public fully and accurately informed of everything that most railroad companies try to keep to themselves.

The next innovation that came along was another young Chicago man named Billoughby, and *his* title on the pay-roll was "Special Agent." What he did to earn his salary was the one thing that Juneman didn't publish broadcast in the newspapers; it was kept so dark that not a line of it got into the office records, and even I, who was as close to the boss as anybody in our outfit, never once suspected the true nature of Billoughby's job until the day he came in to make his final report – and Mr. Norcross let him make it without sending me out on an errand.

"Well, I think I'm ready to talk Johnson, now," was the way Billoughby began. "I've been into all the deals and side deals, and I've had it out with Ripley on the legal points involved. Red Tower is the one outfit we'll have to kill off and put out of business. Under one name or another, it is engineering every graft in this country; it is even backing the fake mining boom at Saw Horse – to which, by the way, this railroad company is now building a branch line."

Mr. Norcross turned to me:

"Jimmie, make a note to tell Mr. Van Britt to have the work stopped at once on the Saw Horse branch, and all the equipment brought in." And then to Billoughby: "Go on."

"The main graft, of course, is in the grain elevators, the fruit packeries, the coal and lumber yards and the stock yards and handling corrals. In these public, or *quasi*-public, utilities Red Tower has everybody else shut out, because the railroad has given them – in fee simple, it seems – all the yard room, switches, track facilities, and the like. Wherever local competition has tried to break in, the railroad company has given it the cold shoulder and it has been either forced out or frozen out."

"Exactly," said the boss. "Now tell me how far you have gone in the other field."

"We are pretty well shaped up and are about ready to begin business. Juneman has done splendid work, and so has Ripley. Public sentiment is still incredulous, of course. It's mighty hard to make people believe that we are in earnest; that we have actually gone over to their side in the fight. They're all from Missouri, and they want to be shown."

"Naturally," said Mr. Norcross.

"We have succeeded, in a measure, though the opposition has been keeping up a steady bombardment. Hatch and his people haven't been idle. They have a strong commercial organization and a stout pull with the machine element, or rather the gang element, in politics. They own or control a dozen or more prominent newspapers in the State, and, as you know, they are making an open fight on you and your management through these papers. The net result so far has been merely to keep the

people stirred up and doubtful. They know they can't trust Hatch and his crowd, and they're afraid they can't trust you. They say that the railroad has never played fair – and I guess it hasn't, in the past."

"Not within a thousand miles," was the boss's curt comment. "But go on with your story."

"We pulled the new deal off yesterday, simultaneously in eleven of the principal towns along the line. Meetings of the bankers and local capitalists were held, and we had a man at each one of them to explain our plan and to pledge the backing of the railroad. Notwithstanding all the doubt and dust that's been kicked up by the Hatch people, it went like wild-fire."

"With money?" queried the boss.

"Yes; with real money. Citizens' Storage & Warehouse was launched, as you might say, on the spot, and enough capital was subscribed to make it a going concern. Of course, there were some doubters, and some few greedy ones. The doubters wanted to know how much of the stock was going to be held by officials of the railroad company, and it was pretty hard to convince them that no Short Line official would be allowed to participate, directly or indirectly."

"And the greedy ones?"

"They kicked on that part of the plan which provides for the local apportionment of the stock to cover the local needs of each town only; they wanted more than their share. Also, they protested against the fixed dividend scheme; they didn't see why the new company shouldn't be allowed to cut a melon now and then if it should be fortunate enough to grow one."

Mr. Norcross smiled. "That is precisely what the Hatch people have been doing, all along, and it is the chief grievance of these same people who now want a chance to outbid their neighbors. The lease condition was fully explained to them, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes; Ripley saw to that, and copies of the lease were in the exhibits. The new company is to have railroad ground to build on, and ample track facilities in perpetuity, conditioned strictly upon the limited dividend. If the dividend is increased, the leases terminate automatically."

The boss drew a long breath.

"You've done well, and better than well, Billoughby," he said. "Now we are ready to fire the blast. How was the proposal to take over the Red Tower properties at a fair valuation received?"

"There was some opposition. Lesterburg, and three of the other larger towns, want to build their own plants. They are bitter enough to want to smash the big monopoly, root and branch. But they agreed to abide by a majority vote of the stock on that point, and my wire reports this morning say that a lump-sum offer will be made for the Red Tower plants to-day."

Mr. Norcross sat back in his chair and blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling.

"Hatch won't sell," he predicted. "He'll be up here before night with blood in his eye. I'm rather glad it has come down to the actual give and take. I don't play the waiting game very successfully, Billoughby. Keep in touch, and keep me in touch. And tell Ripley to keep on pushing on the reins. The sooner we get at it, the sooner it will be over."

After Billoughby had gone, Mr. Norcross dictated a swift bunch of letters and telegrams and had me turn my shorthand notes over to Fred May for transcription. With the desk cleaned up he came at me on a little matter that had been allowed to sleep ever since the day, now some time back, when I had given him Mrs. Sheila's hint about the identity of the two men who had sat and smoked in the auto that Sunday night at Sand Creek Siding, and about the talk between the same two that I had overheard the following morning.

"We are going to have sharp trouble with a gentleman by the name of Hatch before very long, Jimmie," was the way he began. "I don't want to hit him below the belt, if I can help it; but on the other hand, it's just as well to be able to give the punch if it is needed. You remember what you told me about that Monday morning talk between Hatch and Henckel in the Bullard lobby. Would you be willing to go into court as a witness and swear to what you heard?"

"Sure I would," I said.

"All right. I may have to pull that little incident on Mr. Hatch before I get through with him. The train hold-up was a criminal act, and you are the witness who can convict the pair of them. Of course, we'll leave Mrs. Macrae and the little girl entirely out of it. Nobody knows that they were there with us, and nobody need know."

I agreed to that, and this mention of Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann makes me remember that I've been leaving them out pretty severely for a good long while. They weren't left out in reality-not by a jugful. In spite of all the rush and hustle, the boss had found time to get acquainted with Major Basil Kendrick and had been made at home in the transplanted Kentucky mansion in the northern suburb. I'd been there too, sometimes to carry a box of flowers when the boss was suddenly called out of town, and some other evenings when I had to go and hunt him up to give him a bunch of telegrams. Of course, I didn't play the butt-in; I didn't have to. Maisie Ann usually looked out for me, and when she found out that I liked pumpkin pie, made Kentucky fashion, we used to spend most of those errand-running evenings together in the pantry.

But to get back on the firing line. I wasn't around when Mr. Norcross had his "declaration of war" talk with Hatch. Mr. Norcross, being pretty sure he wasn't going to have that evening off, had sent me out to "Kenwood" with a note and a box of roses, and when I got back to the office about eight o'clock, Hatch was just going away. I met him on the stair.

The boss was sitting back in his big swing chair, smoking, when I broke in. He looked as if he'd been mixing it up good and plenty with Mr. Rufus Hatch – and enjoying it.

"We've got 'em going, Jimmie," he chuckled; and he said it without asking me how I had found Mrs. Sheila, or how she was looking, or anything.

I told him I had met Mr. Hatch on the stair going down.

"He didn't say anything to you, did he?" he asked.

"Not a word."

"I had to pull that Sand Creek business on him, and I'm rather sorry," he went on. "He and his people are going to fight the new company to a finish, and he merely came up here to tell me so – and to add that I might as well resign first as last, because, in the end, he'd get my goat. When I laughed at him he got abusive. He's an ugly beggar, Jimmie."

"That's what everybody says of him."

"It's true. He and his crowd have plenty of money – stolen money, a good deal of it – and they stand in with every political boss and gangster in the State. There is only one way to handle such a man, and that is without gloves. I told him we had the goods on him in the matter of Mr. Chadwick's kidnapping adventure. At first he said I couldn't prove it. Then he broke out cursing and let your name slip. I hadn't mentioned you at all, and so he gave himself away. He knows who you are, and he remembered that you had overheard his talk with Henckel in the Bullard lobby."

I heard what he was saying, but I didn't really sense it because my head was ram jam full of a thing that was so pitiful that it had kept me swallowing hard all the way back from Major Kendrick's. It was this way. When I had jiggled the bell out at the house it was Maisie Ann who let me in and took the box of flowers and the boss's note. She told me that Aunt Mandy, the cook, hadn't made any pie that day, so we sat in the dimly lighted hall and talked for a few minutes.

One thing she told me was that Mrs. Sheila had company and the name of it was Mr. Van Britt. That wasn't strictly news because I had known that Mr. Van Britt was dividing time pretty evenly with the boss in the Major Kendrick house visits. That wasn't anything to be scared up about. I knew that all Mr. Norcross asked, or would need, would be a fair field and no favor. But my chunky little girl didn't stop at that.

"I think we can let Mr. Van Britt take care of himself," she said. "He has known Cousin Sheila for a long time, and I guess they are only just good friends. But there is something you ought to know, Jimmie – for Mr. Norcross's sake. He has been sending lots of flowers and things, and Cousin Sheila has been taking them because – well, I guess it's just because she doesn't know how not to take them."

"Go on," I said, but my mouth had suddenly grown dry.

"Such things – flowers, you know – don't mean anything in New York, where we've been living. Men send them to their women friends just as they pass their cigar-cases around among their men friends. But I'm afraid it's different with Mr. Norcross."

"It is different," I said.

Then she told me the thing that made me swell up and want to burst.

"It mustn't be different, Jimmie. Cousin Sheila's married, you know."

"I know she has been married," I corrected; and then she gave me the sure-enough knock-out.

"She is married now, and her husband is still living."

For a little while I couldn't do anything but gape like a chicken with the pip. It was simply fierce! I knew, as well as I knew anything, that the boss was gone on Mrs. Sheila; that he had fallen in love, first with the back of her neck and then with her pretty face and then with all of her; and that the one big reason why he had let Mr. Chadwick persuade him to stay in Portal City was the fact that he had wanted to be near her and to show her how he could make a perfectly good spoon out of the spoiled horn of the Pioneer Short Line.

When I began to get my grip back a little I was right warm under the collar.

"She oughtn't to be going around telling people she is a widow!" I blurted out.

"She doesn't," was the calm reply. "People just take it for granted, and it saves a lot of talk and explanations that it wouldn't be pleasant to have to make. They've separated, you know – years ago, and Cousin Sheila has taken her mother's maiden name, Macrae. If we were going to live here always it would be different. But we are only visiting Cousin Basil, or I suppose we are, though we've been here now for nearly a year."

There wasn't much more to be said, and pretty soon I had staggered off with my load and gone back to the office. And this was why I couldn't get very deep into the Hatch business with Mr. Norcross when he told me what he had been obliged to do about the Sand Creek hold-up.

He didn't say anything further about it, except to tell me to be careful and not let any of the Hatch people tangle me up so that my evidence, if I should have to give it, would be made to look like a faked-up story; and a little before nine o'clock Mr. Ripley dropped in and he and the boss went up-town together.

I might have gone, too. Fred May had got through and gone home, and there was nothing much that I could do beyond filing a few letters and tidying up a bit around my own desk. But I couldn't make up my mind either to work or to go to bed. I wanted a chance to think over the horrible thing Maisie Ann had told me; time to cook up some scheme by which the boss could be let down easy.

If he had been like other men it wouldn't have been so hard. But I had a feeling that he had gone into this love business just as he did into everything – neck or nothing – burning his bridges behind him, and having no notion of ever turning back. I had once heard our Oregon Midland president, Mr. Lepaige, say that it was not good for a man always to succeed; never to be beaten; that without a setback, now and then, a man never learned how to bend without breaking. The boss had never been beaten, and Mr. Lepaige was talking about him when he said this. What was it going to do to him when he learned the truth about Mrs. Sheila?

On top of this came the still harder knock when I saw that it was up to me to tell him. I remembered all the stories I'd ever heard about how the most cold-blooded surgeon that ever lived wouldn't trust himself to stick a knife into a member of his own family, and I knew now just how the surgeon felt about it. It was up to me to whet my old Barlow and stick it into the boss, clear up to the handle.

While I was still sweating under the big load Maisie Ann had dumped upon me, the night despatcher's boy came in with a message. It was from Mr. Chadwick, and I read it with my eyes bugging out. This is what it said:

"To G. Norcross, G. M.,

"Portal City.

"P. S. L. Common dropped to thirty-four to-day, and banks lending on short time notes for betterment fund are getting nervous. Wire from New York says bondholders are stirring and talking receivership. General opinion in financial circles leans to idea that new policy is foregone failure. Are you still sure you can make it win?

"Chadwick."

Right on the heels of this, and before I could get my breath, in came the boy again with another telegram. It was a hot wire from President Dunton, one of a series that he had been shooting in ever since Mr. Norcross had taken hold and begun firing the cousins and nephews.

"To G. Norcross, G. M.,

"Portal City. RUSH.

"See stock quotations for to-day. Your policy is a failure. Am advised you are now fighting Red Tower. Stop it immediately and assure Mr. Hatch that we are friendly, as we have always been. If something cannot be done to lift securities to better figure, your resignation will be in order.

"Dunton."

They say that misfortunes never come singly. Here were two new griefs hurling themselves in over the wires all in the same quarter-hour, besides the one I had up my sleeve. But there was no use dallying. It was up to me to find the boss as quickly as I could and have the three-cornered surgical operation over with. I knew the telegrams wouldn't kill him – or I thought they wouldn't. I thought they'd probably make him take a fresh strangle hold on things and be fired – if he had to be fired – fighting it out grimly on his own line. But I wasn't so sure about the Mrs. Sheila business. That was a horse of another color.

I had just reached for my hat and was getting ready to snap the electrics off when I heard footsteps in the outer office. At first I thought it was the despatcher's boy coming with another wire, but when I looked up, a stocky, hard-faced man in a derby hat and a short overcoat was standing in the doorway and scowling across at me.

It was Mr. Rufus Hatch, and I had a notion that the hot end of his black cigar glared at me like a baleful red eye when he came in and sat down.

IX

And Satan Came Also

"I saw your office lights from the street," was the way the Red Tower president began on me, and his voice took me straight back to the Oregon woods and a lumber camp where the saw-filers were at work. "Where is Mr. Norcross?"

I told him that Mr. Norcross was up-town, and that I didn't suppose he would come back to the office again that night, now that it was so late. Instead of going away and giving it up, he sat right still, boring me with his little gray eyes and shifting the black cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"My name is Hatch, of the Red Tower Company," he grated, after a minute or two. "You're the one they call Dodds, aren't you?"

I admitted it, and he went on.

"Norcross brought you here with him from the West, didn't he?"

I nodded and wondered what was coming next. When it did come it nearly bowled me over.

"What pay are you getting here?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to cuss him out right there and then and tell him it was none of his business. But the second thought (which isn't always as good as it's said to be) whispered to me to lead him on and see how far he would go. So I told him the figures of my pay check.

"I'm needing another shorthand man, and I can afford to pay a good bit more than that," he growled. "They tell me you are well up at the top in your trade. Are you open to an offer?"

I let him have it straight then. "Not from you," I said.

"And why not from me?"

Here was where I made my first bad break. All of a sudden I got so angry at the thought that he was actually trying to buy me that I couldn't see anything but red, and I blurted out, "Because I don't hire out to work for any strong-arm outfit – not if I know it!"

For a little while he sat blinking at me from under his bushy eyebrows, and his hard mouth was drawn into a straight line with a mean little wrinkle coming and going at the corners of it.

When he got ready to speak again he said, "You're only a boy. You want to get on in the world, don't you?"

"Supposing I do: what then?" I snapped.

"I'm offering you a good chance: the best you ever had. You don't owe Norcross anything more than your job, do you?"

"Maybe not."

"That's better. Put on your hat and come along with me. I want to show you what I can do for you in a better field than railroading ever was, or ever will be. It'll pay you – " and he named a figure that very nearly made me fall dead out of my chair.

Of course, it was all plain enough. The boss had him on the hip with that kidnapping business, with me for a witness. And he was trying to fix the witness. It's funny, but the only thing I thought of, just then, was the necessity of covering up the part that Mrs. Sheila and Maisie Ann had had in the hold-up affair that he was so anxious to bury and put out of sight.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.