

Chapman Allen

**Ralph of the Roundhouse: or,
Bound to Become a Railroad
Man**



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Ralph of the Roundhouse Or Bound to Become a Railroad Man:*

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Ralph of the Roundhouse

Or Bound to Become

a Railroad Man

CHAPTER I-THE DAYLIGHT EXPRESS

The Daylight Express rolled up to the depot at Stanley Junction, on time, circling past the repair shops, freight yard and roundhouse, a thing of life and beauty.

Stanley Junction had become a wide-awake town of some importance since the shops had been moved there, and when a second line took it in as a passing point, the old inhabitants pronounced the future of the Junction fully determined.

Engine No. 6, with its headlight shining like a piece of pure crystal, its metal trimmings furbished up bright and natty-looking, seemed to understand that it was the model of the road, and sailed majestically to a repose that had something of dignity and grandeur to it.

The usual crowd that kept tab on arriving trains lounged on the platform, and watched the various passengers alight.

A brisk, bright-faced young fellow glided from their midst, cleared an obstructing truck with a clever spring, stood ready to greet the locomotive and express car as they parted company from the passenger coaches, and ran thirty feet along the siding to where the freight-sheds stood.

He appeared to know everybody, and to be a general favorite with every one, for the brakeman at the coach-end air brake gave him a cheery: "Hi, there, kid!" gaunt John Griscom, the engineer, flung him a grim but pleased nod of recognition, and the fireman, discovering him, yelled a shrill: "All aboard, now!"

The young fellow turned to face the latter with a whirl and struck an attitude, as if entirely familiar with jolly Sam Cooper's warnings.

For the latter, reaching for a row of golden pippins stowed on his oil shelf, contributed by some bumpkin admirer down the line, seized the biggest and poised it for a fling.

"Here she goes, Ralph Fairbanks!" he chuckled.

"Let her come!" cried back Ralph, and-clip! he cut the missile's career short by the latest approved baseball tactics.

Ralph pocketed the apple with a gay laugh, and was at the door of the express section of the car as it slid back and the messenger's face appeared.

The agent had come out of his shed. He glanced over an iron chest and some crated stuff shoved forward by the messenger, and then, running his eye over the bills of lading handed him by the latter, said briskly:

"You will not be needed this time, Ralph."

"All right, Mr. More."

"Nothing but some transfer freight and the bank delivery—that's my special, you know. Be around for the 5.11, though."

"Sure," nodded Ralph Fairbanks, looking pleased at the brisk dismissal, like a boy on hand for work, but, that failing, with abundant other resources at hand to employ and enjoy the time.

With a cheery hail to the baggage master as he appeared on the scene, Ralph rounded the cow-catcher, intent on a short cut across the tracks. His appearance had been actuated by business reasons strictly, but, business not materializing, he was quite as practical and eager on another tack.

Ever since vacation began, three weeks previous, Ralph had made two trips daily to the depot, on hand to meet the arriving 10.15 and 5.11 trains.

This had been at the solicitation of the express agent. Stanley Junction was not a very large receiving point, but usually there were daily several packages to deliver. When these were not for the bank or business houses in the near center of the town, but for individuals, the agent employed Ralph to deliver them, allowing him to retain the ten cents fee for charges.

Sometimes Ralph picked up as high as fifty cents a day, the average was about half that amount, but it was welcome pocket money. Occasionally, too, some odd job for waiting passengers or railroad employes would come up. It gave Ralph spending money with which to enjoy his vacation, and, besides, he liked

the work.

Especially work around the railroad. What live boy in Stanley Junction did not-but then Ralph, as the express agent often said, "took to railroading like a duck to water."

It was a natural heritage. Ralph's father had been a first-class, all-around railroad man, and his son felt a justifiable pride in boasting that he was one of the pioneers who had made the railroad at Stanley Junction a possibility.

"Home, a quick bite or two, and then for the baseball game," said Ralph briskly, as he ran his eye across the network of rails, and beyond them to the waving tree tops and the village green. Preparing to make a run for it, Ralph suddenly halted.

A grimed repair man, tapping the wheels of the coaches, just then jerked back his hammer with a vivid:

"Hi, you!"

Ralph discerned that the man was not addressing him, for his eyes were staringly fixed under the trucks.

"Let me out!" sounded a muffled voice.

Ralph was interested, as there struggled from the cindered roadbed an erratic form. It was that of a boy about his own age. He judged this from the dress and figure, although one was tattered, and the other strained, crippled and bent. The face was a criss-cross streak of dust, oil and cinders.

"A stowaway!" yelled the repair man, excitedly waving his hammer. "Schmitt! Schmitt! this way!"

The depot officer came running around the end of the train

at the call. Ralph had eyes only for the forlorn figure that had so suddenly come into action in the light of day.

He could read the lad's story readily. The last run of No. 6 was of ten miles. There was no doubt but that for this distance, if not for a greater one, the stowaway had been a "dead-head" passenger, perilously clinging to the brace bars, or wedged against the trucks under the middle coach.

The dust and grime must have half-blinded him, the roar have deafened, for he staggered about now in an aimless, distracted way, hobbling and wincing as he tried to get his cramped muscles into normal play.

"What you doing?" roared the old watchman, on a run, and waving his club threateningly.

"I've done it!" muttered the boy dolefully. He kept hobbling about to get his tensioned nerves unlimbered, edging away from the approaching watchman as fast as he could.

"Show me!" he panted, appealingly to Ralph,

The latter understood the predicament and wish. He moved his hand very meaningfully, and the stowaway seemed to comprehend, for he glided to where a heap of ties barricaded a dead-end track. Rubbing the blinding dirt from his eyes, he cleared the heap, dropped on the other side, and ran down a narrow lane bounded on one side by a brick wall and on the other by a ten-foot picket fence.

"Third one in a week!" growled the watchman. "Got to stop! Against the law, and second one lost a foot!"

Ralph moved along, crossed four tracks and a freight train blockaded, and kept on down the straight rails. The stowaway had passed from his mind. Now, glancing toward the fence, he saw the lad limping down the lane.

The stowaway saw him, and coming to a halt grasped two of the fence bars, and peered and shouted at him.

"Want me?" asked Ralph, approaching. He saw that the stowaway was in bad shape, for he clung to the fence as if it rested him. He had not yet gotten all the cricks out of his bones.

"It was a tough job," muttered the boy. "It took grit! Say, tell me something, will you?"

Ralph nodded. The boy rubbed the knuckle of one hand across his coat to wipe off the blood of an abrasion, and groped in a pocket.

"Where is that?" he asked, bringing to light an envelope, and holding it slantingly for Ralph's inspection. "Can you tell me?"

"Why," said Ralph, with a start-"let me look at that!"

"No," demurred the other cautiously. "It's near enough to read. I want to find that person."

"It's my name," said Ralph, quickly and with considerable wonderment. "Give it to me."

"I guess not!" snapped the stowaway. "I don't know who John Fairbanks is, but I know enough to be sure you ain't him."

"No, he was my father. Climb over the fence. I don't quite understand this, and I want you to explain."

The stowaway sized up the fence, wincing as he lifted one

foot, and then, with a disgusted exclamation, turned abruptly and broke into a run.

Ralph saw that the cause of this action was the watchman, who had come into view through a doorway in the brick wall, and had started a new pursuit of the boy.

He was a husky, clumsy individual, and had counted on heading off or creeping unawares on the fugitive, but the latter, with a start, soon outdistanced him, and was lost to Ralph's view where the lane broadened out into the railroad scrap yards.

Ralph stood undecided for a minute or two, and then somewhat reluctantly resumed his way.

"He'll find us, if he's got that letter to deliver," he concluded. "I wonder what it can be? From somebody who doesn't know father is dead, it seems."

Ralph neared home in the course of ten minutes, to save time crossing lots to reach by its side door the plain, but comfortable looking, neatly kept cottage that had been his shelter since childhood.

It was going to be a busy day with him, he had planned, and he flung off his coat with a business air of hurried preparation for a change of toilet.

Ten feet from the door through which he intended to bolt as usual with all the impetuosity of a real flesh and blood boy, on the jump every waking minute of his existence, Ralph came to an abrupt halt.

He expected to find his mother alone, and was ready to tell

her about the stowaway episode and the letter.

But voices echoed from the little sitting room, and the first intelligible words his ear caught, spoken in a gruff snarl, made Ralph's eyes flash fire, his fists clenched, and his breath came quick.

"Very well, Widow Fairbanks," fell distinctly on Ralph's hearing, "what's the matter with that good-for-nothing son of yours going to work and paying the honest debts of the family?"

CHAPTER II-WAKING UP

Ralph recognized that strident voice at once. It belonged to Gasper Farrington, one of the wealthiest men of Stanley Junction, and one of the meanest.

Whenever Ralph had met the man, and he met him often, one fact had been vividly impressed upon his mind. Gasper Farrington had a natural antipathy for all boys in general, and for Ralph Fairbanks in particular.

The Criterion Baseball Club was a feature with juvenile Stanley Junction, yet they had many a privilege abrogated through the influence of Farrington. He had made complaints on the most trivial pretexts, winning universal disrespect and hatred from the younger population.

More than once he had put himself out to annoy Ralph. In one instance the latter had stood for the rights of the club in a lawyer-like manner. He had beaten Farrington and the town board combined on technical legal grounds as to the occupancy of a central ball field, and Ralph's feelings towards the crabbed old capitalist had then settled down to dislike, mingled with a certain silent independence that nettled Farrington considerably.

He had publicly dubbed Ralph "the ringleader of those baseball hoodlums," a stricture passed up by the club with indifference.

Ralph never set his eyes on Farrington but he was reminded of

his father. John Fairbanks had come to Stanley Junction before the Great Northern was even thought of. He had thought of it first. A practical railroad man, he had gone through all the grades of promotion of an Eastern railway system, and had become a division superintendent.

He had some money when he came to Stanley Junction. He foresaw that the town would one day become a tactical center in railroad construction, submitted a plan to some capitalists, and was given supervisory work along the line.

His minor capital investment in the enterprise was obscured by mightier interests later on, but before he died it was generally supposed that he held quite an amount of the bonds of the railroad, mutually with Gasper Farrington.

It was a surprise to his widow, and to friends generally of the Fairbanks family, when, after Mr. Fairbanks' death, a few hundred dollars in the bank and the homestead, with a twelve-hundred dollar mortgage on it in favor of Gasper Farrington, were found to comprise the total estate.

Mrs. Fairbanks discovered letters, memoranda and receipts showing that her deceased husband and Farrington had been mutually engaged in several business enterprises, but they were vague and fragmentary, and, after ascertaining from her the extent of her documentary evidence, Farrington bluntly declared he had been a loser by her husband.

He professed a friendship for the dead railroader, however, and in a patronizing way offered to help the widow out of her

difficulties by taking the homestead off her hands for the amount of the mortgage, "and making no trouble."

Mrs. Fairbanks had promptly informed him that she had no intention of selling out, and for two years, until the present time, had been able to meet the quarterly interest on the mortgage when due.

Gaspar Farrington was now on one of his periodical visits on business to the cottage, but as, right at the home threshold, and in the presence of the gentle, loving-hearted widow, he gave utterance to the scathing remark still burning in the listener's ears, a boy of true spirit, Ralph's soul seemed suddenly to expand as though it would burst with indignation and excitement.

Many times Ralph had asked his mother concerning their actual business relations with Gaspar Farrington, but she had put him off with the evasive remark that he was "too young to understand."

But now he seemed to understand. The spiteful tone of the crabbed old capitalist implied that he indulged in the present malicious outburst because in some way he had the widow in his power.

Ralph took an instantaneous step forward, but paused. He could trust his mother to retain her dignity on all occasions, and he recalled her frequent directions to him to never act on an angry impulse.

Now he could see into the room. His mother stood by her sewing basket, a slight flush of indignation on her face.

Farrington squirmed against the doorway, fumbling his cane, and puffing and purple with violent internal commotion.

"Then what's the matter with that idle, good-for-nothing, son of yours going to work and paying the honest debts of the family!" he stormily repeated.

The widow looked up. Her lips fluttered, but she said calmly: "Mr. Farrington, Ralph is neither idle nor good-for-nothing."

"Huh! aint! What's he good for?"

The widow's face became momentarily glorified, the true mother love shone in the depths of her pure, clear eyes.

"He is the best son a mother ever had." She spoke with a tremor that made Ralph thrill, and must have made Farrington squirm.

"He is affectionate, obedient, considerate. And that is why I have never burdened his young shoulders with my troubles."

"It's high time, then!" snarled Farrington—"a big, overgrown bumpkin! Guess he'll shoulder some responsibility soon, or some one else will, or you'll all be without a shelter."

Ralph felt a sinking at the heart at the vague threat. He was relieved, however, as anxiously glancing at his mother's face he observed that she was not a whit disturbed or frightened.

"Mr. Farrington," she said, "Ralph has nothing to do with our business affairs, but I wish to say this: I am satisfied that my dead husband left means we have never been able to trace. It lies between your conscience and yourself to say how much more you know about this than I do. I have accepted the situation,

however, and with the few dollars in ready money he left me, and my sewing, I have managed to so far give Ralph a fair education. He has well deserved the sacrifice. He has been foremost in every athletic sport, a leader and of good influence with his mates, and was the best scholar at the school, last term."

"Oho! prize pupil in the three R's!" sneered Farrington-"Counts high, that honor does!"

"It is a step upwards, humble though it be," retorted Mrs. Fairbanks proudly. "If he does as well in his academic career-"

"In his what?" fairly bellowed Farrington. "Is the woman crazy? You don't mean to tell me, madam, that you have any such wild idea in your head as sending him to college?"

"I certainly have."

"Then you'll never make it-you'll waste your dollars, and bring him up a pampered ingrate, and he's a sneak if he allows his old mother to dig and slave her fingers off for his worthless pleasure!"

A faint flush crossed the widow's face. Ralph burst the bounds. He sprang forward, and confronted the astonished magnate so abruptly that in the confusion of the moment, Farrington dropped his cane.

"Mr. Farrington," said Ralph, striving hard to keep control of himself, "my mother is not old, but I am-older than I was an hour ago, I can tell you! old enough to understand what I never knew before, and-"

"Hello!" sniffed Farrington, "what's this your business?"

"I just overheard you say it was essentially my business," answered Ralph. "I begin to think so myself. At all events, I'm going to take a hand in my mother's affairs hereafter. If I have hitherto been blind to the real facts, it was because I had the best mother in the world, and never realized the big sacrifice she was making for me."

"Bah!"

"Mr. Farrington," continued Ralph, seeming to grow two inches taller under the influence of some new, elevating idea suddenly finding lodgment in his mind, "as a person fully awakened to his own general worthlessness and idle, good-for-nothing character, and in duty bound to pay the honest debts of the family-to quote your own words-what is your business here?"

"My business!" gasped Farrington, "you, you-none of your business! Mrs. Fairbanks," he shouted, waving his cane and almost exploding with rage, "I've said my say, and I shan't stay here to be insulted by a pert chit of a boy. You'd better think it over! I'll give you five hundred dollars to surrender the house and get out of Stanley Junction. Decline that, and fail to pay me the interest due to-day, and I'll close down on you-I'll sell you out!"

"Can he do it?" whispered Ralph, in an anxious tone.

"No, Ralph," said his mother. "Mr. Farrington, I believe I have thirty days in which to pay the interest?"

"It's due to-day."

"I believe I have thirty days," went on the widow quietly. "It is the first time I have been delinquent. I have even now within

twenty dollars of the amount. Before the thirty days are over you shall have your money."

"I'll serve you legal notice before night!" growled Farrington-"I don't wait on promises, I don't!"

There were hot words hovering on Ralph's lips. It would do him good, he felt, to give the heartless old capitalist a piece of his mind. A glance from his mother checked him.

She was the gracious, courteous lady in every respect as she ushered her unpleasant visitor from the house.

Her heart was full in more ways than one as she returned to the little sitting room. A predominating emotion filled her thoughts. She understood Ralph's mind thoroughly, and realized that circumstances had, as he had himself declared, "awakened him."

She had intuitively traced in his manner and words a change from careless, boyish impetuosity to settled, manly resolution, and was thankful in her heart of hearts.

"Ralph!" she called softly.

But Ralph was gone.

CHAPTER III-A LOST BALL

Ralph Fairbanks had "woke up," had seen a great light, had formed a mighty resolution all in a minute, and was off like a flash.

As he bolted through the doorway it seemed as if wings impelled him.

He realized what a good mother he had, and how much she had done for him.

Following that was one overwhelming conclusion: to prove how he appreciated the fact.

"Yes," he said, as he hurried along, "I'd be a sneak to let my mother slave while I went sliding easy through life. If I've done it so far, it was because I never guessed there wasn't something left from father's estate to support us, and never stopped to think that there mightn't be. She's hidden everything from me, in her kind, good way. Well, I'll pay her back. I see the nail I'm to hit on the head, and I'll drive it home before I'm twenty-four hours older!"

Gasper Farrington had opened a gate on the highway of Ralph Fairbanks' tranquil existence, and, though he never meant it, had aroused the boy's soul to a sudden conception of duty. And Ralph had seen the path beyond, clear and distinct.

It seemed to him as if with one wave of his hand he had swept aside all the fervid dreams of boyhood, formed a resolution, set his mark, and was started in that very minute on a brand-new life.

Ralph did not slacken his gait until he reached a square easily identified as a much used ball grounds.

Over in one corner was a flat, rambling structure. It had once been somebody's home, had fallen into decay and vacancy. The club had rented it for a nominal sum, fixed it up a bit, and this was headquarters.

Over the door hung the purple pennant of the club, bearing in its center a broad, large "C." In the doorway sat Ned Talcott, an ambitious back-stop, who spent most of his time about the place, never tired of the baseball atmosphere.

He looked curiously at Ralph's flustered appearance, but the latter nodded silently, passed inside, and then called out:

"Come in here, Ned-I want to see you."

Ned was by his side in a jiffy. An enthusiast, he fairly worshiped his expert whole-souled captain, and counted it an honor to do anything for him.

"None of the crowd here, I see," remarked Ralph. "Got your uniform yet, Ned?"

"Why, no," answered Ned. "I've got the cloth picked out, and it's all right. Father's away, though, and as we won't need the suits for show till the new series begin next week, I didn't hurry."

"We're about of a size," went on Ralph, looking his companion over.

"And resemblance stops right there, eh?" chuckled Ned.

"I was thinking," pursued Ralph with business-like terseness, as he unfastened the door of his locker. "Maybe we could strike

a trade? I want to sell."

He drew out his baseball uniform, tastily reposing in a big pasteboard box just as he had brought it from the tailor that morning.

"I've been thinking maybe I could strike a deal with some one to take this off my hands," he added.

"Eh!" ejaculated Ned, in a bewildered way.

"Yes, you see it's brand-new, whole outfit complete, haven't even put it on yet."

"You'll look nobby in it when you do have it on!"

Ralph said nothing on this score, compressing his lips a trifle.

"It cost me eight dollars," he continued, after a moment's silence.

"Yes, I know that's the regular price."

"It fits you, or, with very slight alteration, can be made to. I wish you'd try it on, Ned, and give me five dollars for it."

"Why, I don't understand, Ralph?" faltered Ned, completely puzzled.

Ralph winced. He realized that there would be a general commotion when he told the rest of the club what he was now vaguely intimating to Ned Talcott.

Ralph did not flatter himself a particle when he comprehended that every member of the nine was his friend, champion and admirer, and that a general protest would go up from the ranks when he announced his intentions.

"Is it a bargain?" he asked, smiling quizzically at Ned's

puzzled face. "See here, I'd better out with it. I shan't need the uniform, Ned, because I've got to resign from the club."

"Oh, never!" vociferated Ned, starting back in dismay. "Say, now-"

"Yes, say that again, Ralph Fairbanks!" broke in a challenging voice.

Ralph was shaken a trifle by the unexpected interruption. His lips set even a little firmer, however, as he turned and faced his trusty first baseman, Will Cheever, and in his train four other members of the club.

"It's true," said Ralph seriously, "just as it is sudden and sure. I've got to drop athletics as a sport, fellows-for a time, anyhow-and I've got to do it right away."

"You're dreaming!" scoffed Cheever, bustling up in his inimitable, push-ahead way, and pulling Ralph playfully about. "Resign? Huh! On the last test game-with the pennant almost ours? Gag him!"

"Why," drawled a tone of pathetic alarm, "it would be rank treachery, you know!"

"Hello, are you awake?" jeered Will, turning on the last speaker.

Ralph looked at him too, and through some wayward perversity of his nature his face grew more determined than ever. His eyes flashed quickly, and he regarded the speaker with disfavor, but he kept silence.

"You won't do it, you know!" blundered the newcomer,

making his way forward. "It would queer the whole kit. What have we been working for? To get the bulge, and run the circuit. Why, I've just counted on it!"

Grif Farrington, for that was the speaker's name, expressed the intensest sense of personal injury as he spoke.

He was the nephew of Gasper Farrington, although he did not resemble his uncle in any striking particular as to form or feature. Both were of the same genus, however, for the crabbed capitalist was universally designated "a shark" by his neighbors.

Grif was a fat, overgrown fellow, with big saucer eyes and flabby cheeks and chin. "Bullhead" some of the boys had dubbed him. But they often found that what they mistook for stupidity was in reality indolence, and that in any deal where his own selfish concern was involved Grif managed to come out the winner.

As Ralph did not speak, Grif grew even more voluble.

"I say, it would be rank treachery!" he declared. "And a shame to treat a club so. If we lose this game we're ditched for only scrub home games. Win it, and we are the champion visiting club all over the county. That's what we have been working for. Are you going to spoil it? Haven't I put up like a man when the club was behind. See here, Ralph Fairbanks, I'll give you-I'll make it five dollars if you'll keep in for just this afternoon's game."

"Shut up, you chump!" warned Will Cheever, slipping between the boor and Ralph, whose color was rising dangerously fast.

Will pushed aside Grif's pocketbook, linked an arm in that of Ralph, and led him from the building, winking encouragingly to his mates.

He came back to the group in about a quarter of an hour, but alone.

"Fixed it?" inquired half a dozen eager voices.

"Yes, I've fixed it," said Cheever, though none too cordially. "He's going to leave us, fellows, and it's too bad! He'll play the game this afternoon, but that's the last."

"What's up?" put in Grif Farrington, in his usual coarsely inquisitive way.

"You was nearly up-or down!" snapped Cheever tartly. "You nearly spoiled things for us. Money isn't everything, if you have got lots of it, and haven't the sense to know that it's an insult to offer to buy what Ralph Fairbanks would give to his friends for nothing, or not at all!"

When the game was called at two o'clock, Ralph was on hand.

He was the object of more than ordinary interest to his own and the opposition club that afternoon. The word had gone the rounds that he had practically resigned from service, and the fact caused great speculation. His nearest friends detected a certain serious change in him that puzzled them. They knew him well enough to discern that something of unusual weight lay upon his mind.

According to enthusiastic little Tom Travers, Ralph Fairbanks was "just splendid!" that afternoon. Whatever Ralph had on his

mind, he did not allow it to interfere with the work on hand.

Ralph was the heaviest batter of the club, and on this particular occasion he conducted himself brilliantly, and the pennant was the property of the Criterions long before the fifth inning was completed. The club was in ecstasies, and Grif Farrington, who had money and time for spending it, wore a grin of placid self-satisfaction on his flat, fat face.

"Whoop!" yelled Will Cheever, as the ninth inning went out in a blaze of baseball glory.

Will posed to give Ralph, bat in hand, a royal "last one." It was Ralph's farewell to the beloved diamond field. He poised the bat and caught the ball with a masterly stroke that had something cannon-like in its execution.

Crack! he sent it flying obliquely, and felt as if with that final stroke he had driven baseball with all its lovely attributes dear out of his life.

Smash! the ball grazed the high brick wall around the old unused factory to the left, struck an upper window, shattered a pane to atoms, and disappeared.

"Lost ball!" jeered little Tom Travers.

No one went after it. The fence surrounding the factory bore two signs that deterred-one was "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted," and the other announced that it was "For Rent, by the owner, Gasper Farrington."

Ralph made a grimace, and a mental note of later mending the breakage for which he was responsible.

Will Cheever caught him up as he was heading for home.

"See here, Ralph," he remarked, "if you wasn't so abominably close-mouthed-

"About what?" challenged Ralph, pleasantly serious. "Why, there's no mystery about my resigning. I had to do it."

"Why?"

"I've got to go to work. My mother needs the money, and I'm old enough."

"What you going to work at?" inquired Will, with real interest.

"Railroading, – if I can get it to do."

CHAPTER IV-IKE

SLUMP'S DINNER PAIL

Ralph hurried home. His mother had gone temporarily to some neighbors, he judged, for the house was open, and the midday lunch he had purposely avoided was still spread on the table.

He ate with a zest, but in a hurry. His mind was working actively, and he hoped to accomplish results before he had an interview with his mother, and was glad when he got away from the house again without meeting her.

Ralph went down to the depot. He was not in a communicative mood, and did not exchange greetings with many friends there. When the 5.11 train came in there were two packages to deliver. He attended to these promptly, and was back at the express shed just as the agent was closing up for the day.

"All square, Fairbanks?" he inquired, as Ralph handed him the receipt book.

"Yes," nodded Ralph. "They paid me. I want to thank you for all the little jobs you have thrown in my way, Mr. More. It has helped me through wonderfully. You haven't anything permanent you could fit me into, have you?"

"Eh?" ejaculated the agent, with a critical stare at Ralph. "Why, no. Looking for a regular job, Fairbanks?"

"I've got to," answered Ralph.

"Railroading?"

"Any branch of it."

"For steady?"

"Yes, I think it's my line."

"I think so, too," nodded the agent decisively, "You haven't made loaf and play of what little you've done for me. There's no show here, though. I get only forty-five dollars a month, and have to help with the freight at that, but if you are headed for the presidency--"

Ralph smiled.

"Start in the right way, and that is at the bottom of the ladder. You don't want office work?"

"That would take me to general headquarters at Springfield," demurred Ralph, "and I don't want to leave mother alone--just yet."

"I see. There's nothing at the shops down at Acton, where you could go and come home every day, except a trade, and you're not the boy to stop at master mechanic."

"Oh, come now! Mr. More--"

"You can't look too far ahead," declared the agent sapiently. "Dropping jollying, though, we narrow down to real service. There's your Starting point, my boy, plain, sure and simple, and don't you forget it--and don't you miss it!"

He extended his finger down the rails.

"The roundhouse?" said Ralph, following his indication.

"The roundhouse, Fairbanks, the first step, and I never knew a genuine, all-around railroad man who didn't make his start in the business in the oil bins."

"What is the main qualification to recommend a fellow?" asked Ralph.

"An old suit of clothes, a tough hide, and lots of grit."

"I think, then, I can come well indorsed," laughed Ralph. "Whom do I see?"

"Usually the ambitious father of a future railway president goes through the regular application course at headquarters," explained the agent, "but if you want quick action-"

"I do."

"See the foreman."

"Who is he?"

"Tim Forgan. If he takes you on, and you get to be a fixture, the application route is handy later, when you think you deserve promotion."

"Thank you," said Ralph, and walked away thoughtfully.

He had five dollars in his pocket that Ned Talcott had given him for his uniform, and eighty cents in loose change. This made Ralph feel quite free and easy. He had not a single disturbing thought on his mind at present except the broken window at the old factory, and that was easily fixed up, he told himself.

So, in quite an elevated frame of mind, Ralph walked down the rails. The roundhouse was his objective point. Ralph had been there many a time before, but only as a visitor.

Now he was interested in a practical way, and the oil sheds, dog house, turntable and other adjuncts of this favored center of activity fascinated him more than ever.

He had a nodding acquaintance with some of the firemen and engineers, but was not fortunate enough to meet any of these on the present occasion.

Ralph went along the hard-beaten cinder path, worn by many feet, that circled the one-story structure which sheltered the locomotives, and glancing through the high-up open windows caught the railroad flavor more and more as he viewed the stalls holding this and that puffing, dying or stone-dead "iron horse."

Over the sill of one of these windows there suddenly protruded a black, greasy hand holding a square dinner pail. It came out directly over Ralph's head, and halted him.

Its owner sounded a low whistle and a return whistle quite as low and suspicious echoed behind Ralph.

"Take it, and hustle!" followed from beyond the window, and almost mechanically Ralph Fairbanks put up his hand, the handle of the pail slipped into his fingers, and he uttered an ejaculation.

For the pail was as heavy as if loaded with gold, and bore him quite doubled down before he got his equilibrium. Then it was jerked from his grasp, and a gruff voice said:

"Hands off! What you meddling for?"

"Meddling?" retorted Ralph abruptly, and looked the speaker over with suspicion. He was a ragged, unkempt man of about forty, with a swarthy, vicious face. "I was told to take it, wasn't I?"

"Hullo! what's up? Who are you? Oh! Fairbanks."

The speaker was the person who had passed out the dinner pail, and who, apparently aroused by the colloquy outside, had clambered to a bench, and now thrust his head out of the window. He looked startled at first, then directed a quick, meaning glance at the tramp, who disappeared as if by magic. The boy overhead scowled darkly at Ralph, and then thought better of it, and tried to appear friendly.

"I give the poor beggar what's left of my dinner for carrying my pail home, so I won't be bothered with it," he said.

The speaker's face showed he did not at all believe that keen-witted Ralph Fairbanks accepted this gauzy explanation, after hefting that pail, but Ralph said nothing.

"What's up, Fairbanks?" inquired his shock-headed interlocutor at the window-"sort of inspecting things?"

Ralph, preparing to pass on, nodded silently.

"Trying to break in, eh?"

"Is there any chance?" inquired Ralph, pausing slightly.

Ike Slump laughed boisterously. He was a year or two older than Ralph, but had a face prematurely developed with cunning and tobacco, and looked twenty-five.

"Yes," he said, "if you're anxious to get boiled, blistered, oiled and blinded twenty times a day, be kicked from platform to pit, and paid just about enough to buy arnica and sticking plaster!"

"Bad as that?" interrogated Ralph dubiously.

"For a fact!"

"Oh, well-there's something beyond."

"Beyond what?"

"When you get out of the oil and cinders, and up into the sand and steam."

"Huh! lots of chance. I've been here six months, and I haven't had a smell of firing yet-even second best."

Ralph again nodded, and again started on. He did not care to have anything to do with Ike Slump. The latter belonged to the hoodlum gang of Stanley Junction, and whenever his crowd had met the better juvenile element, there had always been trouble.

Ike's ferret face worked queerly as he noted Ralph's departure. He seemed struggling with uneasy emotions, as if one or two troublesome thoughts bothered him.

"Hold on, Fairbanks!" he called, edging farther over the sill. "I say, that dinner pail-"

"Oh, I'm not interested in your dinner pail," observed Ralph.

"Course not-what is there to be curious about? I say, though, was you in earnest about getting a job here?"

"I must get work somewhere."

"And it will be railroading?"

"If I can make it,"

"You're the kind that wins," acknowledged Ike. "Got any coin, now?"

"Suppose I have?"

Ike's weazel-like eyes glowed.

"Suppose you have? Then I can steer you up against a real

investment of the A1 class."

Ralph looked quizzically incredulous.

"I can," persisted Ike Slump. "You want to get in here to work, don't you? Well, you can't make it."

"Why can't I?"

"Without my help-I can give you that help. You give me a dollar, and I'll give you a tip."

"What kind of a tip?"

"About a vacancy."

"Is there going to be one?"

"There is, I can tell you when, and I can give you first chance on the game, and deliver the goods."

Ralph was interested.

"If you are telling the truth," he said finally, "I'd risk half a dollar."

Ralph took out the coin. A sight of it settled the matter for Ike. He reached for it eagerly.

"All right, I'm the vacancy. You watch around, for soon as I get my pay to-morrow I'm going to bolt. It's confidential, though, Fairbanks-you'll remember that?"

"Oh, sure."

Ike Slump was a notorious liar, but Ralph believed him in the present instance. Anyhow, he felt he was making progress. He planned to be on hand the next day, prepared for the expected vacancy, and incidentally wondered what had made Ike Slump's dinner pail so tremendously heavy, and, also, as to the identity of

the trampish individual who had disappeared with it so abruptly.

He wandered about half a mile down the tracks where they widened out from the main line into the freight yards, and selected a pile of ties remote from any present activity in the neighborhood to have a quiet think.

He determined to see the foreman, Tim Forgan, the first thing in the morning, and discover what the outlook was in general. If absolutely turned down, he would await the announced resignation of Mr. Ike Slump.

Ralph understood that a green engine wiper in the roundhouse was paid six dollars a week to commence on if a boy, nine dollars if a man. He picked up a torn freight ticket drifting by in the breeze, and fell to figuring industriously, and the result was pleasant and reassuring.

Ralph looked up, as with prodigious whistlings a single locomotive came tearing down the rails, took the outer main track, and was lost to sight.

Not two minutes later a second described the same maneuver. Ralph arose, wondering somewhat.

Looking down the rails towards the depot, he noticed unusual activity in the vicinity of the roundhouse.

A good many hands were gathered at the turntable, as if some excitement was up. Then a third engine came down the rails rapidly, and Ralph noticed that the main "out" signal was turned to "clear tracks."

As the third locomotive passed him, he noticed that the

engineer strained his sight ahead in a tensioned way, and the fireman piled in the coal for the fullest pressure head of steam.

Ralph made a start for home, reached a crossroad, and was turning down it when a new shrill series of whistles directed his attention to locomotive No. 4. It came down the rails in the same remarkable and reckless manner as its recent predecessors.

"Something's up!" decided Ralph, with an uncontrollable thrill of interest and excitement-"I wonder what?"

CHAPTER V-OPPORTUNITY

The boy turned and ran back to the culvert crossing just as the fourth locomotive whizzed past the spot.

He waved his hand and yelled out an inquiry as to what was up, but cab and tender flashed by in a sheet of steam and smoke.

He recognized the engineer, however. It was gruff old John Griscom, and in the momentary glimpse Ralph had of his hard, rugged face he looked grimmer than ever.

Ralph marveled at his presence here, for Griscom had the crack run of the road, the 10.15, driven by the biggest twelve-wheeler on the line, and was something of an industrial aristocrat. The locomotive he now propelled was a third-class freight engine, and had no fireman on the present occasion so far as could be seen.

Ralph knew enough about runs, specials and extras, to at once comprehend that something very unusual had happened, or was happening.

Whatever it was, extreme urgency had driven out this last locomotive, for Griscom wore his off-duty suit, and it was plain to be seen had not had time to change it.

Ralph's eyes blankly followed the locomotive. Then he started after it. Five hundred feet down the rails, a detour of a gravel pit sent the tracks rounding to a stretch, below which, in a clump of greenery, half a dozen of the firemen and engineers of the road

had their homes.

With a jangle and a shiver the old heap of junk known as 99 came to a stop. Then its whistle began a series of tootings so shrill and piercing that the effect was fairly ear-splitting.

Ralph recognized that they were telegraphic in their import. Very often, he knew, locomotives would sound a note or two, slow up just here to take hands down to the roundhouse, but old Griscom seemed not only calling some one, but calling fiercely and urgently, and adding a whole volume of alarm warnings.

Ralph kept on down the track and doubled his pace, determined now to overtake the locomotive and learn the cause of all this rush and commotion.

As he neared 99, he discerned that the veteran engineer was hustling tremendously. Usually impassive and exact when in charge of the superb 10.15, he was now a picture of almost irritable activity.

Having thrown off his coat, he fired in some coal, impatiently gave the whistle a further exercise, and leaning from the cab window yelled lustily towards the group of houses beyond the embankment.

Just as Ralph reached the end of the tender, he saw emerging from the shaded path down the embankment a girl of twelve. He recognized her as the daughter of jolly Sam Cooper, the fireman.

She was breathless and pale, and she waved her hand up to the impatient engineer with an agitated:

"Was you calling pa, Mr. Griscom?"

"Was I calling him!" growled the gruff old bear-"did he think I was piping for the birds?"

"Oh, Mr. Griscom, he can't come, he-"

"He's got to come! It's life and death! Couldn't he tell it, when he saw me on this crazy old wreck, and shoving up the gauge to bursting point. Don't wait a second-he's got to come!"

"Oh, Mr. Griscom, he's in bed, crippled. Ran into a scythe in the garden, and his ankle is cut terrible. Mother's worried to death, and he won't be able to take the regular run for days and days."

Old Griscom stormed like a pirate. He glared down the tracks towards the roundhouse. Then he shouted ferociously:

"Tell Evans to come, then-not a minute to lose!"

"Mr. Evans has gone for the doctor, for pa," answered the girl.

Griscom nearly had a fit. He flung his big arms around as if he wanted to smash something. He glanced at his watch, and slapped his hand on the lever with an angry yell.

"Can't go back for an extra!" Ralph heard him shout, "and what'll I do? Rot the road! I'll try it alone, but-"

He gave the lever a jerk, the wheels started up. Ralph thought he understood the situation. He sprang to the step.

"Get out-no junketing here-life and death-Hello, Fairbanks!"

"Mr. Griscom," spoke Ralph, "what's the trouble?"

"Trouble-the shops at Acton are on fire, not a locomotive within ten miles, and all the transfer freight hemmed in."

Ralph felt a thrill of interest and excitement.

"Is that so?" he breathed. "I see-they need help?"

"I guess so, and quick. Out of the way!"

The old engineer hustled about the cab, set the machinery whizzing at top-notch speed, and seized the fire shovel.

"Mr. Griscom," cried Ralph, catching on by a sort of inspiration, "let me-let me do that."

"Eh-what-"

Ralph drew the shovel from his unresisting hands.

"You can't do both," he insisted-"you can't drive and fire. Just tell me what to do."

"Can you shovel coal?"

"I can try."

"Here, not that way-" as Ralph opened the furnace door in a clumsy manner. "That's it, more-hustle, kid! That'll do. No talking, now."

Griscom sprang to the cushion. For two minutes he was absorbed, looking ahead, timing himself, reading the gauge, in a fume and sweat, like a trained greyhound eager to strike the home stretch.

Suddenly he ran his head and shoulders far past the window sill, and uttered one of his characteristic alarm yells.

"Rot the road!" he shouted. "No flags!"

He reached over for the tool box, and slammed up its cover. He pawed over a dozen or more soiled flags of different colors, snatched up two, shook out their white folds, and then, as the speeding engine nearly jumped the track at a switch, flopped

back the lever.

"Set them," he ordered.

In his absorbed excitement he seemed to forget the dangerous mission he was setting, for a novice, Ralph did not ask a question. He threw in some coal, then taking the flags in one hand, he crept out through the forward window.

It was his first experience in that line. The swishing wind, the teeter-like swaying of the engine, the driving hail of cinders, all combined to daunt and confuse him, but he clung to the engine rail, gained the pilot, set one flag in its socket, then with a stooping swing the other, and felt his way back to the cab, flushed with satisfaction, but glad to feel a safe footing once more.

Griscom glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, with a growl that might mean approbation or anything else.

"Fire her up," he ordered.

Ralph had little leisure during the twenty miles run that followed—he did not know till afterwards that they covered it in exactly thirty minutes, a remarkable record for old 99.

As they whirled by stations he noticed a crowd at each. As they rounded the last timbered curve to the south his glance took in a startling sight just ahead of them.

On a lower level stood the car shops. He could see the site in the near distance like a person looking down from an observation tower.

The setting sun made the west a glow of red. Against it were set the shop yards in a yellow dazzle of flame.

A broad sheet of fire ran in and out from building to building, fanned by the fierce breeze. On twenty different tracks, winding about among the structures, were as many freight trains.

This was a general transfer point to a belt line tapping to the south. Two of the engines from Stanley Junction were now rushing towards the outer trains which the flames had not yet reached, to haul them out of the way of the fire. No. 99 whizzed towards this network of rails, hot on the heels of the third locomotive.

The general scene beggared description. Crowds were rushing from the residence settlement near by, an imperfect fire apparatus was at work, and railroad hands were loading trucks with platform freight and carting it to the nearest unexposed space.

Ralph was panting and in a reek from his unusual exertions, but not a bit tired. Griscom directed a critical glance at him, caught the excited and determined sparkle in his eye, and said in a tone of satisfaction:

"You'll do-if you can stand it out."

"Don't get anybody else, if I will do," said Ralph quickly. "I like it."

Griscom slowed up, shouted to a switchman ahead, using his hand for a speaking trumpet, to set the rails for action. He took advantage of the temporary stop to rake and sift the furnace, put things in trim in expert fireman-like order, and turned to Ralph.

"Now then," he said, "your work's plain-just keep her

buzzing."

A yard hand jumped to the pilot with a wave of his arm. Down a long reach of tracks they ran, coupled to some twenty grain cars, backed, set the switch for a safe siding, and came steaming forward for new action.

Little old 99 seemed at times ready to drop to pieces, but she stood the test bravely, braced, tugged and scolded terribly in every loose point and knuckle, but within thirty minutes had conveyed over a hundred cars out of any possible range of the fire.

Ralph, at a momentary cessation of operations, wiped the grime and perspiration from his baked face, to take a scan of the fire-swept area.

A railroad official had come up to the engine, hailed Griscom, and pointed directly into the heart of the flames to where, hemmed in a narrow runway between the walls of two smoking buildings, were four freight cars.

"They'll be gone in five minutes," he observed.

"I can reach them in two," announced Griscom tersely, setting his hand to the lever. "Get a good man to couple-our share won't miss. Let her go!"

A brakeman, winding a coat around his head like a hood, and keeping one end open, sprang to the cowcatcher, link and bar ready.

Ralph shuddered as they ran into the mouth of the lane. It was choked with smoke, burning cinders fell in showers on and under

the cab.

"Shove in the coal-shove in the coal!" roared Griscom, eyes ahead, lever under a tensioned control. "Good for you!" he shouted to the nervy brakeman as there was a bump and a snap. "Reverse. We've made it!"

A sweep of flame wreathed the pilot. The air was suffocating. Ralph staggered at his work. As the locomotive reversed and drew quickly out of that dangerous vortex of flame, the boy noticed that the last of the four cars was blazing at the roof.

"Just in time," he heard old Griscom chuckle. "Hot? Whew!"

He set the wheels whirling on the fast backward spin, and stuck his head out of the window to shout encouragingly to the huddled, smoking hero on the pilot.

They were passing a brick building, almost grazing its windows, just then. Of a sudden a curl of smoke from one of these was succeeded by a bursting roar, a leap of flame, and Ralph saw the old engineer enveloped in a blazing cloud.

An explosion had blown out the sash directly in his face. The glass, shattered to a million tiny pieces, came against him like a sheet of hail.

Ralph saw him waver and sprang to his side. The engineer's face was cut in a dozen places, and he had closed his eyes.

"Mr. Griscom," cried Ralph, "are you hurt much?"

"Keep her going," muttered the old hero hoarsely, straightening up, "only, only-tell me."

"You can't see?" breathed Ralph.

"Do as I tell you," came the grim order.

"Switch," said Ralph, in strained, subdued tones as they passed out of the fire belt, ran forward, uncoupled, and sent the four cars down a safe siding, the brakeman and a crowd running after it to extinguish the burning roof of one of the freights.

Ralph saw Griscom strain his sight and blink, and shift the locomotive down a V, then to the next rails leading in among the burning buildings.

He brought the panting little worker to a pause, asked Ralph to draw a cup of water, brushed his face with his hand, and breathed heavily.

"Mr. Griscom," said Ralph, "you are badly hurt! You can't do anything more, for there's only one car left on the last track, right in the nest of the fire. Let me get somebody to help you where you can be attended to."

He placed a hand pleadingly on the engineer's arm. Old Griscom shook it off in his gruff giant way.

"What's that?" he asked.

He turned his face towards the fire. Ralph looked too, in sudden askance. A crowd surged towards two buildings, nearly consumed, between which lay a single car. The firemen who had been playing a hose just there dropped it, running for their lives.

"Get back!" yelled one of them, as he passed the engine, "or you're gone up. That's a powder car! We just found it out, and it's all ablaze!"

CHAPTER VI-THE MASTER MECHANIC

A man appearing to be a railway official shouted up an order to the haggard engineer as he rushed by.

"Get out of this-there's twenty tons of powder in that car!"

Griscom dashed his hand across his eyes. He seemed to clear them partially, and strained his gaze ahead and took in the meaning of the scene, if not all its vivid outlines, and muttered:

"If that stuff goes off, the whole yards are doomed."

Ralph hung on the engineer's words and hovered at his elbow.

"We had better get out of this, Mr. Griscom," he suggested.

The engineer made a rough, impatient gesture with his arm, and then pulled his young helper to the window.

"Look sharp!" he ordered,

"Yes, Mr. Griscom."

"My-my eyes are pretty bad. When the smoke lifts-what's beyond the car yonder?"

"I can't make out exactly, but I think a clear track."

"How's the furnace?"

"Rushing."

"All right. Now then, you jump off. I'm going to let her go."

Ralph stared hard at the grim old veteran. He could see he was on the verge of physical collapse, and he wondered if his mind

was not tottering too; his pertinacity had something weird and astonishing in it.

"Jump!" ordered Griscom, giving the lever a pull.

Ralph did not budge. As he clearly read his companion's purpose, he made up his mind to stick.

The prospect was something awful, and yet, after the previous experiences of that exciting half-hour, he had somehow become inured to danger, and reckless of its risks. The excitement and wild, hustling activity bore a certain stimulating fascination.

With a leap 99 bounded forward at the magic touch of the old king of the lever. It plunged headlong into a whirling vortex of smoke.

A groaning yell went up from the fugitive crowds in the distance, as the intrepid occupants, of the cab disappeared like lost spirits.

Only for the shelter of the cab roof, they would have been deluged with burning sparks.

A tongue of flame took Griscom across the side of his face, and he uttered an angry yell-it seemed to madden him that he could not see clearly. Then as they struck the car they were making for with a heavy thump, the shock and a spasm of weakness drove Griscom from the cushion, and he slipped to the floor of the cab.

Ralph's mind grasped the situation in all its details. He knew the engineer's purpose, and he felt that it was incumbent on him to carry it out if he could do so. He stepped over his recumbent

companion, and placed his hand on the lever.

He could not now see ten feet ahead. They were in the very vortex of the fire. Suddenly they shot into the clear, cool air, bracing as a shower bath.

The cab roof was smoking, the cab floor was paved with burning cinders, and some oil waste was blazing back among the coal at the edge of the tender.

Ahead, the top and sides of the powder car were sheeted with flames, which the swift forward movement drove back in shroud-like form.

On the end of the car facing, the grim, black warning: "Powder! Danger!" stared squarely and menacingly into the eye of the pilot front.

Griscom struggled to his feet. He fell against Ralph. The latter thought he was delirious, for his lips were moving, and his tortured face working spasmodically. Finally he said weakly: "Put my hands on the gearing. We're out of it?"

"Yes, but the car is blazing."

"What's ahead?"

"Dead tracks for nearly a thousand feet."

"And the dump pit beyond?"

"It looks so," said Ralph, leaning from the window and glancing ahead anxiously. "Yes, it's rusted rails clear up to what looks like a slough hole, and no buildings beyond."

He held his breath as Griscom pulled the momentum up another notch. This last effort palsied the engineer, his fingers

relaxed, and he slipped again to the floor, nerveless but writhing.

"Keep her going-full speed for five hundred feet," he panted. "Then stop her."

"Yes," breathed Ralph quickly. "Stop her-how," he projected, knowing in a way, but wanting to be sure, for the sense of crisis was strong on him, and the present was no time to make mistakes. Griscom's directions came quick and clear, and Ralph obeyed every indication with promptness.

Ninety-nine with its deadly pilot of destruction plunged ahead. Ralph estimated distance. He threw himself upon the lever, and reversed.

The wheels shivered to a sliding halt. He ran back rapidly five hundred feet, slowed down, and half hung out of the window, white as a sheet and limp as a rag.

A glance towards the burning shops had shown the firemen back at their work; the powder-car menace removed. Ralph, too, saw little crowds rounding the shops, and making towards them.

Then he fixed his eyes on the lone-speeding powder car.

It had been thrown at full-tilt impetus, and drove away and ahead, a living firebrand, reached the end of the rusted rails, ran off the roadbed, tilted, careened, took a sliding header, and disappeared from view.

Even at the distance of a thousand feet Ralph could hear a prodigious splash. A cascade of water shot up, and then a steamy smoke, and then there lifted, torrent-like, house-high above the pit, a Vesuvius of water, dirt, splinters and twisted pieces of iron.

A reverberating crash and the end had come!

Griscom struggled to his feet. On his face there was a grimace meant for a smile, and he chuckled:

"We made it!"

He managed with Ralph's help to get into the engineer's seat.

"Mr. Griscom," said Ralph, "you're in bad shape. We can't get back the way we came, but if you could walk as far as the offices we might find a doctor."

"That's so, kid," nodded the old engineer, a little wearily. "I've got to get this junk and glassware out of my eyes if I run the 10.15 to-morrow."

Soon the advance stragglers of the curious crowd from the shops drew near. One little group was headed by a man of rather more imposing appearance than the section men in his train.

He was a big-faced individual who looked of uncertain temper, yet there were force and power in his bearing.

"Hello, there-that you, Griscom?" he sang out.

The engineer blinked his troubled eyes, and nodded curtly.

"It's what's left of me, Mr. Blake," he observed grimly.

Ralph caught the name and recognized the speaker-he was the master mechanic of the road.

"They're going to get the fire under control, I guess," continued Blake. "They wouldn't, though, if you hadn't got that car out of the way. Why, you're hurt, man!" exclaimed the official, really concerned as he caught a closer glimpse of the face of the engineer.

"Oh, a little scratch."

Ralph broke in. He hurriedly explained what had happened to the engineer's eyes, while the nervy Griscom tried to make little of it.

"Bring a truck out here," cried the master mechanic. "Why, man! you can't stand up! This is serious."

In about five minutes they had rolled a freight truck to the locomotive, and in ten more Griscom was under charge of one of the road surgeons, hastily summoned to a room in the yard office, where the sufferer was taken.

It took an hour to mend up the old veteran. It was lucky, the surgeon told him, that soot and putty had mixed with the glass in the explosion dose, or the patient would have been blinded for life.

Griscom could see quite comfortably when he was turned over to the master mechanic again, although his forehead was bandaged, and his cheeks dotted here and there with little criss-cross patches of sticking-plaster.

Ralph, waiting outside, had been forced to tell the story of the daring dash through the flames more than once to inquisitive railroad men. He quite obliterated himself in the recital.

The firemen had gained control of the flames, the exigency locomotives had all been sent back to the city. The master mechanic stood conversing with Griscom for a few moments after the latter left the surgeon's hands, and then approached Ralph with him. It was dusk now.

"We'll catch the 8.12, kid," announced Griscom. "That's him, Mr. Blake," he added, pointing Ralph out to his companion. "He did it, and I only helped him, and he's an all-around corker, I can tell you!"

Griscom slapped Ralph on the shoulder emphatically. The master mechanic looked at the youth grimly, yet with a glance not lacking real interest.

"From the Junction?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"What's the name?"

"Fairbanks-Ralph Fairbanks."

"Oh," said the master mechanic quickly, as if he recognized the name. "We'll remember you, Fairbanks. If I can do anything for you--"

"You can, sir." The words were out of Ralph's mouth before he intended it. "I want to learn railroading."

"Learn!" chuckled Griscom--"why! the way you worked that lever--"

"Which you needn't dwell on," interrupted the master mechanic, a harsh disciplinarian on principle. "He had no right in your locomotive, I suppose you know, and rules say you are liable for a lay off."

Griscom kept on chuckling.

"We'll forget that, though. Where do you want to start, Fairbanks?"

"Right at the bottom, sir," answered Ralph modestly.

"In the roundhouse?"

"Yes, sir."

The master mechanic drew a card from his pocket, wrote a few lines, and handed it to Ralph.

"Give that to Tim Forgan," he said simply.

To Ralph, just then, he was the greatest man in the world—he who could in ten words command the position that seemed to mean for him the entrance into the grandest realm of industry, ambition and opulence.

CHAPTER VII-AT THE ROUNDHOUSE

Ralph Fairbanks came out of the little cottage next morning after breakfast feeling bright as a dollar and happy as a lark.

He realized that a new epoch had begun in his young existence, and he stood fairly on the threshold of a fascinating experience.

Yesterday seemed like a variegated dream, and To-Day full of expectation, novelty and promise.

His mother's anxiety the evening previous had given way to pride and subdued affection, when he had appeared about ten o'clock after seeing the engineer home, and had told her in detail the story of the most eventful day of his life.

If Mrs. Fairbanks felt a natural disappointment in seeing Ralph forego the advantages of a finished education, she did not express it, for she knew that the best ambitions of his soul had been aroused, and that his loyal boyish nature had chosen a noble course.

Ralph went down to the depot and bought a Springfield morning paper. It contained a full account of the fire at the yards. It detailed the destruction of the powder car, and Griscom came in for full meed of praise. Ralph was not referred to, except as "the veteran engineer's heroic helper."

It did not take long, however, for Ralph to discover that word of mouth had run ahead of telegraphic haste.

He was hailed by a dozen acquaintances, including the depot master, the watchman, express messenger and others, who made him flush and thrill with pleasure as he guessed that old Griscom had managed to spread the real news wholesale.

"You're booked, sure!" declared More, giving his young favorite a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"Why, I imagine so myself," answered Ralph brightly, but thinking only of the master mechanic's card in his pocket.

"You're due for an interview with the president, you are," declared the enthusiastic More. "Why, you two saved the company half a million. And the pluck of it! Don't you be modest, kid. Hint for a good round reward and a soft-snap life position."

"All right," nodded Ralph gayly. "Only, I'll start at it where you told me yesterday."

"Eh?"

"Yes-at the roundhouse."

"Hold on, Fairbanks-circumstances alter cases-"

"Not in this instance. Good-bye. I expect to be in working togs before night, Mr. More."

Ralph went down the tracks, leaving the agent staring studiously after him.

He had often been inside the roundhouse, but with genuine interest stood looking about him for some minutes after stepping

beyond the broad entrance of that dome-like structure.

Not much was doing at that especial hour of the morning. Three "dead" locomotives stood in their stalls, all furbished up for later employment.

A lame helper was going over one, just arrived, with an oiled rag.

In the little apartment known as the "dog house," a dozen men chatted, snoozed, or were playing checkers-firemen, engineers and brakemen, waiting for their run, or off duty and killing time.

Ralph finally made for a box-like compartment built in one section of the place. A man was sweeping it out.

"Can you tell me where I will find the foreman?" he asked.

"Oh, the boss?"

"Yes, sir-Mr. Forgan."

"You mean Tim. He's in the dog house, I guess. Was, last I saw of him."

Ralph went to the dog house. At a rough board nailed to the wall, and answering for a desk, a big-shouldered, gruff-looking man of about fifty was scanning the daily running sheet.

Two of the loungers, firemen, knew Ralph slightly, and nodded to him. He went up to one of them.

"Is that Mr. Forgan?" he inquired in a low tone.

"That's him," nodded the fireman-"and in his precious best temper this morning, too!"

Ralph approached the fierce-visaged master of his fate.

"Mr. Forgan," he said.

The foreman looked around at him, and scowled.

"Well?" he growled out.

"Could I see you for a moment," suggested Ralph, a trifle flustered at the rude reception.

"Take a good look. I'm here, ain't I?"

Some of the idle listeners chuckled at this, and Ralph felt a trifle embarrassed, and flushed up.

"Yes, sir, and so am I," he said quietly-"on business. I wish to apply for a position."

"Oh, you do?" retorted the big foreman, running his eye contemptuously over Ralph's neat dress. "Sort of floor-walker for visitors, or brushing up the engineers' plug hats?"

"I could do that, too," asserted Ralph, good-naturedly.

"Well, you won't do much of anything here," retorted the foreman, "for there's no job open, at present. If there was, we've had quite enough of kids."

Ralph wondered if this included Ike Slump. He had been surprised at not finding that individual on duty.

The foreman now unceremoniously turned his back on him. Ralph hesitated, then torched Forgan on the arm.

"Excuse me, sir," he said courteously, "but I was told to give you this."

Ralph extended the card given to him the evening previous by the master mechanic.

The foreman took it with a jerk, and read it with a frown. Ralph was somewhat astonished as he traced the effect upon him

of the simple note, requesting, as he knew, that a place be made for him in the roundhouse.

The innocent little screed put the foreman in a violent ferment. His face grew angry and red, his throat throbbed, and his heavy jaw knotted up in a pugnacious way. He turned and glared with positive dislike and suspicion at Ralph, and the latter, quick to read faces, wondered why.

Then the foreman re-read the card, as if to gain time to get control of himself, and was so long silent that Ralph finally asked:

"Is it all right, sir?"

"Yes, it is!" snapped the foreman, turning on him like a mad bull. "I suppose Blake knows his business; I've been sent all the pikers on the line. Probably know what kind of material I want myself, though. Come again to-morrow."

"Ready for work?" asked Ralph, pressing his point.

"Yes," came the surly reply.

"What time, if you please, sir?"

"Seven."

"Thank you."

The foreman turned from him with an angry grunt, and Ralph started to leave.

One of the firemen he knew winked at him, another made an animated grimace at the surly boss. Ralph heard a third remark, in a low tone.

"What a liking he's taken to him! He'll have a fierce run for his money."

"Yes, it'll be a full course of sprouts. You won't have a path of flowers, kid."

"I shan't come here to raise flowers," answered Ralph quietly.

He trod the air as he left the roundhouse. The gruff, uncivil manner of the foreman had not daunted him a whit. He had met all kinds of men in his brief business experience, and he believed that honest, conscientious endeavor could not fail to win both success and good will in time.

Ralph went back to his friend More, at the express shed, and told his story.

"You're booked, sure enough," admitted the agent, though a little glumly. "I'd have struck higher."

"It suits me, Mr. More," declared Ralph. "And now, I want your good services of advice as to what I am expected to do, and what clothes I need."

Ralph left his friend, thoroughly posted as to his probable duties at the roundhouse. The agent advised him to purchase a cheap pair of jumpers, and wear old rough shoes and a thin pair of gloves the first day or two.

Ralph visited a dry-goods store, fitted himself out, and started for home.

He was absorbed in thinking and planning, and turning a corner thus engrossed almost ran into a pedestrian.

As he drew back and aside, a hand was suddenly thrust out and seized his arm in a vise-like grip.

"No, you don't!" sounded a strident voice. "I've got you at last,

have I?"

In astonishment Ralph looked up, to recognize his self-announced captor. It was Gasper Farrington.

CHAPTER VIII-

THE OLD FACTORY

Ralph pulled loose from the grasp of the crabbed old capitalist, fairly indignant at the sudden onslaught.

"Don't you run! don't you run!" cried Farrington, swinging his cane threateningly.

"And don't you dare to strike!" warned Ralph, with a glitter in his eye. "I'd like to know, sir, what right you have stopping me on the public street in this manner?"

"It will be a warrant matter, if you aint careful!" retorted Farrington.

"I can't imagine how."

"Oh, can't you?" giped Farrington, his plain animosity for Ralph showing in his malicious old face. "Well, I'll show you."

"I shall be glad to have you do so."

"Do you see that building?"

Farrington pointed across the baseball grounds at the edge of which they stood, indicating the old unused factory.

A light broke on Ralph's mind.

"I own that building," announced Farrington, swelling up with importance-"it's my property."

"So I've heard."

"A window was broken there and you broke it!"

"I did," admitted Ralph.

"Oho! you shamefacedly acknowledge it, do you? Malicious mischief, young man-that's the phase of the law you're up against!"

"It was an accident," said Ralph-"pure and simple."

"Well, you'll stand for it."

"I intend to. I made a note of it in my mind at the time, Mr. Farrington, and if you had not said a word to me about it I should have done the right thing."

"What do you call the right thing?"

"Replacing the light of glass, of course," was Ralph's reply.

"Glad to see you've got some sense of decency about you. All right. It'll cost you just a dollar and twenty-five cents. Hand over the money, and I'll have my man fix it."

Ralph laughed outright.

"Hardly, Mr. Farrington," he said. "I can buy a pane of glass for thirty-five cents, and put it in for nothing. I will take this bundle home and attend to it at once."

Farrington looked mad and disappointed at being outwitted in his attempt to make three hundred per cent. However, if Ralph made good he could find no fault with the proposition. He mumbled darkly and Ralph passed on. Then a temptation he could not resist came to the boy, and turning he remarked:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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