


The WRECKERS

By FRANCIS LYNDE



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CHAPTER I

At Sand Creek Siding

As a general proposition, I don't believe much in the things called "bunches." 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; 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 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, 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 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.

It was on Sunday that the jolt began to get ready to land on us. Right soon after breakfast, with the help of a little Pullman berth table and me and my typewriter, Mr. Norcross 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.

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. 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. 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, cozy peach; chunky, round-faced, sunny-bathed, jolly; with a neat little turned-up nose and big sort of boyish laughing eyes that fairly dared the world.

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. 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 Portia 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

Portia City—and to find that out he must have asked the train conductor—adding that when we reached Portia 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. Her suit case has her name, 'Mrs. Sheila Macrae,' on it."

The boss has a way of making two up-and-down wrinkles and a little curved horseshoe 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.

"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. 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-bitter, right from the jump. And to 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. 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. 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 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 rail flagman. Just then the big "Pacific type" that was pulling us let out a whistle screech that would have waked the dead, and the airbrakes 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 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 look about 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!" cried 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. 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 beautifully and artistically left.

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



Just as if They'd Been a Couple of Sacks of Meal.

the name of common sense, couldn't you have let me go back after that muff thing?"

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.

So far as we could see, the sure roundings consisted of a short sidetrack, 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.

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."

"But isn't there anything 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."

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."

We 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 woman 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.

The boss asked her if she were warm enough, saying that if she were not, he and I would scrape 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."

The boss lit 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 Portia City by somebody she called "Cousin Basil," but there wouldn't be any more, because she had written about 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 Portia 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.

We had been marooned for nearly an hour when I struck a match and looked at my watch. Mr. Norcross was doing his best to kill time for the young woman, and he was just in the exciting part of a railroad story, telling about a right-of-way fight on the Midland, 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 rumbbling.

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

"Motor car," 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. It stopped a little way below the water tank and about a hundred yards north of the track, or maybe less, 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 sidetrack. But Mr. Norcross had a different think coming.

"Out of sight—quick, Jimmie!" he whispered, and in another second he



"Out of Sight—Quick, Jimmie!" He Whispered.

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. 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.

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.

I was just thinking that all this mystery and kidnaping 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.

"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 kidnaped 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 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.

(Continued in the next issue.)

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