

The WRECKERS

by FRANCIS LYNDE



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CHAPTER XII

The Helpless Wires

When Bobby Kelso shot his news at us we all made a quick break for the dispatcher's office, the boss in the lead. Durgin, the night dispatcher, had been alone on the train desk, and the only other operators on duty were the car-record man and the young fellow who acted as a relief on the commercial wire. When we got there, we found that Tarbell had happened to be in the office when Durgin blew up. He was sitting in at the train key, trying to get Crow Gulch, the one intermediate wire station between the two trains that had failed to get their "meet" orders, and this was the first I knew that he really was the expert telegraph operator that his pay-roll description said he was.

Durgin looked like a tortured ghost. He was a thin, dark man with a sort of scattering beard and limp black hair; one of the clearest-headed dispatchers in the bunch, and the very last man, you'd say, to get rattled in a tangle-up. Yet here he was, hunched in a chair at the car-record table in the corner, a staring-eyed, pallid-faced wreck, with the sweat standing in big drops on his forehead and his hands shaking as if he had the palsy.

Morris, the relief man, gave us the particulars, such as they were, speaking in a hushed voice as if he was afraid of breaking in on Tarbell's steady rattling of the key in the Crow Gulch station call.

"Number Four"—Four was the east-bound "Flyer"—"is five hours off her time," he explained. "As near as I can get it, Durgin was going to make her 'meet' with Number Five at the blind siding at Sand Creek tank. She ought to have had her orders somewhere west of Bauxite Junction, and Five ought to have got hers at Banta. Durgin says he simply forgot that the 'Flyer' was running late; that she was still out and had a 'meet' to make somewhere with Five."

Brief as Morris' explanation was, it was clear enough for anybody who knew the road and the schedules. The regular meeting-point for the two passenger trains was at a point west of Portal City, instead of west, and so, of course, would not concern the Desert Division crew of either train, since all crews were changed at Portal City. From Banta to Bauxite Junction, some thirty-odd miles, there was only one telegraph station, namely, that at the Crow Gulch lumber camp, seven miles beyond the Timber Mountain "Y" and the gravel pit where the stolen 1018 had been abandoned.

Unluckily, Crow Gulch was only a day station, the day wires being handled by a young man who was half in the pay of the railroad and half in that of the saw-mill company. This young man slept at the mill camp,

which was a mile back in the gulch. There was only one chance in a thousand that he would be down at the railroad station at ten o'clock at night, and it was on that thousandth chance that Tarbell was rattling the Crow Gulch call. If Five were making her card time, she was now about half-way between Timber Mountain "Y" and Crow Gulch. And Four, the "Flyer," had just left Bauxite—with no orders whatever. Which meant that the two trains would come together somewhere near Sand Creek.

Mr. Van Britt was as good a wire man as anybody on the line, but it was the boss who took things in hand. "There is a long-distance telephone to the Crow Gulch saw-mill; have you tried that?" he barked at Tarbell.

The big young fellow who looked like a cow-boy—and had really been one, they said—glanced up and nodded: "The call's in," he responded: "Central says she can't raise anybody."

For the next three or four minutes the tension was something fierce. The boss and Mr. Van Britt hung over the train desk, and Tarbell kept up his insistent clatter at the key. I had an eye on Durgin. He was still hunched up in the record-man's chair, and to all appearances had gone stone-blind

crazy. Yet I couldn't get rid of the idea that he was listening—listening as if all of his sealed-up senses had turned in to intensify the one of hearing.

Just about the time when the suspense had grown so keen that it seemed as if it couldn't be borne a second longer, Morris, who was sitting in at the office phone, called out sharply: "Long-distance says she has Crow Gulch lumber camp!"

Mr. Van Britt jumped to take the phone, and we got one side of the talk—our side—in shot-like sentences:

"That you, Bertram? All right; this is Van Britt, at Portal City. Take one of the mules and ride for your life down the gulch to the station! Get that? Stop Number Five and make her take siding quick. Repeat over



"I Couldn't Get Rid of the Idea That He Was Listening."

your own wire what you do. 'Hurry!' By the time Mr. Van Britt got back to the train desk, the boss had his pencil out and was figuring on Bertram's time margin. It was now ten-twelve, and Five's time at Crow Gulch was ten-eighteen. The Crow Gulch operator had just six minutes in which to get his mule and cover the rough mile down the gulch.

There was nothing to do but wait, and the waiting was savage. Tarbell had a nerve of iron, but I could see his hand shake as it lay on the glass-topped table. The boss was cool enough outwardly, but I knew that in his brain there was a heart-breaking picture of those two fast passenger trains rushing together in the night among the hills with no hint of warning to help them save themselves. Mr. Van Britt couldn't keep still. He had his hands jammed in the side pockets of his coat and was pacing back and forth in the little space between the train desk and the counter railing.

At the different tables in the room the sounders were clicking away as if nothing were happening or due to happen, and above the spattering din and clatter you could hear the escapement of the big standard-time clock on the wall, hammering out the seconds that might mean life or death to two or three hundred innocent people.

In horrible suspense the six minutes pulled themselves out to an eternity for that little bunch of us in the dispatcher's office who could do nothing but wait. On the stroke of ten-eighteen, the time when Five was due at Crow Gulch on her schedule, Tarbell tuned his relay to catch the first faint tappings from the distant day-station. Another sounder was silent. There was hope in the delay, and Morris voiced it.

"He's there, and he's too busy to talk to us," he suggested, in a hushed voice; and Disbrow, the car-record man, added: "That's it; it'd take a minute or two to get them in on the siding."

The second minute passed, and then a third, and yet there was no word from Bertram. "Call him," snapped the boss to Tarbell, but before the ex-cow-boy's hand could reach the key, the sounder began to rattle out a string of dots and dashes; ragged Morse it was, but we could all read it only too plainly.

"Too late—mule threw me and I had to crawl and drag a game leg—Five passed full speed at ten-nineteen—I couldn't make it."

I saw the boss' hands shut up as though the finger nails would cut into the palms.

"That ends it," he said, with a sort of swearing groan in his voice; and then to Tarbell: "You may as well call Kirgan and tell him to order out the wrecking train. Then have Perkins make up a relief train while you're calling the doctors. Van Britt, you go and notify the hospital over your own office wire. Have my private car put into the relief, and see to it that it has all the necessary supplies. And you'd better notify the undertakers, too."

Great Joah! but it was horrible—for us to be hustling around and making arrangements for the funeral while the people who were to be gathered up and buried were still swinging along live and well, half of them in the crookings among the Timber Mountain foot-hills and the other half somewhere in the desert stretches below Sand Creek!

Tarbell had sent Disbrow to the phone to call Kirgan, and Mr. Van Britt was turning away to go to his

own office, when the chair in the corner by the counter-table fell over backwards with a crash and Durgin came staggering across the room. He was staring straight ahead of him as if he had gone blind, and the sweat was running down his face to lose itself in the straggling beard.

When he spoke his voice seemed to come from away off somewhere, and he was still staring at the blank wall beyond the counter-railing.

"Did I—did I—hear somebody say you're sending for the undertakers?" he choked, with a dry rattle in his throat; and then, without waiting for an answer: "While you're at it, you'd better get one for me... there's the money to pay him," and he tossed a thick roll of bank bills, wrapped around with a rubber band, over to Tarbell at the train desk.

Naturally, the little grand-stand play with the bank roll made a diversion, and that is why the muffled crash of a pistol shot came with a startling shock to everybody. When we turned to look, the mischief was done. Durgin had crumpled down into a misshapen heap on the floor and the sight we saw was enough to make your blood run cold.

You see, he had put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth, and—but it's no use: I can't tell about it, and the very thought of that thing that had just a minute before been a man, lying there on the floor makes me see black and want to keel over. What he had said about sending for an extra undertaker was right as right. With the top of his head blown off, the poor devil didn't need anything more in this world except the burying.

Somebody has said, mighty truthfully, that even a death in the family doesn't stop the common routine; that the things that have to be done will go grinding on, just the same, whether all of us live, or some of us die. Disbrow had jumped from the telephone at the crash of Durgin's shot, and for just a second or so we all stood around the dead dispatcher, nobody making a move.

Then Mr. Norcross came alive with a jerk, telling Disbrow to get back on his job of calling out the wreck wagons and the relief train, and directing Bobby Kelso to go to another phone and call an undertaker to come and get Durgin's body. Tarbell turned back to the train desk to keep things from getting into a worse tangle than they already were in, and to wait for the dreadful news, and the boss stood by him.

This second wait promised to be the worst of all. The collision was due to happen miles from the nearest wire station; the news, when we should get it, would probably be carried back to Bauxite Junction by the pusher engine which had gone out to try to overtake the "Flyer." But even in that case it might be an agonizing hour or more before we could hear anything.

In a little while Disbrow had clicked in his call to Kirgan, and when the undertaker's wagon came to gather up what was left of the dead dispatcher, the car-record man was hurriedly writing off his list of doctors, and Mr. Van Britt had gone down to superintend the making up of the relief train. True to his theory, which, among other things, laid down the broad principle that the public had a right to be given all the facts in a railroad disaster, Mr. Norcross was just telling me to call up the Mountaineer office, when Tarbell, calmly inking time reports upon the train sheet, flung down his pen and snatched at his key to "break" the chattering sounder.

Mr. Van Britt had come up-stairs again, and he and the boss were both standing over Tarbell when the "G-S" break cleared the wire. Instantly there came a quick call, "G-S" "G-S" followed by the signature, "B-J" for Bauxite Junction. Tarbell answered, and then we all heard what Bauxite had to say:

"Pusher overtook Number Four three miles west of Sand Creek and has brought her back here. What orders for her?"

Somebody groaned, "Oh, thank God!" and Mr. Van Britt dropped into a chair as if he had been hit by a cannon ball. Only the boss kept his head, calling out sharply to Disbrow to break off on the doctors' list and to hurry and stop Kirgan from getting away with the wrecking train.

When it was all over, and Tarbell had been given charge of the dispatching while a hurry call was sent out for the night relief man, Donohue, to come down and take the train desk, there was a little committee meeting

in the general manager's office, with the boss in the chair, and Mr. Van Britt sitting in for the other member.

"Of course, you've drawn your own conclusions, Upton," the boss began, when he had asked me to shut the door.

"I guess so," was the grave rejoinder. "I'm afraid it is only too plain that Durgin was hired to do it. What became of the money?"

"I have it here," said the boss, and he took the blood-money bank-roll from his pocket and removed the rubber band. "Count it, Jimmie," he ordered, passing it to me.

I ran through the bunch. It was in twenties and fifties, and there was an even thousand dollars.

"That is the price of a man's life," said Mr. Van Britt, soberly, and then Mr. Norcross said, "Who knows anything about Durgin? Was he a married man?"

Mr. Van Britt shook his head. "He had been married, but he and his wife didn't live together. He had no relatives here. I knew him in the southwest two years ago. He'd had domestic trouble of some kind, and



There Was an Even Thousand Dollars. didn't mix or mingle much with the other men. But he was a good dispatcher, and two months ago, when we had an opening here, I sent for him."

"You think there is no doubt but that he was bribed to put those trains together tonight?"

"None in the least—only I wish we had a little better proof of it."

"Where did he live?"

"He boarded at Mrs. Chandler's, out on Cross street. Morris boards there, too, I believe."

The boss turned to me. "Jimmie, go and get Morris."

I carried the call and brought Morris back with me. He was a cheerful, red-headed fellow, and everybody liked him.

"It isn't a 'sweet-box' session, Morris," said the boss, quietly, when we came in and the relief operator sat down, sort of half scared, on the edge of a chair. "We want to know something more about Durgin. He roomed at your place, didn't he?"

Morris admitted it, but said he'd never been very chummy with the dispatcher; that Durgin wasn't chummy with anybody. Then the boss went straight to the point, as he usually did.

"You were present and saw all that happened in the other room. Can you tell us anything about that money?" pointing to the pile of bills on my desk.

Billy Morris wriggled himself into a little better chair-hold. "Nothing that would be worth telling, if things hadn't turned out just as they have," he returned. "But now I guess I know. I left Mrs. Chandler's this evening about eleven o'clock to come on duty, and Durgin was just ahead of me.

Some fellow—a man in a smart-colored overcoat and with a soft hat pulled down so that I couldn't see his face—stopped Durgin on the sidewalk, and they talked together.

"I didn't hear what was said, but I saw the overcoated man pass something to Durgin and saw Durgin put whatever it was into his pocket. Then the other man dodged and went away, and did it so quick that I didn't see which way he went or what became of him. Durgin must have run after he left the corner, for I didn't see anything more of him until I got to the office." "He was there when you came in?" It was Mr. Norcross who wanted to know.

TO BE CONTINUED.

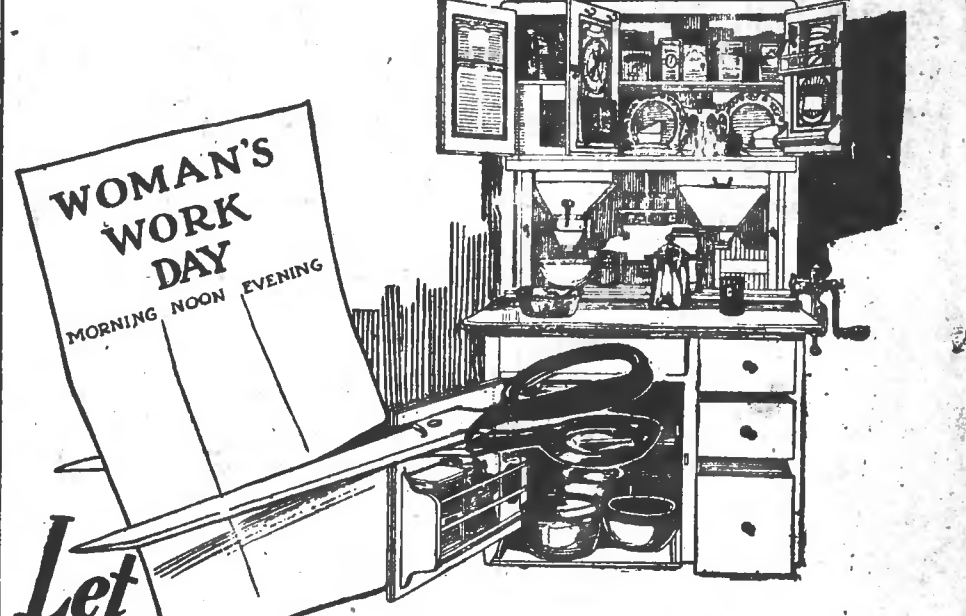
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