The Wreckers

By FRANCIS LYNDE

"YOU'D BETTER NOTIFY THE UNDERTAKERS."

Synopsis.—Graham Norcross, railroad manager, and his secretary, Jimmy Dodds, are marooned at Sand Creek siding with a young lady, Sheila Macrae and her small cousin, Maisie Ann. Unseen, they witness a peculiar train hold-up, in which a special car is carried off. Norcross recognizes the car as that of John Chadwick, financial magnate, whom he was to meet at Portal City. He and Dodds rescue Chadwick. The latter offers Norcross the management of the Pioneer Short Line, which is in the hands of eastern speculators, headed by Breckenridge Dunton, president of the line. Norcross, learning that Sheila Macrae is stopping at Portal City, accepts. Dodds overhears conversation between Rufus Hatch and Gustave Henckel, Portal City financiers, in which they admit complicity in Chadwick's kidnaping, their object being to keep Chadwick from attending a meeting of directors to reorganize the Pioneer Short Line, which would jeopardize their interests. To curb the monopoly controlled by Hatch and Henckel, the Red Tower corporation, Norcross forms the Citizens' Storage and Warehouse company. He begins to manifest a deep interest in Sheila Macrae. Dodds learns that Sheila is married, but living apart from her husband. Norcross does not know this. The Boss disappears; report has it that he has resigned and gone east. Jimmy turns sleuth, suspects he has been kidnaped and effects his rescue. Norcross resumes control of the Pioneer Short Line, refusing to give place to Dismuke, whom Dunton has sent to take charge as general manager. Jimmie follows an emissary of the Red Tower people, spying on Norcross, to a coal yard, where he overhears a plot to arrest the Boss on a murder charge. He frustrates it and thereby drives his enemies to more desperate measures. At the home of Sheila Macrae Dodds is witness of strange actions of a man whom he later recognizes as Howard Collingwood, nephew of President Dunton. A series of wrecks, impossible to explain, cause alarm to the Boss.

CHAPTER XI—Continued.

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"Good Lord!" exclaimed the little millionaire; "you don't have to tell me that! If we can't stop 'em, Uncle Dunton will have plenty of good reasons for cleaning us all out, lock, stock, and barrel! I was talking with Carter, in the claim office, this morning. Our loss and damage account for the past month is something frightful!"

"It is," said the boss gravely. And then: "Upton, we're not altogether as bright as we might be. Has it never occurred to you that we are having too much bad luck to warrant us in charging it all up to the chapter of accidents?"

Mr. Van Britt blew his cheeks out until the stubby, cropped mustache bristled like porcupine quills.

"So you've been getting your pointer, too, have you?" he threw in.

Mr. Norcross didn't answer the question directly.

"Put Tarbell on the job, and if he needs help, let him pick his own men," he directed. "We want to know why that boulder tumbled down ahead of Number Seventeen, and I want to see Tarbell's report on it. Keep at it night and day, Upton. The infection is getting into the rank and file and it's spreading like a sickness. If it becomes psychological, we shall have all the trouble we need."

"I know," nodded the superintendent. "I went through a siege of that kind on the Great Southwestern, one winter. It was horrible. Men who had been running trains year in and year out, and never knowing that they had any nerves, went to pieces if you'd snap your fingers at them."

"That's it," said the boss. "We don't want to fall into that ditch. Things are quite bad enough, as they are."

This ended it for the time. The Petrolite Canyon wreck was picked up, the track was cleared, and once more our trains were moving on time. But anybody could see that the entire Short Line had a case of "nerves." Kirgan, Kirgan the cold-blooded, showed it one afternoon when I went over to his office to return a bunch of blue-prints sent in for the boss' approval. The big master-mechanic had a round-house foreman "on the carpet" and was harrying him like the dickens for letting an engine go out with one of her truck safety chains hanging loose.

Ever since we had gone together on the rescue run to Timber Mountain, Mart and I had been sort of chummy, and after the foreman had gone away with his foot in his hand, I joshed Kirgan a little about the way he had hammered the round-house man.

"Bad medicine," I told him. "It's worrying the bosses, too. What's doing it, Mart?"

"Maybe you can tell," he growled. "It's a hoodoo—that's what it is. Seven engines in the shops in the last nine days, and three more that haven't been fished out of the ditch yet. I wish Mr. Van Britt 'd fire the whole jumpy outfit!"

It didn't seem as though firing was needed so much as a dose of nerve tonic of some sort. Tarbell was working hard on the problem, quietly, and without making any talk about it, and Kirgan was giving him all the men he asked for from the shops; quick-witted fellows who were up in all the mechanical details, and who made better spotters than outsiders would because they knew the road and the ropes. But it was no use. I saw some of Tarbell's reports, and they didn't show any crookedness. It seemed to be just bad luck—one landslide after another of it.

Meanwhile, New York had waked up again. President Dunton had been off the job somewhere, I guess, but now he was back, and the things he wired to the boss were enough to make your hair stand on end. I looked every day to see Mr. Norcross pitch the whole shooting-match into the fire and quit, cold.

He'd never taken anything like Mr. Dunton's abuse from anybody before, and he couldn't seem to get hardened to it. But he was loyal to Mr. Chadwick; and, of course, he knew that Mr. Dunton's hot wires were meant to nag him into resigning. Then there was Mrs. Sheila. I sort of suspected she was holding him up to the rack, every day and every minute of the day.

It was one evening after he had been out to the major's for just a little while, and had come back to the office, that he sent for Mr. Van Britt, who was also working late. There was blood on the moon, and I saw it in the way the boss' jaw was working.

"Upton," he began, as short as pie-crust, "have you thought of any way to break this wreck hoodoo yet?"

Mr. Van Britt sat down and crossed his solid little legs.

"If I had, I shouldn't be losing sleep at the rate of five or six hours a night," he rasped.

"There's one thing that we haven't tried," the boss shot back. "We've been advertising it as bad luck, keeping our own suspicions to ourselves and letting the men believe what they pleased. We'll change all that. I want you to call your trainmen in as fast as you can get at them. Tell them—from me, if you want to—that there isn't any bad luck about it; that the enemies of this management are making an organized raid on the property itself for the purpose of putting us out of the fight. Tell them the whole story, if you want to: how we're trying our best to make a spoon out of a spoiled horn, and how there is an army of grafters and wreckers in this state which is doing its worst to knock us out of the box.

"If you give the force something tangible to lay hold of, it will work the needed miracle. It is only the mysterious that terrifies. Railroad employes, as a whole, are perfectly intelligent human beings, open to conviction. The management which doesn't profit by that fact is lame. If you do this and appeal to the loyalty of the men, you will make a private detective out of every man in the train service, and every one of them keen to be the first to catch the wreckers. You can add a bit of a reward for that, if you like, and I'll pay it out of my own bank account."

For a full minute our captive millionaire didn't say a word. Then he grinned like a good-natured little Chinese god.

"Who gave you this idea of taking the pay-roll into your confidence, Graham?" he asked softly.

For the first time in all the weeks and months I'd been knowing him, the boss dodged; dodged just like any of us might.

"I've been talking to Major Kendrick," he said. "He is a wise old man, Upton, and he hears a good many things that don't get printed in the newspapers."

I could see that this excuse didn't fool Mr. Van Britt for a single instant, and there was a look in his eye that I couldn't quite understand. Neither could I make much out of what he said.

"We'll go into that a little deeper some day, Graham—after this epileptic attack has been fought off. This idea—which you confess isn't your own—is a pretty shrewd one, and I shouldn't wonder if it would work, if we can get it in motion before the hoodoo breaks us wide open. And, as you say, the accusation is justifiable, even if we can't prove up against the Hatch outfit. That turned-over rail in Petrolite Canyon, for example, might have been helped along by——"

It was Kelso, Mr. Van Britt's stenographer, smashed in with the interruption. He was in his shirt-sleeves, as if he'd just got up from his typewriter, and he rushed in with his mouth open and his eyes like saucers.

"They—they want you in the dispatcher's office!" he panted, jerking the words out at Mr. Van Britt. "Durgin has let Number Five get by for a head-ender with the 'Flyer,' and he's gone crazy!"

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 eastbound "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 well east 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 1016 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

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

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. Report over 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 tippings 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 Joash! 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 car-record 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

There Was an Even Thousand Dollars.

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 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 'sweat-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 snuff-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.

"Yes. He had his coat off and was at work on the train sheet. I don't think Durgin left his chair, or said anything to anybody until he jumped up and began to walk the floor, taking on and saying that he'd put Four and Five together on the single track."

There was silence for a little time, and when the boss said, "Do you think you would recognize the man in the snuff-colored overcoat, if you should see him again?"

"Yes, I might; if he had on the same coat and hat."

"That will do, then. Keep this thing to yourself, and if the newspaper people come after you, send them to Mr. Van Britt or to me."

After Morris had gone, Mr. Van Britt shook his head sort of savagely.

"It's h—l, Graham!" he ripped out, bouncing to his feet and beginning to tramp up and down the room. "To think that these devils would take the chance of murdering a lot of totally innocent people to gain their end! What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet, Upton; but I am going to do something. This state of affairs can't go on. The simplest thing is for me to throw up the job and let the Short Line drop back into the old rut. I'm not sure that it wouldn't save a good many lives in the end if I should do it. And yet it seems such a cowardly thing to do—to resign under fire."

Mr. Van Britt had his hand on the door-knob, and what he said made me warm to my finger-tips.

"We're all standing by you, Graham; all, you understand—to the last man and the last ditch. And you're not going to pitch it up; you're going to stay until you have thrown the harpoon into these high-binders, clear up to the hitchings. That's my prophecy. The trouble's over for tonight, and you'd better go up to the hotel and turn in. There is another day coming, or if there isn't, it won't make any difference to any of us. Good-night."

"Mrs. McCrae isn't a widow at all."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Had About Given Up Hope.

A certain Dormont mother had occasion to scold her five-year-old son, the tad taking the call-down very much to heart. After the operation was completed, son disappeared. His failure to reappear caused the mother to worry and she began looking about to locate the culprit. In the bathroom she found him. There he was, with the door closed, talking to himself.

"Johnny," the mother heard him say, "you are a bad boy. You are a very, very bad boy. You are too bad for this family and ought to be taken away. You are a disgrace; you are a son-of-a-gun."

That was enough for the mother. Soon there was a hugging match, and sonnie was assured that he was none of the things he had been calling himself. Still, it took some time to convince him.—Pittsburgh Dispatch.