

# The Wreckers

By FRANCIS LYNDE

Copyright by Chas. Scribner's Sons

(Continued)

"I don't know," said the boss, kind of musingly. "You're forgetting the water that's been put into it from time to time by the speculators and reorganizers; there has been a good deal of that, first and last. Nevertheless, value for value, you know, and I know, that the property is worth more than thirty-two, including the bonds. What I mean is that if anybody would buy the control at that figure—the control, mind you, and not merely a minority—and handle the road purely as a dividend-earning business proposition, he wouldn't lose money; he'd make money—a lot of it."

"All of which doesn't get us anywhere in the present pinch," returned the traffic manager. "I suppose we'll have to wait until Hatch makes his first move, and I've still got fight enough left in me to hope that he'll make it suddenly. Punch the button for me if anything new develops. I'm going back to swing on to my telephone."

Following this talk with Hornack there was a try-out with Billoughby and Juneman, but as this three-cornered conference was held in the private room of the suite, I don't know what was said. A little farther along, when the boss was once more whittling at the dictation, Mr. Van Britt strolled in. Mr. Norcross told me to take my bunch of notes to May and then he gave Mr. Van Britt his lining, starting off with: "Well, how is the general superintendent this fine morning?"

Mr. Van Britt wrinkled his nose. "The general superintendent is wondering, one more time, why under the starry heavens he is out here in this country that God has forgotten, scrapping for a living on this one-horse railroad of yours when he might be in good little old New York, living easy and clipping coupons in the safety-deposit room of a Broad street bank."

The boss laughed at that, and I'm telling you right now that I was glad to know that he was still able to laugh.

"You've never seen the day when you wanted to renege, Upton, and you know it," he hit back. "Think of the perfectly good technical education you were wasting when I took hold of you and jerked you out here."

"Huh!" said our millionaire. "I've just had two engineers on the carpet for running over an old ranchman's pet cow. They said they couldn't help it; but I told them that under the 'public-be-pleased' policy, they'd got to help it."

The boss chuckled. "I believe you'd joke at your own funeral, Upton. You didn't come here to tell me about the ranchman's pet cow."

"Not exactly. I came to tell you that Citizens Storage & Warehouse is due to have a strike on its hands. The management—which seems to have got itself consolidated in some way—shot out a lot of new bosses all along the line on the through train last night, and this morning the entire works, elevators, packeries, coal yards, lumber mills, and everything, are posted with notices of a blanket cut in wages; twenty per cent, flat, for everybody. The news has been trickling in over the wires all morning; and the

"It is true; and the fight is on. You see what Hatch is doing. At one stroke he gets rid of all the local employees of C. S. & W., who have been drawing good pay and who might make trouble for him a little later on, and fills their places with strike-breakers who have no local sympathizers."

"But there will be another result which he may not have counted upon," Mr. Van Britt put in. "The blanket cut serves notice upon everybody that once more the old strong-arm monopoly is in the saddle. The newspapers will tell us about it tomorrow morning. Also, a good many of them will be asking us what we are going to do about it; whether we are going to fight the new monopoly as we did the old, or stand in with the graft, as our predecessors did."

"We needn't go over that ground again—you and I, Upton," said Mr. Norcross. "You know where I stand. But the conditions have changed. We have been knifed in the back." And with that he gave the stocky little operating chief a crisp outline of the new situation precipitated by the Dunton-Collingwood political bribery.

Mr. Van Britt took it quietly, as he did most things, sitting with his hands in his pockets and smiling blandly where Hornack had exploded in wrathful profanity. At the wind-up he said: "Old Uncle Breckenridge is one too many for you, Graham. You can't stand the gaff—this new gaff of Hatch's; and neither can you go before the people as the accuser of your president—and hope to hold your job. The one thing for you to do is to lock up your office and walk out."

"Upton, if I thought you meant that—but I never know when to take you seriously."

"The two engineers who ran over the ranchman's pet cow had no such difficulty, I assure you. And isn't it good advice? You know, as well as I do, that Chadwick is holding you here by main strength; that you can never accomplish anything permanent while Dunton and his cronies are at the steering-wheel. It might be different if you had the local backing of your constituency—the people served by the Short Line. But you haven't that; up to date, the people are merely interested spectators."

"Go on," said the boss, frowning again.

"They have a stake in the game—the biggest of the stakes, as a matter of fact—but it isn't sufficiently apparent to make them climb in and fight for you. They are saying, with a good bit of reason, that after all is said and done, Big Money—Wall Street—still has the call, and any twenty-four hours may see the whole thing slump back into graft and crooked politics."

"It is so true that you might be reading it out of a book," was the boss' comment. And then: "What's the answer?"

Mr. Van Britt shook his head. "I don't know. If you had money enough to buy the voting control in P. S. L., you might get somewhere; but as it is, you're like a cat in Hades without claws."

"Tell me," said Mr. Norcross, after a little pause: "You're a native New Yorker; do you know this man Collingwood?"

"Only by hearsay. He is what our English friends call a 'blooming bouncer'—fast yachts, fast motor-cars, the fast set generally. It's a pretty bad case of money-spoil, I fancy. They say he wasn't always a total loss."

"Did you ever hear that he was married?"

"Oh, yes; he married a Kentucky girl some years ago; I don't remember her name. They say she stood him for about six months and then dropped out. I suppose he needs killing for that."

At this the boss went a step farther, saying: "He does, indeed, Upton. I happen to know the young woman."

That was when Mr. Van Britt fired his own little bomb-shell. "So do I," he answered quietly.

"But you said you had forgotten her name?"

"So I have—her married name. And what's more, I mean to keep on forgetting it."

"There was no mistake about the boss' frown this time."

"That won't do, Upton," he said, kind of warningly.

"It will do well enough for the present. I'd marry her tomorrow, Graham, if she were free, and there were no other obstacles. Unhappily, there are two—besides the small legal difficulty; she doesn't care for my money—having a little of her own; and she happens to be in love with the other fellow."

I guess the boss was remembering what Mrs. Sheila had told him in that confidence before the back-parlor fire, about its being all off between her and Collingwood, for he said: "I think you are mistaken as to that last."

"No, I'm not mistaken. But that's neither here nor there. Neither you nor I can send Collingwood to the penitentiary—that's a cinch. Wherefore, I'm advising you to quit, walk out, jump the job."

At that the boss took a fresh brace, righting his swing chair with a snap.

"You know very little about me, Upton, if you think I'm going to throw up my hands now, when the real pinch has come. I have a scheme—if it could only be worked. But it can't be worked on a rising market. By some trick or other, the Dunton people are boosting the stock again. It went up three points yesterday."

Mr. Van Britt grinned. "They're discounting the effect of this little political deal—which will, at least it doesn't do anything else. What you need is a good, old-fashioned cataclysm of some sort; something that would fair-

ly knock the tar out of P. S. L. securities and send them skittering down the toboggan slide in spite of anything Uncle Breckenridge could do to stop them; down to where they could be safely and profitably picked up by the dear public. Unfortunately, those things don't happen outside of the story books. If they did, if the earthquake should happen along our way just now, I don't know but I'd be disloyal enough to get out and help it shake things up a bit."

After Mr. Van Britt had gone, the boss put in the remainder of the day like a workman, skipping the noon luncheon as he sometimes did when the work drive was extra heavy. Meanwhile, as you'd suppose, rumor was plentifully busy, on the railroad, and also in town.

By noon it was well understood that there had been a radical change in the management of C. S. & W., and that there was going to be a general strike in answer to the slashing cut in wages. I slipped up-town to get a bite, and I heard some of the talk. It was pretty straight, most of it—which shows how useless it is to try to keep any business secrets, nowadays.

For example: the three men at my table in the Bullard grill-room—they didn't know me or who I was—knew that a council of war had been called in the railroad headquarters, and that Ripley had been pulled in by wire from Lesterburg, and that we were rushing along hurriedly to provide storage room for the wheat shippers in case of a tie-up, and that we were arranging to distribute railroad company coal in case the tie-up should bring on a fuel famine—knew all these things and talked about them.

They were facts, as far as they went—these things. The boss hadn't been idle during the forenoon, and he kept up the drive straight through to quitting time. Word was brought in during the afternoon by Tarbell that the Hatch people were wiring the Kansas City and Omaha employment agencies and placing hurry orders for strike-breakers. The boss' answer to this was a peremptory wire to our passenger agents at both points to make no rate concessions whatever, of any kind, for the transportation of laborers under contract. It was a shrewd little knock. Labor of that kind is mighty hard to move unless it can get free transportation or a low rate of fare, and I could see that Mr. Norcross was hoping to keep the strike-breakers away.

When six o'clock came, the boss asked May to stay and keep the office open while I could go down-stairs and get my dinner in the station restaurant, and he went off up-town to the club, I suppose. After I'd had my bite, I let May go. Everything was moving all right so far as anybody could see. We had five extra fuel trains loading at the company's chutes at Coalville, and the dispatcher was instructed to work them out on the line during the night, distributing them to the towns that had reported shortages. They were not to be turned over to the regular coal yards; they were to be sidetracked and held for emergencies.

Mr. Norcross came back about eight o'clock, and I gave him my report of how things were going on the line. A little later Mr. Cantrell dropped in, and there was a quiet talk about the situation, and what it was likely to develop. The Mountaineer editor was given all the facts, except the one big one about Hatch's death-grip on us, and in turn Mr. Cantrell promised the help of his paper to the last ditch—though, of course, he had no idea of how deep that last ditch was going to be. I had a lot of filing and indexing to do, and I kept at work while they were talking, wondering all the time if the boss would venture to tell the editor about the depth of that "last ditch." He didn't. I guess he thought he wouldn't until he had to.

It was pretty nearly nine o'clock when the editor went away, and Mr. Norcross was just saying to me that he guessed we'd better knock off for the night, when we both heard a step in May's room. A second later the door was pushed open and a man came in, making for the nearest chair and flinging himself into it as if he'd reached the limit. It was Collingwood. He was chewing on a dead cigar and his face was like the face of a corpse. But he was sober.

Naturally, I supposed he had come to make trouble with the boss on Mrs. Sheila's account, and I quietly edged open the drawer of my desk where I kept Fred May's automatic, so as to be ready. He didn't waste much time.

"I saw you as I was coming away from Kendrick's last night," he began, with a bickering rasp in his voice. "Did you go up against the gun I had loaded for you?"

Mr. Norcross cut straight through to the bottom of that little complication at a single stroke.

"What Mrs. Collingwood said to me, or what I said to her, can have no possible bearing upon anything that you may have to say to me, or that I can consent to listen to, Mr. Collingwood."

The derelict sat up in his chair. "But you've got to keep hands off, just the same; at Kendrick's, and in this other business, too. If you don't, there is going to be blood on the moon! Get me?"

The boss never batted an eye. "I'm taking it for granted that you are sober, Mr. Collingwood," he said. "If you are, you must surely know that threats are about the poorest possible weapons you can use just now."

"It's a plant, from start to finish!" grieved the man in the chair. "I haven't done a d-d thing more than to cash a few checks for—expenses, and

turn the money over to Bullock. Now Hatch tells me that I was working with a spotter—his spotter—and that he can send me up for bribery. It's a lie. I don't know what Bullock did with the money, and I don't want to know."

"But you had orders to give it to him when he required it, didn't you?" Mr. Norcross cut in.

"That's none of your business. I want you to choke this man Hatch off of me!"

The boss had picked up his paper-knife. "I don't know why you should come to me for help," he said. "You have been hand-in-glove with these conspirators ever since you came out here. Two days ago you knew that they had set a trap for my special train on the Strathcona branch—a trap that was meant to kill me."

It was a random shot, and I knew that Mr. Norcross was just guessing at where it might land when he fired it. But it went home; oh, you bet it went home!

"D-n you!" gurgled the bouncer, half starting to his feet. "Why shouldn't



"Why Shouldn't I Want to See You Killed?"

I want to see you killed? Haven't you done enough to me?"

"No!" the word was slammed at him like a bullet. And then: "As I told you in the beginning, we won't go into any phase of it that involves Mrs. Collingwood. Get back into your own boat. Are you trying to tell me now that Hatch is threatening you?"

"He's played me for a come-on. He says he's got the whole business down in black and white, with affidavits, and all that. He had the nerve to tell me less than an hour ago that he'd burn me alive if I didn't toe the mark."

"What does he want you to do?"

"He wants me to stick around here so that he can use me against you. He knows how you're mixed up with Sheila and that you can't turn a wheel without making it look as if you were going after me on your own personal account."

There was silence for a little time. It was an awful muddle, with bloody murder sticking out of it on every side.

"If you have come here with the idea that I can force Hatch's hand, you are very much misled," said the boss at the close of the electric pause. And then: "Has he made it appear to you that he was merely trying to help you avenge your own fancied wrongs?"

"He said I ought to get you; that any man who would make love to a married woman ought to be got."

My chief was looking past the derelict and out through the darkened window.

"You don't know me, Mr. Collingwood, but you do know your wife; and you know that she is as far above suspicion as the angels in heaven. Let that part of it go. Hatch was merely using you for his own ends. If he could persuade you to kill me off out of the way, it would be merely that much gained in the business fight. You haven't done it thus far, and now he is using your check-cashing excursion as a club with which he proposes to brain the entire railroad management, your uncle included, if we interfere with his plans."

Collingwood scowled up at the ceiling, shifting the dead cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"So that's the way of it, is it?" he commented. "He was working for his own pocket all the time, and Uncle Breck stands pat and slips him the ace he was needing to make his hand a winner. Between you and me, Norcross, I believe this d-d pliker needs killing a few times, himself."

The boss sat back in his swing chair and I could just imagine that he was trying to get some sort of proper angle on this young fellow here, in addition to his other scoundrelisms, big and little, had wrecked the life of Sheila Macrae. I knew what he was thinking. He had a theory that no man that was ever born was either all angel or all devil, and he was hunting for the redeeming streak in this one.

When you looked right hard at the haggard face you could see something sort of half-appealing in it; something to make you think that perhaps, away back yonder before the spilling began, there used to be a man; never a strong man, I guess, but one that might have been generous and free-hearted, maybe. I got a fleeting little glimpse of that back-number man when he turned suddenly and said:

"One night a few weeks ago when I was full up, Hatch got hold of me and told me you were out at the Ken-

drick place with Sheila. He made me believe that I ought to go out there and kill you, and I started to do it. Do you know why I didn't do it?"

"No," said the chief, mighty quietly. "Well, I'll tell you. One night last spring up at the Bullard you slammed me one in the face and dragged me off to my room to keep me from making a bigger ass of myself than I'd already made. I haven't forgotten that. In all these crooked years, nobody else has even taken the trouble to chuck me decently out of sight and give me a chance to brace. Drunk as I was, I remembered it that night when I was climbing up to a window in the major's house and trying to get a shot at you."

Mr. Norcross shook his head, more than half sympathetically, I thought.

"Let that part of it go and tell me about this other trouble," he said. "How badly are you tangled up in this political business?"

"I've given it to you straight on the bribing proposition. Uncle Breck used me as a money carrier because—well, maybe it was because he couldn't trust Bullock. I didn't know definitely what Bullock was doing with the checks I cashed for him, though I supposed, of course, it was something that wouldn't stand daylight. It was only a side issue with me. I was coming out here anyway. I knew Sheila had made up her mind—God knows she's had cause enough; but I had a crazy notion that I'd like to be on the same side of the earth with her again for just a little while. Then this—"

he trailed off in a babble of maledictions poured out upon the man who had trapped him and used him.

The boss straightened himself in his chair, but he still was speaking gently when he said:

"You are not asking my advice, and I don't owe you anything, personally, Mr. Collingwood. But I'll say to you what I might say to a better man in like circumstances. You have done all the harm you can, but, as I see it, there doesn't seem to be any need of your staying here to suffer the consequences. Why don't you go back to New York, taking your wife with you, if she will go?"

Collingwood's smile was a mere teeth-baring grimace.

"Sheila made her wedding journey with me once, when she was just eighteen. The next time she rides with me it will be at my funeral. Oh, I've earned it, and I'm not kicking. And about this other thing: I can't duck. You know what Hatch is holding me for. He told me just a little while ago that if I stepped aboard of a train, I'd be arrested before the train could pull out."

It was a handsome little precaution on the part of the chief of the grafters. If a fight should be precipitated—if the boss should try to checkmate the C. S. & W. gobble—the arrest and indictment of President Dunton's nephew would serve bully good and well as a dramatic bit of side play to keep the newspapers from printing too much about the other thing.

"If you really want to go, I think it can be arranged in some way, in spite of Hatch and his bluffing," Mr. Norcross put in quietly. "So far as our railroad troubles are concerned it will neither help nor hinder for you to stay on here, now."

As if the helpful suggestion had been a lighted match to fire a hidden mine of rage, Collingwood sprang to his feet with his dull eyes ablaze.

"No, by God!" he swore. "I'm going to make him come across with those affidavit papers first! You wait right here, Norcross. You think I'm all cur, but I'll show you. There isn't much left of me but hound dog, but even a hound dog will bite if you kick him hard enough. Lend me a gun, if you've got one and I'll—"

"Hold on—none of that!" the boss broke in sternly, jumping out of his chair to enforce the command. But before he could make the grabbing move the corridor door slammed noisily and the madman was gone.

## CHAPTER XVI

### The Deserter

Mr. Norcross chased out and tried to overtake Collingwood, going as far as the foot of the stairs. I went, too, but got only far enough to meet the boss coming up again. There was nothing doing. The station policeman had seen the crazy rounder jump into a taxi and go spinning off up-town.

There was another jolt waiting for us when we got back to the office. While we were both out, Mr. Van Britt had blown in from his room at the foot of the hall and we found him lounging comfortably in the chair that Collingwood had just vacated.

"I thought maybe you'd turn up again pretty soon, since you'd left the doors all open," was the way he started out. Then: "Sit down, Graham; I want to talk a few lines."

Mr. Norcross took his own chair and twirled it to face the general superintendent. "Say it," he commanded briefly.

Mr. Van Britt booked his thumbs in his armbolts.

"I've just been figuring a bit on the general outlook; you have a decently efficient operating outfit here, what with Perkins and Brant and Conway handling the three divisions as self-contained units. You don't need a general superintendent any more than a monkey needs two tails."

"What are you driving at?" was the curt demand.

"Well, suppose we say retrenchment, for one thing. As I size it up, you might just as well be saving my salary. It would buy a good many new crosses in the course of a year."

"That's all bunk, and you know it," snapped the boss. "The organization as it stands hasn't a single stick of

dead wood in it. You know very well that a railroad the size of the Short Line can't run without an individual head of the operating department."

Mr. Van Britt laughed a little at that.

"If you should get some one of these new efficiency experts out here he would probably tell you that you could cut your staff right in two in the middle."

I could see that the boss was getting mighty nearly impatient.

"You are merely turning handspins around the edges of the thing you have come to say, Upton," he barked out. "Come to the point, can't you? What have you got up your sleeve?"

"Nothing that I could make you understand in a month of Sundays. I'm sore on my job and I want to quit."

"Nonsense! You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do. I'm tired of wearing the brass collar of a soulless corporation. What's the use, anyway? I found a bunch of dividend checks from my bank at home in the mail to-day, and what good does the money do me? I can't spend it out here; can't even tip the servants at the hotel without everlastingly demoralizing them. I'm like the little boy who wanted to go out in the garden and eat worms."

The boss was frowning thoughtfully.

"You're not giving me a show, Upton," he protested. "Can't you blow the froth off and let me see what's in the bottom of the stein?"

"Pledge my word, it's all froth, Graham. I want to climb up on the mesa behind the shops and take a good deep breath of free air and shake my fist at your blamed old cow-track of a railroad and tell it to go to the devil. You shouldn't deny me a little pleasure like that."

It was getting under the boss' skin at last. "I can't believe that you really want to resign," he broke out, sort of hopelessly. "It's simply preposterous!"

"Pull it down out of the future and put it in the present, and you've got it," said Mr. Van Britt. "I have resigned. I wrote it out on a piece of paper and dropped it into your mail box as I came through the outer office. It's signed, sealed, and delivered. You'll give me a testimonial, or something of that sort, 'To Whom It May Concern,' won't you? I've been obedient and faithful and honest and efficient, and all that, haven't I?"

"I'd like to know where you got your liquor, Upton. That is the most charitable construction I can put upon all this. Why, man alive! you're quitting me in the thick of the toughest fight the grafters have put up!"

"Yes, I know; but a man's got only one life to live, and I've always had a sneaking sympathy for the high private in the front rank who didn't want to stand up and get himself shot full of holes. I'm running, and if you should ask me why, I'd tell you what the retreating soldier told Stonewall Jackson; he said he was running only because he couldn't fly." Once more the boss grew silently thoughtful. Out of the digging mental inquiry he brought this:

"Has this sudden notion of yours anything to do with Sheila Macrae, Upton?"

"Pledge my word again. I met Sheila on the street today and promised her that I wouldn't so much as tip my hat to her while Collingwood is on this side of the Missouri river."

"But if you quit, you'll go east yourself, won't you?"

"Maybe, after a while. For the time being, I'd like to loaf on you for a week or so and watch the wheels go around without my having to prod them. It's running in my mind that this newest phase of the C. S. & W. business is going to stir up a mighty pretty shindy, and I had a foolish notion that I'd like to stick around and look on—as an innocent bystander."

"The innocent bystander usually gets shot in the leg," the boss ripped out, with the brittlest kind of humor. And then: "I suppose I shall have to let you do what you want to—and let you pick your own time for giving me the real reason. But you're crippling me most savagely, Upton—and at a time when I am least able to stand it."

Mr. Van Britt got up and edged his way toward the door.

"It's a good reason, Graham; and some time—say when we are walking through the pearly gates of the New Jerusalem together—maybe I'll tell you about it. If I were really a good scrapper, I'd stay and help you fight it out with Hatch; but you know the old saying—capital is always cowardly; and my present credit at the Port City National is pretty well up to a quarter of a million, thanks to the dividends I deposited today. Good-night. I'll see you in the morning—if by that time you haven't decided to cut me cold."

I kept right busy over the indexes after Mr. Van Britt went away, just to give the boss a little chance to catch up with himself. He sure was catching it hot and heavy on all sides. All we needed now was for President Dunton to come smashing in with one more good jolt and it would be all over but the obsequies, the monument and the epitaph. At least, that is the way it looked to me.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## Performing Duty.

Let us do our duty in our shop or in our kitchen, the market, the street, the office, the school, the home, just as faithfully as if we stood in the front rank of some great battle, and we knew that victory for mankind depended upon our bravery, strength and skill. When we do that, the humblest of all will be serving in that great army which achieves the welfare of the world.—Theodore Parker.

"A General Strike of All C. S. & W. Employees Will Go On at Noon Tomorrow."

last word is that a general strike of all C. S. & W. employees will go on at noon tomorrow.

"That is move number one," said the boss. And then: "You have heard that the Hatch people have reached out and taken in the C. S. & W.?"

"Hornack was telling me something about it; yes."