

Chapman Allen

**Ralph on the Engine: or,
The Young Fireman of the
Limited Mail**



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Chapman Allen

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CHAPTER I THE NIGHT RUN

“Ralph Fairbanks.”

“On hand, sir.”

“You are to relieve Fireman Cooper on the Dover slow freight.”

“All right, sir.”

Ralph Fairbanks arose from the bench on which he was seated in the roundhouse at Stanley Junction.

Over a dozen men had been his companions for the past hour. There were engineers waiting for their runs, firemen resting after getting their locomotives in order, and “extras,” who, like the young railroader himself, were so far on the substitute list only.

Ralph was glad of his appointment. This was his second month of service as a fireman. It had been by no means regular employment, and, as he was industrious and ambitious, he was glad to get at work with the prospect of a steady run.

The foreman of the roundhouse had just turned from his desk after marking Ralph’s name on the list when a man hurriedly entered the place. He was rather unsteady in his gait, his face was flushed, and he looked dissolute and unreliable.

“Give me the slow freight run, Forgan,” he panted. “I’m listed next.”

“Two minutes late,” observed the foreman, in a business-like way.

“That don’t count on a stormy night like this.”

“System counts in this establishment always, Jim Evans,” said Mr. Forgan.

“I ran all the way.”

“Stopped too long at the corner saloon, then,” put in Dave Adams, a veteran engineer of the road.

Evans glared at the man who spoke, but recognizing a privileged character, stared down the row of loiterers and demanded:

“Who’s got my run?”

“Do you own any particular run, Jim?” inquired Adams, with a grin.

“Well, Griscom’s was due me.”

“Young Fairbanks was on hand, so it’s his run now.”

“That kid’s,” sneered Evans, turning on Ralph with angry eyes. “See here, young fellow, do you think it’s square cutting in on a regular man this way?”

“I’ll answer that,” interposed Tim Forgan sharply. “He was here, you weren’t. He holds the run till a better man comes along.”

Evans stood glaring at Ralph for a few minutes. Then he moved to the youth’s side.

“See here, kid,” he observed, “I want this run specially. It’ll be a regular, for Cooper is going with another road. I’m a man and must earn a man’s wages. You’re only a kid. I’ve got a family. Come, give me the run and I’ll treat you handsomely,” and the speaker extended a cigar.

“Thank you, I don’t smoke,” said Ralph. Then looking the man squarely in the eyes, he said: “Mr. Evans, I’ll give up the run on one condition.”

“What’s that?” inquired Evans eagerly.

“If you will sign the pledge, work steadily, and give your wages to your family as you should do.”

“I’ll do it!” shouted Evans, not a whit shame-facedly.

“No, you won’t,” announced Forgan. “Fairbanks, kindness is kindness, but business is business. If you drop this run, it goes to the next extra on the list according to routine.”

“Bah, you’re all down on me!” flared out Evans, and left the place in a rage.

“It would do no good, Fairbanks, to help that man,” observed Dave Adams. “He would sign anything to secure a personal advantage and never keep his word. He squanders all his money and won’t last long in the Great Northern, I can tell you.”

Ralph went outside as he heard a whistle down the rails. Evans was standing near a switch.

“Some kind of a plot, eh, you and your friend?” he sneered at Ralph.

“I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Evans,” replied Ralph.

“Oh, yes, you do. Forgan is partial to you. The others don’t like me because I’m a crack man in my line. One word, though; I’ll pay you off for this some time or other,” and Evans left the spot shaking his fist at Ralph menacingly.

“One of the bad kind,” mused Ralph, looking after the fellow, “not at all fit for duty half the time. Here comes one of the good kind,” he added as a freight engine with a long train of cars attached steamed up at the roundhouse. “It’s my run, Mr. Griscom.”

“That’s famous news,” cried old John Griscom, genuinely pleased.

“Good evening, Mr. Cooper,” said Ralph, as the fireman leaped from the cab.

“Hello,” responded the latter. “You got the run? Well, it’s a good man in a good man’s place.”

“That’s right,” said Griscom. “None better. In to report, Sam? Good-bye. Shovel in the coal, lad,” the speaker directed Ralph. “It’s a bad night for railroading, and we’ll have a hard run to Dover.”

Ralph applied himself to his duties at once. He opened the fire door, and as the ruddy glow illuminated his face he was a picture pleasant to behold.

Muscular, healthy, in love with his work, friendly, earnest and accommodating, Ralph Fairbanks was a favorite with every fair-minded railroad man on the Great Northern who knew him.

Ralph had lived at Stanley Junction nearly all of his life. His early experiences in railroading have been related in the first volume of the present series, entitled “Ralph of the Roundhouse.”

Ralph’s father had been one of the pioneers who helped to build the Great Northern. When he died, however, it was found that the twenty thousand dollars’ worth of stock in the road he was supposed to own had mysteriously disappeared.

Further, his home was mortgaged to old Gasper Farrington, a wealthy magnate of the village. This person seemed to have but one object in life; to drive the widow Fairbanks and her son from Stanley Junction.

Ralph one day overheard Farrington threaten to foreclose a mortgage, and the youth suddenly realized his responsibilities. Leaving school, he secured a job in the roundhouse at Stanley Junction. Here, notwithstanding the plots, hatred and malice of a worthless, good-for-nothing fellow named Ike Slump, whose place he took, Ralph made fine progress. He saved the railroad shops from wholesale destruction, by assisting John Griscom to run an engine into the flames and drive a car of powder out of the way. For this brave deed Ralph secured the friendship of the master mechanic of the road and was promoted to the position of junior leverman.

In the second volume of this series, entitled “Ralph in the Switch Tower,” another vivid phase of his ability and merit has been depicted. He rendered signal service in saving a special from disaster and prevented a treasure train from being looted by thieves.

Among the thieves was his old-time enemy, Ike Slump, and a crony of his named Mort Bemis. They had been hired by Farrington to harass Ralph in every way possible. Ralph had searched for the motive to the old man’s animosity.

He learned that Farrington had appropriated his father's railroad stock on an illegal technicality, and that the mortgage on their homestead had once been paid by Mr. Fairbanks.

Once knowing this, Ralph undertook the task of proving it. It required some clever work to unmask the villainous miser, but Ralph succeeded, and Farrington, to escape facing disgrace, left the town, ostensibly for Europe.

In unmasking the old man Ralph was assisted by one Van Sherwin, a poor boy whom he had befriended. Van and a former partner of Gasper Farrington, named Farwell Gibson, had secured a charter to build a short line railroad near Dover, in which project Ralph was very much interested.

As has been said, Ralph had now been a fireman for two months, but heretofore employed in yard service only.

"It's the chance of my life," he cried cheerily, as he piled in the coal, "and what a famous partner is dear, bluff, honest old John Griscom!"

"Won't have me for a partner long, lad," replied the veteran engineer with a slight sigh, as he moved the lever.

"Why not, Mr. Griscom?" inquired Ralph.

"Eyes giving out. Had to drop the Daylight Express. I'm going down the ladder, you are going up the ladder. Stick to your principles, lad, for they are good ones, as I well know, and you'll surely reach the top."

"I hope so." said Ralph.

The locomotive gave a sharp signal whistle, and the slow freight started on its night run for Dover.

CHAPTER II

THE LANDSLIDE

“Trouble ahead!”

“What’s that, Fairbanks?”

“And danger. Quick! slow down, or we’re in for a wreck.”

Ralph Fairbanks spoke with suddenness. As he did so he leaped past the engineer in a flash, clearing the open window space at the side.

Two minutes previous the old engineer had asked him to go out on the locomotive to adjust some fault in the air gauge. Ralph had just attended to this when he made a startling discovery.

In an instant he was in action and landed on the floor of the cab. He sprang to his own side of the engine, and leaning far out peered keenly ahead.

They were now in a deep cut which ended a steep climb, and the engine had full steam on and was making fairly good speed.

“My bad eyes – ” began Griscom, and then he quivered in every nerve, for a tremendous shock nearly sent him off his seat.

“Just in time,” cried Ralph, and then he held his breath.

Slowing down, the train had come to a crashing halt. The locomotive reared upon its forward wheels and then settled back on a slant, creaking at every joint. Ralph had swung the air lever or there would have been a catastrophe.

“What was it?” gasped Griscom, clearing his old eyes and peering ahead, but Ralph was gone. Seizing a lantern, he had jumped to the ground and was at the front of the locomotive now. The engineer shut off all steam after sounding the danger signal, a series of several sharp whistles, and quickly joined his assistant.

In front of the locomotive, obstructing the rails completely, was a great mass of dirt, gravel and rocks.

“A landslide,” spoke Griscom, glancing up one steep side of the cut.

“If we had struck that big rock full force,” observed Ralph, “it would have been a bad wreck.”

“You saved us just in time,” cried the old engineer. “I’ve often wondered if some day there wouldn’t be just such a drop as this of some of these overhanging cliffs. Company ought to see to it. It’s been a fierce rain all the evening, perhaps that loosened the mass.”

“Hardly,” said Ralph thoughtfully, and then, inspecting a glazed piece of paper with some printing on it he had just picked up, he looked queerly at his companion.

“Give them the trouble signal in the caboose, please, Mr. Griscom,” said the young fireman. “I think I had better get back there at once. Have you a revolver?”

“Always carry one,” responded Griscom.

“Keep it handy, then.”

“Eh!” cried the engineer with a stare. “What you getting at, lad?”

“That is no landslide,” replied Ralph, pointing at the obstruction.

“What is it then?”

“Train wreckers – or worse,” declared Ralph promptly. “There is no time to lose, Mr. Griscom,” he continued in rapid tones.

“Of course, if not an accident, there was a purpose in it,” muttered Griscom, reaching into his tool box for a weapon, “but what makes you think it wasn’t an accident?”

Ralph did not reply, for he was gone. Springing across the coal heaped up in the tender, he climbed to the top of the first freight car and started on a swift run the length of the train.

The young fireman was considerably excited. He would not have been a spirited, wide-awake boy had he been otherwise. The paper he had found among the debris of the obstruction on the rails had an ominous sentence across it, namely, "*Handle With Care, Dynamite.*"

This, taken in connection with what had at first startled him, made Ralph feel pretty sure that he had not missed his guess in attributing the landslide to some agency outside of nature.

While adjusting the air gauge Ralph had noticed a flare ahead, then a lantern light up the side of the embankment, and then, in the blaze of a wild flash of lightning, he had witnessed the descent of a great tearing, tossing mass, landing in the railroad cut.

"It can mean only a hold-up," theorized Ralph. "Yes, I am quite right."

He slowed down in his wild dash over the car tops, and proceeded with caution. Down at the end of the train he saw lights that he knew did not belong to the train hands.

Ralph neared the caboose and then dropped flat to the top of the car he was on. Peering past its edge, he made out a wagon, half-a-dozen men, and the train hands backed to the side of the cut and held captive there by two of the strangers, who menaced them with revolvers.

Then two others of the marauding gang took crowbars from the wagon, and one, carrying a lantern, proceeded along the side of the cars inspecting the freight cards.

"They must know of some valuable goods on the train," reflected Ralph.

It was an ideal spot for a train robbery, between two stations, and no train was due for several hours.

Ralph was in a quandary as to his best course of procedure. For a moment he considered going for Griscom and arming himself with a bar of rod.

"It would be six to two and we would get the worst of it," he decided. "There is only one thing to do – get back to Brocton. It's less than a mile. Can I make it before these fellows get away with their plunder? Good! a patent coupler."

The boy fireman had crept to the end of the car next to the caboose. Glancing down, he discovered that the couplings were operated by a lever bar. Otherwise, he could never have forced up the coupling pin.

The cars were on a sharp incline, in fact, one of the steepest on the road. Ralph relied on simple gravity to escape the robbers and hasten for relief.

"There's some one!"

Careful as Ralph was, he was discovered. A voice rang out in warning. Then with a quick, bold snap, Ralph lifted the coupler and the pin shot out. He sprang to the forward platform of the caboose. As the car began to recede, he dashed through its open door.

"Just in time. Whew!" ejaculated Ralph, "those fellows are desperate men and doing this in true, wild western style."

The caboose, once started, began a rapid backward rush. Ralph feared that its momentum might carry the car from the track.

A curve turned, and the lights of Brocton were in sight. Before the runaway caboose slowed down entirely it must have gone fully three-quarters of a mile.

Ralph jumped from the car, and ran down the tracks at his best speed. He was breathless as he reached the little depot. It was dark and deserted, but opposite it was the one business street of the town.

Ralph left the tracks finally and made a dash for the open entrance of the general store of the village. The usual crowd of loiterers was gathered there.

"Hello! what's this?" cried the proprietor, as the young fireman rushed wildly into the store.

"Fireman on the Dover freight," explained Ralph breathlessly.

"What's the trouble – a wreck?"

"No, a hold-up. Men! get weapons, a handcar, if there is one here, and we may head off the robbers."

It took some urging to get that slow crowd into action, but finally half-a-dozen men armed with shotguns were running down the tracks following Ralph's lead.

It was a steep climb and several fell behind, out of breath. One big fellow kept pace with Ralph.

"There they are," spoke the latter as they rounded a curve.

Lights showed in the near distance. A flash of lightning momentarily revealed a stirring scene. The robbers were removing packages from a car they had broken into, and these they were loading into their wagon at the side of the train.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" Ralph's companion shouted back to his comrades. "Now, then, for a dash, and we'll bag those rogues, plunder, rig and all."

"Wait," ordered Ralph sharply.

He was too late. The impetuous villager was greatly excited and he ran ahead and fired off his gun, two of the others following his example.

Ralph was very sorry for this, for almost instantly the robbers took the alarm and all lights near the caboose were extinguished. The echo of rapid orders reached the ears of the relief party. Fairly upon the scene, a flash of lightning showed the wagon being driven rapidly up a road leading from the cut.

"Look out for yourselves," suggested Ralph. "Those men are armed."

"So are we, now!" sharply sounded the voice of one of the men from Brocton, and another flash of lightning showed the enemy still in view.

"Up the road after them!" came a second order.

Ralph ran up to the side of the caboose.

"All safe?" he inquired anxiously.

"All but one of us," responded the conductor.

Ralph lit a lantern, noticing one of the train hands lying on the ground motionless.

"He's a fighter, Tom is," said the conductor. "He resisted and grappled with one of the robbers, and another of them knocked him senseless."

"What's this in his hand?" inquired Ralph. "Oh, I see – a cap. Snatched it from the head of his assailant, I suppose. Hark! they are shooting up there."

Shots rang out along the cut road. In a few minutes, however, the men from Brocton reappeared in the cut.

"No use wasting our lives recklessly," said one of them. "They have bullets, we only small shot. The wagon got away. We'll hurry back to Brocton, get a regular posse armed with rifles, and search the country for the rascals."

"What's the damage?" inquired Ralph of the conductor, going to the side of the car that had been broken open.

"Pretty big, I should say," responded the conductor. "That car had a consignment of valuable silks from Brown & Banks, in the city, and they piled a fair load of it into their wagon. You have saved a wholesale plundering of the car."

The men from Brocton departed. Ralph helped the train crew revive the poor fellow who had been knocked insensible. They carried him into the caboose, applied cold water to his head, and soon had him restored to consciousness.

"Fix the red lights," ordered the conductor to a brakeman, "and then hurry to Brocton and have them telegraph the train dispatcher. What's the trouble ahead, Fairbanks?"

Ralph explained. Shovels and crowbars were brought from the caboose, and two of the train crew accompanied him back to the locomotive.

Ralph thought of the cap he had stuck in his pocket. He looked it over carefully in the light of the lantern he carried.

On the leather band inside of the cap were two initials in red ink – "I. S."

“Ike Slump,” murmured Ralph.

An old-time enemy had appeared on the scene, and the young fireman of the Great Northern knew that he would have to keep a sharp lookout or there would be more trouble.

CHAPTER III

EVERYBODY'S FRIEND

“Stand back there, you fellows!”

“Scatter, boys – it’s Ralph Fairbanks!”

It was two days after the landslide near Brocton. The young fireman had just left the roundhouse at Stanley Junction in a decidedly pleasant mood. His cheering thoughts were, however, rudely disturbed by a spectacle that at once appealed to his manly nature.

Ralph, making a short cut for home, had come across a farmer’s wagon standing in an alley at the side of a cheap hotel. The place was a resort for dissolute, good-for-nothing railway employes, and one of its victims was now seated, or rather propped up, on the seat of the wagon in question.

He was a big, loutish boy, and had apparently come into town with a load to deliver. The wagon was filled with bags of apples. Around the vehicle was gathered a crowd of boys. Each one of them had his pockets bulging with the fruit stolen from one of the bags in the wagon.

Standing near by, Jim Evans in their midst, was an idle crowd of railroad men, enjoying and commenting on the scene.

The farmer’s boy was seemingly asleep or unconscious. He had been set up on the seat by the mob, and one side of his face blackened up. Apples stuck all over the harness of the horses and on every available part of the vehicle. A big board lying across the bags had chalked upon it, “Take One.”

The crowd was just about to start this spectacle through the public streets of Stanley Junction when Ralph appeared. The young fireman brushed them aside quickly, removed the adornments from the horses and wagon, sprang to the vehicle, threw the sign overboard, and, lifting up the unconscious driver, placed him out of view under the wagon seat. As he did so, Ralph noticed the taint of liquor on the breath of the country lad.

“Too bad,” he murmured to himself. “This doesn’t look right – more like a piece of malice or mischief. Stand back, there!”

Ralph took up the reins, and also seized the whip. Many of the crowd he had known as school chums, and most of them drew back shamefacedly as he appeared.

There were four or five regular young loafers, however, who led the mob. Among them Ralph recognized Ted Evans, a son of the fireman he had encountered at the roundhouse two days previous. With him was a fellow named Hemp Gaston, an old associate of Mort Bemis.

“Hold on, there!” sang out Gaston, grabbing the bridles of the horses. “What you spoiling our fun for?”

“Yes,” added Ted Evans, springing to the wagon step and seizing Ralph’s arm. “Get off that wagon, or we’ll pull you off.”

Ralph swung the fellow free of the vehicle with a vigorous push.

“See here, you interfere with my boy and I’ll take a hand in this affair myself,” growled Jim Evans, advancing from the crowd of men.

“You’ll whip me first, if you do,” answered one of them. “This is a boys’ squabble, Jim Evans, and don’t you forget it.”

“Humph! he struck my boy.”

“Then let them fight it out.”

“Yes,” shouted young Evans angrily, “come down here and show that you are no coward.”

“Very well,” said Ralph promptly. “There’s one for you!”

Ralph Fairbanks had acted in a flash on an impulse. He had leaped from the wagon, dealt young Evans one blow and sent him half-stunned to the ground. Regaining the wagon he drove quickly into the street before his astonished enemies could act any further.

“Poor fellow,” said Ralph, looking at the lad in the wagon. “Now, what am I ever going to do with him?”

Ralph reflected for a moment or two. Then he started in the direction of home. He was sleepy and tired out, and he realized that the present episode might interfere with some of his plans for the day, but he was a whole-hearted, sympathetic boy and could not resist the promptings of his generous nature.

The young fireman soon reached the pretty little cottage that was his home, so recently rescued from the sordid clutches of old Gasper Farrington. He halted the team in front of the place and entered the house at once.

“Here I am, mother,” he said cheerily.

Mrs. Fairbanks greeted him with a smile of glad welcome.

“I was quite anxious about you when I heard of the wreck, Ralph,” she said with solicitude. He had not been home since that happening.

“It was not a wreck, mother,” corrected Ralph. Then he briefly recited the incidents of the hold-up.

“It seems as though you were destined to meet with all kinds of danger in your railroad life,” said the widow. “You were delayed considerably.”

“Yes,” answered Ralph, “we had to remove the landslide debris. That took us six hours and threw us off our schedule, so we had to lay over at Dover all day yesterday. One pleasant thing, though.”

“What is that, Ralph?”

“The master mechanic congratulated me this morning on what he called, ‘saving the train.’”

“Which you certainly did, Ralph. Why, whose wagon is that in front of the house?” inquired Mrs. Fairbanks, observing the vehicle outside for the first time.

Ralph explained the circumstances of his rescue of the vehicle to his mother.

“What are you going to do with the farmer’s boy?” she inquired.

“I want to bring him in the house until he recovers.”

“Very well, I will make up a bed on the lounge for him,” said the woman. “It is too bad, poor fellow! and shameful – the mischief of those men at the hotel.”

Ralph carried the farmer’s boy into the house. Then he ate his breakfast. After the meal was finished, he glanced at his watch.

“I shall have to lose a little sleep, mother,” he said. “I am anxious to help the poor fellow out, and I think I see a way to do it.”

The young fireman had noticed a small blank book under the cushion of the wagon seat. He now inspected it for the first time. All of its written pages were crossed out except one. This contained a list of names of storekeepers in Stanley Junction.

Ralph drove to the store first named in the list. Within two hours he had delivered all of the apples. It seemed that the storekeepers named in the account book ordered certain fruits and vegetables regularly from the owner of the team, the farmer himself coming to town to collect for the same twice each month.

When Ralph got back home he unhitched the horses, tied them up near the woodshed, and fed them from a bag of grain he found under the wagon seat.

“What is this, I wonder?” he said, discovering a small flat parcel under the wagon seat. The package resembled a store purchase of some kind, so, for safe keeping, Ralph placed it inside the shed.

His mother had gone to visit a sick neighbor. The farmer boy was sleeping heavily.

“Wake me before the boy leaves,” he wrote on a card, leaving this for his mother on the kitchen table. Then, pretty well tired out, Ralph went to bed.

It was late in the afternoon when he awoke. He went down stairs and glanced into the sitting room.

“Why, mother,” he exclaimed, “where is the farmer boy?”

“He left two hours ago, Ralph.”

“Is that so? Then why didn’t you wake me up? I left a card for you on the kitchen table.”

“I did not find it,” said the widow, and then a search revealed the card where the wind had blown it under the stove.

“What did the boy say?” inquired Ralph.

“He told me his name was Zeph Dallas. I talked to him about his misfortunes of the morning, and he broke down and cried. Then he went out to the wagon. He found an account book there, and said you must have delivered his load for him, and that he would never forget your kindness.”

“There was a package in the wagon,” said Ralph.

“He spoke of that, and said some one must have stolen it.”

“You are sure he didn’t find it later?” inquired Ralph. “It was in the woodshed, where I placed it for safe keeping.”

Ralph went out to the shed, and found the package where he had left it. He returned to the house with it, ate a hurried meal, and hastened down town. He learned that Zeph had called at several stores. The farmer boy appeared to have discovered Ralph’s interest in his behalf, and had driven home.

“I wonder what there is in the package?” mused Ralph, when he again reached the cottage. “I had better open it and find out.”

The young fireman was quite startled as he untied the parcel and glanced at its contents. The package contained two bolts of silk, and the tags on them bore the name of the firm which, Ralph had learned at Dover, had shipped the goods stolen from the slow freight two nights previous.

CHAPTER IV AN OLD-TIME ENEMY

“New engine, lad?”

“Not at all, Mr. Griscom, as you well know,” answered Ralph.

The veteran engineer chuckled, but he continued looking over the locomotive with admiring eyes.

The young fireman had come to work early that afternoon. The roundhouse men were careless and he decided to show them what “elbow grease” and industry could do. In an hour he had the old freight locomotive looking indeed like a new engine.

They steamed out of the roundhouse and were soon at the head of their freight train.

“I wish I had a little time to spare,” said Ralph.

“Half-an-hour before we have to leave, you know, lad,” said Griscom. “What’s troubling you?”

“I wanted to see Bob Adair, the road detective.”

“About the silk robbery?” inquired the engineer with interest.

“Yes.”

“Something new?”

“Considerable, I think.”

“You might find him in the depot offices. Run down and see. I’ll attend to things here.”

“Thanks, Mr. Griscom.”

Ralph hurried away from the freight train. He wished to report about the discovery of the silk, and hunt up Zeph Dallas at once.

“I hardly believe the farmer boy a thief,” mused Ralph, “but he must explain his possession of that silk.”

The young fireman did not find Adair at the depot, and came back to the engine to discover Jim Evans lounging in the cab.

“Been helping Griscom out,” grinned the man.

“Well, get out, now,” growled Griscom. “Time to start up. There’s the signal from the conductor. That man has been hanging around the engine ever since you left,” the old engineer continued to Ralph, “and he is too good-natured to suit me.”

“Nothing out of order,” reported the youth, looking about the cab.

“Now, lad, for a run on time,” said Griscom. “This run has been late a good deal, and I don’t want to get a bad name. When I ran the Daylight Express it was my pride and boast that we were always on time to the minute.”

They made good time out of Stanley Junction to Afton. Ten miles beyond, however, there was a jolt, a slide and difficult progress on a bit of upgrade rails.

So serious was the difficulty that Griscom stopped the train and got out to investigate. He returned to the cab with a set, grim face.

“Grease,” he reported; “some one has been tampering with the rails. Spite work, too.”

There was fully an hour’s delay, but a liberal application of sand to the rails helped them out. Five miles later on the locomotive began to puff and jerk. With full steam on, the engine did only half duty.

“Water gauge all right,” said Ralph. “I don’t understand it.”

“I do,” said Griscom, “and I can tell it in two words – Jim Evans.”

“Why, what do you mean, Mr. Griscom?”

“He didn’t come into the cab for nothing. Yes, we are victims of the old trick – soap in the water and the valves are clogged.”

“What are we going to do about it?” inquired Ralph anxiously.

“Pump out the water at the next tank and take a new supply on.”

There was a further delay of nearly two hours. Once more they started up. Ten miles from Dover, a few seconds after Ralph had thrown in coal, a terrible explosion threw the fire cover open and singed and burned both engineer and fireman.

Griscom looked angry, for the fire now needed mending.

“Lad,” he said grimly, “these tricks are done to scare you and delay the train.”

“I am not scared one particle,” retorted Ralph, “only this strikes me as a dangerous piece of mischief – putting explosives in among the coal.”

“Jim Evans did it,” positively asserted Griscom. “That’s what he sneaked into the cab for, and he has confederates along the line.”

Ralph said nothing but he resolved to call Evans to account when he returned to Stanley Junction.

They were over an hour late on the run. Returning to Stanley Junction, they were delayed by a wreck and the time record was bad at both ends of the line.

“I don’t like it,” said Griscom.

“We’ll mend it, Mr. Griscom,” declared the young fireman, and he did not go home when they reached Stanley Junction, but proceeded at once to the home of Jim Evans.

Ralph knocked at the open door, but no one answered the summons and he stepped to the door of the sitting room.

“Any one here?” he called out through the house.

“Eh? oh – no,” answered a muffled voice, and a man in the adjoining room got up quickly and fairly ran out through the rear door.

“That’s queer,” commented Ralph. “That man actually ran away from me.”

“Ma has gone after pa,” lisped a little urchin in the kitchen. “Man wants to see him. What for funny man run away?”

Ralph hurried past the infantile questioner and after the object of his curiosity.

“Yes, the man did look funny, for a fact,” said Ralph. “He was disguised. There he is. Hey, there! whoever you are, a word with you.”

He was now in close pursuit of a scurrying figure. The object of his curiosity turned to look at him, stumbled, and went headlong into a ditch.

Ralph came to the spot. The man lay groaning where he had fallen.

“Help me,” he muttered – “I’m nearly stunned.”

“Why!” exclaimed Ralph as he assisted the man to his feet, “it is Gasper Farrington.”

It was the village magnate, disguised. He stood regarding Ralph with savage eyes.

“I thought you had gone to Europe, Mr. Farrington,” said Ralph.

“Did you? Well, I haven’t,” growled Farrington, nursing a bruise on his face.

“Are you going to stay in Stanley Junction, then?”

“None of your business.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” retorted Ralph quickly. “You owe us thousands of dollars, and we want it.”

“You’ll collect by law, then. I’ll never give you a cent willingly.”

Ralph regarded the man thoughtfully for a minute or two.

“Mr. Farrington,” he said, “I have come to the conclusion that you are trying to make me more trouble. This man Evans is up to mischief, and I believe that you have incited him to it.”

The magnate was silent, regarding Ralph with menacing eyes.

“I warn you that it won’t pay, and that you won’t succeed,” continued Ralph. “What do you hope to accomplish by persecuting me?”

The old man glanced all about him. Then he spoke out.

“Fairbanks,” he said, “I give you one last chance – get out of Stanley Junction.”

“Why should I?” demanded Ralph.

“Because you have humiliated me and we can’t live in the same town together, that’s why.”

“You deserved humiliation,” responded Ralph steadily.

“All right, take your own view of the case. I will settle your claim for five thousand dollars and pay you the money at once, if you will leave Stanley Junction.”

“We will not take one cent less than the full twenty thousand dollars due us,” announced Ralph staunchly, “and I shall not leave Stanley Junction as long as my mother wants to live here.”

“Then,” said Gasper Farrington, venomously, as he walked from the spot, “look out for yourself.”

Ralph went back to the Evans home, but found only the little child there. He concluded he would not wait for Evans that evening. The discovery of his old-time enemy, Farrington, had been enlightening.

“I will have a talk with mother about this,” he mused.

When Ralph reached home a surprise greeted him. The little parlor was lighted up, indicating a visitor. He glanced in through the open windows.

The visitor was Zeph Dallas, the farmer boy.

CHAPTER V ON SPECIAL DUTY

Ralph entered the house glad of an opportunity to interview the farmer boy, who had been in his thoughts considerably during the day.

“Mr. Dallas, this is my son, Ralph,” said Mrs. Fairbanks, as the young fireman came into the parlor.

The visitor arose from his chair in an awkward, embarrassed fashion. He flushed and stammered as he grasped Ralph’s extended hand.

“Brought you a sack of potatoes and some apples,” he said. “Neighbor gave me a lift in his wagon.”

“Is that so?” returned Ralph with a friendly smile. “Well, Mr. Dallas, I am very glad to see you.”

“Gladder than you were last time, I reckon,” said Zeph. “Say, I – I want to say I am ashamed of myself, and I want to thank you for all you did for me. It’s made me your friend for life, so I came to ask a favor of you.”

This was rather a queer way of putting the case, thought Ralph, and the fellow blundered on.

“You see, Mr. Ames, that’s the man who hired me, found out about my doings down here at Stanley Junction, and he has set me adrift.”

“That is too bad,” observed Ralph.

“No, it ain’t, for I deserve better work,” dissented Zeph. “They say you’re dreadfully smart and everybody’s friend, and I want you to help me get where I want to get.”

“All right, I am willing to try to assist you.”

“I don’t know exactly which I had better do,” proceeded Zeph – “become a chief of police or a railroad conductor. Of course, the man who speaks quickest and will pay the most money gets me.”

Ralph concealed a smile, for Zeph was entirely in earnest.

“Well, you see,” remarked the young fireman, “it is somewhat difficult to get just the position you want without some experience.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” declared the farmer boy confidently. “I’ve thought it all out. I once watched a conductor go through a train. Why, it’s no work at all. I could do it easily. And as to being a detective I’ve read lots of books on the subject, and I’ve even got some disguises I made up, in my satchel here.”

“Oh, brought your satchel, too, did you?” observed Ralph.

“Why, yes, I thought maybe you’d house me for a day or two till I closed a contract with somebody.”

The fellow was so simple-minded that Mrs. Fairbanks pitied him, and, observing this, Ralph said:

“You are welcome, Zeph, and I will later talk over with you the prospects of a situation.”

The visitor was soon completely at home. He ate a hearty supper, and, after the meal, took some home-made disguises from his satchel. The poor fellow strutted around proudly as he put these on in turn.

“Old peddler,” he announced, donning a skull cap, a white beard made out of rope, and a big pair of goggles. “Tramp,” and he put on a ragged coat and a torn cap, and acted out the appearance of a typical tramp quite naturally. There were several other representations, but all so crude and funny that Ralph with difficulty restrained his merriment.

“How will it do?” inquired Zeph, at the conclusion of the performance.

“You have got the elements of the profession in mind,” said Ralph guardedly, “but there is the practical end of the business to learn.”

Then Ralph seriously and earnestly told his visitor the real facts of the case. He devoted a full hour to correcting Zeph’s wrong impressions of detective and railroad work. By the time he got through, Zeph’s face was glum.

“Why, if what you say is true,” he remarked dejectedly, “I’m next to being good for nothing.”

“Oh, no,” said Ralph, “don’t you be discouraged at all. You have the starting point of every ambition – an idea. I myself do not think much of the detective line for one as young as you are. As to railroading, I can tell you one fact.”

“What’s that?” interrogated Zeph dreamily.

“You must begin at the bottom of the ladder and take one step at a time – slow steps, sure steps, to reach the top.”

“You’re a fireman, aren’t you?” asked Zeph, admiringly.

Ralph answered that he was, and this led to his relating to the curious and interested Zeph the story of his career from roundhouse worker and switch tower man to the present position.

“It’s fascinating, ain’t it?” said Zeph, with a long-drawn breath, when Ralph concluded his recital. “I reckon I’ll give up the detective idea. Can you help me get a position in the roundhouse?”

“I am willing to try,” assented Ralph. “You are strong and used to hard work, and that means a good deal in the roundhouse service.”

Ralph suggested a stroll before bedtime. Zeph was glad for the exercise. Once they were outside, Ralph broached a subject he had been thinking over all the evening.

“Zeph,” he said, “I want to ask you a very important question.”

“What is that?”

“You remember the day I kept your team for you?”

“I’ll never forget it.”

“You missed a package that had been under the feed bags when you came to leave town?”

“Yes, and that’s why I am here,” said Zeph. “Old Ames was almost ready to discharge me for letting those men at the hotel give me drink I had never tasted before and getting in that fix you found me in, and for losing some of the apples, but when he found out that I had lost that package, he was nearly wild.”

“Was there something so valuable in it, then?”

“I dunno. I only know I was told to be sure I kept it hidden and safe till it was delivered to a fellow named Evans in town here.”

“Jim Evans?”

“Yes, that’s the full name.”

Ralph looked pretty serious.

“You see, old Ames himself didn’t send the package,” went on Zeph. “It was brought to the house by a fellow who had hired a team from Ames one day last week. Dunno who he is, dunno where he lives, but I can describe him, if you are interested.”

“I am interested, very much so,” assented Ralph.

Zeph went on to describe the person he had alluded to. By the time he had concluded, it was evident to Ralph that the sender of the package was Ike Slump.

The young fireman took Zeph back to the house but did not enter it himself.

“I will be back soon, Zeph,” he said, “I have some business down town.”

Ralph went at once to the home of Bob Adair.

“Want to see me, Fairbanks?” questioned the brisk, wide-awake railroad detective, as Ralph was shown into the room where he was busily engaged in packing a satchel.

“Yes, Mr. Adair, about the silk robbery.”

“Oh, that mystery,” nodded the detective. “I spent two days on it, and didn’t find a clew.”

“I had one, but failed to find you,” explained Ralph. “I’ll tell you all about it now.”

“Quick work, then, Fairbanks,” went on Adair, “for I’m due for a special to the city. Big case from the General Superintendent.”

Ralph rapidly related all he had learned. Adair listened intently. He reflected for a moment or two after the young fireman had finished his recital. Then he said:

“Fairbanks, this is of great importance, but I can’t neglect the city case. You helped me on another similar case once.”

“Yes,” said Ralph.

“Also aided me in running down those switch tower wreckers.”

Ralph nodded.

“Good work, and you did nobly in those affairs. Let me think. Yes, I’ll do it! Here, I want you to go straight to the Assistant Superintendent at Afton.”

“You mean to-night?”

“Right away. I will give you a letter. No, hold on, I’ve got a better plan.”

Again Adair consulted his watch. Bustlingly he hurried through with his preparations for departure. Then he left the house, swung down the street briskly, and, Ralph accompanying him, proceeded to the railroad depot.

He wrote out a long telegram and handed it to the night operator. Then he came back to Ralph.

“See here, Fairbanks,” he remarked. “I’ve fixed this thing as I want it, and you are one of the few persons I would trust in a matter like this.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Adair.”

“I know your ability from past experience. It won’t do to neglect following this clew to the silk robbers. I have wired the assistant superintendent for an official request that you be detailed on special duty in my department. Wait here for the reply. Then start out on the trail of those thieves, and report to me day after to-morrow, when I shall return to Stanley Junction.”

“All right,” said Ralph, “I may be able to accomplish something.”

“I think you will, judging from your present success in assisting me,” said Adair.

Ralph had to wait nearly an hour after Adair had left on a special. Then a reply came to the telegram. The operator, as instructed by Adair, handed the message to Ralph. It read:

“Fairbanks, freight fireman, detailed for special work in another department.”

“It’s all right,” said Ralph to himself, as he started homewards. “Now to trace down Ike Slump and the other train robbers.”

CHAPTER VI

ZEPH

The young fireman reported at the roundhouse early in the morning, showing the telegram to Jim Forgan, but not until the foreman had got out of sight and hearing of the other men in the place.

"H'm!" commented Forgan laconically, "I don't like this."

"Indeed, Mr. Forgan?" smiled Ralph.

"I don't, and that's the truth of it – for two reasons."

"What are they, Mr. Forgan?"

"First, it interrupts a regular run for you."

"But I may not be away two days."

"Next, it gives that Jim Evans a chance to take your place, and I don't trust the man."

"Neither do I," said Ralph pointedly, "and I may have something important to tell you about him when I return."

Ralph found Zeph industriously chopping kindling wood when he got back home again. The young fireman went into the house, explained his new employment to his mother, and then called to Zeph.

"You wanted some work, Zeph," he said to the farmer boy.

"Sure, I do," cried Zeph with unction.

"Very well, I think I am authorized to offer you a dollar a day."

"Steady job?" inquired Zeph eagerly.

"No, it may not last, but it is in the railroad service, and may lead to your further employment."

"Good," commented Zeph. "What do they want me to do – engineer?"

"Scarcely, Zeph," said Ralph, smiling. "I simply want you to take me back to the Ames farm and direct me about the locality."

Zeph looked disappointed.

"Why, what's that kind of work got to do with railroading?" he said.

"You shall know later."

"All right. You're too smart to make any mistakes and too friendly to do anything but good for me, so I'm your man."

"Very well. First, then, tell me the location of the Ames farm."

Zeph did this, and Ralph ascertained that it was about five miles west of Brocton.

Ralph secured some money, and in an hour he and Zeph stepped aboard the cab of a locomotive attached to a load of empties due to run down the line in a few minutes.

They reached Brocton about noon. Ralph proceeded down the tracks towards the railroad cut which had been the scene of the landslide.

He turned off at the wagon road and soon, with his companion, was started westward in the direction of the Ames farm.

"Zeph," he said, "did you hear anything of a train robbery here the other night?"

No, Zeph had not heard of it. Then Ralph questioned him closely as to the night Ames had loaned his wagon to strangers and gained a few more particulars relating to the silk robbers.

"There is the Ames farm," reported Zeph at last.

Ralph had already planned out what he would do, and proceeded to instruct his assistant as to his share in the affair.

"Zeph," he said, "I do not wish to be seen by Ames, nor must he know that you came here with a stranger."

“Am I to see him?”

“Yes,” answered Ralph, taking a package from under his coat.

“Why, that’s the package I lost!” cried Zeph.

“The same.”

“And you had it all the time?”

“I did, Zeph, yes. No mystery about it – I simply don’t care to explain to you anything about it till a little later on.”

“All right.”

“I want you to take it and go up to the farmhouse. I will keep out of sight. You go to Ames and tell him it was returned to you, and you want to give it back to the person it belongs to with a message.”

“Whose message?”

“Nobody’s,” answered Ralph, “but you need not say that.”

“What shall I say, then?”

“Tell him you want to advise the person who sent the parcel that it isn’t safe to send such goods to any one at the present time.”

“Very well,” said Zeph. “Suppose Ames tells me where to find the fellow who sent the package?”

“Come back and report to me.”

Zeph started for the farmhouse. Ralph watched him enter it, the package in his hand. He came out in a very few minutes without the parcel.

He was rather glum-faced when he rejoined Ralph.

“Say,” he observed, “I’ve found out nothing, and old Ames took the package away from me.”

“What did he say?” asked the young fireman.

“He told me he would see that it was returned to the person who sent it.”

“That delays matters,” thought Ralph, “and I don’t know whether Ames will take it back to the silk thieves, or wait for some of them to visit him.”

Then the young fireman formed a sudden resolution. He regarded his companion thoughtfully, and said:

“Zeph, I am going to trust you with what is known as an official secret in the railroad line.”

The farmer boy looked pleased and interested.

“I believe you are too square and friendly to betray that secret.”

“Try me, and see!” cried Zeph with ardor.

“Well,” said Ralph, “there was a silk robbery of the Dover night freight last week, the train I am fireman on. From what you have told me, I feel sure that the thieves hired their rig from Ames. That package you had was part of the stolen plunder. I am acting for the road detective of the Great Northern, and I must locate those robbers.”

“Then,” cried Zeph delightedly, “I am helping you do detective work.”

“Yes, Zeph, genuine detective work.”

“Oh! how I wish I had my disguises here!”

“You are of more use to me as you are, because the thieves know you worked for Ames, and they seem to trust him.”

“That’s so,” said Zeph thoughtfully. “What you going to do?”

“I want to locate the thieves,” responded Ralph. “You must know the district about here pretty well. Can’t you think of any spot where they would be likely to hide?”

“None in particular. But I know every foot of the woods, swamps and creek. If the men you are looking for are anywhere in the neighborhood, I am sure we will find a trace of them.”

“You pilot the way, then, Zeph. Go with caution if you find any traces of the men, for I am sure that at least two of the party know me.”

For three hours they made a tour of the district, taking in nearly four miles to the south. The swamp lands they could not traverse. Finally they came out of the woods almost directly on a town.

“Why,” said Ralph in some surprise, “here is Millville, the next station to Brocton.”

“That’s so,” nodded Zeph. “I hardly think those fellows are in the woods. We have made a pretty thorough search.”

“There’s the swamp and the high cliffs we haven’t visited,” said Ralph. “I suppose you are hungry?”

“Moderately,” answered Zeph.

“Then we will go and have something to eat. I have a friend just on the edge of Millville, who keeps a very unique restaurant.”

Ralph smiled pleasantly, for the restaurant in question was quite a feature with railroad men.

Two lines of railroad crossed at Millville, a great deal of switching was done outside of the town, and there was a shanty there to shelter the men.

A little off from the junction was a very queer-looking house, if it could be called such. Its main structure was an old freight car, to which there had been additions made from time to time. Across its front was a sign reading, “Limpy Joe’s Railroad Restaurant.”

“Ever taken a meal here?” inquired Ralph, as they approached the place.

“No.”

“Ever heard of Limpy Joe?”

“Don’t think I have.”

“Then,” said Ralph, “I am going to introduce you to the most interesting boy you ever met.”

CHAPTER VII

LIMPY JOE'S RAILROAD RESTAURANT

Zeph Dallas stared about him in profound bewilderment and interest as Ralph led the way towards Limpy Joe's Railroad Restaurant.

It was certainly an odd-appearing place. Additions had been built onto the freight car until the same were longer than the original structure.

A square of about two hundred feet was enclosed by a barbed wire fence, and this space was quite as interesting as the restaurant building.

There was a rude shack, which seemed to answer for a barn, a haystack beside it, and a well-appearing vegetable garden. Then, in one corner of the yard, was a heap of old lumber, stone, brick, doors, window sash, in fact, it looked as if some one had been gathering all the unmated parts of various houses he could find.

The restaurant was neatly painted a regular, dark-red freight-car color outside. Into it many windows had been cut, and a glance through the open doorway showed an interior scrupulously neat and clean.

"Tell me about it," said Zeph. "Limpy Joe – who is he? Does he run the place alone?"

"Yes," answered Ralph. "He is an orphan, and was hurt by the cars a few years ago. The railroad settled with him for two hundred dollars, an old freight car and a free pass for life over the road, including, Limpy Joe stipulated, locomotives and cabooses."

"Wish I had that," said Zeph – "I'd be riding all the time."

"You would soon get tired of it," Ralph asserted. "Well, Joe invested part of his money in a horse and wagon, located in that old freight car, which the company moved here for him from a wreck in the creek, and became a squatter on that little patch of ground. Then the restaurant idea came along, and the railroad hands encouraged him. Before that, however, Joe had driven all over the country, picking up old lumber and the like, and the result is the place as you see it."

"Well, he must be an ambitious, industrious fellow."

"He is," affirmed Ralph, "and everybody likes him. He's ready at any time of the night to get up and give a tired-out railroad hand a hot cup of coffee or a lunch. His meals are famous, too, for he is a fine cook."

"Hello, Ralph Fairbanks," piped a happy little voice as Ralph and Zeph entered the restaurant. Ralph shook hands with the speaker, a boy hobbling about the place on a crutch.

"What's it going to be?" asked Limpy Joe, "full dinner or a lunch?"

"Both, best you've got," smiled Ralph. "The railroad is paying for this."

"That so? Then we'll reduce the rates. Railroad has been too good to me to overcharge the company."

"This is my friend, Zeph Dallas," introduced Ralph.

"Glad to know you," said Joe. "Sit down at the counter, fellows, and I'll soon have you served."

"Well, well," said Zeph, staring around the place one way, then the other, and then repeating the performance. "This strikes me."

"Interesting to you, is it?" asked Ralph.

"It's wonderful. Fixed this up all alone out of odds and ends? I tell you, I'd like to be a partner in a business like this."

"Want a partner here, Joe?" called out Ralph to his friend in a jocular way.

"I want a helper," answered the cripple, busy among the shining cooking ware on a kitchen stove at one end of the restaurant.

“Mean that?” asked Zeph.

“I do. I have some new plans I want to carry out, and I need some one to attend to the place half of the time.”

Again Zeph glanced all about the place.

“Say, it fascinates me,” he observed to Ralph. “Upon my word, I believe I’ll come to work here when I get through with this work for you.”

“Tell you what,” said Limpy Joe with a shrewd glance at Zeph, as he placed the smoking dishes before his customers. “I’ll make it worth the while of an honest, active fellow to come in here with me. I have some grand ideas.”

“You had some good ones when you fitted up the place,” declared Zeph.

“You think it over. I like your looks,” continued Joe. “I’m in earnest, and I might make it a partnership after a while.”

The boys ate a hearty meal, and the young fireman paid for it.

“Business good, Joe?” he inquired, as they were about to leave.

“Famous. I’ve got some new customers, too. Don’t know who they are.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t, for a fact.”

“That sounds puzzling,” observed Ralph.

“Well, it’s considerable of a puzzle to me – all except the double pay I get,” responded Joe. “For nearly a week I’ve had a funny order. One dark night some one pushed up a window here and threw in a card. It contained instructions and a ten-dollar bill.”

“That’s pretty mysterious,” said the interested Zeph.

“The card told me that if I wanted to continue a good trade, I would say nothing about it, but every night at dark drive to a certain point in the timber yonder with a basket containing a good solid day’s feed for half-a-dozen men.”

“Well, well,” murmured Zeph, while Ralph gave quite a start, but remained silent, though strictly attentive.

“Well, I have acted on orders given, and haven’t said a word about it to anybody but you, Ralph. The reason I tell you is, because I think you are interested in some of the persons who are buying meals from me in this strange way. It’s all right for me to speak out before your friend here?”

“Oh, certainly,” assented Ralph.

“Well, Ike Slump is one of the party in the woods, and Mort Bemis is another.”

“I guessed that the moment you began your story,” said Ralph, “and I am looking for those very persons.”

“I thought you would be interested. They are wanted for that attempted treasure-train robbery, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and for a more recent occurrence,” answered Ralph – “the looting of the Dover freight the other night.”

“I never thought of that, though I should have done so,” said Joe. “The way I know that Slump and Bemis are in the woods yonder, is that one night I had a breakdown, and was delayed a little, and saw them come for the food basket where I had left it.”

Ralph’s mind was soon made up. He told Joe all about their plans.

“You’ve got to help us out, Joe,” he added.

“You mean take you up into the woods in the wagon to-night?”

“Yes.”

“Say,” said Joe, his shrewd eyes sparkling with excitement, “I’ll do it in fine style. Ask no questions. I’ve got a plan. I’ll have another breakdown, not a sham one, this time. I’ll have you two well covered up in the wagon box, and you can lie there until some one comes after the basket.”

“Good,” approved Ralph, “you are a genuine friend, Joe.”

Ralph and Zeph had to wait around the restaurant all the afternoon. There was only an occasional customer, and Joe had plenty of time to spare. He took a rare delight in showing his friends his treasures, as he called them.

About dusk Joe got the food supply ready for the party in the woods. He hitched up the horse to a wagon, arranged some blankets and hay in the bottom of the vehicle, so that his friends could hide themselves, and soon all was ready for the drive into the timber.

Ralph managed to look out as they proceeded into the woods. The wagon was driven about a mile. Then Joe got out and set the basket under a tree.

A little distance from it he got out again, took off a wheel, left it lying on the ground, unhitched the horse, and rode away on the back of the animal. The vehicle, to a casual observer, would suggest the appearance of a genuine breakdown.

“Now, Zeph,” said Ralph as both arranged their coverings so they could view tree and basket clearly, “no rash moves.”

“If anybody comes, what then?” inquired the farmer boy.

“We shall follow them, but with great caution. Keep close to me, so that I can give you special instructions, if it becomes necessary.”

“Good,” said Zeph. “That will be soon, for there they are!”

Two figures had appeared at the tree. One took up the basket, the other glanced around stealthily. Ralph recognized both of them, even in the dim twilight, at some distance away. One was Ike Slump, the other his old-time crony and accomplice, Mort Bemis.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HIDDEN PLUNDER

“That’s the fellow who brought the package of silk to old Ames,” whispered Zeph, staring hard from under covert at Slump.

“Yes, I recognize him,” responded Ralph in quite as guarded a tone. “Quiet, now, Zeph.”

Ike Slump and Mort Bemis continued to linger at the tree. They were looking at the wagon and beyond it.

“Say,” spoke the former to his companion, “what’s wrong?”

“How wrong?” inquired Mort.

“Why, some way our plans appear to have slipped a cog. There’s the wagon broken down and the boy has gone with the horse. Two of our men were to stop him, you know, and keep him here while we used the wagon.”

“Maybe they’re behind time. What’s the matter with our holding the boy till they come?”

“The very thing,” responded Ike, and, leaving the basket where it was, he and Mort ran after Limpy Joe and the horse.

“Get out of here, quick,” ordered Ralph to Zeph. “If we don’t, we shall probably be carried into the camp of the enemy.”

“Isn’t that just exactly the place that you want to reach?” inquired the farmer boy coolly.

“Not in this way. Out with you, and into the bushes. Don’t delay, Zeph, drop flat, some one else is coming.”

It was a wonder they were not discovered, for almost immediately two men came running towards the spot. They were doubtless the persons Ike Slump had referred to, for they gave a series of signal whistles, responded to by their youthful accomplices, who, a minute later, came into view leading the horse of which Limpy Joe was astride.

“We were late,” panted one of the men.

“Should think you were,” retorted Ike Slump. “This boy nearly got away. Say, if you wasn’t a cripple,” he continued to the young restaurant keeper, “I’d give you something for whacking me with that crutch of yours.”

“I’d whack you again, if it would do any good,” said the plucky fellow. “You’re a nice crowd, you are, bothering me this way after I’ve probably saved you from starvation the last week.”

“That’s all right, sonny,” drawled out one of the men. “We paid you for what you’ve done for us, and we will pay you still better for simply coming to our camp and staying there a prisoner, until we use that rig of yours for a few hours.”

“If you wanted to borrow the rig, why didn’t you do so in a decent fashion?” demanded Joe indignantly.

“You keep quiet, now,” advised the man who carried on the conversation. “We know our business. Here, Slump, you and Mort help get this wheel on the wagon and hitch up the horse.”

They forced Joe into the wagon bottom and proceeded to get ready for a drive into the woods.

“Bet Joe is wondering how we came to get out of that wagon,” observed Zeph to Ralph.

“Don’t talk,” said Ralph. “Now, when they start away, I will follow, you remain here.”

“Right here?”

“Yes, so that I may find you when I come back, and so that you can follow the wagon when it comes out of the woods again if I am not on hand.”

“You think they are going to move some of their plunder in the wagon?”

“Exactly,” replied the young fireman.

“Well, so do I. They won’t get far with it, though, if I am after them,” boasted Zeph. “Wish I had a detective star and some weapons.”

“The safest way to do is to follow them until they get near a town or settlement, and then go for assistance and arrest them,” advised Ralph. “Now, then, Zeph, make no false moves.”

“No, I will follow your orders strictly,” pledged the farmer boy.

The basket was lifted into the wagon by Ike, who, with Mort, led the horse through the intricate timber and brushwood. Progress was difficult and they proceeded slowly. As soon as it was safe to do so, Ralph left Zeph. The two men had taken up the trail of the wagon, guarding its rear so that Joe could not escape.

Ralph kept sight of them for half-an-hour and was led deeper and deeper into the woods. These lined the railroad cut, and he wondered that the gang of robbers had dared to camp so near to the recent scene of their thieving operations.

At last the young fireman was following only two men, for he could no longer see the wagon.

“Perhaps they have left Ike and Bemis to go ahead with the wagon and they are reaching the camp by a short cut,” reflected Ralph. “Why, no,” he suddenly exclaimed, as the men turned aside to take a new path. “These are not the same men at all who were with the wagon. I am off the trail, I am following some one else.”

Ralph made this discovery with some surprise. Certainly he had got mixed up in cautiously trailing the enemy at a distance. He wondered if the two men he was now following belonged to Ike Slump’s crowd.

“I must assume they do,” ruminated Ralph, “at least for the present. They are bound for some point in the woods, of course, and I shall soon know their destination.”

The two men proceeded for over a mile. They commenced an ascent where the cliffs lining the railroad cut began. The place was thick with underbrush and quite rocky in places, wild and desolate in the extreme, and the path they pursued so tortuous and winding that Ralph at length lost sight of them.

“Where have they disappeared to?” he asked himself, bending his ear, keeping a sharp lookout, and with difficulty penetrating the worst jungle of bushes and stunted trees he had yet encountered. “I hear voices.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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