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"I'm blown if I do!" he cried, and rushed to the telegraphic apparatus standing at the opposite side of the room, but fell senseless ere he reached it, stricken down by the butt of Nebraska Ben's revolver.

"Tie that coyote up an' gag him, quick," whispered that worthy, hoarsely; "we must try to work the thing without him. Git the men in, too; there are plenty in Jagersville 'ud blow the gaff if they saw 'em hangin' around."

He was obeyed immediately, and about ten men entered hastily, taxing the limited space so much that one of them stumbled over the prostrate form of Mr. Jackson.

"Take that feller away out o' the light," snarled the leader; "carry him upstairs, dump him down in the room above, an' lock the bloomin' door. He ain't likely to give trouble jest now, anyway."

There was a moment's confusion, as two men, bearing the limp body between them, obeyed the second order as silently as possible under the circumstances, and then came stumbling down the little stairs, softly cursing their narrowness.

"Silence there gents,—if you please," continued Nebraska Ben, "an' look to yer guns. Are the picks outside?"

"Yes, cap," replied one of the newcomers; "they're stacked in the waitin'-room along with the porter chap."

"Good, they'll be wanted in a hurry. Halloo, here's a wire. Now, then, Wily William, what's the news?" he added, as the telegraph bell tinkled.

"Jest in time, cap," replied a tall man bending over the keys, his pale, sinister face barred by the crape mask; "here's what they say"—and he slowly spelled out as the instrument clicked its message—"Freight suspended, gold express due Jagersville by nine. Keep sharp look-out. Telegraph Big Timbers if anything unusual today."

"Our train, by gum!" exclaimed the captain. "Mighty smart, too, to send the dust round by this Rip Van Winkle place; they must ha' got wind of our little game up Nebraska way. Gay! That O'Grady girl's got sand, you bet! If I hadn't the wire Jeff Crimmins sent on today—she's engaged to him now—we were goners. Anyway, she's even with that paloot upstairs over the Dubleek gal, for they'll sack him on this job, sure as candy. There ain't much margin left for mistakes. Now, then, to biz. You wire some sort o' answer, Billy, an' you boys take yer picks an' ket the rails up quick at the canyon side. She must go over there, for, of course, there's no chance of her stoppin' at this yere station. The rest'll be easy as kissin' yer hand. How blamed close they kept everything even from their own clerk, till the last moment! If there's a dime there's a million in gold in that there train, an' if we only manage the trick proper we're made men!"

There was a low growl of satisfaction, and the greater part of the men trooped out immediately. Then came the muffled pat-pat of horse-shoes on the grass-grown road outside leading from the diggings, and a booted, armed man appeared in the little blur of light thrown by one of the signal-lamps. Jem Potts, the porter, now lying bound in the tiny waiting-room, had lit just before being taken prisoner.

"Right you are, Pete—on time as usual," said Nebraska Ben, gaily. "How many have you got?"

"Seven, cap, counting myself," answered the other.

"That'll do. Jest send a couple to watch the Jagersville road, an' a few more to patrol the canyon bridge. Hold up anything you meet, but don't fire, if possible. The quieter every move of this game's kept, the better—there's too many Vigilants knockin' around. You may slip on yourself to the gates where the road crosses the line, with some o' these. 'Twill be a good ambush, for if she pulls up at all it will be before passin' the station, an' jest there. It ain't likely, but we can't afford to take no risks."

"All right, cap. We'll make it lively for that escort if they get curious. There's sure to be troops along with the dust?"

Nebraska Ben nodded. The man beckoned some three or four others from within, and departed silently for the point mentioned, less than a quarter of a mile up the line. The leader looked at his watch.

"Time's passin', gents," he observed to those remaining, "an' we must get them lights in position. Flare up that candle there, boys. So. Now, Sam Willins, take that lamp yonder, an' put it on the bracket o' that pole, outside, behind the piece o' glass on the arm—you'll find a ladder, at the side. The train's comin', of course, from Denver, s— the distance signal ought to be out from Jagersville. I'll tote this up there myself. Then we've only got to pull the lever yonder the clerk showed me today, an' the arms 'ill fall, an' the signal stand at 'clear.' I'll look after this, for everything's got to be done reg'lar, else they'll smell a rat. Rest yer eye on them telegraph keys, Bill, an' don't you boys fail to keep a sharp lookout neither."

And with this pleasantry, which provoked a suppressed guffaw, he hurried away into the darkness.

When Mr. Jackson was so roughly deposited upon the floor of his room he returned to consciousness almost immediately. For a while he remained perfectly still, endeavoring to collect his thoughts and listening to all that had passed in the room below. But when he heard the telegram he knew prompt action was imperative.

The gag had not been securely fastened and the roughness of his bearers had further loosened it at one side. Working his jaws furiously, he was soon able to clear his mouth of the felt bandage, and then lifting his numbed arms, he patiently bit asunder the cords binding his hands. A little care presently set his feet free also. He was suffering great pain, his ears ringing, his head aching from the effects of the blow, but he forced himself to concentrate his attention on the need of the moment.

Leaning against the wall, he stealthily struck a match and looked at his watch. Good heavens, he had not quite twenty minutes! What could he do in that time? Escape to Jagersville was out of the question were he strong enough to attempt it. An active, unwounded man might succeed in tapping the telegraph wires which he knew passed close to the shingles overhead, but the message would inevitably arrive too late at Big Timbers. Whatever was to be done should be done at once—but what?

He almost groaned aloud in his impotence, and remembering Rosie, cursed her heartily. Then he thought of Miss Dubleek and included her in the anathema, for if they had not quarreled she would probably be now at her window waiting, and he might, by signalling to Bee Ranch, get something accomplished.

"Why not do so instantly?" he asked himself, dreamily; anything was better than this awful inactivity, with every lost minute bringing the express nearer to her doom. The chance of attracting the girl's attention was sickeningly faint, but it was the only means of communicating with the outer world left to him, and he resolved to try it.

Slipping off his boots he groped his way painfully to the window, and after some little search found the bicycle-lamp with which he used to signal, now lying idle for many weeks. He shook it—alas! there was not much oil left, but he prayed passionately there would be enough to serve his purpose. Still acting with the utmost caution. Listening to the suppressed tones of the guards below, and hearing the dull, swift strokes of the picks upon the track beyond the canyon, he lit it, and dragging himself to an upright position, though the effort cost him torture and might mean a bullet in his brain, he began to make the flash signals.

Miss Dubleek had just finished