

# Larrison's Lay Off

Strictly speaking there were two men intervening, and there was no doubt about his having earned them. Larrison happened in the fast mail with his engine, the big 619. Train No. 7, the Pacific Flyer, was badly delayed at the Missouri river terminal six miles later, overtook the passenger train at Grand Butte.

Here the division dispatcher made a slip. The mail's time was faster than that of the delayed flyer, hence the passenger train should have let the passenger train pass No. 7 at the Butte.

But Perkins gave the order to pass No. 7 at the Butte. Ten minutes later he let the mail pass.

As it chanced I was a passenger on No. 7 that morning, the guest of the superintendent Blaisdell, of the Pacific division. Our car, which was the superintendent's private office—no, was the last—in the long train.

Through the plate glass rear windows we had frequent glimpses of the mail as Larrison whistled into the station just as we were leaving.

As we were on the other side of the hill that young berserker would have a good chance to repeat "MacCartney's bad break," remarked the superintendent, chewing grimly on a cigar.

I nodded. MacCartney was one of the mail engineers, who under present conditions, had chafed at the mail run, with its 34-hour lay-over at the division station, brought possibilities. By dint of a little practice a man may learn to catch catches in the saddle, and Teddy and I did it back and forth between town and the Howison ranch when he was supposed to be sleeping the clock around.

It was a matter of course that he should be jeered unmercifully by the men. He took it all in good part till one day old man Targis received a tradition to the effect that Bart Howison was an escaped convict from one of the southern states. Then he struck back smartly.

"It's a lie, and you all know it," he retorted. "The livin' last one of you dassent hint at that to Bart Howison's face!"

Targis laughed. "Mebbe not. But if I were you I wouldn't mix up 'our truck with the family, Buddy."

"If an orange-outang on this railroad wants to make my business his business—"

A chorus of derisive groans drowned the defiance, and so the matter rested.

It was during the final week of Larrison's enforced vacation, that a short-whiskered man with sleepy eyes arrived at the Butte, the morning on the Flyer, and put up at the Arroyo Hotel. Then this whisper went around that he was an officer of some sort looking for his man.

Its effect on the colony at Grand Butte was interesting. There were mysterious disappearances not a few. As you would suppose, the town grinned broadly every time a mail dropped out, grinned and looked to see the short-whiskered one give chase. But as yet he had made no sign.

One afternoon I chanced to be the only other occupant of the shaded porch, and he removed his cigar to say, "Wasn't some buddy tellin' me you was a lawyer?"

"Then maybe you can tell me what I want to know. They tell me the government ain't just the same in the territories as 'tis in the states."

I replied that the government was the same, for all practical purposes, and he went on:

"I got some papers to serve, and I didn't know whether they hold out here or not."

"It will hold all right if it was properly issued. Have you found your man?"

He shook his head. "It's a girl I'm lookin' for. Black eyes, brown hair, with a gimlet red in it, the prettiest mouth you ever saw, and a trim-built, tight little nigger to match. When I find her, I'll know where to find my man."

The mystery fog began to lift. His rough and ready description was wonderfully like an impressionist's sketch of Mary Howison.

Then into the dust-shimmering end of the main street rode two figures side by side, a young woman sitting her pinto like one bred to the saddle, and a young man whose normal seat was the cushion of an engine cab—to wit, Mary Howison and our Teddy.

The sheriff's chair came to the floor with a snap.

"Excuse me," he said, and vanished.

An hour later, when Larrison and Mary rode out of the dusty street and a slouched figure mounted on a hired hack made a wide detour on the bare plain to hold them in view.

As I afterward learned, it was on this return to the ranch that Teddy put his fate to the touch.

It promised to be his last opportunity for a while. While in town he had been notified to hold himself in readiness to take out the west-bound Fast Mail at midnight.

Now he the speaker flouted, or tongue-tied, such things as Teddy had to say do not utter themselves spontaneously. So it came to pass that 15 of the 30 miles had been galloped over before he said haltingly: "I guess you know why I was so struck on seeing you home, tonight."

"How should I know—except that I know you are always headstrong."

ought to kep' out o' my way," he growled when we had dug him out of the wreck.

In the hills to the northwest of Grand Butte lies the seigniorly of one Barton Howison, cattle king, and thither Teddy took himself at the beginning of his month of leisure.

Now, from the Bad Lands to the Three Tetons you would not find a custer Ishmaelite, than this man Howison. But he had taken a fancy to Teddy, and Teddy, like every other unattached bachelor in the Chugwater country, was desperately in love with Mary Howison.

Teddy's standing with the cattle king dated back to the time when he was pulling fast freights. Howison had driven into the Butte one day with a trainload of prime beef.

The Chicago market was up and posing for a plunge, wherefore time in transit meant money. Ted happened to be sent out on that particular run, and he gave Howison and the beef outfit the ride of their lives. By consequence, the cattle king, known far and wide as a hater of railroad men on principle, gave him the latch-string of the ranch house to pull when he pleased.

The ranch was 30 miles from the Butte as the crow flies. But the mail run, with its 34-hour lay-over at the division station, brought possibilities. By dint of a little practice a man may learn to catch catches in the saddle, and Teddy and I did it back and forth between town and the Howison ranch when he was supposed to be sleeping the clock around.

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haven't the nerve to say what I've been aching to say to you for a month back, Miss Mary."

"You mustn't come to the ranch any more," she said.

"You could have knocked me out with a bunch o' waste," said Teddy when he was telling me of it afterwards.

"Not come to see you any more," says I. "No," says she.

"It's against the law to hang a man without tellin' him what for," says I.

"It was just about then that we both saw a slouchy-looking chap riding by on top of the rise. He was heading for the ranch, with the throttle wide open.

"If I should tell you what for," says she, with a sort of slow fire in her eyes, "you'd never want to see me again, Mr. Larrison." And with that she hit the horse a lick and was gone.

That night it was the private opinion of the round-house foreman, or less publicly expressed, that Larrison's lay-off had ruined his temper beyond repair. And when the big eight-wheeler had been backed to her stand at the station, Teddy perched himself like a silky boy on his box-seat, and let the woman "oil around."

It was while he was sitting thus in sullen majesty that the incoming mail whistled. Above the din of shrilling brakes and drumming wheels Larrison's ears caught an her sound—the quick thudding of a mail box on the dry, hard soil of the mesa.

It was a moonless night, and the sheen of the electric headlight made everything Egyptian dark behind it. None the less, Larrison saw a horse picking its way across the tracks in the yard toward the cab of 619.

When the horse came under the cab window he saw that it was ridden by a woman. His silliness vanished like the mists of the morning when a voice well known and well loved came up to him out of the darkness. "Is that you, Mr. Larrison?"

"You bet it's me. It's always me when you're the one that's askin', he rejoined promptly. "What's happened?"

"The worst that could happen," she quavered. "A man has come from Tennessee—with a warrant. He is taking father to the train at Black Canyon, to carry him east by Maverick and the Short Line."

He was afraid the boys might find out and overtake him if he came this way."

"Taking Bart Howison—when he didn't want to go?" said Teddy, incredulous.

"Yes. Ah Ling, the cook, told me. Father was alone in the ranch house, and the man slipped up behind him. There was a fight."

Larrison was coolly disregarding the conductor's signal to go. "What have they got against your father?"

"A charge of murder. But he is innocent, and—Oh, Mr. Larrison, you must help me! He will never tell, and he will be lynched if they get him back to Bledso County!"

"I'm yours to command, same as ever," said Teddy, laconically. "What's your notion?"

"To go to Black Canyon on this train and head them off."

"What'll you do?"

"I'll tell Mr. Pettijoe who kills John Barnwell."

"It is a hard thing for a woman to say to the man she loves that which she has reason to believe will slay his love for her. But she did it."

"It was—it was my cousin. We were engaged, and father tried to push it up for my sake. When he found he couldn't do it, he let them think he was the guilty one, and ran away. Now, you know why you must help me this once, and then try to forget me."

Teddy fought his battle between two-sitting beats of the air pump.

"I'll see, Miss Mary, did you lose that other fellow?"

"I thought I did, and father thinks so, too. He will go to his death, shelling Bud Parker for my sake. But I know now that I didn't never did."

"Teddy's rejoinder was not in words. Reaching out of the cab window, he swung her clear of the pin to his back and drew her up to the cushioned cab seat. Then he dropped from the gangway, and entered the superintendent's office."

What Theodore had to say to me was said in the cab of the 619 after he had checked me upon the fireman's box and was snatching the Fast Mail out over the switches. Mary Howison's story was slung into my ear, and this was the deduction from it.

"You prater round here as the company lawyer, you're going to Black Canyon to find something wrong with this here Sheriff's papers."

"I saw," I said, "I was in for anything from picking a pocket to committing high treason." But not heeding Mary Howison's lover, I had hopes.

There was a blind siding three miles east of Black Canyon. Unless I mistook my man, Dispatcher Perkins would order No. 8 on this siding, where we would pass her at the rate of 60 miles an hour, and I should be well out of a bad business."

But my thinking mechanism ran as swift as Theodore's. In a very few moments it became evident that he had sized the situation up to the same conclusion, and what steam and steel could do to forestall Perkins was going to be done in the racing interval.

Across the cab, lighted now by the bottle-green glow of the gauge lamp, and now by the fierce glare from the open fire-door, was a picture to stir the genius of a Holbein.

Larrison stood on the narrow running-step, bracing himself against the lurch of the great engine by his grip on the throttle, statuesque, immovable, like a life-size figure done in ruddy bronze. Beyond him, one shoulder touching his, sat the girl, her hands lightclasped over her knees, and the strained eagerness in her face matching Teddy's knit brows in color.

A mile after mile shot backward beneath us. The powerful machine seemed to be doing its utmost, yet Larrison was still twitching nervously at the throttle.

I knew his purpose. There was but one night, telegraph station between the Butte and Black Canyon. Once safely past Maverick without the detaining order, and we might make sure of finding No. 8 on the siding at Black Canyon.

Larrison strained every nerve, but the eyes were against him. When we surged around the long curve which was the eastern approach to Maverick Junction, we saw the red light signal. "Stop for orders."

The air was still whistling through the brakes when Hogan came running forward with the order. "No. 8 would leave Black Canyon in time, and would sidetrack for us at blind siding No. 2."

Larrison read the order by the light of the gauge lamp.

"I'm d-d if she does!" was all he said, and the 619 lunged into motion like an angry thoroughbred under an unpermitted cut of the whip.

Larrison: "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to shove 'em back into Black Canyon's split her in two," he yelled. "Study your piece. You are going to have a look at it."

I recall little of that tumultuous night beyond Maverick save the rattle and roar and the plunging rush. Only once did full-blooded consciousness assert itself. It was when, overhauled over the switches of the yet unoccupied blind siding and rushing onward in the darkness to our doom.

When I opened my eyes again the 619's whistle was screaming in deafening shrieks, and Larrison was twitching at the airbrake. Straight in front of us, the cone of its headlight merging fairly with ours, was No. 8. I held my breath for the crash which should presently efface it. It did not come. Instead, the advancing headlight dimpled, wavered and began to recede. Larrison had won the race.

A minute later we were at a stand beside the waiting passenger train, and he had pooped upon me with a savage oath.

"Down with you and speak your piece!" he roared. "I've done myself up for all time, and if you don't get Bart Howison loose low—"

I did not wait to learn the alternative. My man and his man were

in the day coach, and I found them and went at my part in the affair like a bull at a gate. There was no other way.

"Your authority for this arrest, Mr. Pettijoe," I demanded.

What I fully expected to see was an authorization from the governor of Wyoming honoring a formal requisition from the governor of Tennessee. But what the country-bred sheriff handed me was the requisition itself. It had never been presented to the Wyoming authorities, and so was utterly ineffective as a warrant for Howison's arrest.

I gave the paper back to the sheriff and spoke to the cattle king.

"This man has no more authority to arrest you than I have."

"What's that you say?" demanded the short-whiskered one, bounding to his feet.

"You heard what I said. That is merely a request from your governor to ours—it isn't a warrant. Moreover, Mr. Howison is not the man you want. He did not kill John Barnwell, as we are now prepared to prove."

Pettijoe was standing irresolute when Larrison and Mary came in. Then what had happened before Teddy set it out in terse speech.

"Soper's order, No. 13, Engineer Hoskins' transfer from 87 to mail, and Ted Larrison gets the O. B. for running against his orders," he said, briefly. "Let's go and find a couple of seats and sit down. Miss Mary's seat is free."

Howison looked at me and his harsh face softened for an instant. Later, when we were sitting behind the two youngsters and the rattle and roar of the wheels gave us isolation, he said, soberly: "A's partner a whole lot."

"Because Ted has lost his job?"

"Now that good friend o' Bert Howison don't have to work for a maverick railroad outfit. But he ain't going to get what he did it for."

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Molly can't give him what she hasn't got. I wish to God she could!"

"I laughed. 'I shouldn't borrow any trouble on that score. I wags you. They've settled it between them. Your daughter was holding off for Ted's sake, not for Dad's sake.'"

"The old king of the range turned a kind eye on me."

"Wasn't she?" she never let on to me.

"She wouldn't, under the circumstances. Hadn't you stepped into the breach to save Parker's life?"

"Y-as, but not for him—was Molly I was thinking of."

"Precisely. But now?"

"Now it's different. Tomorrow the X-bar-X gets that little red-headed Irishman for its foreman and the day Molly marries he'll be a side-partner in the outfit. Saver? Lord! Lord! Let's go back and hunt up the booby man. Then we'll see 'em miss us."

And they didn't.

What's that you are reading?" asked the girl with the fur jacket.

"One of those modern society novels," said the girl with the yellow business.

"Haven't you anything better to do?"

"Perhaps. I'm only reading it to occupy my mind."

"(See) is that all it takes to occupy it?" Chicago Tribune.

Information Wanted.

Information is wanted at the office of the U. S. marshal concerning the whereabouts of Thomas Baker, of Basse.

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