

TWO OF A TRADE

By ROBERT BARR.

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If a man finds himself enduring a night journey on an American railway train, there are two or three things he may do to make life worth living. If he has \$2 to spare, with 25 cents extra for the porter in the morning, he may enrich the Pullman company to the extent of the \$2 and thus get a berth in the sleeping car. This is a good way to spend \$2, and if you are on a line where train robbers are epidemic you are just that much ahead, for what the company gets you may depend the train robbers never see, and so you have the comfort of the berth and the satisfaction of knowing that your money has been divided between two sets of plunderers. Of the two I like the company the better, for it certainly gives you something for the money, while the others give you nothing but bad language, with perhaps an ounce of lead thrown in.

If you haven't the \$2 to spare, there are still three things left for you to do. You may sit bolt upright in your seat, or you may turn the back of the opposite seat over and stretch your weary legs across the chasm, or you may try to lie down on one seat, which you will find to be practically impossible unless you are as short of stature as you are short of cash. Entering a smoking car at night on a through express you will find men in all these three attitudes, doing the best they can with the weary hours that are ahead of them until daylight breaks.

The smoking car on the night express of the Texas, Belmont and Crucifer Air line was well filled with men of all descriptions, most of whom were endeavoring to get some sleep in one or other of the three attitudes above alluded to. There was only one sleeping car on the train at the rear. In front of that came two ordinary cars, then the smoker, the luggage car, the car of the American Express company, and in front of all the engine. On the train were two very anxious men, and they sat on camp stools near the big safe in the express car, fully armed, knowing that in that safe were gold packages amounting to over \$200,000 moving east from California. These two men at least made no attempt to sleep, but listened without saying much to the express grinding on through the night, the whistles of the engine breaking through the continuous roar with an occasional long toot followed by two short ones. It was now midnight, and in two hours the train would reach Belmont. After that the two guards of the safe would feel easier in their minds. They were at present going through a wild country where anything might happen, although they hoped that the secret of the safe had been well kept. It is astonishing how news leaks out and how quickly it travels when large sums of money are being transported across the plains.

In the forward end of the smoking car four bearded men sat opposite each other playing euchre. They were rough looking citizens, who might have been cowboys or anything else. The conductor looked askance at them as he collected the money for their ride, for none of them had tickets, but they paid their fares without trouble, and that in itself was a boon, for the conductor expected some dispute from the look of them. Three others had come on at the next station and were now watching

the game. There were a few more passengers in the car who might have been suspected of belonging to the same gang, if gang it was, but no sign of recognition passed between the card players and the others, who were apparently trying to get some sleep.

"I don't half like the looks of that crowd," said the conductor to the brakeman, after he had collected the tickets and the fares.

"What's the matter with them?" asked the brakeman, who was chewing tobacco, taking a bit from a black plug as he spoke. "They seem quiet enough." The brakeman appeared to be himself about as rough a customer as any of the card players, and so perhaps had a feeling of comradeship for them.

"That's just it. They're too darned quiet," replied the conductor. "If they were real cowboys, playing a real game, there would have been a row before this, sure. That tall, black whiskered man's been looking at his watch a good deal lately, and 's been trying to peek through the window 's if he wanted to know just where we were. I don't like the look of it."

"Think they're going to hold us up?" inquired the brakeman, with a trace of anxiety in his voice.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised."

"Why, there ain't \$50 on the whole train, is there? How many people in the sleeper?"

"Not more'n half a dozen. Still, there may be some rich cuss on board we don't know anything about. These chaps may be on to him."

"Well," drawled the brakeman, with some deliberation. "I give the T., B. and C. company notice that when the firing begins I crawl under a seat. I don't take no lead in mine for \$55 a month."

The conductor made no reply to this heroic declaration, for at that moment the engine gave a long whistle, and through the entire train ran the shudder of the quickly applied airbrake. The two trainmen hurried to the outside platform, and the conductor, hanging on by the iron stanchion rods, leaned forward, peering along the side of the slowing train, and saw in the darkness far ahead down the line the waving of a red lantern—the signal of danger.

When the train came to a standstill, there appeared on each side of the engine shadowy forms that seemed to have risen from the black earth. In response to a curt command the engineer and stoker fired, threw up their hands and remained in that position standing out readily against the glare of the engine fires. A masked man with a seven shooter in his hand entered each door of the smoker, and instantly most of the now wide awake passengers got under the seats, not all of them however. The tall, black bearded man who had been one of the card players rose hastily to his feet, letting the bits of pasteboard flutter unheeded to the floor. He cursed loudly and energetically, using the most fearful language with a dexterity and ease that instantly commanded the respectful admiration of the masked men at each end of the car, who both paid him the immediate compliment of turning the muzzles of their weapons upon him.

"Throw up your hands!" they cried simultaneously.

"Throw up nothing!" cried the man in a tone of the utmost contempt, although he forbore to make any motion that might indicate he possessed a gun himself. "Do you know who you're chinning? I'm Steve Mannies!"

"The devil you are!" cried one of the masked men, lowering the point of his revolver.

"Same thing," replied Steve, who was justly proud of his well earned



reputation, being known far and wide as the most industrious and capable train robber in all Texas, a quick firing and straight shooting, ruthless desperado, afraid of nothing, least of all the law.

"Who's running this show?" demanded Mannies. "Who's your boss?"

"We're Captain Snike's gang," replied the other with deference.

"I might 'a' known it," cried Steve, with unconcealed derision. "It's just like his Sunday school picnic way of holding up a train. I'm going out to have a talk with him."

The masked man made no attempt to stop Steve and his followers as they poured out of the car into the surrounding darkness.

"What are you about there?" yelled a voice from near the engine. "Don't let these men leave the car."

"It's Steve Mannies and his boys!" shouted back the masked man in excuse.

Although the surprised Captain Snike merely mentioned the lower regions, there was a tremor in his voice which showed that the unexpected meeting with so noted a man as Steve was not one of unalloyed pleasure.

"See here, captain," roared the angry desperado, "what's the meaning of this? What are you doing on my territory? Can't I take care of these here trains, or has there been any complaint on the part of the T., B. and C. company that I'm not looking after them close enough? What in thunder's the reason of your being out so late at night anyhow? Some of you boys'll catch cold first thing you know."

"Why, hang it, Steve," said the captain in tones of apology. "I didn't know you were in this locality at all. You see, nobody's heard from you for a month, and we thought perhaps you had struck for California. We did, sure. But I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll divide square and fair."

"Divide nothing!" cried Steve. "The train's mine, and you've no business here at all. Still, there's nothing mean about me, and I like to encourage amateurs. If you want the passengers, you kin have 'em. You go through 'em and then git."

"We don't want no passengers—not tonight we don't," demurred the captain. "We got news from Frisco and thought nobody else was on to it. We're after the safe, and that's what's the matter with this crowd."

"Well, I'd like to oblige you, but

that safe's mine. We had news from Frisco too. Did you think we were off on our vacation?"

"Won't you divide?" appealed the captain. "There ought to be enough to go round."

"Nary a divide," said Steve determinedly. "The safe's ours and has been ever since we got on the express. We've got dynamite in a bag to blow her open, and we'd 'a' been through and away by this time if you hadn't chipped into the game when you weren't wanted."

At this juncture one of the express messengers with a genius for doing the right thing at the psychological moment fired at Steve, dimly seen through the radiance from the car windows, and missed him, of course, but winged one of the gang who stood near, who instantly whipped out his gun with an oath and blazed away in the direction the shot came from. Each side thought the other had broken the underworld truce and had fired first. Both gangs had been on the alert for that very thing, and every man had his finger on a trigger. In two seconds the biggest fight that part of Texas had ever seen was on, and the black darkness was fitfully spotted with the crimson spitting of revolvers. Cries of rage and pain showed that some at least of the bullets were finding their billets.

The conductor, crouching along the outside of the train, stole up to the engine and said in a hoarse whisper to the driver, who still stood dazed with his hands on his head.

"For God's sake, John, pull out quick!"

"Ain't they covering me?" asked the frightened engineer in a trembling voice.

"No, you're all safe. They're fighting like cats and dogs. Get a move on you."

"But the track's bound to be torn up ahead."

"We'll have to risk that, John. Anything's better than this. Pull yourself together and clap on all the steam she'll stand," said the conductor, climbing beside the engineer.

The engine gave three stentorian puffs, so long that both conductor and engineer trembled with apprehension lest the sound would be heard by the combatants above the roar of the fusillade; then the train glided almost noiselessly away into the darkness.

When the firing slackened off a bit, the voice of Captain Snike from behind a bush made itself heard.

"Put up your guns!" he yelled. "What's the use of this nonsense? Somebody will get hurt with all this carelessness. Stop your pack of fools, Steve!"

"Stop yours!" roared Steve. "You began it, you lunkhead."

"We didn't. You fired first."

"You're a liar!" cried the thoroughly exasperated Steve. "One of your men fired at me and hit Bill Simmons. I never see such foolish shooting in my life before. You fellows couldn't hit the Nevada mountains."

"You're not much better. Well, Steve, seeing it's you, we'll go through the passengers while you blow up the safe."

In answer to this there was a torrent of profanity from Steve that startled both gangs with its comprehensive terseness. The smoke had now partially cleared away. Steve stood between the rails looking eastward at the two rear lights winking maliciously at him a mile off.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Steve, more in sorrow than in anger, his stock of malediction running dry when a realization of the joke fate had played