

The Great K. & A. Train Robbery

BY PAUL LEICESTER FORD

AUTHOR OF.....

"The Hon. Peter Stirling," &c.

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(Continued.)

CHAPTER III.

A NIGHT'S WORK ON THE ALKALI PLAINS.

I hurried Miss Cullen into the car, and, after bolting the rear door, took down my Winchester from its rack. "I'm going forward," I told her, "and will tell my boys to bolt the front door; so you'll be as safe in here as in Chicago."

In another minute I was on my front platform. Dropping down between the two cars, I crept along beside—indeed, half under—Mr. Cullen's special. After my previous conclusion, my surprise can be judged when at the farther end I found the two Britishers and Albert Cullen standing there, in the most exposed position possible. I joined them, muttering to myself something about Providence and fools.

"Aw," drawled Cullen, "here's Mr. Gordon, just too late for the sport, by Jove."

"Well," said Lord Ralles, "we've had a hand in this deal, Mr. Superintendent, and haven't been potted. The soundrels broke for cover the moment we opened fire."

By this time there were twenty passengers about our group, all of them asking questions at once, making it difficult to learn just what had happened, but so far as I could piece the answers together the poker-players' curiosity had been aroused by the long stop, and, looking out, they had seen a single man, with a rifle, standing by the engine. Instantly arming themselves, Lord Ralles let fly both barrels at him, and in turn was the target for the first four shots I had heard. The shooting had brought the rest of the robbers tumbling off the cars, and the captain and Cullen had fired the rest of the shots at them as they scattered. I didn't stop to hear more, but went forward to see what the road agents had got away with.

I found the express agent tied hand and foot in the corner of his car, and, telling a brakeman who had followed me to set him at liberty, I turned my attention to the safe. That the diversion had not come a moment too soon was shown by the dynamite cartridge already in place, and by the fuse that lay on the floor, as if dropped suddenly. But the safe was intact.

Passing into the mail car, I found the clerk tied to a post, with a mail sack pulled over his head, and the utmost confusion among the pouches and sorting compartments, while scattered over the floor were a great many letters. Setting him at liberty, I asked him if he could tell whether mail had been taken, and, after a glance at the confusion, he said he could not know till he had examined.

Having taken stock of the harm done, I began asking questions. Just after we had left Sanders two masked men had entered the mail car, and while one covered the clerk with a revolver the other had tied and "sacked" him. Two more had gone forward and done the same to the express agent. Another had climbed over the tender and ordered the runner to hold up. All this was the regular programme, as I had explained to Miss Cullen, but here had been a variation which I had never heard of being done, and of which I couldn't fathom the object. When the train had been stopped, the man on the tender had ordered the fireman to dump his fire, and now it was lying in the roadbed and threatening to burn through the ties, so my first order was to extinguish it, and my second was to start a new fire and get up steam as quickly as possible. From all I could learn there were eight men concerned in the attempt, and I confess I shook my head in puzzlement why that number should have allowed themselves to be scared off so easily.

My wonderment grew when I called on the conductor for his tickets. These showed nothing but two from Albuquerque, one from Laguna and four from Coolidge. This latter would have looked helpful but for the fact that it was a party of three women and a man. Going back beyond Lamy didn't give anything, for the conductor was able to account for every fare as either still in the train or as having got off at some point. My only conclusion was that the robbers had sneaked on to the platforms at San-



Found the express agent tied hand and foot.

course, they insisted it was impossible, but they were bound to do that.

Going back to 97, I got my telegraph instrument, though I thought it a waste of time, the road agents being always careful to break the lines. I told a brakeman to climb the pole and cut a wire. While he was struggling up, Miss Cullen joined me.

"Do you really expect to catch them?" she asked.

"I shouldn't like to be one of them," I replied.

"But how can you do it?"

"You could understand better, Miss Cullen, if you knew this country. You see, every bit of water is in use by ranches, and those fellows can't go more than 50 miles without watering. So we shall have word of them, wherever they go."

"Listen, Mr. Gordon," came from overhead at that point, making Miss Cullen jump with surprise.

"What was that?" she asked.

I explained to her, and, after making connections, I called Sanders. Much to my surprise, the agent responded. I was so astonished that for a moment I could not believe the fact.

"This is the queerest hold-up of which I ever heard," I said to Miss Cullen.

"Aw, in what respect?" asked Albert Cullen's voice, and, looking up, I found that he and quite a number of the passengers had joined us.

"The road agents take us lump-sum fire," I said, "and yet they haven't cut the wires in either direction. I can't see how they can escape us."

"What fun!" cried Miss Cullen.

"I don't see what difference either makes in their chance of escaping," said Lord Ralles.

While he was speaking I ticked off the news of our being held up, and asked the agent if there had been any men about Sanders, or if he had seen anyone board the train there. His answer was positive that no one could have done so, and that settled it as to Sanders. I asked the same questions of the other places we had stopped at after leaving Coolidge, getting the same answers. That eight men could have remained concealed on any of the platforms from that point was impossible, and I suspected magic. Then I called Coolidge and told of the hold-up, after which I telegraphed the agent at Navajo Springs to notify the commander at Fort Defiance, for I suspected the road agents would make for the Navajo reservation. Finally I called Flagstaff as I had Coolidge, directed the authorities be notified of the facts, and ordered a special to bring out the sheriff and posse.

"I don't think," said Miss Cullen, "that I am a bit more curious than most people, but it has nearly made me frantic to have you tick away on that little machine and hear it tick back and not understand a word."

After that I had to tell her what I had said and learned.

"How clever of you to think of counting the tickets, and finding out where people got on and off! I never should have thought of either," she said.

"It hasn't helped me much," I laughed, rather grimly, "except to eliminate every possible clue."

"They probably did steal on at one of the stops," said a passenger.

I shook my head. "There isn't a stick of timber nor a place of concealment on these alkali plains," I replied, "and it was bright moonlight till an hour ago. It would be hard enough for the man to get within a mile of the station without being seen, and it would be impossible for seven or eight."

"How do you know the number?" asked a passenger.

"I don't," I said. "That's the number the crew think there were, but I myself don't believe it."

"Why don't you believe the men?" asked Miss Cullen.

"First, because there is always a tendency to magnify, and, next, because the road agents ran away so quickly."

"I counted at least seven," said Lord Ralles.

"Well, Lord Ralles," I said, "I don't want to dispute your eyesight, but if they had been that strong they would never have bolted, and if you want to lay a bottle of wine I'll wager that when I catch those chaps we'll find there weren't more than three or four of them."

"Done!" said he.

Leaving the group, I went forward to get the report of the mail agent. He had put things to rights, and told me that, though the mail had been pretty badly mixed up, only one pouch at worst had been rifled. This, the one registered mail, had been cut open, but as if to increase the mystery, the letters had been scattered, unopened, about the car, only three out of the whole being missing, and those very probably had fallen into the pigeonholes and would be found on a more careful search.

I confess I breathed easier to think that the road agents had got away with nothing, and was so pleased that I went back to the wire to send the news of it, that the fact might be included in the press despatches. The moon had set, and it was so dark that I had some difficulty in finding the pole. When I found it, Miss Cullen was still standing there. What was more, a man was close beside her, and as I came up I heard her say, indignantly:

"I will not allow it. It is unfair to take such advantage of me. Take your arm away or I shall call for help!"

That was enough for me. One step carried my 160 pounds over the intervening ground, and using the momentum of the stride to help, I put the flat of my hand against the shoulder of the man and gave him a shove. There are three or four Harvard men who can tell what that means, and they were braced for it, which this fellow wasn't. He went staggering back as if struck by a cowcatcher and lay down on the ground a good fifteen feet away. His having his arm around Miss Cullen's waist unattended her so that she would have fallen, too, if I hadn't put my hand against her shoulder. I longed to put it about her, but by this time I wanted to do only what I thought she would wish and so restrained myself.

Before I had time to finish an apology to Miss Cullen the fellow was upon his feet and came at me with an exclamation of anger. In my surprise at recognizing the voice as that of Lord Ralles I almost neglected to take care of myself; but, though he was quick with his fists I caught him by

the wrists as he closed, and he had no chance after that against a fellow of my weight.

"Oh, don't quarrel!" cried Miss Cullen.

Holding him, I said, "Lord Ralles, I overheard what Miss Cullen was saying, and supposing some man was insulting her I acted as I did." Then I let go of him and, turning, said, "I am very sorry, Miss Cullen, if I did anything the circumstances did not warrant," while cursing myself for my precipitancy and not thinking that Miss Cullen would never have been caught in such a plight with a man unless she had been half willing, for a girl does not merely threaten to call for help if she really wants aid.

Lord Ralles wasn't much mollified by my explanation. "You're too much in a hurry, my man," he growled, speaking to me as if I were a servant. "Be a bit more careful in the future."

I think I should have retorted—for his manner was enough to make a saint mad—if Miss Cullen hadn't spoken.

"You tried to help me, Mr. Gordon, and I am deeply grateful for that," she said. The words look simple enough set down here. But the tone in which she said them and the extended hand and the grateful little squeeze she gave my fingers all seemed to express so much that I was more puzzled over them than I was over the robbery.

(To be Continued.)

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"Why, of course," said the doctor, and then he reached over and gave him some of the same stuff for an antidote.—Chicago Times-Herald.

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