



THERE was no doubt about it, Abijah Mason had a cinch, if he could but believe what he was told. The train-despatcher told him so; the agent of the station where he was night telegrapher was willing to take his oath that it was so; the train and engine crews of freights that paused at the station just long enough to get their train-orders stated emphatically that if they had jobs like his they would soon succumb to *ennui* (although they did not put it in just those words), and the young fellows of his own age were unable to see how he had the nerve to accept money from the railroad for the light duties he performed.

The outward and most visible sign of his authority was a nice blue cap with a neat, but not gaudy, nickel-plated badge. Deprived of this cap he could not have accomplished his duties and kept traffic moving on the rails. Without this cap in evidence, doubtless not only the local and through freights, but the White Owl, the Bar Harbor Express, the Flying Yankee, and lesser passenger trains would have been stalled or piled up in disastrous wrecks. It is true that most of the passing passenger trains recognized his presence only by throwing off their register slips, for him to copy on the book, as they sped by at fifty miles an hour; but if he had desired them to stop, would they not have been

compelled to do so? They would—if he had set the signals against them.

The next visible sign of authority—and it was much in evidence—was a huge bunch of keys, attached by a long chain to a suspender button. There was a switch-key, a car-key, the office key, keys to the station, freight-house, oil-house, coal-bin, and many others which he had picked up at different times; and although he did not know to what locks they belonged, they might come in handy some time, and they certainly looked well. Some of the boys who congregated at the station nightly would almost have been glad to work for nothing, provided they could have carried such an imposing bunch of keys.

Then, too, Abijah had several lanterns, regular railroad lanterns, with various colored globes—red, green, blue, and white. These lanterns were kept polished so brightly that one could see his reflection in the bright nickel which comprised the larger portion of them. In addition, he knew all the engineers and conductors by name, and referred to them as "Mac," "Bunzo," "Jim," "Pa," "Daddy," "Jack," and so on, and spoke offhand of the different trains by their numbers, as "Seventy-one," "One-twenty-seven," and so on, instead of designating them by the time they were due.

This denotes an intimacy and familiarity with the inner workings of a railroad, such as an outsider or a mere passenger could never hope to attain.

Abijah was night telegraph operator at a small country station, which had its best excuse for existence in the fact that it was situated where the double-track ended and the single-track began. It was an important main line, and to enable trains to meet and pass each other, there was a double-track eighteen miles long. His station, Greenville, was at the eastern end of it. Before trains could pass from the double-track to the single one, they had to be assured by the proper signals that there was no train coming westward on the single track. There was quite a prejudice in railroad circles against having two or more trains meet or attempt to pass each other on a single track. In fact, such attempts have been known to result disastrously, and records will show very few occasions where such a thing has been successfully accomplished.

All Abijah had to do was to clean the station, fill and polish the oil-lamps with which it was lighted, pump the tank full of water for the station use, bring in, clean, fill, and replace in their respective positions eighteen signal lights of various descriptions, one of which was on a switch a mile from the station; gather in the mail-pouches flung from the trains, watch for the register-slips, also emanating from those same trains which despised his station too much to stop there; take train-orders and messages from the despatcher governing the movement of trains, answer the telegraph "roll-call" every half-hour through the night, keep the ball signals lighted on a pole about two hundred yards from the station, and keep them in their proper position to indicate to trains whether the track to the next station was clear, or whether an opposing train was occupying the same rails over which they wished to travel; keep the fire going in the round-bellied stove, and be on the

job every minute listening for his office call, "SY," on the telegraph instrument.

The company did not require him to do all this at once. It was not one of those companies without any regard for its men, and it did not insist on them completing their work in eight short hours. It generously allowed Abijah twelve hours in which to perform his duties—from seven at night till seven in the morning, when the agent came on duty. In addition to the glory and responsibility vested in him, it compelled Abijah to accept the sum of one dollar and a half a day, or ten-fifty a week as it was a seven-day job, which amount seemed too large for the few nominal services he had to perform.

It was not that Abijah had no use for money. On the contrary, he sometimes had visions of the various things he might be able to do if "Pa" Evans, the conductor of the Bar Harbor Express, would only pay him the small legacy of five hundred dollars which had been due Abijah when his father's estate was settled. Pa Evans had acted as administrator, and although he had been in possession of the money now for more than three years, he manifested no disposition to heed Abijah's appeals to hand it over. Abijah had no idea of his rights under the law, and hesitated to make any accusation, which he could not positively prove, against Pa; so, as matters stood, he considered it improbable that he ever would receive the money.

The small station where he worked, being on the main line, was right in the line of travel of certain gentlemen of the road who toil not, neither do they spin. These hoboes rode on blind baggage-cars or beat their way on freights until kicked off by the hard, unfeeling brutes of brakemen; walked when they were compelled to, and had shacks or huts built of old ties, brush, *et cetera*, in secluded spots of pasture or woods at intervals along the road, in which to repose when the weather was inclement. On a

cold, rainy night some of these gentry would prefer the warm waiting-room of a station rather than to walk to the nearest hut. It was Abijah's custom to let them stay long enough to get comparatively dry and warm, and then start them on their journey again.

Abijah had been night operator there about two months, and as this was his first job, he still took pride in the manner in which his duties were performed. All had gone without a hitch, with the exception, perhaps, of one or two telegraphic blunders which every operator is bound to make. One of these had caused him many minutes of chagrin when he was reminded of it by his fellow operators and trainmen who came into his office for orders. The foreman of a work-gang had sent a message to the division engineer, who happened to be in Greenville at the time, asking for two more car-loads of the "same material." Abijah, slightly confused by the presence of a dignitary of the road, had received the telegram and handed it to his superior, reading "same malaria." Needless to say, it had occasioned no little merriment, and he had yet to hear the last of it. But these things are bound to occur in the best regulated families, and to every young telegrapher. He had kept awake, missing no roll-calls, unless it was when he was up the track setting the signals for the next train. These signals, as has been mentioned, were on a pole about forty feet high, and consisted of two balls by day and two lanterns by night. Two balls or lights at the masthead signified that the track was clear for an eastbound train; one, alone, in that position, gave the clear signal to a westbound train, and the absence of both meant that every train must stop.

One night a cold drizzly rain had set in, with enough wind blowing to put out the signals about as fast as they could be lighted. These lights were hoisted to the masthead by means of chains running over pulleys. It was trying for the feelings of an operator, when, after having

set the signals for number "Sixty-three," giving her a clear track, and being back in the warm office, he looked out of the window and saw that one or both of the lights had gone out. It meant going out in the rain, up the track about two hundred yards, pulling down the lanterns, taking them inside the signal-shanty, relighting them, and pulling them up again. Add to that the fact that the chains were covered with rust, and when the luckless operator raised his hands and started pulling them up or down, as the case might be, the water ran down the chains and up the operator's sleeves and inside his collar. As it was very rusty water, and there were several gallons, or so it seemed, gathered on each chain, it generally became an occasion provocative of profanity.

It was about ten o'clock, and the boys who generally drifted in to keep Abijah company during the evening, had all gone home. There was no light to be seen in any direction except the railroad signal-lights. Abijah had locked the back door of the station, as the wind kept blowing it open. He was sitting in the office, with the door leading into the waiting-room open. He had reported the trains which had gone, and having an hour of leisure until No. 127, the Bar Harbor Express, should pass, was improving his mind by reading a particularly interesting work entitled "Two-Gun Pete, or the Mystery of Lonesome Gulch," which had been left by one of the boys.

The door of the waiting-room opened, and in walked three men. One was a small man, one was medium sized, while the third was a tall, thin fellow with a big scar running across his face from mouth to right ear. They were wet, dirty, unshaven, and all carried heavy sticks as canes. Abijah immediately decided that any one of them would cheerfully cut a throat for a nickel. They pulled one of the settees up to the stove and proceeded to make themselves comfortable, talking in low tones meanwhile. Presently, thinking there was no cause for

worry, Abijah resumed the adventures of *Two-Gun Pete*; but a few minutes later the tallest of the trio arose, walked to the office door, and leaned on the gate. As he did so, Abijah noticed that the second finger of his left hand was missing.

“Say, Kid,” the man growled, “when does the next train go east?”

Abijah was only eighteen, and very sensitive about being addressed as “Kid,” especially when he was wearing his official uniform consisting of the blue cap. His feeling of wrath served to overweigh his feeling of funk.

“There’s none till morning,” he answered indignantly.

“How about the Bar Harbor Express?” leered the other.

“Doesn’t stop here,” replied Abijah.

The man continued to lean on the gate and surveyed the office leisurely. On one wall were suspended eight mail-bags, some quite full, thrown off passing trains, to be taken by the mail-carrier in the morning to the different country post-offices on his route. The office safe occupied a good portion of one of the other walls, and contained express packages as well as the railroad funds collected during the day.

“You boes get out of this now.” Abijah protested with a vague feeling of growing unrest. “You are not allowed to stay here.”

The ruffian grinned at him.

“Is that safe unlocked?” he asked.

“No,” said Abijah; “and it’s none of your darned business, anyway.”

“Is that so?” said the big fellow calmly. “Well, I guess it’s up to you to unlock it, and you’ve got about one minute to do it in, too.”

“I don’t know the combination, and wouldn’t unlock it if I did,” replied the now thoroughly scared operator, as he pulled open the drawer where he kept his trusty revolver, wondering as he did so, if he would have to shoot all three of the men, as the other two had come to the office door and were interested

spectators.

As he took the revolver from the drawer, the big fellow, who had not seemed to be watching his movements, suddenly raised his arm and brought his club down on Abijah’s head. Abijah collapsed in his chair and sank slowly on to the floor without a word.

When consciousness returned there was a throbbing pain in his head and, attempting to raise his hand to it, he discovered that he was tightly bound to one of the waiting-room settees. The three hoboos were sitting around the stove examining the contents of the mail-bags, which they had opened by slitting them down the side with a knife.

“Pretty poor pickin’s for Slim Perkins, ain’t it, Slim?” asked one of the men.

“Oh, well,” said the tall fellow, “I can’t expect to hold up a train every day.”

“Slim Perkins!” The man who held up a transcontinental train and robbed the express-car! The man for whose capture there was a standing reward of one thousand dollars offered by the Wells Fargo Express Company! The description as printed on the handbills read:

Slim Perkins, height about six feet; deep scar running from mouth to right ear; second finger of left hand missing.

These thoughts flashed across Abijah’s mind while he lay on the settee, and his spirits dropped to several degrees below zero as he realized that one of his captors was the notorious Slim Perkins.

Presently Slim threw the mail to the floor in disgust, and asked: “How long will it take you to open the safe, Mike?”

The man addressed as Mike made a brief investigation.

“I can open dat box in about fifteen minutes. Slim,” he pronounced. “It’s de one dat old man Noah used to keep his meal-tickets in at de time of de big wet. Dere’s a quarter-inch crack all

around de door. I'll just pour a little soup in around de edge, bust off de combination, and put some in dere. Why, if I had a can-opener. I'd use dat an' save de soup."

"Well, rip 'er open quick," said the third man. "We got to be away from here before anybody gets wise."

"Aw, don't worry, Bill," said Mike; "there ain't no railroad gumshoe could ever catch a cold, and these hicks round here ain't even found out that the Civil War is over."

Abijah could hear the telegraph roll-call start and come down the line, with the different offices answering in their turn until it called SY, paused, repeated the call three times, and then passed on to the next office. He hated to have that call go unanswered, as it would be recorded against him; and, besides, it was a matter of personal pride to answer all roll-calls. This wears off in time, but Abijah was young.

"You must have handed that kid some wallop. Slim," said Bill, as the two went to the office gate to watch Mike at work on the safe. "You don't s'pose you croaked him, do yer?"

"No; he'll be all right bimeby," replied Slim, glancing round at the figure on the settee. "I hope there's something in that safe to pay us for our trouble. The mail-bags were no good."

"I wish we hadn't bothered with them bags," said Bill. "It'll git us in bad with the secret-service bunch."

"Aw, we'll be three States away before they get wise," commented Slim.

And just then Abijah gave a sudden start. He recalled that the agent, when locking the safe that night, had remarked that there was in there an express package containing sixteen hundred dollars, the monthly pay-roll of a sawmill gang working about two miles from the station. Visions of going to jail for not defending the package, added to the other responsibilities, which, although mostly imaginary and self-imposed, bore so heavily upon him, began to torture him. Even if he were not sent to jail, he

would be blacklisted, so that his career as a railroad man was ruined. He thought of what *Two-Gun Pete* would do; but, then, *Pete* would have "got the drop" on these three men, and laid them out, cold and stiff. He thought of other stories, where the operator had always managed to telegraph in some way and warn headquarters, so that the next train would stop and capture the robbers. But the next train, No. 127, the Bar Harbor Express, was in the habit of going past at sixty miles an hour; and, besides, Abijah was tied up in the waiting-room and the telegraph instruments were in the office. His hands were bound, one to each leg of the settee so he could not get them together to work at his bonds. He could think of no way out of the scrape.

"Gimme dem mail-bags to put over de door," said Mike. "She's all ready to shoot."

As Slim and Bill turned to pick up the pouches the whistle of the One-twenty-seven was heard calling for signals. Abijah could not imagine the reason for it, as he knew he had left the signals at "clear," and finally decided he had made a mistake in counting the whistles, and that it must have been the regular crossing signal that she had given. In another minute, with a harsh grinding of brakes, the train came to a standstill in front of the station.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Bill. "She don't stop here."

The three men turned to bolt. As they reached the back door, the front door opened, and in came the engineer, followed by the conductor, Pa Evans, and two brakemen, intent on expressing their opinion in no gentle terms to the sleepy operator who had stopped them.

"What in blazes do you mean?" shouted the conductor.

"Burglars!" yelled Abijah. "Catch 'em! Don't let 'em get away. Quick; stop 'em!"

The trio of crooks, having discovered the back door was locked, made a rush for the front door. The engineer swung a wicked right on

Bill's chin, and the two went to the floor in a rough-and-tumble. The conductor, a slight-built man, raised his lantern, swung it viciously, and landed a blow on the head of Slim, who went down for the count. The two brakemen rushed at Mike, who stood with his hands above his head and beseeched in terrified tones: "Don't hit me; my pockets is full of soup. You'll blow us all to pieces."

When the three men had been securely tied, Abijah was released from his bondage. He was a sad-looking object, with an ugly wound on the top of his head and a tendency to unsteadiness on his feet.

"W-what made you—how'd you come to stop? Who told you about 'em?" he asked as they helped him to a seat and some one ran for a glass of water.

"What made us stop!" echoed the conductor. "There were no signals."

"Why!" gasped Abijah, "I—" Then a sudden enlightenment burst upon him. The wind had blown out both lights, and thereby stopped the

train.

"Why, er—er—oh, yes," said Abijah, seeing his way clear to gain a little glory. "I guess I was a little dazed at first. You see, I signaled you to stop because I wanted to catch these burglars. That tall fellow there is Slim Perkins, and there's a reward of a thousand dollars for him."

"Well, I guess you've earned it all right, son," said the engineer. "They sure treated you rough."

"How about me?" said Pa Evans. "I'm the one who knocked him down."

"Oh," said Abijah with an angelic smile, "I'll divide it with you, Pa. That's five hundred for me—and the other five hundred you owe me, anyway."

And after that, when those lights blew out on cold, wet, windy nights, Abijah was more inclined to bless than to curse them, for if it had not been for their vagaries he would not have become a capitalist to the extent of one thousand dollars.