

A Complete Novelet
of a Baffling
Railroad Mystery

MURDER LIMITED

By
**JOHNSTON
McCULLY**

Author of "Deadly Peril," "The Mark of
Zorro," etc.



Jim Thatcher Holds the Key Down on Danger When Big-City Gangsters Unleash Death and Destruction in a Melee of Double-Track Doom!



CHAPTER I

Shock at Midnight

AFTER an hour of constant activity the telephone buzzer was quiet and the telegraph sounder had ceased its wild clatter. A silence that was almost oppressive fell over the operator's room in the little depot at Cedarville.

Jim Thatcher, night track man, sighed his relief as he leaned back in his squeaky swivel chair comfortably cushioned with old newspapers, put his feet upon the telegraph board, and relaxed. He had been on night duty for some time in this peaceful village midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, where the mountains came tumbling down to meet the sea.

Now he glanced up at the clock on the wall, and saw that it was almost midnight. From force of habit, he compared his watch with the clock. Standing up Jim Thatcher yawned and stretched his arms. He was twenty-eight, tall, with quite ordinary features and a tousled mass of

yellow hair. His pale blue eyes gave him a sleepy expression generally, but they could look like cold steel on occasion.

Jim Thatcher suddenly went cold, felt uncomfortable. He shrugged. Just nerves, he thought. Then he smiled warmly as he thought of Clara Millard, the object of all his adoration. Thatcher had two burning ambitions at present: to get married and be promoted to the day shift—but especially married. And to get married he'd need that promotion.

Suddenly, he frowned as he thought of Barney Crogan, the state highway policeman who cruised this district at night on a high-powered motorcycle. His brow furrowed still more as he thought about Ben Mead.

Mead had come to Cedarville about two weeks ago and stopped at Clara's mother's rooming house. He claimed that he was from San Francisco. Thatcher didn't like anything about Mead, especially his too-friendly attitude toward Clara. His anger and jealousy got so much the best of him that he even imagined Mead to be a fugitive from justice.

Suddenly, the mad chatter of the clicking telegraph snapped his reverie. Thatcher's brow corrugated as he listened intently.

Something had happened to one of the overnight limiteds that operated between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The northbound train had lost an hour already because of locomotive trouble.

AFRANTIC dispatcher was trying to make a swift readjustment of schedules. At Jim's section it was a single track division, and the trains had to meet and pass here.

Finally the dispatcher was finished with him and the other operators along the line, and the sounder was silent again. Thatcher bent forward and glanced through the north window at the twin lines of steel glistening in the bright moonlight. Down the track, the semaphores burned. Everything was all right in that direction.

He turned then to make his routine inspection through the south window. After a single glance his lower jaw sagged in an expression of puzzled astonishment. He gripped the arms of his chair and gathered his feet beneath him preparatory to springing up.

A woman's face was at the window—a beautiful face framed in a mass of disheveled dark hair and twisted in a spasm of pain. She reeled against the window, putting both hands against the casement to steady herself.

Thatcher saw she was wearing an evening gown and an expensive-looking wrap. Jewels gleamed at her throat and in her dark hair. The left side of her light-colored gown was crimson, and blood was trickling down her bare arm.

Her mouth opened; her lips moved. She seemed to be making an effort to speak.

"Help . . . Help!" her lips formed the words.

"I'll be right there!" Thatcher shouted.

He opened the door of the dark waiting room, dashed over and opened the outside door. A motor car accident, he thought grimly. Cars were always traveling the state highway at terrific speed during the night, and there were many accidents.

She was clutching at the window casement when Thatcher reached her. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing in gasps. She's probably a guest staying at one of the big estates on the coast down the highway, Thatcher surmised. Or at the health resort a short distance back in the hills.

Thatcher supported her and led her to the door of the waiting room. As she sagged against him and seemed about to collapse, he carried her into the operator's room and helped her to an old easy chair.

"Help . . . Help!" she was moaning monotonously.

Thatcher hurried to the water cooler and returned with a cup of water, which he held to her lips. But she was unable to drink.

"Did you have a motor crack-up?" Thatcher asked. "Anybody else hurt? I'll phone the state highway cops—"

"Yes . . . call . . . police," she muttered, speaking with an effort.

"Where did you crack up?" he asked tersely. "How far from here?"

He stopped talking abruptly as her head suddenly sagged to one side. Her body slumped down into the chair sickeningly. Thatcher's eyes grew wide as he stared at her.

NO motor car accident had brought this unknown beauty stumbling to the depot for aid. Thatcher knew a bullet wound when he saw one.

He could not decide whether she had merely lost consciousness or had died. He fumbled for her pulse, but could feel none. He dashed water into her face, rubbed her hands briskly. Her eyes opened momentarily, then closed again.

Thatcher became genuinely alarmed. This woman needed immediate medical attention. Cedarville's only doctor was in San Francisco. But there was a house physician at the big resort hotel back in the hills.

He walked briskly across the office to where the public telephone was fastened to the wall. Thatcher unhooked the receiver, put it to his ear and waited.

"Yeah?" somebody barked over the wire.

Thatcher flinched at the sound of the voice. It was not the pleasant, quiet voice of Ed Carter, the regular night operator.

"Give me Main Six-O," Thatcher said.

He was wondering what had happened to Ed Carter, and why a strange man was taking Ed's place at the switchboard. The connection with the hotel was not completed immediately, and Thatcher jiggled the receiver hook.

"Yeah?" the man at the other end of the wire snarled again.

"Get that number quickly!" Thatcher said excitedly. "Hurry, man! I've got to have the doctor right away. There's been an accident!"

"Line's out of order."

"Out of order? It was all right a couple of hours ago."

"Yeah, but that was a couple of hours ago. It's out of order now."

"I must get the hotel, I tell you! Where's Ed Carter?" Thatcher demanded.

"I'm sittin' in for him. You don't know me, buddy, and you don't want to know me. You run your little railroad—"

"Listen, whoever you are!" Thatcher begged. "I've got to get a doctor here at

once. There's a woman here who's been shot—"

"What's that? Woman shot? What's she look like?" The man at the other end of the wire seemed excited.

"She's a small brunette—class. Listen! I can't leave the depot. Train orders may come through. You connect me with Dave's garage. I'll wake him up and—"

"That line's out of order, too," the man said curtly. "You're out of luck, buddy. All the lines are out of order—including yours." He broke the connection.

Thatcher jiggled the hook furiously, but could get no reply. He had a sudden idea then. He would use the railroad's private telephone system. He would telephone down to the nearest station having a night trick man, and ask him to tell the state police what had happened.

He seized the telephone instrument, plugged in the proper station, and touched a button to signal. He slapped the receiver to his ear, waiting for a response. A peculiar expression came into his face. The line was dead.

That was a serious thing. The railroad's private telephone system supplemented the telegraph service and was used almost equally by the dispatchers. It was unthinkable it could be dead.

CHAPTER II

Silent Wires



UT dead it was. Thatcher knew he could telegraph his brother operators along the line about what had happened and have them notify the police by telephone. It was his immediate duty to report his dead telephone line, too.

He flicked open the switch and struck the telegraph key with a practiced hand. But no swift flow of resonant dots and dashes came from beneath his fingers, only a series of flat-sounding metallic clicks. The telegraph line was also dead.

A sense of peril came to Jim Thatcher. Something was definitely wrong. This was not an act of the elements. Somebody had deliberately destroyed all means of communication between Cedarville and the outside world since he had helped the wounded woman into the depot.

He glanced quickly through the window, half expecting to see scowling faces and menacing guns, but the bright moonlight and the lights over the station platform revealed nobody. Swiftly, he lowered the window shades, jerked open a drawer beneath the telegraph board and got out a heavy revolver and thrust it into his coat pocket.

It was against the company's regulations for him to leave the depot. And he could not communicate with the outside. He felt that something wrong was transpiring, and wondered if the state police knew what was happening.

Hurrying to the radio he kept in a corner of the office, he turned it on and tuned in on the state police wave length. As he began listening to the official broadcast, he bent over the wounded woman again. He felt her pulse, and thought he could detect a flutter of life. The wound in her chest had almost stopped bleeding.

She was not more than twenty-five, Thatcher judged, and was a beautiful brunette. She was small, not more than five feet two, and did not weigh more than a hundred pounds. Her clothes and jewels indicated wealth. She was class, real class, Thatcher decided.

Her high-heeled evening pumps revealed that she had walked quite a

distance to get to the depot, and not on the paved highway either. Burrs and wisps of dry weeds clinging to the hem of her gown told that she had cut across vacant land to get there.

Thatcher's ear suddenly caught the state police broadcast:

". . . calling Car Twelve . . . car One, Two . . . go to Cedarville . . . telephone company reports office there can't be reached . . ."

There it was—good old State Highway Police! The broadcast promptly continued:

". . . calling all cars and stations in the central district . . . intercept Motorcycle Officer Crogan . . . instruct him to go to Cedarville immediately and investigate."

SUDDENLY, his ears caught a welcome sound—the unmistakable exhaust of a high-powered motorcycle running smoothly. Without being aware of how badly his presence there was desired, Barney Crogan was coming.

Jim Thatcher turned toward the wounded woman again. Her eyelids were fluttering slightly now. He got more water from the cooler and held the cup to her lips, but she did not drink.

"Help's comin'," Thatcher said to her. "We'll soon have a doctor for you."

He left her then and dashed through the waiting room to the outside door. He got the revolver out of his pocket and held it ready as he peered out cautiously. The exhaust of the motorcycle had stopped.

"Barney! . . . Barney!" he shouted.

There was no answer. Thatcher hurried out. He made out the motorcycle at the end of the platform under one of the lights, and Barney Crogan sitting beside it.

"Barney!" he shouted again, and ran toward him.

Barney Crogan was bracing himself with the palms of his hands pressed flat against the platform on either side of him.

The light showed Thatcher that the policeman's face was drained of color and racked with pain.

"What is it, Barney?" he cried.

"Help me, Jim, I'm shot," Crogan muttered.

"Shot?"

"Just as I turned into the street . . . somebody shot from behind tree . . . my right leg. . . Help me to my feet. I'll drag along."

As he helped, Thatcher rapidly told him what had happened. He got Crogan on his feet, and the highway policeman leaned against him heavily and managed to reach the waiting room. As he dropped on a bench there, Thatcher closed the door and turned on the lights.

"Knife in my pocket . . . cut pants—" Crogan muttered.

Thatcher got the knife out, and slashed through the tough uniform cloth and exposed a bullet wound in the upper right leg. He made a tourniquet with the officer's belt, twisted it tight with his blackjack, stopping the flow of blood.

"Tell me again," Crogan ordered.

Thatcher told him swiftly.

"I deputize you, Jim," Barney Crogan said. "Get me into the operator's room. I'll give the orders, and you'll have to carry 'em out till help comes. Got nerve?"

"Hope so," Thatcher replied.

"You'd better have some. This is something big. The telephone office—that's the first thing. Got to get an alarm out. Got to have cops—and a doctor for the woman and me both."

"I thought at first that it was a motor smash," Thatcher said. "But her wound, and the wires being cut, and you shot—"

"Maybe the wires weren't cut just to keep you from sending out word about her."

"It's all pretty fishy," Thatcher said. "You'd have to know just where to cut.

And all three of the lines—public phone, company phone and the telegraph line—were all put out of business inside a few minutes."

"Help me into the operator's room now," Crogan ordered. "I want a look at the woman. Remember. You're a deputy now, Jim."

WITH some difficulty, Barney Crogan got to his feet. Thatcher supported him, helped him along the wall slowly to the door of the office. As they entered the operator's room, Thatcher gave a cry of surprise.

The wounded woman was gone!

The rear window was open, and the back door, which had been both locked and barred on the inside, now stood open also.

"She was almost dead," Thatcher said, as he got Crogan to the chair in front of the telegraph board. "She couldn't have walked."

"Somebody probably got in through the window and got her, and took her out through that back door," Crogan said. "If she's small, like you told me, she could have been carried out easily."

Thatcher ran to the back door and looked out, half expecting a shot out of the night. Nobody was in sight, but there were deep shadows beside the freight warehouse where somebody could be hiding in wait. Thatcher closed and barred the door, and closed the window and pulled down the shade.

"If the telegraph line comes alive while I'm gone—" Thatcher said.

"You've taught me to dot-and-dash some, Jim," Crogan interrupted. "If the line comes alive, I'll try to explain the situation here. Anyhow, you're in the clear if you leave the depot. I've made you an emergency deputy."

"But what if there are any important

train orders—”

“I’ll do my best, Jim. Throw the board.”

“There’s no train due through for almost an hour.”

“Throw the board anyhow. It’ll stop anything that happens along in case you’re not back by then.”

Thatcher quickly threw the board, and a glaring red semaphore eye flashed the stop signal for any train that might come along.

“Now, hand me my gun,” Barney Crogan ordered.

Thatcher gave him the gun. Then he hurried into the waiting room, closing the office door. He turned out the lights, went to the outside door, listened, heard nothing, and unlocked the door quietly. With his gun held ready, he stepped out onto the platform.

It was a little more than a block down the street to the telephone office, and Barney Crogan’s motorcycle was standing at the end of the platform. Thatcher decided to use the vehicle to save time.

With searching eyes, he probed the shadows at the far end of the platform, but saw nobody. Then he slipped swiftly along the side of the depot toward the motorcycle. As he neared it, he emerged into a streak of light. Suddenly a gun cracked not far away, and a bullet whistled past his head.

Thatcher quickly flattened himself on the platform and squirmed to a dark spot. Another bullet came whistling out of the night. Thatcher fired directly at the flash of the gun across the street. He wondered whether the shooting would arouse some of the villagers. Cars and trucks passing on the state highway often backfired with a sound like the bark of a gun.

Reaching the telephone office as quickly as possible was the important thing now. To try to use Crogan’s

motorcycle would be committing suicide. The man behind the tree across the street obviously did not want that motorcycle to be used, and was in a position of command.

CHAPTER III

Guns Ablaze



oving slowly and carefully, and keeping in the deeper shadows as much as possible, Thatcher stole away from the platform. No more shots were fired at him. Unseen, he went cautiously to the street,

every instant expecting to hear the crack of a gun and feel the hot impact of a bullet tearing in his body.

The telephone exchange was located on the second floor of a two-story building. Thatcher came to the bottom of the stairway safely, and looked up. He saw a streak of light showing beneath the door. And the door was the only way into the office. There was a window in the rear, but it could not be reached from the outside except with a ladder.

Thatcher went up the narrow stairs carefully, holding his gun ready. At the top, he stood back against the wall, listening. At first, he heard no sound. Then he heard somebody cough, and the sounds of footsteps as somebody paced nervously around the room. He reached out and knocked boldly on the door with the barrel of his gun.

“Open up!” he ordered. “We’ve got you!”

No answer came.

“March out with your hands in the air!” Thatcher shouted. “Try to use the window, and you’ll be filled with hot

lead!”

He got an answer now.

“Get away from there—whoever you are! You’re not a cop. The cop got blasted—I saw it. You’ll be findin’ a couple of tough mugs at your back in a couple of minutes, when they come along to pick me up. Go home and you’ll live longer.”

The words indicated a gang at work, that some crime so big was being committed that unusual precautions had to be taken.

Thatcher raised his gun, aimed carefully at the lock and fired. A cloud of acrid smoke engulfed him and the echoes of the shot roared in the narrow hallway. He fired again and looked. The door sagged inward a couple of inches. Thatcher bent forward, swung his right leg and kicked the door open wider. Then he saw a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a swarthy face, standing crouched with an automatic pistol held ready.

Thatcher fired in the same instant the automatic cracked. A bullet scorched his left arm. Then he saw the man drop his gun and sprawl on the floor, writhing violently. Thatcher sprang into the office and kicked the automatic out of the other man’s reach. But it was unnecessary, for the man on the floor was beyond using a gun at the moment.

Thatcher turned quickly toward the switchboard—and came to an abrupt stop. In a corner of the office, bound and gagged was Ed Carter. Thatcher rushed to him, worked swiftly to remove the gag and get off the ropes. Ed Carter began talking immediately.

“I got to thinkin’ that nobody would ever come. That man came in here and smashed me—”

“Did he say anything to give you an idea what’s going on?” Thatcher asked.

“Plenty,” Carter said. “There’s a gang raiding the resort hotel and it was his job to seize the telephone office and keep the news of the raid from gettin’ out too quick. There’s another man watchin’ around town, he said, and the rest of the gang’s at the hotel.”

QUICKLY, Thatcher told Carter what had happened at the railroad depot.

“You call the highway cops the first thing, Ed,” he said. “Then call the hotel and have the doctor rush here, too.”

As he spoke, he helped Ed Carter to his feet and across to the switchboard, then used the rope he had taken off Ed to bind the man he had shot.

“The hotel line’s out—cut up there, prob’ly,” Ed Carter said, frowning. “The village lines and the main trunks seem to be all right. Wonder why they didn’t cut them, too? Prob’ly thought it’d bring an emergency repair crew on ‘em too quick. I’ll try to get the cops.”

He called the nearest State Highway Police station through the main trunk line, and hurriedly told the story. But it would take some time for the highway police to get to Cedarville, and fully as long for the sheriff’s men to arrive from the county seat.

“You ring Dave’s garage and wake him up, and tell him all about this,” Thatcher ordered Ed Carter. “Wake up anybody else you think has nerve enough to tangle in this mess. We’ll need a lot of help.”

“Maybe the gang raidin’ the hotel hasn’t come down from there yet,” Ed Carter said.

“Probably. Maybe we can wake up some folks and be ready for the crooks when they come down the hill road. Keep your eyes open, Ed, and get busy at that switchboard. Keep your gun handy and be

ready to use it. I've got to get back to the depot."

"Maybe I can get a doctor in Dobyville."

"Get him if you can," Thatcher snapped. "Tell him to come right to the depot."

He left Ed Carter at the switchboard and hurried down the stairs. He was thinking about the wounded woman who had disappeared so mysteriously. He could not believe she had left the depot herself. And, if somebody had got into the depot and taken her away—why? Was she allied to a band of criminals, and had they taken her away so she could not be identified and point the way to the others?

But he had other things to worry about now. He had not forgotten the man who had fired at him near the depot. He must have heard the shooting at the telephone office, and surely he would come to make an investigation if he thought a pal was in trouble.

Jim Thatcher was cautious as he stepped out into the street. He crouched in the darkness against the front of the building; listening, watching. He saw nobody, heard nothing unusual. Evidently, the shooting had not aroused any of the townsmen. But Ed Carter would soon awaken some of them by telephone. Thatcher could hear a telephone ringing in the distance now, in Dave's garage.

He stepped out from under the awning and started briskly down the street. He was eager now to get back to the depot and learn if anything new had happened there.

"Stop right where you are!" a hoarse voice ordered.

THATCHER was holding his gun ready. His nerves were keyed to the cracking point. He flinched at the sound of that unexpected voice. Suddenly, he fired and got results.

His gun barked and blazed. There was a wild howl of pain and a blistering curse as the man lurching toward him dropped his own gun and clutched with a left hand at a wounded right arm. Thatcher sprang forward.

"Turn around!" he snapped at his victim. "Get your good arm up in the air! We're go in' to the depot. March!"

"You'll have plenty happen to you for this, smart guy!" the other threatened.

"Shut up and move!" Thatcher snapped. "I handled your pal in the telephone office, and I can handle you. And your whole gang will be taken care of."

"Smart guy, huh?"

"You can't get away it! Coming here and holding up hotels and shooting women!" Thatcher said, growling. "Cutting wires and shooting cops! You're the gent who shot Barney Crogan, I suppose. You'll pay for that."

"Where do you come in, Boy Scout? You're no cop."

"I come into this double. I'm a railroad man, and your outfit messed up our wires. And right now I'm a deputy cop, too."

"You'd better let me go and 'tend to your railroad. If you don't—"

Thatcher prodded him in the back with the muzzle of the gun. He was nervous. He never had shot a man until tonight, and he never had held a criminal a prisoner before. He compelled the other to start down the street, and he kept close behind him with the muzzle of the gun pressed against the prisoner's spine.

He hoped that Ed Carter would keep busy arousing the town. If the crooks came down from the hotel, they would have to be handled promptly to prevent their escape. The highway police would guard every road, but a clever getaway might have been planned.

Thatcher glanced into the shadows on

either side of the street, fearing that they held enemies. He neared the street up which the Millard boarding house was located. He caught sight of a flash of white beneath one of the street lights, and heard a woman call:

"Jim! Are you all right?"

It was Clara Millard. What was she doing up at such an hour?

"Get back home, Clara," he shouted. "A gang of crooks are raiding the hotel. They'll be coming back to town—"

"I know, Jim. I want to tell you—"

She started toward him. But a man darted from the shadows and up to her. Thatcher instantly recognized him as Ben Mead.

"Clara, don't tell him anything! Remember your promise!" Ben Mead shouted.

CHAPTER IV

Another Shock



land.

"Clara!" Thatcher said loudly. "Come here."

He could see that Ben Mead was beside her now, talking to her.

"You, too, Ben Mead!" Thatcher ordered. "Come here to me, or I'll do some shootin'. I've landed a couple of your pals already—"

"Don't be a fool!" Mead yelled.

He said something else to Clara Millard, then turned and darted into the

HIS man Mead was in with the gang of crooks, Thatcher decided. That was the explanation of his presence in the village for the past two weeks. He had been the lookout for the gang, learning the land of the

shadows. Thatcher promptly sent a shot singing in that direction. No answering slug came in reply. Clara Millard started running straight toward Thatcher, calling to him not to shoot again.

In that instant Thatcher's prisoner whirled, struck out with his left fist, then turned again and fled into the shadows, and continued his flight in zigzag fashion. Thatcher reeled from the blow, quickly recovered and fired a shot after the fleeing man. Then, Clara was beside him.

"Jim! It's all right!" she cried.

"What's all right?" he demanded. "What secrets have you got with Ben Mead. He's a crook—"

"He's all right, Jim."

"What'd he mean by you remembering your promise?"

"I can't tell you, Jim," Clara said softly.

"Are you crazy, Clara? That Ben Mead—he's a crook, I tell you. How come you're up at this hour? You'd better get home now. You've made me lose my prisoner. Barney Crogan's been shot, and he made me his deputy—"

"Jim, if you'd only listen—" she pleaded.

"I'm listening. What did you promise Ben Mead? What is it he doesn't want you to tell me?"

"Jim, you're jealous!" she accused.

"I haven't time to be. I tell you Ben Mead is a crook. The wires are down. The hotel's being raided. Barney's been shot. And you—you—"

He did not have a chance to continue his denunciation. Clara Millard sobbed and turned and fled along the street toward her home. Thatcher called after her, but she did not stop. He had to get back to the depot.

He kept in the shadows as much as possible. As he hurried along, Thatcher reloaded his gun with shells he had taken

from the drawer in the desk at the depot. In his other coat pocket, he had the automatic he had taken from the man in the telephone office. In the far distance, he heard a motor car traveling at a high rate of speed. It was coming down the winding hill road—the only road which ran to the hotel from the state highway and the village!

He could see the headlights flashing as the car sped around curves. The crooks were coming back to escape on the main highway! And the man who had escaped from him undoubtedly would meet them and explain the situation in the town. Thatcher's proper place now was at the depot, where Barney Crogan could give him orders and advice.

AS he raced toward the depot, he caught a glimpse of another figure running through the shadows, and recognized Ben Mead hurrying toward the railroad tracks. Thatcher sped toward the depot, jumped up on the platform and ran to the operator's room as swiftly as he could.

"Barney! It's Jim!" he called, as he came to the door. He swung the door open and darted into the operator's office, and came to an abrupt stop. Again, the rear door was unbarred, unlocked, standing open.

And Barney Crogan, the wounded officer, was gone!

Thatcher could not believe that Crogan had left the depot of his own volition. He would not desert the telegraph board without good cause. Yet, he had disappeared as completely as the wounded woman, and in the same direction.

Thatcher, seeing a trail of blood drops on the floor, raced across to the open rear door and looked out. A dark shadow he knew was a man was dodging alongside the freight warehouse. When he passed

through a streak of moonlight, Thatcher recognized him. It was Ben Mead!

The shadow drifted on toward the end of the warehouse. Thatcher sent a shot singing in that direction. Then he closed and barred the door and ran to the telephone. Ed Carter answered his call immediately.

"Watch out for yourself, Ed," Thatcher warned. "A car is coming down the hill road. It may be the gang from the hotel. Barney's disappeared."

"That man you shot in here—I rolled him out into the hall and braced a lot of stuff against the door," Ed Carter reported. "They won't get in here easy. I got the Dobyville doctor, and he's on his way. The highway cops are closin' in, but it'll take 'em some time to get here."

"Good!" Thatcher approved.

Cradling the receiver, Thatcher remembered that he had left the outside door open, so he raced through the waiting room and locked it. He locked the inner door, too. He was a prisoner in the operator's room.

He tried the railroad telephone line and the telegraph again, and found them still dead. The board was still red, but it would be at least fifteen minutes before the southbound limited arrived. He could not hold the limited long, regardless of the situation. And he would have to stop and sidetrack the freight following it, to let the delayed northbound limited through.

He heard a motor car stop not far from the depot, and the voices of excited men. Then it was quiet. Thatcher hurried to the telephone again.

"Did you manage to get anybody up, Ed?" he asked.

"I got Dave at the garage, and he said that he'd rout out a few others."

"I think the gang from the hotel is outside now."

"Yeah, I heard 'em talkin' through the

window,” Ed Carter said. “That man you shot down in the street was yellin’ somethin’ at them. You watch out for yourself.”

“They’ll probably stop to pick up that man you put out into the hall, and may get nasty with you,” Thatcher said warningly.

“I’m ready for ‘em!” Carter said firmly.

Thatcher broke the connection and stood in the middle of the office, listening.

He thought he heard steps outside on the platform. Quickly he snapped off all the lights except the one over the telegraph board.

Then he heard a crash, and realized that somebody had smashed in the door of the waiting room. He made sure that his revolver was loaded, and stood back against the wall holding it ready.

He could hear somebody moving around in the waiting room, heard steps again on the platform outside the window.

Then he flinched, jumped. The telegraph sounder had broken the tension by starting its melodious clatter. The line was alive again!

The dispatcher was giving the Cedarville call signal.

Thatcher moved slowly toward the telegraph board. He would be in a precarious position there. The light would throw his shadow on the window shades.

There would be nothing but glass on three sides of him. He was an easy target for a bullet.

HE crouched and went forward slowly. He knelt before the board, held his revolver in his left hand, reached the key with his right, flicked the switch open and answered:

“I . . . I . . . CV . . . I.”

“What’s up?” the distant dispatcher demanded.

“Crooks raiding resort hotel . . . cut all wires,” Thatcher reported. “Highway police . . . on their way here now.”

“Number Four must go through, regardless,” the dispatcher flashed.

Number Four was the southbound limited.

“She’ll get through,” Thatcher promised.

“Flag and sidetrack extra Number Sixty-seven following. Imperative we have a clear track for Number Three.”

Number Three was the badly delayed northbound limited. Thatcher knew what the dispatcher meant. It would be a close meeting point between the extra freight and the northbound, limited at Cedarville. The slightest miscalculation might mean a catastrophe.

Thatcher heard an operator down the line reporting the passage of the southbound limited. She should go through Cedarville in less than fifteen minutes.

The board was red. Thatcher threw the lever and cleared it. The limited would flash through with a snort from the locomotive’s whistle.

There was a sudden crash behind him, and he whirled, bringing up his gun. The rear window had been smashed. And, at the same instant, there was a crash against the waiting room door, and also at the front window. He did not have a chance to shoot. Guns were covering him from both windows, and to fire would have meant instant death for him. The door crashed in, and men bounded in.

“Drop that gun and get your hands up!” one of the crooks ordered.

Thatcher dropped the revolver. It was the sensible thing to do. Then he glanced about him. The men at the windows remained in position, their guns menacing him. Three men strode into the office, and

one was the man Thatcher had wounded in the street.

"BACK up there against the wall," the leader ordered.

Thatcher backed up with his hands held high. The leader, he saw, was middle-aged, tall and heavy in body. One of the men beside him was short and squat, and younger. The wounded man was tall and slender, almost emaciated, his gleaming eyes those of a drug addict.

"Tryin' to play cop, huh?" the leader asked Thatcher. "Well, you put on a pretty good show, at that. Get over to the telegraph key."

CHAPTER V

"Where's That Woman?"



IGHING, Thatcher went to the telegraph board and sat down before it.

"Now listen, mug!" the leader said. "We cut those wires. And I fixed the telegraph line a few minutes ago because I want some news to get out now—my kind of news. You send what I tell you. And get this—I can read the little dots and dashes. You send anything but what I tell you, and you'll be blasted."

Suddenly, Thatcher remembered that in his left hand coat pocket he had another automatic.

Far down the track, a locomotive whistle screeched. The leader gestured for Thatcher to wait. He seemed to know something about railroading, for he assured himself that the board was clear, and waved his man back from the front windows.

"What train is that?" he asked.

"It's the southbound limited," Thatcher replied. "She goes through tonight."

"How come the limited don't meet here as usual?"

"The northbound's late—locomotive trouble."

"All right."

The train flashed through a moment later.

"Report her in the regular manner—and be careful about it," the gang leader instructed.

Thatcher opened the key and flashed his report. He wondered if the dispatcher noticed anything unusual in his sending.

"Now," the leader ordered, "tell 'em that we've come down from the hotel and taken the highway south."

Thatcher began working the telegraph key. The gang leader bent forward and listened. Perhaps he could read Morse, and perhaps not. Thatcher wished he knew for sure. He sent the bogus alarm—but said north instead of south. The gang leader did not correct him. Thatcher smiled inwardly.

The dispatcher broke in, demanding to know what was up. Thatcher took a chance. He tapped out that he was being forced to send the message, that some of the hotel raiders were in the office at the moment.

"What'd he want?" the leader demanded of Thatcher.

"He was asking how many of you there were, and what you looked like, and all that kind of stuff. I told him I didn't get a good look at you."

"You're a wise Boy Scout," the leader said. "Let's see, now, if you can go on bein' smart. We know that the cops are comin', and that they'll be here mighty soon. We've planned a getaway that'll shock 'em some. It's time for us to be goin' now, and if you value your hide any make quick talk. Where is she?"

"Where is who?" Thatcher asked.

“Where’s the dame who stumbled in here tonight with a bullet in her? We want her, and then we’ll go. Where’d you put her?”

THATCHER gulped. “I don’t know where she is,” he replied. “She came here to the depot, and seemed about dead. Then Barney Crogan, the state highway cop, came riding in wounded. I helped him in here, and found the woman gone.”

“How could she be gone, if she was almost dead?” the gang leader demanded.

“That puzzles me, too,” Thatcher said. “Somebody must have come in here while I was out in front, and carried her away. Then, later, Barney Crogan disappeared.”

“I don’t want any of your damned lies!” the gang leader shouted. “Talk straight. What do you know about that woman?”

“Nothing. I never saw her before in my life. And she was so bad hurt she couldn’t talk and tell me anything.”

“Listen, you! We raided the hotel in the hills, all right, and got some good pickin’s out of it. But that was just on the side. We staged that raid just to get hold of that woman. She got away from us even though she got shot durin’ the brawl.”

“She wasn’t able to tell me anything,” Thatcher said.

“I’m tellin’ you now. She came here to get help. I had a couple of my men stationed here in town, and this one beside me says—”

“I saw him help the woman into the depot, and saw the copper come ridin’ in,” the wounded man interrupted. “I followed this yap to the telephone office when I heard the shootin’ there.”

The gang leader whirled to face Thatcher again.

“I want that dame!” he said icily. “She’s the big haul in this raid. It’s none

of your business why I want her. But I want her enough to blast anybody who tries to keep me from findin’ her. Now, you talk!”

“But I don’t know where she is,” Thatcher protested. “I’ve told you the truth. When I got Barney Crogan into the depot, she was missing.”

“Yeah? We’ll soon make you talk. Butcher, bring that girl in here.”

The short, heavy man stepped out of the waiting room. He was back again immediately, thrusting Clara Millard into the office ahead of him. Her wrists were tied behind her back and she was gagged with a piece of cloth.

“What—” Thatcher cried.

“Steady!” the leader warned. “This is your girl, huh? This pal of mine you shot says so, and we picked her up as she was comin’ to the depot. Now, Boy Scout, we don’t mean you any harm, and you can save yourself and this little lady a lot of nasty trouble. Where’s that other dame? I’m tradin’ you this one for her.”

Thatcher started forward, but one of the men stopped him. They removed Clara Millard’s gag, and she gasped for breath.

“**L**ISTEN to me!” Thatcher begged. “I don’t know what became of that woman. When I got back here, she was gone.”

“And where’s that cop?”

“I don’t know that, either. He disappeared, too. And they were both hurt bad.”

“I’ll give you just two minutes to tell me where you hid that dame,” the gang leader said. “This girl of yours is safe just that long.”

Clara Millard was looking at him imploringly. Yet he had not the slightest idea of what had become of the wounded woman. But he knew these men never would believe that.

"You put that skirt somewhere," the leader accused. "She probably told you all about everything—"

"She couldn't talk at all," Thatcher said. "I tell you she was almost dead."

"We'd better hurry it up, Chief," the short, heavy man warned the leader. "The cops will be comin' in flocks, and one of the boys says the village hicks are gatherin'."

"Where's that woman?" the leader howled at Thatcher.

"I don't know."

"He's not lying to you," Clara Millard cried. "He honestly doesn't know. He'd talk to save me, if he knew."

"Who else could have got her away from here?" the leader snapped. "He was the only person here with her. And he helped that cop get away, too. The cop's with the woman. Talk quick, mug!"

Thatcher felt sick, helpless. He could do nothing, not even to save his own girl. He glanced at Clara again, and thought she was trying to flash him some sort of message.

The gang leader whipped out an automatic.

"Talk quick, or I'll blast this girl of yours right before your eyes!" he said.

"We'd better get goin', Chief," the heavy-set man said again.

"We came here to get that woman, and we're goin' to have her!" the leader declared.

He whirled back toward Thatcher again and brought up the automatic. And again there came a shriek from the whistle of a locomotive.

The extra freight was coming! Without thinking what he was doing, Thatcher started forward. The move was instinctive. He had imperative orders to stop and sidetrack that freight, to clear the line for the delayed northbound limited.

"Here, you! Where do you think you're goin'?" the gang leader demanded. "Get back there!"

"That freight's got to be stopped!"

"So the crew can barge in here and help you, huh? Do you think we're idiots?"

"Listen!" Thatcher begged. "The northbound limited—if the freight gets through Cedarville, they'll meet. The limited—"

"What's a little wreck? You tell me where you put that woman."

"I don't know where the woman is, I tell you! Please listen to me! If that freight goes through, there'll be a terrible catastrophe."

"Get back there against the wall and tell me what I want to know. Quick! I'm fed up with your stallin'."

CHAPTER VI

On Time



IN that instant, Thatcher had a swift vision of the aristocratic limited meeting the heavy freight head-on at terrific speed, of a rending crash, twisted steel, escaping steam, fire, broken human bodies, men and women shrieking in agony . . . wrecking trains, doctors and nurses, newspaper headlines.

He had to do something to stop it. But what could he do? Unless—

Three of the men were standing in front of Thatcher, and a couple more were stationed at the windows. But Thatcher did not hesitate. He hurled himself forward suddenly, at the same instant whipping the automatic out of his pocket.

His unexpected move took them by surprise. They didn't dream he would dare attempt such a thing with the odds so heavy against him. The automatic he held cracked and flamed, and one of the men reeled back against the wall.

Then Thatcher made two moves so swiftly that they did not realize what he was doing. He threw the light switch and plunged the office into total darkness. Then he seized the lever and threw the board, and flattened himself on the floor.

Two guns were flaming and barking, and the leader of the gang was howling for his men to stop shooting, that they might hit one another.

A wild screech sounded from the locomotive whistle of the freight train. The red board had flashed almost in the face of the engineer. The heavy train rolled past the depot with the wheels spinning, sliding, sending out showers of sparks as the man at the throttle worked desperately to make an emergency stop.

"Throw on the lights!" the gang leader was yelling. "You boys outside take care of that freight crew. Grab this wild mug, but don't kill him—yet."

Thatcher tried to get to the door. He heard the train grind to a stop, then the labored exhaust of the locomotive as it sought to back up the heavy load. Outside the depot, guns began blazing and barking.

Lights suddenly flashed on in the office, and they grabbed him before he could use the automatic again. They slapped him back against the wall, and the gang leader grasped his throat cruelly.

"Stand that girl up in the corner!" the leader howled. "And if this Boy Scout doesn't tell us where that woman is—"

"I don't know!" Thatcher shouted.

"Wait!" Clara Millard cried. "He's telling, the truth. He doesn't know where she is—but I do."

"You?" The gang leader whirled

toward her.

"Yes. She's in the freight warehouse. Somebody took her there—took the state policeman there, too."

"In the freight warehouse? We'll get her. Bring this railroad pest along till we're sure. And make it quick! We've got to be gettin' out of here."

OUTSIDE the building, there was a burst of gunfire that seemed unusually heavy.

"Chief! They're on us!" some man howled;

The gang leader cursed and whirled toward the door. Outside, men were yelling. Thatcher guessed that some of the highway police had reached the scene, and that some of the townsmen were helping them. The crew of the freight would be in the fighting, too.

The man holding Clara Millard let go of her and lurched toward the door, whipping out his gun. Thatcher sprang to the girl's side. He grabbed up his automatic from the floor.

But there was no escape for the three gangsters in the office. They reeled back from the waiting room. Men appeared suddenly at all the broken windows and in the doorway, guns held ready for instant use. One of the three gangsters fired wildly and got a bullet in reply which sent him reeling back against the wall.

"Hands up, or you get it!" somebody shouted.

The face of the gang leader had suddenly gone white. He glanced at the wounded man, and at the other Thatcher had shot in the arm earlier. They could not help him now. He threw down his gun and gestured for the other two to submit to the Law.

The group at the door parted, and a man strode into the office with the air of one in command of the situation.

Thatcher's eyes bulged. Ben Mead!

Mead's eyes were glittering and his face was stern.

His lips curled contemptuously as he looked at the three gangsters standing against the wall.

"Good evening, Jed Joyce!" he greeted the leader. "Ah! 'Butcher' Wykes and 'Slim' Barlott, too. We captured some interesting gentlemen outside, too, and had to shoot up a couple. This is the end of the trail for you, Joyce."

"Maybe not."

Ben Mead gestured to the state policemen behind him.

"Take them away," he ordered. "The town boys will help you mop up outside. This is a better night's work than you suspect."

Tongue-tied, Jim Thatcher leaned weakly against the wall and watched. Clara Millard sank into a chair, on the verge of fainting. The gangsters were seized and hustled out of the operator's room, and their captors were none too gentle.

"What—" Thatcher began.

"Me?" Ben Mead grinned at him. "You thought I was a crook, and was trying to steal your girl, huh? She's worth stealing, at that, but I think you've got her safe enough."

"But, what—" Thatcher asked again.

"You attend to your railroad business first, Thatcher. Then I'll explain."

THE conductor of the extra freight was standing in the doorway.

"What's all this excitement about?" he wanted to know.

"Here!" Thatcher handed him a written order he grabbed up from the telegraph board. "Sidetrack, quick! The northbound limited's coming through late. You'd have smashed into her if you'd passed the board."

The freight conductor was already on his way out to the platform, howling for his brakeman.

"Now," Ben Mead said, grinning again. "I've got Barney Crogan safe enough in the freight warehouse. The woman is there, too. The Dobyville doctor is taking care of them. It's like this, Thatcher. The lady who stumbled in here wounded is Miss Jeanette Nartley. Some time ago, she was a witness to a robbery and killing in a San Francisco night club. And her testimony will convict a couple of killers. We were afraid she might not live to give it."

"So that's it!"

"Partially. We sent her to the resort hotel and announced that she'd gone to Europe to spend the season. When the gang learned where she was hiding, I came down here to keep an eye on things."

"Who are you?" Thatcher asked.

"Me? I'm just a San Francisco cop. Tonight, I got wise that the gang was coming. But they had already raided the hotel while a party was going on. But that was only a blind. The real object of the raid was to abduct Miss Nartley, thinking they could get their two pals released as the price of letting her go.

"But she got wise the moment the raid on the hotel began, and tried to get away. One of the gang lost his head and shot her. But she managed to get to a car and make a getaway, and got as far as the depot here. I saw you help her inside, and then Barney Crogan came. While you were helping him, I got the girl out of the office and hid her in the freight warehouse."

"Why?"

"I was afraid that you might weaken if that gang got to you."

"I'd have helped."

"I know that now. I identified myself to Crogan and got him into the warehouse also, so he could protect Miss Nartley

while I went about my business. I told Miss Millard and her mother because I needed women's help, and made Clara promise not to tell you what was going on."

"And I was the one who finally weakened and told," Clara said.

"Can't blame you," Mead told her. "You held out longer than most girls would."

The telephone bell jangled. Thatcher hurried to the instrument.

"Hello!" he said.

"This is Ed Carter, Jim. What's all the shootin' for?"

"We've cleaned up the gang," Thatcher told him. "It's safe now."

HE was grinning as he hung up the receiver and turned to face the others again.

"I think I'd better apologize for thinking that you were a crook," he told Ben Mead, flushing.

"Oh, I like a man who's a bit jealous," Clara said, laughing.

"It probably was a good night's work for you personally, Thatcher," Ben Mead put in. "Miss Nartley thinks that you're a hero. Her uncle is vice president of the railroad company. And you can be pretty sure of promotion, now."

They heard the screech of a locomotive whistle again, and again Jim Thatcher remembered that he was above all a railroad man. The extra freight was in

the clear, and the northbound limited was coming at top speed.

Thatcher sprang across the room and pulled the lever. Outside, the red eye disappeared, and a green one burned in its place. An answering belch came from the locomotive's whistle.

Then the little Cedarville depot shook as the heavy train rushed past in a whirl of steam and smoke, cinders and dust. Then the limited was gone, flinging back another screech of the whistle as it flashed around a distant curve.

Thatcher shivered. What if the limited had met the heavy freight head on? Then, shrugging, he reached out a hand and found the telegraph key, and reported the northbound limited safely in and out of the station at Cedarville.

"I'm worried about Barney Crogan," he told Ben Mead. "I wish you'd see how he's getting along, and let me know. I can't leave the depot."

Ben Mead looked from Thatcher to Clara. Millard grinned at them, and turned toward the door.

"It couldn't be that you want to be alone with your girl, could it?" Mead said, grinning broadly. "Well, may the semaphores always burn green for you two!"

He laughed a little and hurried outside. Jim Thatcher took Clara in his arms.

"He's not a bad guy, at that," he admitted.