



By Johnston McCulley

Danger and trouble come to a lone mountain telegraph post on the buzzard-like wings of a raging blizzard!

WHEN the telegraph sounder resumed its loud chattering, Eph Cartwright, railroad agent at Rock Siding, was in the little rear living room of the station starting to brew an enormous pot of black coffee. Though it would have been only sunset, had a man been able to see the sun, he had lit the lamps in the tiny station house. He would need the black coffee, he knew. There would be little sleep for him tonight.

For almost forty hours, the blizzard had been raging in the Nevada mountains. Railroad traffic was in a snarl. Some trains

were so late they had been canceled. The telegraph lines had withstood the force of the storm so far, but might go down at any time.

The dispatcher at Sierra Grande, the nearest division point, was pounding his key continuously as he made a frantic effort to keep things moving. Though his own situation was bad enough, Eph Cartwright pitied the dispatcher, who carried a great weight of responsibility.

This winter was worse than last, which had been his first at Rock Siding, Eph thought. Yet he did not complain. He was

glad the railroad had given him this little, lonesome post, where he lived alone, depended on the telegraph for gossip, and spoke seldom except to trainmen whose trains took the siding there, a regular meeting point.

His tenure at Rock Siding had saved his life, he knew. The doctor at the division point hospital had told him as much. His lungs had been going. But this post gave him the pure thin air of altitude and work enough to keep his thoughts from growing morbid and to pay him a living.

And this post had made him acquainted with Mora Lansing, too. Her middle-aged father was the agent at Indian Bend, ten miles away. Eph had met her first at Sierra Grande, when he had gone to the hospital for a check-up while a relief man did his work.

THE attraction between them had been immediate and mutual. It had been an unusual courtship. Only occasionally did they meet. But twice each day they gossiped over the wire, and grinning friendly trainmen carried love letters between them and tossed them off as the trains sped past.

They planned to be married in the spring, if the doctors said Eph was well enough. Eph had been promised a better station when that happened. For he had made a good record at Rock Siding. It was an important post, especially in bad weather.

For miles, the great snowsheds twisted and curved along the side of the Nevada mountain range like a great serpent. The trains roared through them, partially protected from drifts that would have blocked progress, and disastrous snow slides from the slopes above.

There was always fear of disaster. A spark from a locomotive's stack might start flames which, wind-driven, would race through the sheds and imperil lives and

property. A slide might block the track. So the tiny stations, not far apart, were links in safeguarding the trains. Dispatchers sighed with relief when a train passed safely over the division.

Eph realized the importance of his post, and his superiors at division headquarters knew it. They had hinted to him that better things were in store for him as soon as the doctors said he could handle them. So he looked into the future with confidence.

Now, as he thrust wood into the little cook stove in the rear room and put the huge coffee pot in place, Eph was listening to the chatter of the sounder. He heard the call signal for his own station, and hurried through the door to the telegraph board, sprawled in the big chair before it, reached for his key and acknowledged the call.

The dispatcher pounded out the message: R.S. PLOW HAS PASSED INDIAN BEND. MAY BE FOLLOWED BY No. 8, WHICH WILL TAKE SIDING AT R-S FOR No. 9, IF SHE CAN MAKE IT. MEET ORDER OUT.

Eph acknowledged, and the sounder was still. He guessed that the dispatcher at Sierra Grande was at the point of collapse from fatigue and worry. This last had been a sort of general gossip instead of an official-sounding bit of wire work.

Eph got out of his chair, stretched and yawned. It was time to light the switch lights, for it had grown dark outside. He bundled up as well as he could, thinking as he did so that it was fortunate a friendly brakeman had tossed off a bundle of old magazines a few days before. If he had to keep awake all night, reading matter and strong coffee would come in handy.

He gathered up the lighted switch lamps and hooked his own lantern over his left arm. As he opened the outside door of the little depot, a blast of the blizzard made the building shake and almost sucked Eph's breath from his lungs. He bent almost

double to make progress against the force of the storm. Frozen sleet made footing precarious. He struggled to the first switch and got the lights into position securely. Any brakeman who had to open a frozen switch tonight would have a tough job, he thought.

AND another thought came to him at that instant. This would be New Year's Eve. Tomorrow, another year would start. He hoped that the end of it would find him married to Mora and in charge of a more lucrative station.

He must get her on the wire as soon as he got back to the depot, he told himself, and wish her a Happy New Year. Unless the dispatcher at distant Sierra Grande was pounding out emergency orders, the line would be clear.

He struggled on against the storm to the second switch. When the lamp was in position there, he turned his back upon the sleet-driving wind and hurried down the track, past the station, and to the other end of the long siding. It did not take him long to do his work there.

It was pitch black, and his lantern was a necessity, as he had known it would be. He had to face the storm again, and the force of it almost took his breath at times. He slipped and stumbled through the drifts, breathing painfully. It was growing much colder. That might put an end to the sleet and snow, but not to the biting wind.

If the snowplow had left Indian Bend, as the dispatcher had said, it should be getting through soon, unless they ran into trouble. The plow would clear the siding as well as the main line, and if the eastbound limited, greatly delayed, was following, the plow crew would thaw the switches and make it easy for the train to take the siding.

Eph finally stumbled against the end of the depot platform. There was little snow on the platform or track in front of the depot,

for the fierce wind had swept it clean, to pile it a short distance away across the siding.

Inside, in his little office, Eph stripped off his superfluous storm clothing and hurried into the back room, where he slept, cooked, ate and lived within hearing of the telegraph sounder.

The coffee was boiling. Eph filled a mug with the scalding liquid and put it to one side to cool off a bit before he started gulping it. He put more fuel into the cook stove, and carried a couple of chunks of wood to the stove in the office.

The sounder began clattering, and he hurried to the telegraph board. He knew the distant dispatcher's "hand." More orders or trouble, he supposed.

"All stations!" the wire was saying.

The others along the line began acknowledging. Eph heard Indian Bend acknowledge, and knew it was Mora at the key.

He acknowledged in turn, then waited for the message.

"All stations. Jud Marlin has appeared along the line. Broke into empty station at Pinecrest and used key to make threats. Be on guard. That is all."

Eph sprawled in the chair, sipping coffee, and looked through the window at the blackness of the night, relieved only by streaks of light from the office. The distant switch lamps were winking through the falling sleet.

He had no fear of seeing the evil face of Jud Marlin pressed whitely against the pane of a window. Pinecrest, where the outlaw had been reported, was twenty miles away.

Even a tough outlaw like Jud Marlin wouldn't make much speed on a stormswept night like this.

MARLIN had been a railroad worker. Monce, a rapid-fire telegraph operator. He might not have been tolerated on another

division, but here in the mountains the railroad took what it could get.

Marlin was addicted to whiskey, and not in moderation. But he never forgot his work. However, he was uncouth and quarrelsome, continually fighting with trainmen, delighting in his physical prowess. And finally, after he had battered an engineer into insensibility and driven off the others of a train's crew with a gun, he had been discharged.

Instead of going to some other part of the country, Eph remembered, Marlin had remained in the mountain country and had turned outlaw. At every chance, he attacked the railroad, which he hated because of his discharge.

Railroad property had been damaged or destroyed. Huge piles of ties had appeared on the track in unexpected places, causing two bad freight wrecks. Railroad detectives and local sheriffs had failed to catch Jud Marlin. A posse had been formed to comb the hills during the autumn, after a disastrous snowshed fire set by Marlin, who always informed the railroad officials of what he had done. But Marlin had not been found.

It was thought he had fled the country because of the posse. But, according to this message of warning, he was present again, a bad man to have at large. He hated the railroad, and he knew railroad work, and how to attack and where least expected. If Jud Marlin was running wild in blizzard weather, he could be expected to commit almost any atrocity.

Eph Cartwright waited for a time until the line was clear, meanwhile getting warm and drinking hot coffee. Then he reached out and opened his key and called Indian Bend. The reply came at once, and by the "send" he knew Mora was at the key.

"This is Eph," he wired. "Hope you are keeping warm. I had a sweet time putting out switch lights."

"Wind abating here," she replied. "We will be up all night."

"Wish I could be there with you," Eph sent.

"Wish you could," Mora answered.

Eph could visualize her sitting at the key—a short, rather plump girl with a rosy face, black hair and eyes and a smile that seemed to be working almost always.

"Did you get the Jud Marlin message?"

"Got it," she answered. "Hope he does not drop in on us here."

"If he does, handle him rough," Eph sent. "Hope he does not drop in here either. Do not feel like showing hospitality. Did you hear him sending from Pinecrest?"

"Yes. Somebody flagged the limited there and they think he did it. He broke into the section house and got out a hand car and they think he went back up the track after the plow and limited passed."

"Did not hear any of that," Eph sent. "Must have come over the wire while I was putting out switch lamps. By the way, Happy New Year."

"Same to you," she tapped in reply.

Eph heard a roar up the track, and a distant headlight flashed its streams of brilliance through the sheets of sleet.

"Snowplow coming," he wired her. "Must stop now. More later."

THROUGH the track window, he could make out that the plow was standing at the upper switch. They were opening it, he supposed. And a moment later he knew that guess was correct, for the plow turned into the siding and started clearing it.

Slowly, it approached the station, a rotary giant that could bite through the deepest drifts and make the passage of trains possible. It went past the station toward the lower end of the siding and out upon the main line after opening the other switch. Then it came back slowly on the main line and chuffed to a stop at the depot.

The snowplow crew tumbled into the little depot and began swigging Eph's coffee as they talked and stood around the stoves to get warm. They discussed the sudden and unexpected appearance of Jud Marlin.

"He probably backtracked with the hand car," one of the plow crew decided. "He'll leave it on the track, no doubt, for some locomotive to hit. Must have a hideout somewhere up in the hills."

"He can't get around much on a night like this," another said.

"Neither can the sheriff and his men," the first countered. "Hope they land him one of these days. Makes everybody along the line nervous to have him runnin' loose."

"It'll be a shootin' affair if they run into him," another of the crew declared. "They've got evidence enough to hang him—or anyhow send him to prison for a long term."

The men finally bundled up and went back to their rotary and started off down the line. Eph went to his key and reported the plow out and got the dispatcher's acknowledgment.

"Limited following plow from Indian Bend," the dispatcher sent. "See her yet?"

"Not yet," Eph replied.

He didn't try to talk to Mora again then, being afraid the dispatcher might want to get to work following the progress of the plow. So he went into the back room and filled the coffee pot again, stoked up the fire and got the coffee cooking.

Twenty minutes later, the limited whistled down the track. Through the window, Eph saw the train stop and turn into the siding as if intending to wait for No. 9 to pass. The train pulled up opposite the station, and the conductor came into the depot kicking snow and sleet off his boots.

"How far is the plow ahead?" he asked.

"Less than half an hour."

"We're stuck here for a while, then. No. 9 is waiting for the plow at Silver Creek. Take her some time to make it here and pass."

"Hear about Jud Marlin?" Eph asked.

The conductor gave voice to a burst of imprecations. "He, or somebody, got into the Pinecrest station and flagged us down," he reported. "Pure devilishness. Took us some time to call in and find we could proceed. Like to get a glimpse of that so-and-so, when I have a gun in my hand."

"Every railroad man would," Eph suggested.

The sounder began clattering; it was the dispatcher again. Eph took orders for the limited to proceed to Silver Creek behind the snowplow. No. 9 would wait for the passing there.

"Glad to be moving, anyhow," the conductor said, as he prepared to go back to his train, clutching the orders he had received. "Happy New Year!"

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" Eph replied.

The conductor hurried out. The locomotive's whistle called in the flagman. A few minutes later, the train started rolling. Eph watched the taillights until they disappeared in the swirls of sleet and snow.

He checked on the fire and the coffee and returned to the office room, rolling and lighting a cigarette. He was thinking of Mora again as he sat down before the telegraph board.

He knew that company officials considered his record good, that he was proper material for a bigger and better job. The next checkup by the railroad physician, he felt sure, would reveal his physical condition as good.

Perhaps he and Mora could be married in the spring, and then he would be assigned to a larger station, to some town where there were people around, life. Even a small town

would seem like a metropolis after Rock Siding.

Now he sat before the telegraph board and bent forward to reach for the key. He called Mora.

"Plow and No. 8 have gone past," he told her.

"I heard the meeting order."

"Anything new on Jud Marlin?"

"Not a thing. He probably went back up the cleared line. Are you going to get to Indian Bend next week?"

"If the storm stops and traffic gets regular, I'll report off some evening and come back in the morning. Want to see me?"

"You know I do," she replied. "Wish you could be here for New Year's Day. We are going to have fried rabbit. One of the brakemen tossed some off."

"I have a chunk of venison myself," he sent in reply. "Maybe some day before long we will be eating together. Hope our plans for next spring work out."

"Good-night," she sent.

He answered and closed the key, leaned back in the chair and picked up his pipe instead of making another cigarette. He took his time about getting the pipe going, puffed in content, dreaming of the future.

AND suddenly the office door was pulled open. In it stood framed a huge man dressed in rough clothing, a muffler almost obscuring his face, his eyes gleaming. His gloves were off, and in his right hand he held a menacing revolver.

"Take it easy, key-pounder," the unknown visitor said. "Surprised to see me?"

"Who are you?" Eph demanded. "Where'd you come from?"

"Came to town on the limited. Conductor didn't know that, though. Rode free—all the way from Pinecrest."

"Pinecrest!" Eph exclaimed.

The visitor laughed. "I see you've been listenin' to wire gossip. Yeah, from Pinecrest. Had a little fun there. Broke into the station and cussed out the dispatcher. Hung out a red light and flagged No.8. While they were fussin' around tryin' to figure out what was happenin', I got aboard without bein' seen. I know my way around trains. Got off when she stopped here without bein' seen, too. Knew she'd stop here. Listened to the wire at Pinecrest."

"You—you're Jud Marlin!"

"Yeah, that's right. Got a little business here."

As Eph stood like a man petrified by shock, Jud Marlin began removing his outside clothing. The muffler came down and revealed a bestial face covered with a heavy stubble of beard. Marlin's eyes were bloodshot. As he divested himself of his body's heavy wrappings against the cold, his eyes never left Eph for a moment, and the gun was always ready at his hand on the end of the telegraph board.

"I can use some of that hot coffee," Marlin said. "Walk ahead of me and get me some."

Eph obeyed because at the moment there was nothing else he could do. He filled a mug and put it on the table, and Jud Marlin sat down, gun still held ready. He lifted the mug and began drinking.

"Cook me a mess of eggs or somethin'," he ordered. "And make it lively. Haven't had any thin' to eat since early this mornin', and I crave vittles."

Eph got out supplies and put a skillet on the stove. He sliced some cold boiled potatoes and some bacon and broke four eggs into a dish.

"I heard you talk to your girl over the wire," Jud Marlin said, as he waited for the food to be prepared. "Gettin' married in the spring, huh?"

"That's right," Eph managed to reply as he worked.

"Then you'll get a bigger job and go right on workin' for this cussed railroad, huh?"

"That's the plan."

"Plans don't always work out," Jud Marlin reminded him. "I reckon I'll have to mess yours up. Ain't got anything against you personal, understand. It's the railroad I'm fightin'."

"What do you mean?" Eph asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

"Tell you later. Hurry with that grub. Got any whiskey?"

"A couple of gulps, maybe."

"Well, what are you waitin' for?"

Eph opened his little cupboard and brought out a flask and put it upon the table. Marlin held it up to the light.

"Only half a swaller," he commented. "All you got?"

"That's all. I seldom use it."

Marlin upended the bottle and emptied it at a gulp. "Anyhow, you won't be needin' this whiskey."

He crashed the bottle in a corner of the room as Eph put a platter of food before him. Marlin ate ravenously, with the gun a few inches from his plate.

Eph's mind was in turmoil. He was wondering what Marlin contemplated. Here was an emergency he never had expected to confront. Before him was the man who had been fighting the railroad, burning company property, wrecking trains, who had caused the serious injury of three trainmen.

It was Eph's duty to try to overpower this man, to make him a prisoner and turn him over as soon as help could get there. But Eph was a small man and had been going through a serious, strength-sapping illness. And Jud Marlin was a beast in size, strength and thought.

EPH had a gun, the same as any station agent, but it was in a drawer in the telegraph board, and he knew he never

could get it without a shot from Marlin's weapon cutting him down. He didn't want to die a hero in making the attempt. That would not amount to anything in this crisis. It would mean Marlin's triumph. The only way Eph could triumph would be to overpower this man in some manner and turn him over for trial.

Marlin wiped the platter clean and swigged more coffee. Eph refilled the empty cup. Marlin borrowed Eph's tobacco sack and package of papers and made himself a cigarette, then thrust sack and papers into a coat pocket.

"I'm feelin' a little better," Marlin declared, "after that coffee and grub." He glanced through the open door at the clock on the wall above the telegraph board. "It's almost time," he added.

"Time for what?" Eph asked.

"Time to give this cussed railroad trouble they won't forget for years to come. All I've done before this has been little annoyin' stuff. I'll repay 'em for gettin' that posse after me! Got my plans all made. Been hidin' and waitin' for just the right time, and this is it."

"How do you mean?" Eph asked.

"Traffic's in a snarl. Everything's mixed up. I know how it is. I've set before a telegraph board all night listenin' to a crazy dispatcher tryin' to straighten things out."

"Yeah, things are sure bad tonight," Eph said.

"Now, I'm waitin' for that sounder to talk. It'll tell me what I want to know."

"What's that?" Eph asked.

"I want to know when the limiteds pass at Silver Creek, when the northbound starts in this direction. I know how long it'll take 'em to get here through the snowsheds over slippery rails. I know that northbound's got some high railroad officials on it. There'll be a few new board members after my work tonight."

"I don't see what you're drivin' at."

“Gettin’ interested, are you?” Marlin asked. “Oh, I don’t mind tellin’ you! You’ll never be able to repeat it. You just picture that limited comin’ crawlin’ slow up the long grade through the sheds ‘tween Silver Creek and here. What you think’d happen if it met a snowshed fire, driven by this wind, rushing straight at ‘em? They couldn’t run back fast enough to get away from it. It’d be on ‘em almost before they knew it. No warnin’, ‘cause I’m goin’ to cut the wires right on your telegraph board.”

“Why—why—” Eph gulped. A picture of horror was forming in his mind.

“Yeah! The company’s crack train will be burned. And the crew and passengers will be broiled, includin’ them railroad big men. Easy to start the fire, too—and you’ll be blamed. Nobody will know I’ve even been here. They may suspect, but they won’t know.”

“How’ll I get the blame?” Eph asked.

“The fire’ll start here, and folks will say you got careless with your stove or your pipe. All I’ve got to do is shoot down a lamp and move on and watch. I’ve got my getaway planned. I busted into the section house at Pinecrest, and they thought I got a handcar and rode away with it. But here I’ll really do that. After the fire sweeps south through the sheds, I’ll drive the handcar north.”

“Do you know what you’re sayin’?” Eph asked, his face revealing the horror he felt.

“Sure, I do! Got it all planned.”

“Why’d they blame me for it? They’ll believe me when I tell ‘em the truth.”

“You won’t tell ‘em,” Jud Marlin replied. “Because, before I shoot out the lamp and start the fire, I’m goin’ to shoot you. They’ll find what’s left of you and think you burned here in the depot.”

MARLIN spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, in an ordinary conversational

voice, and laughed a little when he had finished speaking. That he was insane, Eph did not doubt. But the fact of his insanity did not lessen Eph’s peril. Hating the railroad as he did, Jud Marlin would do anything to cause it trouble. A thing like a mere human life would not deter him.

The sounder began clattering, and Eph knew Mora was trying to get him. She would be suspicious if he did not reply, for she knew he intended to remain up all night, and also that, trained as he was, even if asleep the sounder would awaken him.

“That’s not the dispatcher,” Marlin commented. “I know the sound of his send. He’s a pounder. Whoever that is has a slower touch. Your girl?”

“That—that’s right,” Eph told him. “She in knows I’m up. Everybody along the line is. Just wants to talk, I suppose.”

“Don’t answer!” Marlin ordered.

“If I don’t, she may think somethin’ is wrong.”

“Let her think it. Somethin’ will be wrong later. Won’t she be shocked and surprised when she learns what happened to you!”

“You’re a devil!” Eph burst out.

“I aim to be. I want a reputation for bein’ one.”

“If they blame me, like you said, they won’t think you had anything to do with it.”

“Oh, they’ll get around to thinkin’ that way some day!” Marlin assured him.

The sounder began clattering again. This time it was the dispatcher, and he was calling Rock Siding.

“Don’t answer!” Marlin ordered. “Let the old buzzard worry. He used to burn me up over the wire twice a week. Sent in a report askin’ that I be fired.”

“If I don’t answer—”

“Let him fuss and stew!” Marlin decided.

Then they heard the dispatcher calling Indian Bend and asking if they could get

through to Rock Siding. Mora replied that she had just tried to get Rock Siding and hadn't been able to do so, and was worried. The dispatcher knew of the romance.

The wire was quiet. Jud Marlin looked at the clock again, and made himself another cigarette. The snowplow was reported in at Silver Creek.

"That means that No.8 will be there in fifteen or twenty minutes, and will pass No.9," Marlin observed. "It'll soon be time to start the fireworks."

"Won't you change your mind?" Eph begged. "You won't gain anything by killin' me. They'll catch you some day and make you stretch rope."

"You won't be here to see me stretch it," Marlin reminded him.

WHAT would happen if Marlin carried out his plan was horribly plain to Eph. The little station, the main line and siding in front of it, were in the clear. But there was a high windbreak behind the station, running in each direction to connect with the snowsheds, made of thick old timbers and planking that would ignite easily from a blazing heat.

If Marlin shot down a lamp, oil from it would set fire to the little depot. The raging wind would carry the flames through the structure, attack the platform, catch the windbreak and rush on to the sheds. The draft through the sheds would send the fire racing along the mountainside, creating an inferno of heat and flame. Rushing hot air would give an urge to the traveling flames.

And the doomed limited, crawling slowly upgrade through the sheds with its load of living freight, would encounter that holocaust before it could retreat.

Eph tried to keep from thinking of the picture. He made an effort to drive all terror from his mind. He had to do something quickly, he knew. And how could he, small and ill and weak, master this strong beast of

a Jud Marlin?

Wildly, he thought of almost everything, discarded plans he knew would not lead to success. He glanced at Jud Marlin frequently. Marlin was swigging more coffee. He motioned for Eph to refill the mug, and, gun held ready, he watched carefully while Eph carried the big pot to the table and poured and returned the pot to the stove.

The idea of a last desperate chance came to Eph. If it failed, Marlin would shoot him down. But if he did not try something, Marlin would shoot him anyway when he decided the time had come.

Marlin was watchful that Eph did not go to the telegraph board and try to get his gun from the drawer. He had been watchful that Eph did not try to smash him with the coffeepot. But he disregarded ordinary, casual movements.

After returning the coffeepot to the stove, Eph hooked the lid lifter in a lid of the old cook stove, then stooped and got a stick of wood from the box beside it. Marlin grinned and swung up the gun.

"You ain't thinkin' of tryin' to brain me with that skinny stick of wood, are you?" he asked.

"Got sense enough to know I couldn't live to get near enough to you," Eph replied.

His heart was pounding as he turned his back, lifted the stove lid and slid the stick of wood into the firebox. Such a simple weapon! But luck had to be with him if he won.

He pretended the stick of wood stuck, and jammed it at the bed of embers a couple of times. Finally, he had the stick in the firebox. Standing sideways to Marlin and not looking at him, he lifted the stove lid with the lifter as if to put it in place.

SUDDENLY, he whirled and cast the lid off the lifter like a boy casting a rock from a sling. Jud Marlin had the coffee mug

up to his mouth, and was drinking. He was watching Eph, too, but the hot stove lid caught him full in the face as he tried to drop the cup and lift his gun.

The gun exploded, and the bullet sang past Eph's head and thudded into the wall. Eph had jumped forward as soon as he had cast the stove lid. As Marlin reeled, trying to get out of the chair and on his feet, Eph was upon him.

He began striking Marlin on the head with the lid lifter, careful not to let Marlin get hold of him. That would have meant a quick end of him, Eph knew. One smash of the lid lifter made Marlin drop his gun from a hand suddenly numbed. He reeled, and Eph had a chance to strike him behind the ear.

As the big man tottered, Eph continued hammering at him. Marlin crashed to the floor. Eph struck him on the head twice more. Then he ran to a corner where he had a coil of half-inch rope that recently had been sent him with some supplies.

He continued sobbing from nervousness and fear as he knelt beside the unconscious Marlin and began using the rope. He tied Marlin's wrists behind him, ran the rope down and lashed it around the ankles. Then he ran the rope tightly around and around Marlin's body.

Marlin was groaning when he had finished, returning to consciousness. Eph tested the ropes and stepped back. Marlin's head was covered with blood, and blood was upon the floor and table.

Eph felt suddenly weak and almost fell. But he drew on his remaining strength and reeled into the office and to the telegraph board. His hand was shaking as he opened

the key. He was thinking that the distant dispatcher could tell by the sound of his "send" that something was wrong.

He received the dispatcher's acknowledgment.

"R-S," Eph sent. "Jud Marlin got off No. 8 and entered depot. I subdued him by trick. Have him securely bound."

The dispatcher was not long in sending the reply: "Good man. Stop No. 9 and turn over prisoner. Will have orders for No. 9. Station operator aboard coming in to Sierra Grande. Will have him relieve you. You ride No. 9 to Indian Bend and spend New Year's with your girl. More later."

Afterward, Eph remembered turning on the red. He remembered how the limited ground to a stop, how the conductor came in for orders and heard the story.

Trainmen appeared and took charge of a conscious Jud Marlin who was screeching oaths. The sounder clattered, and orders came through for the relief operator to take charge of Rock Siding, and for the limited to proceed to Indian Bend, carrying Eph on it.

But before all that happened, Mora had cut in to hold a conversation with Eph.

"Heard everything, honey. So glad we can spend New Year's together and make plans for next spring. After this you will practically own the railroad. They are sure to give you a good post. And do not forget the cash reward posted for the capture of Jud Marlin. You can take a few dollars out of it and buy me a wedding ring."

"Be seeing you in about an hour," Eph sent back.

"Kiss waiting," Mora wired.