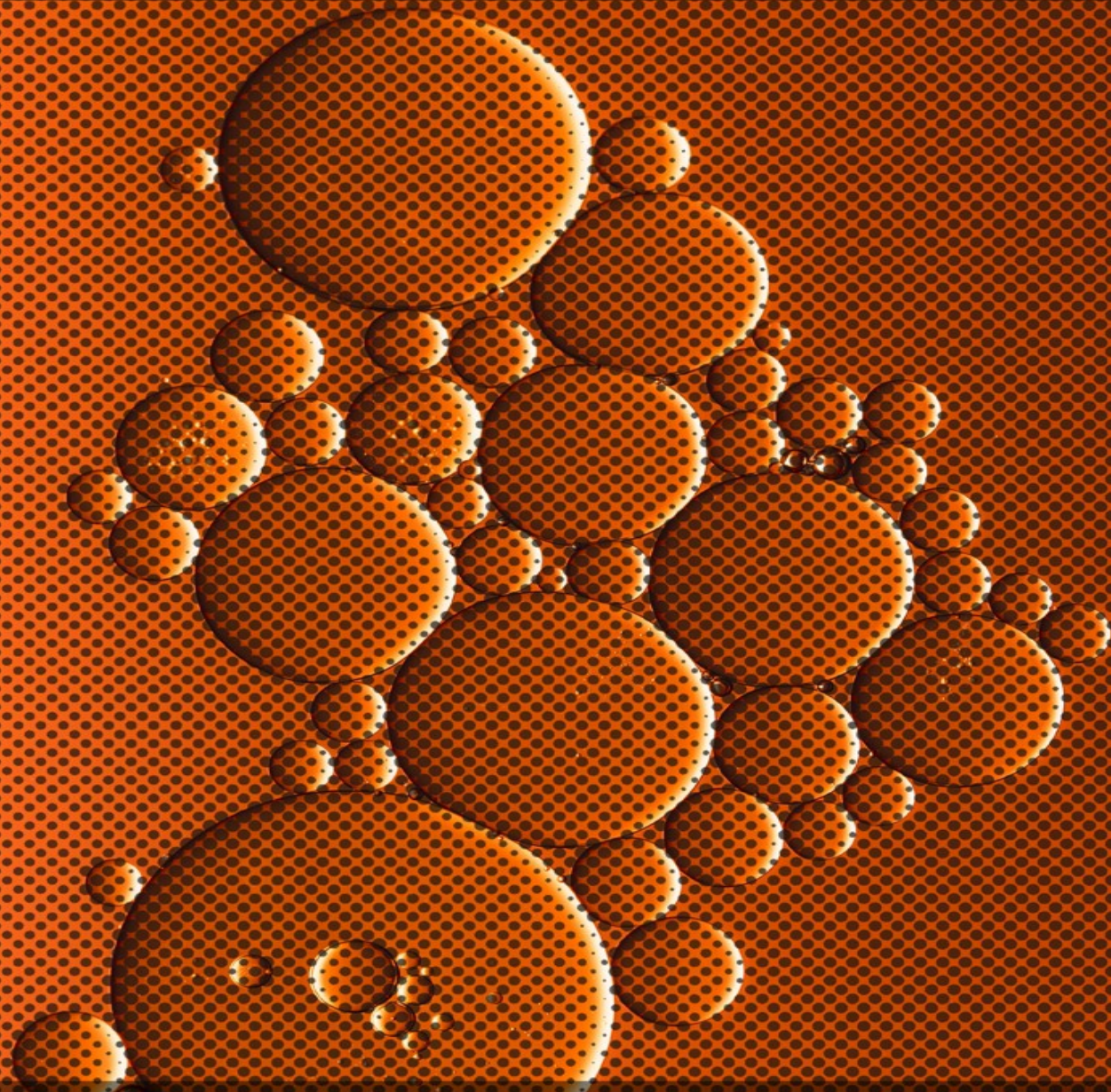


Francis Lynde



*Scientific
Sprague*

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Scientific Sprague

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I

The Wire-Devil

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CONNOLLY, off-trick division despatcher doubling on the early night trick for Jenner, whose baby was sick, snapped his key-switch at the close of a rapid fire of orders sent to straighten out a freight-train tangle on the Magdalene district, sat back in his chair, and reached for his corn-cob pipe with a fat man's sigh of relief.

Over in the corner of the bare, dingy office, Bolton, night man on the car-record wire, was rattling away at his typewriter; and on the wall opposite the despatcher's table the electrically timed standard clock was ticking off the minutes between eight-fifty-five and nine. While Connolly was striking a match to light his pipe, Bolton tore the typewritten sheet out of his machine and twisted himself in his chair to ask a question.

"What's the good word from the Apache Limited?" he inquired, his evil little eyes blinking indecently. And then, before Connolly could reply: "It's up to me to 'buy for the boys to-night. My little girl-doll is comin' on the Apache. Whadda you know about that: chasin' me all the way from little old New York."

The fat despatcher knew precisely where the Limited was, but he glanced at his train-sheet from sheer force of habit.

"On time at Angels, double-heading with the Nine-thirteen, and the Six-five," he said. Then he shifted over to the car-record man's cause for jubilation. "I didn't know you were a married man, Bolton. If I ever get out of the woods and make good on the job, I'm going to do it myself. "

Bolton's mouth widened like a split in a parchment mask, and his laugh was a dry cackle.

"Married—that's a bully good joke. I'll have to tell it to the little doll-girl, when she comes."

Connolly was Irish chiefly by virtue of his name. He entirely missed the pointing of the car-record man's remark, but the apparent gibe touched his vanity and his round and naturally ruddy face grew a shade darker.

"Meaning that no girl with half a chance at other fellows would look twice at a fat slouch like me? That's where you're off your trolley. There is one, Barry, and she's pretty enough to make a wooden-Indian cigar-sign get down from his block and chase her up the street for another look-in. But I've got to make good and pull down a wad, first."

The car-record man's laugh this time was an unchaste sneer.

"Aw, chuck it!" he derided. "Whadda you want to tie yourself up for when there's plenty of——"

"Say, that'll do," Connolly broke in, with a frown of cleanly disgust, taking Bolton's meaning at last. Then he changed the subject abruptly. "Mr. Maxwell's got him a new chum: seen him?"

Bolton nodded.

"Sure, I have; couldn't help seein' him if you happened to look his way. What is he?—champion All-America heavy-

weight?"

The despatcher shook his head. "College professor, somebody said; one of Mr. Maxwell's classmates. Specializes in something or other; I didn't hear what."

Again the tag-wire operator's laugh crackled like a snapping of dry twigs. He had risen from his chair and was half-sitting, half-leaning, upon his table-desk, his hands resting palms down, with the fingers curled under the table edge—his characteristic loafing attitude.

"He might specialize in any old thing," he jeered, with a small man's bickering hostility for a big one in his tone. "All he's got to do is to reach out and take it; nobody but a fellow in the Joe Gans class 'd have the nerve to tell him not to. I saw him sittin' on the Topaz porch with the super as I came over. He's so big it made me sick at my stomach to look at him."

Connolly's pipe had gone out, burned out, and he was feeling in his pockets for the tobacco sack. While he was doing it the corridor door opened and Calmaine, the superintendent's chief clerk, came in, let himself briskly through the gate in the counter railing, and leaned over Connolly's shoulder to glance at the train-sheet.

"Everything moving along all right, Dan?" he asked.

"Is now," said the despatcher, still feeling absently for the missing tobacco sack. "Twenty-one and Twenty-eight got balled up on their orders over on the other side of the range, but I guess I've got 'em straightened out, after so long a time. ... Now what the dickens did I do with that tobacco of mine, I wonder?"

"Have a cigar," said the chief clerk, laying one on the glass-topped wire-table. Calmaine, eastern trunk-line bred, had been inclined to cockiness when he came West, but a year with Maxwell, whose standing was that of the Short Line's best-beloved tyrant, had taken a good deal of it out of him.

"Thanks," returned Connolly, with a fat man's grin, "not for me when I'm despatching trains. The corn-cob goes with the job. Sit in here on the wire for a minute while I go up to the bunk-room and look in my other coat."

Calmaine took the vacated chair and ran his eye along the latest additions to the many columns of figures on the train-sheet. Bolton in his far corner was still loafing, though his night's work of taking and typing the wire car reports from the various stations on the double division was scarcely begun. "You think you're a little tin god on wheels, don't you?" he muttered under his breath, blinking and scowling across at the well-groomed young man sitting in Connolly's chair. "You can let down with Dan Connolly all right, but when it comes to throwin' a bone to the other new dog, you ain't it. One o' these times I'm goin' to jump up and bite you."

The object of this splenetic outburst was still bending over the train-sheet, abstractedly unconscious of Bolton's presence. From the conductors' room beyond the wire office three or four trainmen drifted in to look over the bulletin-board notices; and still Connolly did not return.

Suddenly the sounder in front of the substitute set up a furious chatter, clicking out a monotonous repetition of the "G.S." call, breaking at intervals with the signature "Ag," the

code letters for Angels, the desert-edge town from which the Apache Limited had been last reported. Calmaine flicked his key-switch and cut in quickly with the answering signal. Then, reaching for pad and pen, he wrote out the message that came boiling over the wire.

"G.S.

"Apache Limited in ditch at Lobo Cut four miles west. Both engines crumpled up. Two engine-men, one route agent, under wreck. Everything off but rear Pullman. Train on fire and lot of passengers pinned down. Hurry help quick.

"A.G."

Calmaine was an alert young man, well abreast of his job and altogether capable. But before he could yelp twice Connolly had come in, and it was the fat despatcher who gave the alarm.

"My Lord, Bolton—see here!" he shouted, pushing Calmaine aside as an incumbrance. And then, when the car-record man came over to stare vacantly at the fateful message: "Get a move! Send somebody after Mr. Maxwell, quick! Then get busy on that yard wire and turn out the wrecking crew. Get Dawson on the 'phone and tell him I'll have a clear track for him by the time his wreck-wagons are ready! Jump at it, man! Your wife isn't the only one that's needing help! *Wake up!*"

Over on the sidewalk loggia porch of the Hotel Topaz fronting the electric-lighted railroad plaza, Maxwell, the division superintendent, was sitting out the evening with a broad-shouldered, solidly built young man whose big frame,

clear gray eyes, and fighting jaw were the outward presentments of a foot-ball "back" rather than those of the traditional college professor.

"I don't mind piping myself off to you, Dick, though the full size of my job isn't generally known," the athletic-looking stop-over guest was saying. "You got the first part of it right; I'm down on the Department of Agriculture pay-rolls as a chemistry sharp. But outside of that I've half a dozen little hobbies which they let me ride now and then. You'll guess what one of them is when I tell you that I was the man who fried out the evidence in the post-office cases last winter."

"What!" exclaimed Maxwell. "But your name didn't appear."

The big man with the smooth-shaven, boyish face smiled contentedly.

"My name never appears. That is the high card in the game. So far as that goes, I never mess or meddle in the police details. My part of the job is always and only the theoretical stunt. They come to me and I tell 'em what to do. And just about half the time they haven't the least idea why they are doing it."

"Say, Calvin; that interests me a lot more than you know," was the young superintendent's eager comment. "I wish you didn't have to go on to the coast to-morrow morning. We've developed an original little Chinese puzzle of our own here in the Timanyoni that is pretty nearly driving the last one of us wild-eyed. If you could stop over _____"

The interruption came in the shape of a one-armed man with a lantern, sprinting like a base-runner across from the railroad building to the hotel. It was the night watchman summoned by the despatcher, and ten seconds later he had delivered his message.

"The Lord have mercy!" gasped the superintendent, bounding out of his chair, "the Limited?—in the ditch and on fire, you say? For Heaven's sake, where?"

"'Tis at Lobo Cut; 'tis Angels reporting it, sorr, so Mither Connolly did be saying. He's clearing f'r the wreck-train now, and he axed would you be coming over."

"Tell him I'll be over in a minute or two: as soon as I've called up the hospital and turned out the doctors."

"Yis, sorr; but Mither Bolton's doing that same now. They do be saying his wife's on the train, and he's *that* near crazy."
"

Maxwell turned to his guest.

"You see how it is with us poor railroad devils, Calvin. It's a bad case of 'have to,' and I know you'll excuse me. Just the same, it's an infernal outrage—when we haven't been able to get together for a dog's age."

The chemistry sharp, as he had called himself, was standing up and stretching his arms over his head like a pole-vaulter hardening his muscles for the jump.

"I'll trot over to your shop with you, Dick, if you don't object," he said good-naturedly. "I want to see what happens when you get a hurry call like this."

In the despatcher's office Connolly was hammering at his key like a madman, with the sweat running down his full-moon face and the hand which was not in use shaking as if

the left half of him had been ague-smitten. Trainmen were coming and going, and the alarm whistle at the shops was bellowing the wreck call at ten-second intervals. Everybody made way for Maxwell when he pushed through the counter gate with his big guest at his heels.

"Any more news, Dan?"

The despatcher flicked his closing switch, and immediately the ague spread to the hand which was no longer steadied on the key.

"Nothing. I've been clearing, and everything is getting out of the way. I've tried twice to get Angels, but I can't raise anybody. I guess Garner, the operator, has set his signals at block and gone to gather up what help he can find. "

Just then more men came crowding in from the corridor, and one of them, a small man with hot eyes and a harsh voice, barked at Connolly.

"Orders for the wreck-wagons, Dan; we're ready to go."

Out of the throng behind the counter barrier Bolton, yellow-faced and ghastly, fought his way to the gate and besought the superintendent.

"Let me go, too, Mr. Maxwell!" he panted. "My God! I've got to go!"

"Of course, you shall go, Barry," said the superintendent with quick kindness, remembering what the watchman had said about Bolton's wife being on the ditched train. "Dan, send the caller after Catherton and let him take Bolton's wire." Then he turned to his guest, who had been standing aside and looking on with a level-eyed gaze that lost no detail. "It's hello and good-by for us, Sprague, old man; that is, unless you'd care to go along?"

The guest decided instantly. "I was just about to ask you if you couldn't count me in," he returned; and together they followed the rough-tongued little conductor in a hurried dash for the platform.

The wrecking-train had been backed down to the station spur to take on the hospital car, and it was standing ready for the eastward flight; two flat-cars loaded with blocking and tackle, a desert tank-car filled with water, two work-train boxes crowded to the doors with men, and, next to the engine, which was one of the big "Pacific types" used on the fast-mail runs, a heavy steam crane powerful enough to lift a locomotive and swing it clear at a single hitch.

"Who's pulling us, Blacklock?" Maxwell asked, overtaking the little man with the hot eyes.

"Young Cargill."

Maxwell turned to Sprague.

"I'm going on the engine, Calvin. There's room for you if you care to try it. If you don't, I'll turn you over to Dawson, our master mechanic, and he'll make you at home in the doctors' car."

"I guess I'm in for all of it," was the even-toned reply, and they ran forward to climb to the cab of the big mail flyer.

"My friend, Mr. Sprague, Cargill," snapped Maxwell, introducing the stranger to the handsome young fellow in overalls and jumper perched upon the high right-hand seat, and Cargill pulled off his glove to shake hands.

"You'll find the Ten-sixteen a pretty hard rider," he began; but Maxwell cut him short.

"You have a clear track, and Blacklock's got your orders. Open her up and see what you can do. It's a plain case of

'get there' to-night, Billy. The minutes may mean just so many lives saved or lost."

"*Right!*" yelled the fireman, leaning from the gangway to get Blacklock's signal; and at the word the engineer's hand shot to the lever, the great engine shook itself free, and the rescue race was begun.

For the first few miles of the race the track was measurably straight. Maxwell stood on the raised step at Sprague's elbow, steadying himself with a grip on the sill of the opened side window. When he saw that the ex-fullback was making hard work of it he shouted in the big man's ear.

"Loosen up a bit and take the roll with her," he advised, and Sprague nodded and tried it.

"That's much better," he called back. "What are we making now?"

"Forty, or a little more. She's good for sixty, and so is Cargill, but the tangents are too short to let us hit the limit."

"And the wreck—how far away is it?"

"An hour and forty-five minutes from Brewster, on a passenger schedule. We'll better that by ten or fifteen minutes, though."

Evidently young Cargill meant to better it if he could. At Tabor Mine, ten miles out, the big engine's exhaust had become a continuous roaring blast, and the tiny station at the mine siding flashed through the beam of the electric headlight like some living thing in full flight to the rear. At Kensett, where the line skirts the reservoir lake of the Timanyoni High Line Irrigation Company, they passed a long freight on the siding; the caboose was only a few yards inside of the clear post, and Sprague winced involuntarily

when the engine cab shot past the freight's rear end with what seemed only an inch or two to spare.

Corona was the next night telegraph station, and here the wrecking special met the two following sections of the freight drawn out upon the sidings to right and left. Cargill's grip closed upon the throttle when the switch and station lights swept into view; but the station semaphore was wigwagging the "clear" signal, and once more the big man on the fireman's box sat tight while the flying special roared through the narrow main-line alley left by the two side-tracked freights.

Maxwell was holding his watch in his hand when the special cleared the switches at Corona and the great beam of the headlight began to flick to right and left in the dodging race among the foot-hills.

"We'll make Timanyoni, at the mouth of the canyon, in ten minutes' better time than our fast mail makes it," he said to Sprague; and the Government man nodded grimly.

"It's all right, Dick," he shouted back. "Just the same, I'd like to know how a man ever acquires the nerve to send a train around the hill corners this way when he hasn't the slightest notion of what may be waiting for him five hundred yards in the future."

Apparently the stalwart young fellow on the opposite side of the cab owned the necessary nerve. Easing the huge flyer skilfully around the sharpest of the turnings, he drove it to the limit on the tangents in spurts that seemed to promise certain destruction at the next crooking of the track. But the wheels of the train were still shrilling safely on the steel when the headlight beam, playing steadily for the moment,

brought the lonely station at the canyon's mouth into its field.

Cargill was whistling peremptorily for the signal before the short train had fully straightened itself on the tangent below the station. But for some reason the red light on the station semaphore remained inert. Instantly the sweating fireman jerked his fire-door open, and the four pairs of eyes in the flyer's cab were all fixed upon the motionless red dot over the track when Cargill sounded his second call.

While the whistle echoes were still yelling in the surrounding hills the climax came. Out of the station door darted a man with a red lantern. Cargill pounced upon the throttle, and in the same second the brakes went into the emergency notch with a jerk that flung the superintendent and the fireman against the boiler-head and slammed the guest unceremoniously into the cab corner.

At the shriek of the brakes, the man with the red lantern turned and ran in the opposite direction, waving his signal light frantically; and the wrecking special was still only shrilling and skidding to its stop when a long passenger-train drawn by two engines slid smoothly out of the canyon portal and came grinding down the grade with fire spurting from every suddenly clipped wheel-rim.

Thanks to the man with the red lantern, there were half a dozen car-lengths to spare between the two trains when the double stop was made. But Maxwell was swearing hotly when, with Sprague for a close second, he dropped from the step of the panting 1016 and ran to meet the conductor of the passenger-train in the middle of the scant safety distance. Like the superintendent, the conductor was also

boiling over with profanity, but he swallowed the cursing portion of his wrath hastily when he recognized the "big boss."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Maxwell?" he blurted out. "By hen! I was getting ready to cuss somebody out, red-hot! What's the trouble?"

"There doesn't seem to be any," snapped Maxwell shortly. "Is this the Limited?"

"Sure it is," replied the conductor. "Hadn't it ought to be?"

"And you haven't been in the ditch?"

The big red-faced train captain grinned.

"Not that anybody's heard of. Is that what's the matter? Was you coming to pick us up?"

Maxwell's answer was a barked-out string of orders.

"Let these wreck-wagons in on the siding. Find Blacklock and tell him to get orders to follow you to Brewster as second section. Pull out as quick as you can. You're ten minutes off time, right now!"

In the drawing-room of the rear sleeper of the limited, Maxwell closed the door on his guest and himself, passed his cigar-case, lighted a fresh cigar in his own behalf, and said nothing until after the short shifting stunt had been worked out and the Apache Limited was once more racing on its way westward. Then he opened up.

"You've got it now, Calvin; the thing that has been smashing more nerves for us than we can afford to lose. Of course, you understand what has happened. That blood-curdling report of an accident was a fake wire; God only knows where it came from, or who sent it."

"And there have been others?" queried Sprague.

"A dozen of them, first and last. It began about a month ago. Sometimes it's merely foolish; at other times it's like this—a thing to bring your heart into your mouth."

"And you mean to say you haven't been able to run it down?"

"Run it down? If there is anything we haven't done it's some little item that has been merely overlooked. We've had about all of the company detectives here, first and last, and the best of them have had to give it up. There is nothing to work on; absolutely nothing. This wire to-night purported to come from Angels; as a matter of fact, it may have come from anywhere east of Brewster and this side of Copah. When we come to examine the Angels operator, we'll probably find that he doesn't know a thing about it—not a thing in the wide world."

"Yet it was a real wire?"

"Calmaine, my own chief clerk, took it from the sounder and wrote it down. It seems that Connolly, the night despatcher, had gone out for a moment and Calmaine was holding down the wires for him. I saw the message before we left. The call and signature were all right, and the exact time, nine-thirteen, was given."

"Wire-tappers?" suggested the listener, who had grown shrewdly sympathetic.

"That is what we've all thought. But to tap a wire, you have to cut in on it somewhere. Of course, it could be done in any one of a thousand isolated places, but hardly without leaving some trace. Wickert, our wire-chief, has been over

the lines east and west with a magnifying-glass, you might say."

For the measuring of a few other miles of the westward flight of the train the big man in the opposite seat said nothing. Then he began again.

"Have you tried to figure out a motive, Dick?"

"That is precisely what is driving every one of us stark, staring mad, Calvin," was the sober confession. "There isn't any motive—there can't be!"

"No trouble with the labor unions?"

"Not a bit in the world. More than that, the men have spent good money of their own trying to help us find out—as a measure of self-protection. You can see what they're afraid of; what we are all afraid of. Everybody is losing nerve, and if the scare keeps up, we'll have real trouble—plenty of it."

"And you say the source of the thing can't be localized?"

"No. We have a double division, with Brewster as the common head-quarters. Sometimes the yelp comes from the east, and sometimes from the west."

Again the big-bodied chemistry expert sank back in his seat and fell into the thoughtful trance. When he came out of it, it was to say:

"You've probably settled it for yourself that it isn't a plant for a train robbery—the kind of robbery which would be made easier by a wreck."

Maxwell shook his head.

"A pile of cross-ties would be much simpler."

"Doubtless. We'll cancel that and come to the next hypothesis. Could it be the work of some crazy telegraph operator?"

"We've threshed out the crazy guess. It doesn't prove up. A madman would slip up now and then—trip himself. I have a file of the fake messages. They were not sent by a lunatic."

"Call it another cancellation," said the guest. "You are convinced that some sane person is doing it. Very good. What is the object? You say you can't find out; which merely means that you've been attacking it from the wrong angle. Or, rather, you've let the professional detectives give you their angle. What you need is a bit of first-class amateur work."

The superintendent laughed mirthlessly. "If I could only find the amateur I'd hire him, Calvin,—if it took a year's salary. I don't know what the wire-devil's object is, but I can catalogue the results. These periodical scares are demoralizing the entire Short Line. The service is on the ragged edge of a chaotic blow-up. Half the men in the train crews are running on their bare nerves, and the operators who have to handle train-orders are not much better."

"Yes," said the guest quietly. "I've been noticing. I saw only one man in your office who wasn't scared stiff; and the conductor of this train we're riding on had a pretty bad attack of the tremolos when you told him what the wrecking-train was out for."

"Who, Garrighan? No, you're mistaken there. He's one of the cold-blooded ones," said the superintendent confidently.

"Excuse me, Dick; I'm never mistaken on that side of the fence. There were signs, plenty of them. Ninety-eight men in every hundred will duck and put up one or both arms if you strike at them suddenly. Garrighan did neither, you'll say;

but if you had been watching him as closely as I was, you would have seen that he started to do both."

Maxwell was regarding his former classmate curiously.

"Is that how you do it? Is that the way you caught the post-office thieves, Calvin?"

The chemistry expert laughed.

"It's only a little pointer on methods," he averred. "When my attention was first called to such things—it was on a case in the Department of Justice in which I was required to give expert testimony—I was very strongly impressed with the crudities of the ordinary detective methods. I said to myself that what was needed was some one who could apply good, careful laboratory practice; a habit of observation which counts nothing too small to be weighed and measured."

"Go on," said Maxwell.

"The idea came to me that I'd like to try it on, and I did. My theory is correct. Human beings react under certain given conditions just as readily, and just as inevitably, as the inorganic substances react in a laboratory experiment."

Maxwell reached for the box of safety matches and passed it to Sprague, whose cigar had gone out.

"I wish you could stay and put this railroad of ours into your test-tube, Calvin. We're teetering along on the edge of an earthquake—oh, yes—I know you'll say it's only a scare; but the worst panic that has ever gone into history was only a scare in the beginning. One of these fine nights some engineer or some operator with the bare nerves will lose his grip. You know about what that will mean. We've escaped alive, so far; but the first real wreck that hits us will be just

about the same as dropping a lighted match into a barrel of gunpowder; I thought it had come to-night; I'm glad it hasn't, but I know it's only postponed."

The chemistry man nodded.

"Somebody is reaching for you with a big stick; that is very evident, Maxwell. And there are brains behind it, too, when you come to think of it. If you wanted to kill a man without getting hanged for murder, one way to do it would be to persuade him to commit suicide. Has it ever occurred to you that somebody may be trying the same experiment on your railroad?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"Stranger things have happened. But that is beside the mark. You say you are needing help. I've half a mind to stop off and give you a bit of a lift."

"By Jove, Calvin!—if you would——"

"Call it a go," interrupted the guest. "I'll take a chance and say that my business in San Francisco can wait a few days. The fellow I'm after out there won't run away; it's the one thing he doesn't dare to do."

"Say, old man! but that's bully of you!" exclaimed the host, reaching across to grip the hand of helping. "You shall have everything in sight; I'll put every man on the two divisions under your orders, and you can have a special train and my private car. If you don't see what you want, just ask——"

The chemistry sharp was holding up his hand and laughing.

"No, no; hold on, Dick. You'll have to let me tackle the thing in my own way, and there won't be any grand-stand

plays in it—in fact, I don't mean to appear personally in it at all. Let's see where we stand. You have a division detective of some sort, haven't you?—a fellow who does the gun-play act when it becomes necessary?"

"We have; a young fellow named Archer Tarbell, who got his experience chasing cattle thieves in Montana. He's a fine fellow, and it's breaking his heart because he can't get the nippers on our wire-devil."

"All right. I may want to use him. Now another matter. You have a live newspaper in Brewster; I bought a copy of it on the train this morning. If I remember right, it's called *The Tribune*. Is it friendly to your railroad?"

"Ordinarily, yes; though Treadwell, the owner, is independent enough to print anything that he thinks is news."

"Know him pretty well?"

"Very well, indeed."

"Good. When we get in, make it your first care to see the newspaper people and to persuade them not to make any mention of this little miss-go of to-night. That's the first move and it's an important one. Can you work it?"

"Sure. But I don't see the point."

"Never mind about that; I probably sha'n't do anything that you think I ought to do. Now about this man Tarbell; is he known as a company detective?"

"No, not generally known; he's on the pay-roll as a spare operator—relief man, you know."

"That's better. When I meet him I'll see if I can't get him interested in chemistry. That's how you're going to account for me, you know. I'm an old friend of yours, a Government

man out of the Department of Agriculture off on a vacation. Incidentally, I might be wanting to buy a mine, or something of that sort—anything to start the town gossip on a harmless chase and to keep it as far as possible from the real reason for my stopover.

"Everything goes," said Maxwell. "I'll start the gossip. What else?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. I shall ask you to give me the run of your railroad office, and I'd like to meet anybody and everybody, when it falls in naturally—but always as the chemistry sharp; get that well ground into your cosmos. But here—what's this? Are we already back in Brewster?"

"We are," said the superintendent, with a glance out of the window. Then he became the regretful host again. "I hate to have you go back to the hotel, Calvin. It's just my crooked luck to have you come along when the house is shut up and Mrs. Maxwell and the babies are out of town. They're due to come home in a day or two, and I'm selfish enough to hope that we can keep you over. Let's drop off here at the crossing. It's nearer to the hotel, and it'll give me a chance to reach *The Tribune* office before Treadwell's young men come in with their scare stuff."

It was a half-hour after the arrival of the unwrecked Limited, and the story of the curious false alarm was just getting itself passed from lip to ear among the loungers in the Hotel Topaz lobby, when the Government man came down from his room to file a rather lengthy New York message with the hotel telegraph operator.

"Cipher?—holy smoke!" exclaimed the young man at the lobby wire desk; but a liberal tip made it look easier, and he

added: "All right, I'm good for it, I guess, and I'll get it through as quick as I can. Answer to your room?"

"If you please," said the guest; and, as it was by this time well on toward midnight, he went to bed.

By noon of the day following the false-alarm run of the wrecking-train to Timanyoni Canyon, all Brewster, or at least the railroad part of it, knew that Superintendent Maxwell was entertaining an old college classmate at the Hotel Topaz. For the town portion of the gossip there was some little disagreement as to Mr. Calvin Sprague's state and standing. Some had it that the big, handsome athlete was a foot-ball coach taking his vacation between seasons. Others said that he was a capitalist in disguise, looking for a ground-floor investment in Timanyoni mines.

These were Mr. Sprague's placings for the man in the street. But to the rank and file in the railroad head-quarters building Sprague figured in his proper character as a Government drug-mixer on a holiday; a royal good fellow who fraternized instantly with everybody, whose naïve ignorance about railroading was a joke, and whose vast unknowledge was nicely balanced by a keen and comradely curiosity to learn all that anybody could tell him about the complex workings of a railroad head-quarters in action.

Naturally, and possibly because Davis, the chief despatches was willing to be hospitable, he spent an hour of the forenoon in the wire office, ingenuously absorbing detail and evincing an interest in the day's work that made Davis, ordinarily a rather reticent man, transform himself into a lecturer on the theory and practice of railway telegraphy.

It was in Davis's office that he met Tarbell; and the keen-eyed, sober-faced young fellow who was carried on the division pay-rolls as a relief operator became his guide on a walking tour of the shops and the yards. Tarbell saw in Mr. Maxwell's guest nothing more than an exceedingly affable gentleman with an immense capacity for interesting himself in the workaday details of a railroad outfit; but at one o'clock, when Maxwell joined Sprague at a quiet corner table for two in the hotel café, there were several surprises awaiting the superintendent.

"Getting it shaken down a little so that you'll know where to begin?" was Maxwell's opening question; and the ex-fullback laughed.

"You must take me for a sleuth of the common or garden variety," he retorted. "Did you suppose I had thrown away an entire forenoon scoring for a start? Not so, Richard; not even remotely so. I've been finding out a lot of things. I am even able to suggest an improvement or two in your telegraph installation."

"For example?" said Maxwell.

"Both of your yard offices are cut in on the working wire. If this were my railroad I'd put them on a pony circuit and cut them out of the main line."

"Why would you?"

"We'll have to go back a little for the specific answer in the present case; back to last night, and to the young man who chased out with a red lantern to keep us from running into the passenger train which wasn't wrecked. Why do you suppose he did that?"

"That's easy; he heard the passenger coming down the canyon."

"That was the inference, of course. But when you have taken the thirty-third degree in the exact science of observation, Dick, you'll learn to distrust inferences and to accept only conclusions. He didn't hear the passenger; he didn't know it was coming. If you had been observing him as closely as I was, you would have seen him write this down in his actions as plain as print. He had a much better reason for stopping us—and the passenger. It was a wire order from somebody. If you don't believe it, have Davis call him up and ask him, when you go back to your office."

Notwithstanding the criticism just passed upon him by his table-mate, Maxwell again caught at an inference.

"You've found the wire-devil, Calvin? You've got to the bottom of the thing in a single fore-noon?"

"No; not quite to the bottom. But some few things I have learned, beyond any question of doubt. In the first place, this trouble of yours is pretty serious; far more serious than you suspect. In fact, it is designed to remove your railroad from the map, not by murder outright, but by what you might call incited suicide. The condition which you described last night is painfully apparent, even to an outsider like myself. Half of your men are potential powder-mines, ready to blow up if the spark is applied."

"Go on," said Maxwell eagerly. "What else did you find out?"

"I learned that a stop-all-trains order was sent to your young man at the canyon station last night, and that, in all probability, it was sent from Brewster. The ultimate question

fines itself down to this: did your night despatches Connolly, send that order through his own instrument in his own office? or did he, or some other, send it from the upper yard office?—which, as I have remarked, is rather injudiciously cut in on the regular working wire. I'll venture to make the answer positive; the order was sent from the yard office."

"Connolly!" said the superintendent under his breath. "I can't believe it, Calvin. Who ever heard of a fat villain?"

"Go a little easy on the inferences," laughed the chemistry expert. "I didn't say it was Connolly, though it looks rather bad for him at the present stage of the game. He is in debt, and he wants to get married."

"But, good Lord! what has that got to do with——"

"Hold on," interposed the expert calmly. "We haven't come to that part of it yet. As I say, this stop-order was sent from the yard office. How do I know? Because the sender left his trail behind him in the shape of a wire recently cut and re-coupled—the cut-out being made to keep the message from repeating itself in the head-quarters office where it might be heard by anybody who happened to be standing around."

"But Connolly couldn't leave his wire to go to the yard office."

"Unfortunately for him, he did leave it. About half an hour after the wrecking-train left he called Davis, who was sleeping in one of the bunk-rooms in your wickiup attic. His excuse was that he was so rattled that he couldn't hold himself down at the train-desk. Davis relieved him for an hour or so, and then he came back."

"Still I can't believe it of Connolly," Maxwell persisted. "If he sent that message to Timanyoni last night, that makes him responsible for all the others—the devil-messages, as the men are calling them. Some of these have come in the night, while he was on duty. How could he have worked it in that case?"

Again the chemistry expert laughed. "A suspicious person might draw a bunch of inferences," he said, "throwing out a dark hint or so about a concealed cut-in on the wires after they enter the attic of the railroad building and a hidden set of instruments. Also, the same person would probably point to the fact that Connolly wasn't at his desk when the fake wreck notice came last night. It was your chief clerk, Calmaine, who took it from the wire, and he tells me he was subbing for Connolly for a few minutes while Connolly went upstairs for his smoking-tobacco."

"My Lord!" said Maxwell; "you've put it upon Connolly, fair and square, Calvin; it's all over but the hanging!"

"There you go again," joked the Government man, with his good-natured grin. "I haven't said it is Connolly. But I will say this: with another half-day at it, I'll probably be able to turn the case over to Tarbell—and the newspapers."

"The newspapers?"

"Yes. That will be a part of the cure for the crazy sickness among your men. Sit tight and say nothing, and by this evening I'll be ready to put you next."

It was late in the afternoon, and the man from Washington had spent much of the intervening time loafing in the different offices sheltered by the head-quarters roof, when young Tarbell got a telephone summons from the

hotel. In the writing-room, which was otherwise deserted, he found the superintendent's guest waiting for him. Sprague waved him to a chair and began at once.

"What did you find out, Mr. Tarbell?"

"Nothing to hurt. The fellow you was askin' about went out on the wreck-train and came back on it."

"You're sure of that?"

"Sure of the first part, and not so sure of the last. I've found half a dozen o' the men who saw him get on the train here, and saw him after he was on. They're a little hazy about the back trip, but he must've come back that way, because he didn't come on the Limited."

"And his wife?"

Tarbell's lip curled in honest cleanliness.

"He ain't got any wife. It was his girl he was expectin', and she didn't come."

"And afterward?" suggested the questioner.

"After he got back he showed up in the office and took his job again, lettin' Catherton go home."

The Government man's eyes narrowed and after a moment he began again.

"How near can you come to keeping your own counsel, Mr. Tarbell?" he demanded abruptly.

"I reckon I can talk a few without sayin' much," said the ex-cowboy. And then, after a pause: "You mean that you don't want to be mixed up in this thing by name, Mr. Sprague?"

"You've hit it exactly. You've got your start and I want you to work it out yourself. You have the line. Somebody—somebody who is not a thousand miles from your head-

quarters building over yonder—is working this scare, working it for a purpose which he wishes to accomplish without making himself actually and legally responsible. Had you got that far in your own reasoning, Mr. Tarbell?"

"No, indeedy," was the prompt reply. "I reckon I'm only a plug when it comes down to the sure-enough, fine-haired part of it."

"You'll learn, after a bit," said the chemistry expert shortly. "But let that go. You have the facts now, and they are driven pretty well into a corner. Can you go and get your man?"

Tarbell got up and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"I reckon I can," he admitted slowly, and started to move away. But at the door the big man at the writing-desk recalled him.

"Don't go on supposition, Tarbell. Ask yourself, when you get outside, if you've got the evidence that the court will demand. Ask yourself, also, if you know of your own knowledge, or if you've only allowed yourself to be hypnotized into your belief. If you can get satisfactory answers to these questions, go to it and bring back the money, as they say up in Seattle. "

For what remained of the afternoon after Tarbell went away, Sprague sat in the writing-room and wrote letters, sealing and addressing the last one just as Maxwell came over to go to dinner with him. At table there were plenty of uncut back-numbers in the way of college reminiscences to be threshed over, and Sprague carefully kept the talk in this innocuous field until after they had left the dining-room to