

# ROMANCE OF THE RAIL

BY FREDERIC REDDALL

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"Do not expose yourself," she said, as she drew him into the interior, and for her sake he desisted.

Ives let the sash fall with an angry snap, saying with a grim laugh, "There's no use arguing with a man when he's at the trigger end of a gun and you are looking into the business end!" and then went about the car lowering all the lights but one and drawing down the heavy damask shades.

"Why, where's Mr. Filley?" suddenly exclaimed Madge. Sure enough, where was he? They looked in each other's faces as if to recall when he had previously been seen. Then it was remembered that his last appearance was at dinner.

"And Henry and Alec, too," added Uncle John.

"Doubtless they are as snugly trapped in the other car as we are," laughed Chester.

To make certain Chester went to the rear door of the Miranda and peered through the glass. Yes; the Pullman was there sure enough, shrouded in gloom, but with their backs to the doors stood a couple of guards, motionless as statues, with the butts of their rifles resting on the platforms.

"No chance to communicate, that's certain," thought Chester. "Hope the fellow's all safe, though."

At least there was nothing to prevent the prisoners from moving about in the car with perfect freedom. Naturally enough, no one cared to sleep, much less to think of going to bed. All conventional disguises were thrown aside in this hour of peril. Draper and Florence straggled from one end to the other arm in arm, he stroking and patting the little hand that lay on his sleeve as he strove to reassure her and quiet her alarms.

In their wake came Madge and Chester, likewise linked closely, he talking hopefully and consolingly, while Mrs. Hurst sat by and said never a word.

Luckily Annette, the maid, and Gustave, the cook, were with the party in the Miranda, and when the latter had been dragged out of his buffet, the door of which, with Gallic prudence, he had shut and locked at the first intimation of danger, he was prevailed upon to set about preparing some refreshments, for it was now past midnight.

For the tenth time at least Florence voiced the question.

"What do you suppose they mean to do with us?" and for the tenth time John Draper made answer.

"I can't imagine. But," he continued after a pause, "it's my opinion that we shall not be kept in doubt. They will show their hands at dawn." Nor was he mistaken. Faint tinges of grayness began to outline the gaps between the shades and the glass when there was a sudden bustle outside and the sound of commands delivered in strident tones.

Then came the tramping of feet on the steps of the Pullman. Draper and Ives sprang each to a window and flung up the curtains. Yes, the dawn was all abroad, though as yet no clear idea of their whereabouts could be gleaned. But the light was sufficient to enable them to perceive Filley, Henry and Alec standing by the track side by side, their arms pinioned behind them and blindfolded. "This, then, was what they, too, might expect."

In a few moments a noise was heard at the front door of the Miranda, and almost immediately it was flung open with a crash that shook the car, and then the command was given:

"Step out here, John Draper, and pretty dum quick!"

"Don't go! Oh, don't go!" begged Florence, grasping his arm, to which plaint Mrs. Hurst added her plea. Draper stood irresolute. Then a quick footfall was heard, and Jim Dalton appeared in the curtained doorway, carbine in hand.

"Did you hear me call?" he thundered. "John Draper, I want you! No one's going to hurt you, man! Unless you want to be carried out you'll walk out!"

Gently releasing Flo's grasp he led her to Mrs. Hurst and with a nod all around stepped out ahead of the robber leader. On the platform he was seized by two of the gang, who rapidly searched him for concealed weapons, taking away even a small pen-knife, and then proceeded to pinion his arms and blindfold him. This done he was led to a place alongside Filley and told to "keep his mouth shut!"

Chester was subjected to the same treatment, and then came Gustave's turn. The poor Frenchman made lots of sport for the band, falling on his knees and begging for his life, beseeching them not to "coot trout," until at last he was forced to rise by a well placed kick in the nether regions and ranged alongside the five other unhappy masculines.

Sullen despair sat on Filley's countenance. He saw all his plans dashed to finders by this untoward break in their journey. At this instant he had hoped to have been bound eastward on the fastest express, and he cursed John Draper by all his gods for having dragged him out west at such a time. Con-

sequently he felt none of the indignation experienced by Draper and Ives when they were forced to stand by and know that rough hands were being laid on the women they loved, while they were powerless for help or defense. Chester ground his teeth and strained at his bonds until they cut into his coat sleeve. The veins in Draper's neck and forehead swelled, and he grew purple in the face with suppressed rage.

"You infernal villains!" he roared, and then could have bitten his tongue in half, for at that instant the voice of Florence Granniss became audible as she appeared at the car door leading the little procession of four.

Their captors had forbore to pinion the ladies' arms, but they were blindfolded like the rest, nor were they suffered to come near their natural protectors.

"I can't stand this," exclaimed Chester, as he started to run after the women, the bandage having dropped from his eyes during his contortions. But he was speedily yanked backward and downward by one of the desperadoes, who proceeded to sit on his chest until Dalton himself came up an inquired:

"What's the row?"

"Gettin' a little obstropolous, that's all!" was the response.

"Set him up," was the command. And then, addressing himself to Draper and Chester, the captain of the gang thus spoke:

"You needn't be afeared that we're goin' to harm them ladies o' yours—leastways, not yet! We've got a little matter o' business to settle with you men first, and we're goin' where we kin talk quiet and confidential like."

"If you harm a hair of their heads you shall pay dearly," exclaimed Chester hotly, and in the same breath John Draper uttered the words:

"As sure as there's a God in heaven you shall suffer for this, you bound!"

A sneering laugh was the only response as the chief rascal gave the signal to march. The bandages were carefully looked to, and then the entire party set out in single file, a prisoner between every two robbers, the ladies and the maid heading the column, with Jim Dalton in front.

They proceeded thus in silence and by a devious way for more than an hour, though it seemed like four. The road was rugged, and its general trend was upward. In fact, they were ascending the bed of a dried up water course. The pace was necessarily slow, for the ladies being ahead they could not proceed very fast and frequently had to be helped and half carried over the rougher places. Both Florence and Madge at first indignantly spurned all such assistance, but when Dalton turned and said, "If they kick, boys, just carry 'em," they decided to accept the lesser of the two evils. As for Mrs. Hurst, she was too dazed and dispirited to offer any resistance.

At length a halt was called. Each captive was half lifted, hauled or boosted up what seemed like a steep bank, and then, moving forward again, their tired and weary feet sank into a carpet of soft sand. A few paces more and the bandages were removed from their eyes, and, looking about them, our friends discovered that they were all reunited and that they were standing in a large and airy cavern down whose side meandered a little brook and dimly lighted from the entrance, which was fringed with bushes around its upper edges.

Both Florence and Madge sprang toward their natural protectors with exclamations of sympathy. Mrs. Hurst sank wearily down on the dry sand, while Reuben Filley looked grimly and sulkily about him. The game was up, he thought, so far as he was concerned. It mattered not to him what became of the rest. So he leaned moodily against the rocky wall of the cave, biting his mustache.

Soon a fire was kindled, and sundry tin cups of wretched coffee were handed around, together with some half baked "flapjacks," from which, however, the ladies turned in disgust, while Gustave muttered French invectives on the rough and barbarous cookery. This apology for a meal being ended, the men were bidden to take their places in line again and were marched to the upper end of the grotto, the ladies being kept strongly guarded near the entrance.

When they were well out of earshot, Jim Dalton proceeded to unfold his "little matter o' business."

SIXTH DAY.

SHOTGUN SOVEREIGNTY.

It was Sunday morning. What a Sabbath experience, thought Mrs. Hurst and the girls as they conjured up visions of Fifth avenue and the richly dressed churchgoing procession of which they usually formed a part! What a Sabbath experience, thought Chester Ives as he stood facing the motley gang of cutthroats, while down the gloomy vista of the cavern he could see the forms of the women huddled together on the sand for protection and comfort, and a few paces away stood a couple of the gang on

"This ain't quite as tony as that there car o' yours," began Jim Dalton, addressing Mr. Draper, "but it's good enough for poor devils like us, and p'raps you and your lady friend can manage to worry along. You ain't obliged to stay here no longer than you like," he added truculently.

"Why have we been brought here?" inquired John Draper.

"Well, pard, it's just this way," said Dalton, who did all the talking. "Some people gits all the fat in this life, and some gits all the lean. Here's you, fr instance," checking off the index finger of his left hand with his right forefinger, "and here's us," indicating the second finger. "By all signs you've got more money'n you know what to do with, and we've got none. I don't ask you how you come by it—you got it, and that's enough for me," he said savagely, looking around at his auditors.

"That's the kind o' talk, cap'n," said one, while angry looks were directed on the chief object of their attack, John Draper.

"Such bein' the case," resumed the outlaw, with forced politeness, "the present proceedin's has for their object the unloadin' o' some o' your surplus cash for the benefit o' the poor laborin' man. Ain't that so, boys?"

"Right you are, Cap'n Jim," was the unanimous answer.

"Now," said Dalton, resuming his argument, "how much do you vally yourself at, John Draper?"

"Oh, I'm not a rich man, as rich men go," replied Draper, affecting to misunderstand the fellow's meaning and fencing with him.

"I don't mean that," hastily rejoined Dalton. "I know how much money you've got soaked away—about five millions o' dollars, I guess. What I mean is, how much do you vally that hide o' yours—wot's it worth to you to get out o' this scrape?"

Draper was silent. Chester Ives stood by, taking no part in the colloquy, yet closely noting every word. Filley, too, could not help being interested in the outcome of the duel of words—indeed, he experienced a fellow feeling for the robber. Their trades were not so far apart, and perhaps he might do worse than join the gang when his own private and particular crash came.

While the president hesitated, weighing all the chances, considering the sufferings of the ladies, seeing clearly that worse might follow if Dalton were enraged and also running over in his mind the chances of rescue or escape, the captain of the band resumed:

"Might as well understand that yet! trapped hard and fast. Oh, yes, they'll send out a search party from Denver," he laughed, reading Draper's thoughts, "and they'll maybe find them kyers. What then? They can't find you, nor till I choose. You're a long cry from the railroad anyways." Then, stepping forward, he bled in Draper's ear:

"How about the women folks? I shouldn't like 'em to get hurt, but I won't answer for the boys. If you're ugly, they'll be ugly too."

This decided John Draper. They were in a hole, that was clear. Better get out with as little damage as possible. So he said curtly:

"Name your price."

The gang crowded around in eagerness now that the crucial point was reached. Dalton was clearly embarrassed. It was his move. If he asked too much, the negotiations would be prolonged and thus increase the chances of detection. On the other hand, if he named too little he would "everlastingly kick himself," as he elegantly phrased his inward thoughts. Twice he moistened his lips and essayed to speak, but the words refused to come. At length he rapped out:

"Fifty thousand dollars!"

"Done!" exclaimed Draper as quietly as though he were buying a block of stock on 'change in New York. "But you don't suppose I carry that much money about me, do you?" he inquired.

"Not on yer life!" was the slangy rejoinder. "I've thought o' that," said Dalton in a swaggering tone, clated and conceited at the success of his plot and strutting before his men like the monarch of a barnyard.

"You got a checkbook, I s'pose?"

"Well, your name's good in Denver for a heap more'n \$50,000."

"I see what you mean," replied Draper. "But I'll be fair and plain with you. No bank in Denver would cash a check for any one of you men for \$5 without identification, much less for \$50,000. The man that presents that check will be detained and questioned, and then your whole plot is exposed."

"You make me tired!" snorted Dalton. "As if I hadn't thought of all that. What do you take me for, a farmer? D'you think I'm such a fool as to show me face in Denver or to let one o' me boys do it? Not much! What's the matter with havin' one o' your friends go to the bank—him or him," pointing first at Ives and then at Filley, "with a escort, o' course, I mean," he added hastily. "I guess he can git the money, and as he knows what it's fer he ain't got to expose no plot. Hey, what d'you say?"

The thing was feasible certainly and proved that Dalton had engineered his vile scheme in a fiendishly clever manner. Uncle John thought a moment and then said:

"Yes, it will do."

"Course it'll do," growled Dalton. "Now, which o' these 'ere young gents is to go?"

If the light of the cave had not been so dim, Reuben Filley's manner must have attracted attention. He trembled from head to foot; his parched lips needed constant moistening, while great drops of sweat beaded his face.

Here was the chance to be free and to obtain this money he so sorely needed. No feelings of honor, of humanity, of chivalry, rose in his evil heart. His one dominant thought was that, once

in possession of the check or money, he could start east, or if need be he could telegraph the funds to take up the forged paper. His "good name" would be saved, even though his friend and benefactor was sacrificed. He was roused from his cruel reverie by the voice of John Draper:

"Reuben, you should be the one to go. As my confidential man you can cash the check and avoid any awkward questions. Remember, the safety of these ladies is the first consideration. Do nothing that will imperil them."

"Very good, sir," was all that Filley dared trust himself to say.

While Draper was speaking Dalton unfettered the things that bound his arms, but so cramped were they that several minutes' vigorous rubbing was necessary before he could wield the fountain pen which Filley handed him with trembling hands. Drawing a pocket checkbook from the breast of his coat, the president knelt on the sand in front of an empty cracker box and there filled in the necessary blanks. The precious slip of paper was waved in the air for a few minutes to dry and then handed to Filley. This was the way it read:

No. 846. Denver, May 17th, 1904.  
National Bank of the Commonwealth.  
Pay to the order of ————— \$50,000.00.  
John Draper.

Upon the back it was also indorsed by the maker.

"I have purposely dated it tomorrow, this being Sunday," said Draper as Dalton peered over Filley's shoulder at the magic document, adding also for the latter's information, "This drawn to self or bearer. Better go to the Drovers' bank, as they know me, and there will be no trouble."

Then addressing Dalton he said, "How do you want the money, in large bills or small ones?"

"Oh, fifties and hundreds'll do," replied the robber nonchalantly; "hey, boys?" turning to his henchmen.

"What you say goes, cap'n," was the response of the former spokesman.

"Now, young feller," said Dalton, turning to Filley, "you goes under the escort of these two gents," indicating a couple of the gang euphemistically known as Leather Jack and Bill Root, who had stepped out of the ruck and were waiting with their Winchester slung carelessly in the hollows of their left arms. "They've got strict orders to keep you in sight this side of Denver, which you'll reach tomorrow mornin'. They'll wait for you, and if you feel like playin' any games just think o' the very wust as happenin' to them you



"Fifty thousand dollars!"

leave behind. Now, boys, you've got the rowt and the orders. Off with you!"

So the three marched down the cave, Filley looking neither to the right nor the left as he passed the anxious group of women. Did his heart smite him as he thought of the fate to which in all probability his dastard treachery would consign them? Not at all—his was the nature of the octopus, all tentacles, all muscle and hideous fibers, but no soul or conscience.

Arrived outside the robbers' retreat, the trio followed a devious but short ascending path, which quickly led to the higher country. In a cleft of the rocks they found a number of horses tethered, and selecting three of these each man mounted and rode toward the north, Denver being about 50 miles away.

The events of this momentous Sabbath have been quickly described, but they really consumed several hours in passing. It was after 4 o'clock when Filley and his guards departed. At the earliest they could not return for 24 hours, which meant a whole day of tedious waiting and suspense for those left behind.

Now that the "little matter o' business" was settled, all restraint within the limits of the cave was removed, and Draper and Chester were free to rejoin the ladies, who stood sadly in need of such encouragement and consolation as they could offer. Their welcome was out of all proportion to their deserts, and they were showered with questions as to what had happened.

Uncle John said brightly that he had arranged for the ransom of the entire party and that within 24 hours he hoped to see them safe aboard the

Miranda again and en route for Denver.

"That is, if we are not rescued before," said Madge Hurst.

"If you value your own safety and that of your mother and Florence, my dear, you will not talk of rescuing anyone," said Uncle John gravely. "Our friends over there might not like it, and after what has passed I don't want to hurt their feelings."

Madge was silenced, but in her heart of hearts she distrusted Filley, and so, forbidden to speak her thoughts, she turned to Chester for comfort, and together they conversed in low tones, while Mr. Draper and his ward did

nothing. There being no objection, Chester was roused up and bidden to accompany a sort of a repeat out of the security materials in the commissariat of the robber gang. With the accustomed ingenuity of his profession he worked wondrous, and soon a decent appearing and smelling meal was spread before the famished captives, to which they sat down by the side of the brook gurgling through the cavern.

While they were eating a curious phenomenon occurred. The tiny stream began to foam and sputter; its volume of water momentarily increased until in the space of ten minutes it ran bank full, and our party had to move back to avoid a wetting. For upward of half an hour the miniature freshest continued, and then the stream as quickly subsided to its former modest dimensions.

On being questioned as to the cause of this sudden swelling of the water, Dalton replied in an offhand manner: "Been a-rainin' up yonder in the mountains—sorter cloudburst, I reckon. That there creek tumbles in here from underground som'eres, but no one rightly knows where."

This set Ives pondering, and soon a wild and perhaps foolish idea occurred. The water in the creek had risen at least three feet above its normal level and then subsided. This proved that the inlet or orifice by which it entered the cave had a capacity or bore sufficient to carry the larger flow of water. When the flood drained away, there would naturally be a space of three or four feet left between the water and the roof of the tunnel—if, as he supposed, there was a subterranean tunnel connecting somewhere with the open air.

What was to hinder a man escaping from the cave that way? Prudence said, "No; remain where you are until Filley returns." But suppose Filley met with some accident or the bank refused to pay the money? What then would be the fate of Madge and Florence and Mrs. Hurst? He shuddered to think!

By this time it was pitch dark in the cave. A small fire was kept burning, but the embers had died down to a dull red glow. One by one the women succumbed to fatigue and excitement and lay down on the sand, their heads pillowed in each other's laps. Uncle John, Henry, Alec and Gustave soon followed their example. The robbers were all withdrawn to the mouth of the cavern, that in their estimation, being the only spot worth guarding.

Soon the regular and rhythmic breathing around him convinced Chester that he was the only person awake. He rose to a sitting posture, then got upon his hands and knees and in this fashion wriggled his way to the upper end of the cave, following the sound of the flowing water on his left hand.

He had covered less than a hundred yards when he was stopped by a wall of rock. Gently stepping into the stream, he felt all around the opening and found it had a radius of about three feet above the water, being of a roughly semicircular shape. The bottom of the stream was smooth and pebbly and the water not more than nine inches or a foot deep. Rising to his feet, Chester looked back along the full length of the cave to where the members of the fire glowed like a red spark. All was quiet.

Again he stooped and got on all fours in the bed of the stream. This brought his head below the level of the arch and a cool, fresh breeze came blowing in his face, proving that not far away there existed some sort of connection with the open air.

With a whispered "For Madge!" he began to move forward cautiously, the ice cold water reaching nearly to his middle and swishing and curling around his legs and arms.

SEVENTH DAY.

CHESTER IVES AT WORK.

The situation was an uncanny one. Chester had no matches and would not have dared to strike a light in the other event. The dense darkness, the rushing waters, the utter sense of isolation, the foreboding fear that any moment might plunge him into a chasm which would prove a nameless tomb—these tangible and untangible fears and dangers might have quailed the heart of the stoutest frontiersman much less of an inexperienced tenderfoot, well enough versed in the wiles of Wall street, but a veritable tyro to the dangers of the Colorado desert.

However, the stuff of which brave men are made does not vary much with the world over, and Ives was buoyed up with the hope and belief that on him rested the safety of the whole party including that of the girl he loved.

He saved her from this peril, she would belong to him in a dual sense.

For the space of perhaps 20 minutes he toiled painfully up the bed of the stream. He was soaked from head to foot, and his garments, heavy and sodden with the water, impeded his progress and held him back. Even as he floundered along he thought grimly of what a capital story the adventure would make for the sensational press of the metropolis and how the nasty habits of the cafes of Wall and Broad streets would shout with merit could they behold him in his present drowned-out predicament.

Suddenly his head came in hard contact with the rocky roof, which proved that the orifice was becoming narrower, forcing him to flatten himself out until his chin was nearly touching the water and in this fashion he wriggled for perhaps a dozen yards farther. Then, resting for a moment and raising his eyes, he beheld through the dense gloom, but right ahead, a cluster of twinkling lights.

To be continued.

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