

ROYAL RANGER RALPH.

— OR —

The Waif of the Western Prairies.

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAIN-WRECKERS.

Fire!
"Who is it?"

"A spy—one of the vigilantes. Down him, or the game is lost!"

These ejaculations, spoken rapidly and excitedly, broke the silence of a weird and tragic scene in one of the lowliest valleys of the far West.

They were directed toward a man who had suddenly appeared upon a landscape which for over an hour had held half a dozen human figures, who had been lurking in the vicinity of a lonely stretch of railroad.

The time was night, relieved by the radiance of a September moon, its rays just beginning to illumine mountain and valley with a rare crystalline beauty.

Half a mile distant, where the river stretched a dim silver thread of radiance, a lonely station showed, from which glimmered the light of a single lantern.

At the spot where the story opens, the single railway track curved over a high, rocky world, and then descended on a sharp grade toward the station and the stream.

For years this section, especially the course pursued by the railroad, which was a recently constructed branch of the great Pacific system, had been known as the Lone Canyon trail. The station was called Ten-spot, and the nearest settlement was twenty miles over the mountain at Miner's Gulch.

Beyond that stretched an alternation of plain and hill and valley, infested even at the time of our narrative by marauding bands of savages.

The region was one in which a rough, uncultured set of miners and rangers roamed and outlaw bands found it a favorite field for their depredations.

As has been said, an hour previous to the utterance of the words that begin this chapter, half a dozen men rode up to the scene, dismounted silently, led their horses to a thicket near by, and then became massed together near the railroad.

Here for some moments they were engaged in some mysterious movements about the rails. One of their number went down the tracks to the station, returned, muttered an ominous "All right," and then their dusky figures moved hither and thither. Not an audible word was spoken until a tall, full-bearded man, evidently the leader of the party, started his companions with the exclamation:

"Get to cover! Someone is coming!"

Someone was coming straight down the tracks—a man past middle age, stalwart, rugged, and attired in the garb of a frontiersman.

His gait was a careless and leisurely one, as if he had not tired of waiting for the train at the depot and was strolling about to kill time until it arrived.

All unsuspicious of the perilous ambuscade that he was in wait for him, he was not conscious of the presence of a foe until he turned a curve in the rails and fell back with a startled cry:

"What's this! An obstruction on the road! They're at it again! Redskins or outlaws; there's danger afoot for the night train, sure."

He turned to hasten back to the station. At that moment six dusky forms arose from the bushes that lined the side of the tracks.

"Fire!"

"Who is he?"

"A spy—one of the vigilantes! Down him, or the game is lost."

There was a blinding blaze of light, and six revolvers flashed in the moonlight.

"Missed him—after him! He must not escape and give the alarm!" cried the leader of the coterie.

The stranger had indeed been missed.

He must have been magically alert, for as the bullets whistled past him he dropped to the ground and they flew over his head.

"You scoundrels! Come on, whoever you are!"

His voice, clear and stentorian, rang out like an indignant roar of defiance and courage.

He had again sprung to his feet and had drawn his own revolver.

At that moment his enemies made a united rush for the spot where he was. He was forced to retreat a step or two. A creeping vine entangled his foot, and he fell violently backward.

"Take that!"

The words were spoken by the leader, as he reached the prostrate man.

"Despard—outlaw and renegade! I know you. Coward! villain! If I was at fair odds with you—"

The words were silenced suddenly. The leader of the band—the man he had called Despard—had raised a curved iron bar he held in his hand. It descended with terrific force, cutting a cruel gash in the forehead of the courageous stranger, stunning him to insensibility.

Despard's eyes were a haunted, frightened expression, and his face was deathly pale as he surveyed his unconscious foe.

"You've settled him, Despard," spoke one of the men as he crowded to his side. "What does it mean?"

Despard spoke in an awed tone.

"What mean?"

"That man."

"You know him."

"Know him! Look again, Jim Danton. Ah! I thought you would recognize him."

Despard's companion peered close at the face of the prostrate man.

"Ranger Ralph!" he gasped out.

"Yes. Do you remember when last we saw him, and we left him die a prisoner in a cave in the Utah hills? He had crossed our trail, determined to bring me to justice for a stage robbery. He swore to me that he would avenge me. He escaped. What can his purpose here mean but disaster to our plans? His object is the same as our own—to meet the girl who stands between me and a royal fortune. It is an ill omen, Danton. I fear, I tremble."

"For a dead man!" scoffed Danton, jeeringly; "for he is certainly dead this time."

"He may have friends near at hand."

"We can soon find that out. But no; he would not walk to his fate that way if he knew we were here or suspected our plans."

Danton turned from the spot.

"Vance," he called, to one of the men. "What is it?" asked the person addressed.

"You visited the station?"

"Yes."

"There was no one there?"

"No, but the depot agent."

"You are sure?"

"Go there again and reconnoiter. If there are any others arrived since we came, return and report at once."

"All right."

Danton returned to the leader's side who had walked away from the place where Ranger Ralph lay.

"Everything is arranged for the wreck,"

Captain," he said to Despard. "As to yonder enemy—ranger, deceiver and vigilante—the blow with the iron bar has settled him. You are sure the girl will be on the train."

"Inez?"

"Of course she will. I received positive information. Remember, Danton, that she is of more value to us than the boy."

"That's all right. You and I will look out for the girl, and the others for the boy. But if she should be killed?"

"Then I trust just so much, that's all," replied Despard, coolly. "What makes me uneasy is Ranger Ralph's appearance here."

"Why so?"

"Because he was one of her dead father's companions."

"Well?"

"Inez's father was one of his old-time friends. He probably warned him of his renegade relative."

"Yourself?"

"Exactly. If so, even if the girl were dead, my claim might be disputed, or my past record would prevent my appearing to secure the fortune. No, Danton, the only way is to get possession of the girl; and I love her just enough to want to marry her. Your men insisted on a wreck to secure what booty the train had. I take the chances of the accident killing the girl. At all events, she must be secured by us, or her death assured before the night is over."

"You are a relative of Robert Tracey, her father?"

"A distant one—but the only one after her."

"And the fortune?"

"It is a mystery, in a way, and was left by Tracey in possession of an old relative known as Hermit Ben. The story is too complicated a one to relate now. Remember, the girl is our especial care; when the disaster comes, search for her."

"All right, Despard. Let us get with the boys. The train will be due in a short time."

The two men moved some distance away, to where an obstruction consisting of logs, rocks and iron had been piled on the track.

At that moment the man Vance, whom Danton had sent to the depot, returned.

"Well?" asked the latter.

"No one there but the depot agent."

"And the man we had to set you down?"

"I guess he had just arrived, for two horses were standing outside the station. I'll wait for him."

"C'mon, for heaven's sake!" cried the scout, in imploring tones. "See! the train is almost now due."

With another word, the young man sprang through the doorway, the unlighted lantern in one hand, a revolver in the other.

The young man started violently.

"It cannot be!" he cried.

"Yes, there are six of them, led by Dyke Despard, a notorious outlaw. Is there no one near?"

"No one. Rouse yourself, man. Together we may be able to disperse these scoundrels."

"Impossible. I could not walk a step under."

The other hastened to a window and looked out toward the south.

"The depot agent will arrive shortly," he said, hurried, anxious tones.

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[TO BE CONTINUED.]

One of Herrmann's Great Tricks.

People have repeatedly asked me whether the Ossie has pleased me the most and which I take most delight in performing. Naturally the effort that brings the greatest success is regarded by a man his best.

I consider the trick of restoring the shattered mirror as my most famous one. This I had the honor of performing before the Czar of Russia upon the orders of the Ossie.

It was done unexpectedly to the spectators, and was not down on the regular bill.

While playing billiards with the attaches of the court after the performance, the Czar being present in the saloon, I shot a ball with all my strength against a plate-glass mirror extending from floor to ceiling.

It was shivered into fifty pieces.

Consequently, it was broken into many small pieces.

While the Czar courteously waived my apology, considering the destruction of the mirror as trifling, and ordered the game to proceed, I could easily see that my awkwardness made a disagreeable impression.

With the Czar's permission I examined the mirror to estimate the damage done and the possibility of repairing it.

While so engaged one of the suite

had come to the Czar to inform him of the accident.

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