



# BEHIND *The* **THROTTLE!**

by

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*Young "Strap" Hales' ambition is to drive an M.N.E.R. express—and his chance comes sooner than he expects!*

## THE FIRST CHAPTER

### Two Mysteries!

YOUNG "Strap" Hales wiped his hands on a scrap of oily waste, tucked the waste into the pocket of his dungarees, and leaped down from the cab of Locomotive No. 407. Standing back a little from the engine, he looked at it critically.

Number 407 was one of the Metropolitan and North of England Railway's newest type locomotives—a thing of delight to the

eyes of an expert. With its huge driving-wheels, its gleaming rods, its long boiler, squat smoke-stack and streamlined tender, the engine was the embodiment of grace and speed, an enduring tribute to the brains of many inventors and to the skilled hands of countless craftsmen.

"You'll do," said Strap, grinning. "You can go on living up to your name, Bright and Shining!"

A sudden hiss of escaping steam made him turn quickly. The slow-moving bulk of an

old type shunting engine loomed up before him on the rails of the locomotive shed. The face of the engineer grinned at Strap round the edge of the cab.

"That made ye jump, Strap—hey?"

"Jump yourself!" said Strap good-humouredly, moving out of the shunter's way. "Run that old can out of here, Bill, or I'll take a tin-opener to it!"

The engineer laughed, and halted his shunter alongside the gleaming length of Number 407.

"She may be an old can, Strap, but she's an engine, anyway. I bet you wish you was runnin' her, instead o' just bein' an oiler in the sheds here."

"I do, Bill," said Strap truthfully. "But I shall get an engine one day all right."

"How'd you like to be drivin' old Bright an' Shinin'?" asked the engineer, nodding at No. 407.

Strap grinned, but the sudden eagerness in his grey eyes betrayed the fact that the driver had touched on a sensitive spot.

"How'd I like to be driving 'The Flying Scotsman'?" You'll ask me that next! Have a heart, Bill—putting ideas into my young head like that!"

"Well, tastes differ," said the engineer. "I tell you this, Strap—I ain't got no ambition to drive Bright an' Shinin'! She ain't bin on the rails a month—an' look what she's bin in already. I got a feelin' creepin' over me that 407's goin' to turn out one o' them hoodoo engines. What's happened to the bloke who was drivin' her—Sam Palmer, hey?"

Before Strap could make any reply, a voice bellowed from the end of the shed:

"Hey, you, Bill! Come on here! What d'ye think this is—a debatin' society?"

The engineer grinned at Strap, and withdrew into the cab of his shunter. The old engine chugged along to the end of the shed.

Strap stood looking after it thoughtfully. His lean, brown young face had become suddenly grim. The engineer, he reflected, had been right. It was a strange thing that Locomotive 407 should have been connected

with the only two incidents that had marred the smooth running of the M. and N.E.R. for some time past. There was something in the mysterious quality of those two incidents which fascinated Strap. What exactly *had* happened to Sam Palmer, the driver of 407?

The vast, hollow cavern of the locomotive shed was clangorous with the rumble of engines, the hissing of open steam-cocks, the metallic ring of hammers, the rattle of tube-expanders, the voices of men. But Strap was unconscious of the activity all about him. He was thinking of Sam Palmer, and of what had happened to him. He was imagining himself on the footplate of 407, at Sam Palmer's side, rocketing northwards through the roaring dark, with the hot breath of the fire-box in his face and the belch from the smoke-stack streaking the night with flame. What *had* happened to Sam Palmer?

"Hi, Strap!"

The calling of his name brought Strap's thoughts back abruptly to the present. He looked toward the great, arched entrance of the locomotive shed, beyond which, in the grey winter daylight, was an intricate tangle of shining rails, a forest of signal posts, and a slow-moving mass of shunting goods trains, tankers, and passenger carriages. A youngster of about his own age, clad in dungarees, and with a shock of red hair and a freckled face, stood in the entrance of the shed, beckoning to him.

Strap strolled forward.

"Hallo, Nervous! What's up?"

"Nervous" Hobson chuckled softly, winking at Strap. Nervous was about the most indefatigable trouble-seeker on the M. and N.E.R.'s pay-sheet. Wherever there was a rough-and-tumble, Nervous was on the spot; if there was ever a job to be done that promised to provide thrills or danger, Nervous was there to volunteer for it. But that was only because Nervous suffered from the delusion that he was a highly timid person, and was convinced that the only way he could cure his timidity was to seek trouble in every form, thereby making himself so accustomed to it that it would cease to hold any horrors for him.

Strap, whose friend and fellow-oiler Nervous was, had tried many times to make Nervous understand that in reality he had the courage of a tiger, but it was waste of time. Nervous was timid; he said so himself, and, if anybody contradicted him, he blacked their eye for them.

"Strap," said Nervous, "there's something in the wind. You're wanted up at the old man's office."

"Me?" Strap exclaimed. "What on earth for?"

"Dunno," said Nervous, "but it looks like trouble to me." His blue eyes gleamed. "Strap, if it is trouble, count me in on your side. I shall be scared stiff, but—count me in!"

"O.K., Nervous," said Strap, grinning, and headed for the traffic superintendent's office.

Outside the door he ran his hand through his crisp, short brown hair, and then tapped decorously on the glass-panelled door marked: "Vernon Hales, Traffic Superintendent."

"Come in," said a voice.

Strap went in. The tall, grey-haired man who was standing by the window of the sparsely-furnished office, looking out at the passing trains, turned round slowly.

"Hallo, Tom!"

"Hallo, dad!" said Strap. "You sent for me?"

"Yes." There were little lines of strain about Mr. Hales' mouth. Strap saw that he was worried and uncertain. "You've heard about what happened to 407 last night, Tom, of course?" Mr. Hales said.

"Sam Palmer's fireman has put it all over the junction," said Strap, smiling. "It was too choice a bit of sensation to keep quiet about." He became grave. "But what is the truth of it, dad?"

Mr. Hales sat down at his desk, fidgeting uncomfortably with his watch-chain.

"Tom, I'll be darned if I know. I've just been talking to a fellow who came round from Scotland Yard, and he's as mystified as I am. All that we can be certain about is the story told us by Sam Palmer's fireman. You know that 407 was on the night run from Edinburgh to London?"

"Yes," Strap said.

"Well, between Darlington and York there's a stretch of pretty wild, lonely country. It was a foul night—a high wind and a stinging sleet; real dirty weather. Number 407 was going at a pretty good bat. We're proud of our Edinburgh-London express run, as you know, and Sam was trying to reach York on time, the fireman says, being a bit late leaving Newcastle. They passed through Darlington at about two o'clock. That means that it would be about two-thirty when it happened. A long, long way ahead they saw a red light waving from side to side on the line. Sam braked at once, naturally, slowing down for all he was worth. They came to a stop within about twenty-five yards of the light. It all happened very quickly and quietly. A man came alongside the engine. The fireman said he couldn't see much of him; it was so dark. But he said that he had an automatic, and was holding something—a scarf or a muffler—against his face. He said to Sam: 'I've got you covered. Climb down—and no tricks.' Sam obeyed; he had no choice. Then the bandit told the fireman he could go on."

Mr. Hales made a little helpless gesture with his hand.

"And that's all there is to it. The fireman ran 407 into York single-handed, informed the station-master there of what had happened, picked up a driver, and arrived here seventeen minutes late."

Strap drew a deep breath. His eyes glittered with excitement.

"And what about Sam Palmer?"

"He's gone—disappeared—*kidnapped!* I've a wire here"—he touched a pink slip on his desk—"from the police at York. They've been out to the scene of the hold-up, but there's absolutely no clue to the whereabouts or the identity of the bandits. They've put the matter into the hands of Scotland Yard. But the mystery is—what did the bandits want with Sam Palmer? What possible reason can they have had for taking the colossal risk of holding up an express on an English railway merely to kidnap the driver?"

Strap shook his head.

"I don't know, dad; but what sort of a record has that fireman got? It was Trevor, wasn't it?"

"Trevor—yes. And his record's first-class. He's been with M. and N.E.R. all his life," said Mr. Hales. "Why do you ask?"

"Just an idea," said Strap. "And what about Sam Palmer?"

"His record's first-class, too. He was with us for years before the War. He went into the Army, and then, in 1923, he re-applied for a job with us, and we took him on. He's an A 1 man." Mr. Hales lighted a cigarette, and then went on: "Tom, what I'm worried about is the publicity. You can bet the evening papers'll be out with an extra almost any minute. The news was too late for the dailies."

"You're thinking of that theft three days ago?" said Strap. "It was on the very same run, wasn't it? Same engine and everything?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hales. "And the sort of publicity we've been getting lately is going to do the M. and N.E.R. no good. Take that business three days ago. The police seem to be no nearer solving it. We know only the bare details. A man called Hanbury got into the train at Doncaster, carrying a brief-case containing five thousand pounds in notes. He was to sign a certain contract in London here which called for a cash payment of that amount. He has a first-class compartment to himself; most of the first-class passengers, of course, had taken sleeping-berths. He is drowsing in his seat when he is struck a blow on the head by someone whom he does not even see. He comes to himself about ten miles the other side of Peterborough—and his money's gone. He pulls the communication-cord, and stops the train, frightening everybody. But nothing can be done, of course. The train runs into Peterborough, to find the police there, waiting.

"They've had the tip from Doncaster that there are three crooks on board, and have been advised to watch out for trouble. Of course, as soon as they're told of the

theft, they weed out the crooks and arrest them on suspicion. But there's nothing on them, and nothing in the way of evidence against them. The police have to let them go. And the point is," said Mr. Hales hopelessly, "that the train runs non-stop from Doncaster to Peterborough, so that they couldn't have got rid of the stuff to any confederate waiting at an intermediate station."

Strap nodded slowly.

"Two distinct and separate crimes on the M. and N.E.R. within three days," he said. "I see why you're down on the publicity, dad."

"It's pretty obvious," said his father dryly. "But look here! I didn't send for you to talk about our troubles. I sent for you because you're going to take 407 to Edinburgh to-night!"

"Me?" Strap gasped.

His excitement and his incredulity were so obvious that, in spite of his worry, Mr. Hales smiled.

"Yes. Why not? You're a qualified driver, although you're only working as an oiler at present. We're pretty short of drivers just now, but your foreman guarantees you absolutely capable. And you've done some short runs, haven't you?"

"Once or twice," said Strap, "but only as a last-minute substitute."

"That's what you are this time," said Mr. Hales. "Don't think you're being promoted definitely to a driver's job. You'll have to prove yourself mighty good before that happens to you."

"I understand," said Strap, grinning. But almost at once he became serious. "I say, dad, there's no question of—well, favouritism about this? You know what our bargain was. I'll work my way up from the bottom, fair and square, like everybody else, and if I can't do it, I'll stay down at the bottom. I shall belong there."

His father nodded gravely.

"There's no favouritism, Strap. We're short of drivers, you're the senior in Shed A, and your foreman says it's your turn. Will you take it on?"



Strap Hales sent the shovel hurtling through the air, for it to crash on to the raider on the second step.

"I will," said Strap. "Can I have Nervous to fire for me?"

"You can," said Mr. Hales. "And you'll be given your schedule in the ordinary way. Now, clear out! And good luck to you, son!"

### THE SECOND CHAPTER "Gaolbird I"

THE twelve o'clock hooter had blown nearly half an hour ago before Strap Hales and Nervous Hobson left the station to seek a meal at their lodgings. They had spent that half-hour's overtime in putting the finishing touches to Number 407's toilet, for it is not every day that two young and ambitious railwaymen are entrusted with the safe conduct of such a monster as Bright and Shining, and to Strap and his ally a successful run was profoundly important. The slightest hitch might mean a

black mark against their names as driver and fireman.

"Strap," Nervous said as they walked down the street outside the station, "you don't think that—well, that there's anything in the talk that's going round, about 407 being a hoodoo engine?"

Strap's lips tightened grimly.

"It's come to that already, has it? The chaps are definitely labelling it 'hoodoo'?"

"They are," said Nervous. "You know that railwaymen are apt to be a bit on the superstitious side. I heard some of 'em saying this morning that there's something rum about 407. The only robbery the M. and N.E.R.'s had for ages occurred on a train pulled by 407; the only kidnapping in the history of the company took place on the footplate of 407. The chaps are saying that the next thing 407'll be mixed up in is a smash!"

"Rot!" said Strap briefly.

"Rot it may be," said Nervous, "but, all the same—"

He broke off as a news-boy trotted out of a side-street, shouting:

"Extra! Extra! Express train driver kidnapped! Another railway mystery! Extra!"

"Dad was right," Strap said grimly. "The papers were on to things pretty quick!"

He stopped the news-boy, bought a paper, and stood on the kerb with Nervous, reading the report.

The door of the public-house before which they were standing swung open suddenly. A man, emerging, lurched into Nervous.

"Sorry, mate," Nervous said politely.

The man stood swaying, peering at him. Unshaven and ill-clad, his eyes bloodshot, and a greasy cap pulled far down over his brow, the man was obviously drunk.

"Sorry nothin'!" he grunted. "You barged into me a-purpose! You railway skunks thinks you own the earth, don't ye—huh? Dirty gaolbirds!"

He put a hand on Nervous Hobson's chest, pushing him back. Strap saw the sudden flare of anger in his pal's eyes.

"Keep your hands off me!" Nervous gritted. "You're bigger'n me, and I'm scared stiff of you, but if I get any more out of you, I'll dot you one in the eye!"

Strap smiled inwardly. It was his pal's way always to declare himself frightened, but Strap knew that Nervous wanted nothing better than a rough-and-tumble with the man in the greasy cap. If a man-eating lion had been stalking him, Nervous would first of all have declared himself so scared he could hardly stand, and then he would have sailed in and tried to settle the lion with his bare hands. That was Hobson's way.

The man was peering at Nervous truculently.

"Huh! I knows ye, now! I thought I recognised ye! Nervous Hobson, ain't it?"

"It is," said Nervous. "And if you want trouble, I'm here to oblige, in spite of my weak nerves!"

But the man's desire for battle seemed

to be fading from him; obviously he knew of Nervous' reputation as a fighter. Muttering sullenly, he made to turn away, but Strap checked him quickly.

"Half a minute! You're Dan Yemm, aren't you, who used to be one of the repair gang up at the junction?"

"What if I am?" the man growled. "I ain't no gaolbird of a railwayman now!"

"No," said Strap pleasantly. "If I remember rightly, the M. and N.E.R. decided they could manage to totter along without you!"

The man glared viciously.

"I don't want none o' your lip—gaolbird!"

"You're very keen on that word," Strap said easily. "Who's a gaolbird, anyway?"

"You railway coves," Dan Yemm snarled—"or, at any rate, that there Sam Palmer is, who a lot o' your railway friends is talkin' about in the pub. there."

Strap's lips tightened. The man's use of the word "gaolbird" had puzzled him from the first; he had deliberately followed the matter up.

"Who says Sam Palmer was ever in gaol?" he demanded.

"I do," said Dan Yemm. "Not many knows it, but Sam Palmer done two separate stretches, soon after he come out of the Army. Burglary they was for, an' I was told about it by a feller who was servin' a long term in the same quod. An', if you ask me," added Dan Yemm sneeringly, "there's somethin' crooked behind this here alleged kidnappin' o' Sam Palmer that all you railway blokes is talkin' about!"

Growling under his breath, he moved away, going somewhat uncertainly.

"I ought to have downed him, Strap," Nervous said wistfully. "A bit of an up-and-downer with a husky like him would've helped toward curing this nervousness of mine."

But Strap said nothing. As they walked on to their lodgings and made a hasty meal, he was very quiet and thoughtful. So Sam Palmer had been in prison, had he? That gap in his record between 1918 and 1923 was explained by the fact that he had gone

in for a profession where he had thought the money was come by more easily than it was in the railway business.

The theft, three days ago, of the five thousand pounds from the first-class passenger; the hold-up of the night express from Edinburgh, and the kidnapping of Sam Palmer; the revelation that Sam Palmer was an ex-gaolbird—were there any connecting links between those three things?

Strap was beginning to wonder.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER

#### Neck or Nothing!

THE night train from London to Edinburgh pulled out slowly from the great echoing cavern of the metropolis station. Going cautiously, like a powerful, monstrous dog held firmly on the leash, it threaded its way through the complicated network of lines which sprawls far and wide among the environs of London. Slowly the myriad signal lights, glittering in the dark like a stupendous constellation of stars, fell behind. Locomotive Number 407 quickened speed.

Peering round the edge of the cab, his peaked cap drawn far down over his eyes and the rush of the icy wind stinging his cheeks, Strap Hales peered forward into the dark. Reaching up his left hand, he pulled the whistle-cord three times; then he opened the throttle a little more, sending a rush of steam into the steam-chest. Locomotive Number 407 leaped forward like a giant released.

His hand resting lightly on the throttle control, Strap looked at Nervous Hobson. The door of the fire-box was open; the roaring furnace within lighted the cab with a flickering red glare. Nervous was shovelling coal down from the tender into a heap on the steel footplate. He scrambled down from the tender, replenished the fires, and slammed shut the door of the fire-box. Pushing back his peaked cap, he mopped his sweating forehead with a coal-grimed handkerchief.

"Well, we're off now!" he grinned. "Hey, Strap?"

Strap nodded, saying nothing. Every nerve in his body was taut with excitement,

but his brain was cool, clear, and alert. He was behind the throttle at last, the man upon whose courage, whose self-control in an emergency, depended the lives of the hundreds of people who slept, ate, read, or talked in the speeding carriages behind.

He was behind the throttle of a hurtling mass of machinery which, for all its power, was obedient to the lightest touch of his hand, leaping ahead or slowing down as he saw fit. He was behind the engine of which men said: "It's hoodooed! The next thing it'll be in is a smash!" But Strap Hales, born and bred on the railway, was cool, confident, and unafraid.

Watching for his signals, and alert on the steam-gauge and the throttle control, he sent Locomotive 407 thundering northward through the night.

A successful run—for Strap Hales everything depended on that. If anything were to happen, if he were to fail to do all that was expected of him, he might be ruined for ever as a railwayman.

Belching flame and sparks from her smoke-stack, Locomotive 407 roared northward through the dark.

They left Peterborough behind, well up to schedule—Doncaster, York. And so, with thundering wheels and roaring fires, Number 407 came out on to the lonely stretch of country between York and Darlington.

Without realising it, Strap, peering ahead round the edge of the cab, was taut with suspense. Subconsciously, under his concentration on driving, he had been thinking about the hold-up of Sam Palmer, and about the robbery between Peterborough and Doncaster.

The obvious thing, of course, was to believe in the guilt of the three men who had got into the train at Doncaster, and of whom the Peterborough police had been warned. But the police at Peterborough had found nothing incriminating on the three men, and had been forced to release them. The train being non-stop between Doncaster and Peterborough, how had the men, if indeed they *had* stolen the banknotes, got rid of them?

A confederate among the passengers was

unlikely; the Doncaster police had notified Peterborough of three suspicious characters only. What had happened to that five thousand pounds' worth of bank-notes? Had their disappearance any connection with the kidnapping of Sam Palmer on this very stretch of country? What significance was there in the fact that Sam Palmer had been in gaol for burglary?

Those three questions hammered in Strap Hales' mind as Locomotive Number 407 pounded ahead over the wide moorland, dragging behind it a long string of carriages, which flickered through the dark like the tail of a comet.

No wonder, Strap thought, that the bandits had chosen this stretch of country for their hold-up! For miles on end there was not so much as a signal-hut; no glimmering light showed in the darkness ahead. The moorland was lonely and desolate. Locomotive 407, snorting northward under her banner of flying sparks, seemed the only living thing in the darkness.

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, Strap saw the light!

It hung motionless, far ahead in the darkness—a tiny red eye, close down over the rails.

Strap stiffened, peering round the edge of the cab, one hand on the throttle control. He felt his heart leap; for a moment the blood drummed in his head. Then at once he was cool again, thinking swiftly.

Was this another hold-up? Was it possible that there was some immense and terrible plot in existence to capture the drivers of express trains? Or was that light a genuine warning of peril ahead?

What ought he to do?

Nervous was shouting in his ear:

“What is it, Strap? What is it, man?”

And suddenly Strap knew what he must do. His duty was to the passengers in the carriages behind, sleeping there, all unwitting of the drama that was being played in the night.

He must stop! Even though it might be a trap into which he was running, he must stop, for the red light on the line might be a warning of genuine danger, and the lives of those hundreds of passengers were

his responsibility. He must stop!

Carefully, with the cool judgment and the firm touch of an expert, he throttled down, applying the powerful hydraulic brakes.

In the red glare from the fire-box, Nervous was staring at him incredulously.

“What's the idea, Strap? What is it?”

Strap gripped his arm. The glare from the fire showed his face, grim with purpose.

“There's a red light ahead! It might be—it just *might* be another hold-up! If it is”—his voice was stern—“if it is, Nervous, we'll fight! Understand? Lay hold of some handy lumps of coal, and if I give the word, then it's *neck or nothing!*”

His pal's eyes blazed.

“Man, I'm so scared I can't keep my knees still—but I'm with you, Strap! We'll fight through or bust!”

He snatched up two great lumps of coal, one in each hand. He stood ready, a dark, tense form against the glow of the fires.

Locomotive Number 407 slowed down; its speed dropped slowly to a mere crawl.

Peering round the edge of the cab, Strap saw that the red light had disappeared. Only the glow from 407's smoke-stack broke the thick, cold, starless dark.

The engine was scarcely moving now. The darkness was intense. Behind, in the carriages, the passengers slept peacefully, unaware of that red warning of danger which had showed so fleetingly and had so swiftly disappeared.

*What had happened to that light?*

If the warning had been genuine, where was the man who had shown it?

The conviction came suddenly to Strap Hales that this was a trap. He whirled round from the controls, snatching up a shovel from the footplate.

“Neck or nothing, Nervous!”

Even as he spoke, a figure leaped up out of the dark, gripping the rail of the cab. In the glare of the fires, Strap saw the figure of a man in a heavy motor-coat. Goggles covered his eyes, and a black muffler was tied about the lower half of his face. An automatic in his hand menaced the young railwaymen.

"Put up your hands! You're covered from behind as well!"

Involuntarily, Nervous Hobson half-turned. On the other step of the cab there was a second raider; his pistol covered Nervous.

"Drop that coal, you!"

Nervous obeyed, but almost as he did so Strap Hales sent his shovel hurtling through the air. It crashed against the wrist of the raider on the left step. The man fell back, with a shout.

throttle a notch. Locomotive 407 snorted deep down in its steam-chest, and began to move slowly.

A pistol barked—twice, in quick succession. The circle of plate-glass near Strap's head was shattered to splinters. There was a sudden, hot sting at Strap's cheek.

But Number 407 was gathering way. Within a minute it was gliding forward under half-throttle, its mighty driving-rod quickening under the growing pressure. With a sudden roar, the full force of steam



Strap Hales went down, fighting, the man on top of him. "Nervous" Hobson leaped to his aid, a huge spanner upraised.

His confederate's pistol roared, but Strap was too quick. He leaped, knocking up the weapon. The bullet flattened itself viciously against the roof of the cab. Strap and the raider crashed down, fighting, on to the rails.

Strap was up first, driving his fist to the man's jaw. The raider reeled backward. Strap leaped for the footplate.

"Quick, Nervous! There may be more of 'em!"

He released the brakes, opening the

made itself felt. Number 407 leaped forward like a straining monster.

They were through!

As the grey dawn came up out of the east, the night train from London glided, with a hissing of steam, into the M. and N.E.R. station at Edinburgh.

Strap Hales, glancing at the station clock, grinned slightly. They were up to schedule! He turned a tired, strained face

to Nervous Hobson, on the footplate beside him.

"Well, we're through, Nervous!"

"We are," said Nervous. "And now for the superintendent, I suppose? We've got something worth reporting, by golly! And when that's done, I'm for some sleep! We leave at midnight to take the night train back to London, and, man, I'm frightened rigid!"

Strap shook his head. His grey eyes, for all their weariness, were keen with excitement.

"I don't think we're in for much sleep to-day. I've got an idea, and if there's anything in it, we're going to have a hectic time!"

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER

##### One Hour to Go!

THE hands of the station clock pointed to ten minutes past ten. Save for a few porters, waiting for the rush for the midnight train to London, the platforms were practically deserted.

In Locomotive Shed B Number 407 stood in the berth it always occupied between its dawn arrival at Edinburgh and its midnight departure therefrom. In exactly one hour and forty minutes Number 407 would draw alongside Platform 1 of the station to commence its long night journey to London.

The interior of the locomotive shed was in darkness. But it was not, as it seemed, entirely deserted. Crouching in one corner, motionless and alert, were two shadowy figures.

Officially the driver and the fireman of Locomotive Number 407 were at supper, preparing for the strain of the journey which lay before them. But Strap Hales and Nervous Hobson had other and more urgent business than supper on their hands.

"Man," Nervous whispered, "I'm so scared my teeth are rattling like an 1880 model tanker! Do you think we're on the right track?"

"Can it, Nervous!" Strap chuckled. "Listen! That's what we've got to do—keep our ears open! If my theory's any-

thing like right, they'll be here by eleven o'clock. Got that spanner tight?"

"You bet!" said Nervous softly.

They were silent then, waiting. The minutes went by with what seemed to be maddening slowness. Away in the station the great clock struck eleven.

"One hour to go," Strap breathed. "If they aren't—"

He checked abruptly, his hand tightening on his pal's arm.

They were tense and ready, there in the darkness of the shed.

From outside there came the sound of a stumble. A man's voice said softly:

"Quiet, you fool! D'you want to wake the whole town?"

Silhouetted in the great arched entrance to the shed, there appeared the black figure of a man. In the dim light from a nearby signal he seemed to be wearing dungarees and the peaked cap of a railwayman. Another figure joined him—yet another. They stood in a small group in the entrance of the shed, talking swiftly and softly.

Listening intently, the two young railwaymen could catch only an occasional word:

"Dark as pitch. Palmer said—steam up—Shed B. At supper. Yes. Coast clear. Third plate—steam-gauge. Ready?"

Swiftly and quietly, the three dark figures moved forward into the blackness of the shed. The watchers could see them no longer. They were hidden by the great, panting bulk of Number 407. Strap's hand was tight on his pal's arm. The two were motionless, listening.

From the stealthy sounds in the dark before them, they knew that the three men were climbing into the cab of Number 407. For a second, there flashed out the white ray of an electric torch. It was gone at once. A voice said harshly:

"Here!"

There was the sound of whispering, the clatter, instantly checked, of steel on steel.

"Third plate—here—steam-gauge."

The voice fell silent. There was a soft, scraping sound. Then suddenly a voice snarled:

"407 did stop between Doncaster and Peterborough," said Strap to his father—"when the man who was robbed pulled the communication cord!"



"Gone!"

Simultaneously, Strap Hales leaped to his feet, pressing a whistle to his lips. Three shrill blasts split the quiet. From the cab of the engine a dark form leaped at him like a springing tiger.

He went down, fighting, the dark form on top of him, panting, cursing.

"A trap! A trap!"

Nervous Hobson's hand went up. There was a dull thud. The man on top of Strap went limp suddenly, rolling sideways. Strap leaped to his feet.

Even as he did so, there was the sound of running feet from outside the shed. Great arc-lights high up in the roof flared out suddenly. Four policemen stood in the entrance of the shed, covering the way of escape.

Two men in the dungarees and peaked caps of railway workers, who stood beside the long, shining bulk of Number 407, over the still form of their stunned confederate, put up their hands slowly. One of them—a dark, lean man with a diamond-shaped

scar on his cheek—shrugged slightly, looking at the policemen.

"Well, I suppose you win, officers," he sneered.

One of the policemen moved forward. There sounded the double click of handcuffs. The policeman, smiling, nodded at Strap Hales.

"Here's the lad who beat you, Diamond Kelly!"

The man with the scar looked viciously at Strap.

"Him!" He gave a short, bitter laugh. "I suppose he stumbled on the five thousand by chance, eh?"

Strap grinned.

"I found it all right—behind the third steel plate to the left of the steam-gauge, where Sam Palmer hid it! But"—his smile broadened—"I didn't find it by chance, Diamond Kelly!"

Back again at the M. and N.E.R. headquarters, Strap was explaining to his father.

" You see, dad, from the very first the theft of that money and the kidnapping of Sam Palmer seemed to me to be connected, and when I heard that Palmer had been in prison, I began to wonder if, perhaps, those crooks hadn't been pals of his back in the days when he was playing the crooked game."

Mr. Hales nodded, intent on every word.

" It seemed probable to me," Strap continued, " that those crooks had followed the chap with the money to the station, and then, by chance, had seen their old pal, Sam Palmer, in the cab of the engine. Knowing the police at Doncaster might be watching 'em, and might warn the Peterborough and London police to look out for trouble, they had a word with Palmer, and arranged to pass on the stolen money to him. The problem was that the train was non-stop from Doncaster to Peterborough, so—how did they get the money to Palmer?"

Mr. Hales looked at him blankly.

" Well, how did they do it?"

" It was the simplest thing in the world," Strap grinned. " I knew I was on the right track when I remembered that, as a matter of fact, 407 *did* stop between Doncaster and Peterborough."

" But," began Mr. Hales, " I tell you—"

" One minute!" said Strap quickly. " What about when the man who was robbed pulled the communication cord?"

For a moment Mr. Hales sat looking blankly at his son; then he drew a deep, deep breath and thumped the desk with his fist.

" Of course! Palmer got out of the engine and walked along the side of the train to see what was the matter, and—"

" And the crooks handed him the money out of the window," said Strap. " Exactly! Don't you see, dad? The crooks absolutely relied on the robbed man coming to and doing the natural thing—in other words, pulling the cord!"

" But why the kidnapping of Palmer?" his father asked.

" That's what I wondered," said Strap, " till it struck me that probably Palmer,

having got the five thousand pounds, wanted to keep the lot! See what I mean, dad? Palmer didn't turn up at the place where he'd probably arranged to meet the crooks. He kept the money, and went on driving 407, so as not to make things look fishy by chucking up his job all of a sudden."

" I see," said Mr. Hales. " And the crooks kidnapped him to get the money back. Quite! But why the second hold-up?"

Strap smiled.

" That's what gave me the key to the whole thing, dad. Palmer had hidden the money, while the fireman was out of the way, actually on 407! The crooks forced him to tell 'em where he'd hidden it, and—thus the second hold-up attempt! I thought it all out between Darlington and Edinburgh, and at Edinburgh Nervous and I searched 407 thoroughly. We found that the third plate to the left of the steam-gauge was loose. We took it off—and there was Locomotive 407's hoodoo—five thousand pounds in notes!"

" Phew!" said Mr. Hales.

" It occurred to me then," Strap went on, " that, their second hold-up attempt having failed, probably the crooks, getting desperate, would try to reach 407 in the sheds at Edinburgh. I argued that, with Palmer in their hands, they'd force him to tell them where 407 would be berthed, and when would be the best time to make the attempt. So I went to the police at Edinburgh, and—we laid that trap! The rest you know."

" And now the crooks and Palmer are coming up for trial next week," said Mr. Hales, " and that 'tec from the Yard is wondering how you boys did it! Tom, my son, without any question of favouritism, I've an idea the M. and N.E.R.'s going to lose a couple of oilers!"

Strap looked at him eagerly.

" What d'you mean, dad?"

" You and Nervous watch the list of full-blown drivers and firemen," chuckled Mr. Hales, " and perhaps you'll see!"

THE END