



The Pride of the Footplate

Jim Darrell's initial trip on an express has more than the thrill of riding on the footplate—for it coincides with a bandit gang's attempt to rob the train of its bullion!

By
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THE FIRST CHAPTER

Jim's Chance!

WHERE'S the foreman, son? I want a relief fireman—quickly!"

Jim Darrell, making up his timesheets at the running-shed foreman's desk, looked up in surprise as the words were flung at him, rather than spoken, by the tall man who stood framed in the doorway of the little office.

"Why, what's the matter, Bill?" he queried.

Big Bill Harrigan, crack driver of the Northport loco. shed express link, heaved his six-foot-two of bone and muscle over the threshold and stood, a massive figure in oil-stained overalls, under the glaring electric light.

"My fireman, Wilson, has hurt himself," he explained briefly. "Fell from the running-board as we were taking water. They've run him off to hospital—it looks like a broken arm."

He gave an anxious glance at the clock.

"Seven-fifty—I must be away in five minutes, for I can't afford to lose time this run. We've got bullion from the South African mail on board! Where's the foreman, Jim?"

His question was answered at that moment by the appearance of Donaldson, a red-headed, choleric Scotsman, who presided over the destinies of the men and engines stabled at Northport Harbour shed.

"Why, Harrigan!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? The boat train is due away in about five minutes! I was just

going down to see what had become of you."

Hastily Harrigan explained what had happened to his fireman.

"A fireman I must have, Mr. Donaldson," he concluded. "There'll be the dickens to pay if we don't get that train through right on time. It's bad enough to have to work her up to the Rand on a night like this without a pilot, to say nothing of a small army of detectives snooping round as though they thought I was going to steal my own engine!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Donaldson. "There's not a spare man in the place. The three spare men have gone out to a derailment at Carrowbank. Christmas Eve as usual!"

For a moment there was silence in the office whilst the wind blowing in from the sea whistled round the building and lashed the driving rain into fresh transports of fury against the glass panes of the windows.

Jim Darrell, an interested spectator of the little drama, realised at once the desperate predicament. It being Christmas Eve, there were no trains out of Northport except the South African Mail Special, delayed in departure owing to the late arrival of the liner in harbour. The only available enginemen besides Big Bill Harrigan and his unfortunate fireman Wilson had been called away to a breakdown twenty miles away—and now Wilson was injured and there was no man to fire the engine of the boat train for her long run to the mining metropolis, Johannesburg.

"I'll get a man down from the town now," snapped Donaldson. "You'll be able to get away in half an hour at the most, Harrigan."

The burly driver looked black.

"Is there no one in the shed who can fire for me—now?" he snapped. "This is a matter of minutes, with the Mail Special, Mr. Donaldson."

Donaldson nodded, and grimly reached for the telephone.

"It is; but there's nobody who can—"

"I can!"

It was Jim Darrell, flushed with sudden excitement, who interrupted him. Jumping to his feet, he confronted the startled foreman and driver and, breathlessly, put into a few hurried words the ambition of a life-time.

"Mr. Donaldson, I can fire Bill's loco. for

him! You know I shall pass my firing tests next month—I would have passed this month if it hadn't been for my having to go away on holiday relief. I can fire your train for you, Bill."

With a weary smile Donaldson shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I'd give you the chance if I could, but until you're a passed fireman you're not allowed, by the company's regulations, to fire a passenger locomotive."

Then Big Bill Harrigan broke into the conversation.

"The Mail must get through on time, and we've got to forget regulations in a case like this. Jim's only a kid—"

"I'm eighteen," interjected Jim, "and I'll bet you I can hold the pressure you want all the way up to Johannesburg, Bill. Mr. Donaldson, will you give me a chance to show what I can do?"

For a moment the foreman hesitated, and in that moment the clock began to strike, inexorably: One, two, three, four—

"Eight o'clock, and the Mail due away!" snarled Big Bill Harrigan. "Which is it to be, Mr. Donaldson—regulations and an hour's delay to that bullion, or a blind eye and a chance of keeping time?"

Again Donaldson reflected for a few seconds that seemed eternity to the eager Jim. Then:

"I'll take a chance," he said. "Off you go, Darrell—and the best of luck to you!"

Before Jim could realise his good fortune, Harrigan had caught him by the arm and whirled him from the room into the rain and darkness outside.

"Come on, sonny," he cried exultantly, "you and I and 535 against a wet night, slippery rails, and Father Time; and if you don't give me two hundred on the gauge all the way to the Rand you'll never tread a footplate again!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Danger Light!

FOR so long as he lives Jim Darrell will remember that night when he fired the Mail Special out of Northport. Wind and rain greeted them boisterously as they left the shed at the double and ran across the network



The masked face of an intruder appeared over the side of the cab, and a gun menaced Jim and Harrigan.
"Don't move, Mr. Driver!" snapped the man.

of rails, gleaming wet and shining in the light of the lamps, to where the twin headlights of 535, the fastest flier on the line, flickered a cheerful welcome.

Jim Darrell caught a brief glimpse of the long line of coaches strung behind 535, their occupants sitting cosily behind drawn blinds; saw the shadowy shape of the great liner stretching up from the edge of the darkened quay, and then he was swinging with true professional ease up the footrails and into the cab.

The cab! Jim Darrell had cleaned the cab of 535 often enough; had groomed the shining levers with painstaking care, and had burnished with tender hands those gleaming

gauges that flickered in the light of the roaring fire. Little had he dreamed that in a night he would turn from engine-cleaner to express fireman, and thus by one stroke of good fortune achieve the half-way milestone to his life's ambition—to sit in the seat where Big Bill Harrigan sat, his body hunched against the sway of the engine, his careful hands nursing 535 over curve and gradient, his eyes scanning those winking reds and greens that pointed the way to safety.

But there was no time for day-dreams now. Harrigan, he saw, was in anxious conclave with Tracey, the guard who had occupied the Mail's van for fifteen years. Mechanically Jim tested brake and injectors, swung over

the lever that controlled the blast, and sent the pressure-gauge creeping upwards to the 200 mark. His fire needed attention, and for half a minute he wielded shovel and "pricker" dexterously, till 535 was purring and hissing with eagerness to be away.

Stray fragments of conversation from the rails floated up to him, then a green lamp was waved, a whistle blew, and Big Bill Harrigan swung himself into the cab, flashed a glance of approval at the levers and gauges, and nodded his satisfaction to his young mate. Then, a touch of the throttle—wider, a twist at the sand-ejector wheel as the giant drivers lost their grip, caught, and spun wildly once more. Then they swung over the points on to the fast line, and the open road lay before them.

That first thirty miles was as some dreadful nightmare to Jim Darrell. The Mail was toiling against the grade all the way, and before the first half hour was up Jim's head was spinning dizzily, while every muscle ached from feeding that roaring, insatiable fire. Try as he would, the pressure began to fall, and as they breasted a stiff climb Big Bill Harrigan cast an anxious glance at the steam-gauge. With a grim smile Jim carried on, swinging the shovel untiringly till Big Bill stopped him with a gesture.

"Over the summit now—easy a while and take a rest—plenty of steam."

His words, shouted across the swaying cab of 535, were almost lost in the thunderous roar of their passage.

For a few minutes Jim took a well-earned rest, hanging over the cab-rail to gaze down the line ahead as signal after signal flashed past. Big Bill, with a glance at his watch, pursed his lips and jerked the regulator still wider; 535, responding gallantly to this new call upon her strength, leaped forward like a live thing, and they raced, swaying and rolling, with whistle screaming defiance, over a long viaduct and through a dark, deserted station whose stark platforms flung back the thundering echo of their eighty-mile-an-hour flight.

"Half-way, and we're ten minutes late!" shouted Big Bill as they raced into a tunnel, only to roar into the open again within a

minute. "It's that bullion I'm frightened of, Jim; it's in the two vans behind the engine, and Tracey tells me that the detectives guarding it were afraid of being held up on the way to Johannesburg."

Jim nodded silently. He was an adventure-loving boy, and ordinarily the thought of being involved in a possible attempt to rob the Mail would have thrilled him beyond measure, but now his responsibility to Big Bill and 535 outweighed all other considerations.

As though conscious of the importance of the occasion, 535 was straining every joint and rivet to keep up the speed as they dashed through the storm which howled round the cab and blurred and blinded the signal lights in a flurry of swirling rain.

"Jensen's Spruit!" shouted Harrigan as they dashed over the points at a dark junction. "Keep her going well, Jim; you'll—Good heavens, what's that?"

But Jim needed no warning to show him what lay ahead. Far down the track he saw a light that grew in volume with every turn of those flying wheels. A red light—red for danger!

He turned to shout to Harrigan, but even as he did so he saw the driver's arm fly out as the regulator thudded into the "shut" position. One second and Big Bill's arm caught the air-latch of the brake; pulled it down.

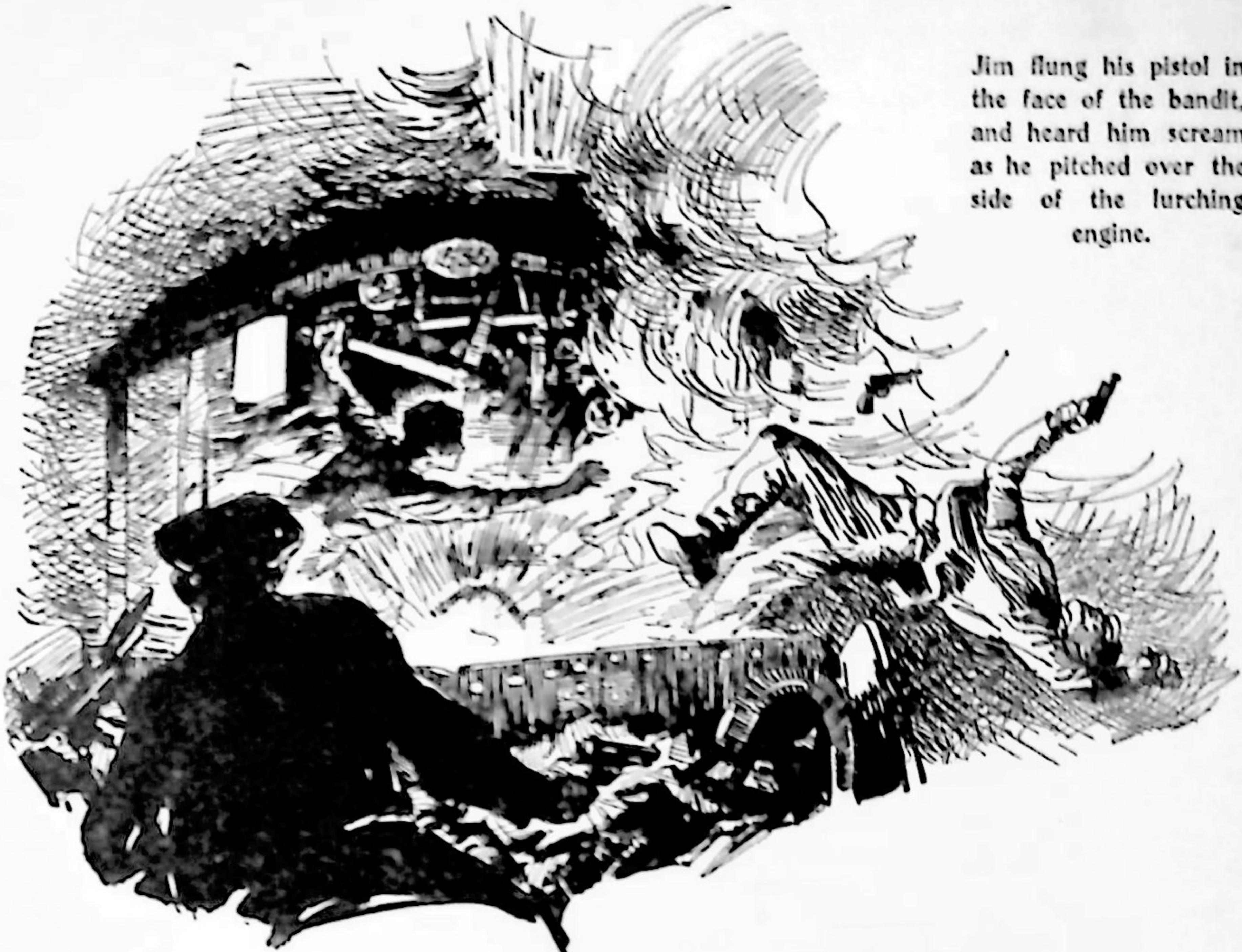
Suddenly checked, 535 lurched like a drunken man, while the harsh grind of brakes told of the air clutching at her tortured driving-wheels. Big Bill, his face tense, was holding down the whistle-chain. And with every revolution of the wheels the red light by the trackside grew ominously nearer.

For a few seconds 535 seemed to be hurling herself at the danger signal; then suddenly her six-coupled drivers locked and she skidded to a dead stand. They had stopped.

"What the thunder!" exclaimed Harrigan impatiently. "A hand-light, by Jiminy!"

At that moment some sixth sense warned Jim Darrell of impending danger, and he jumped to the side of the cab.

Too late! A man's head suddenly appeared over the side of the cab, and the face under the cap worn by the intruder was masked!



Jim flung his pistol in the face of the bandit, and heard him scream as he pitched over the side of the lurching engine.

"Don't move, Mr. Driver!" snapped a harsh voice, and Jim caught a glimpse of a gleaming pistol-barrel. But Big Bill, mad with sudden fury as he realised how they had been trapped, let out a sudden bellow of rage and flung himself across the footplate, brandishing in his right hand a spanner which he had snatched from the tool-rack over the driver's seat.

"You fool!" snarled the masked man, and his gun spat fire.

Big Bill Harrigan swayed on his feet, gazed round him stupidly, and then his eyes seemed to glaze and he crashed in an inanimate heap at the feet of his fireman.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

Strategy !

FOR a moment Jim stood rooted to the spot, too aghast at the brutality of the deed which he had just witnessed to move. Big

Bill Harrigan lay ominously still, a thin trickle of blood coursing down his tanned face.

At sight of what had happened to Harrigan, a blind anger possessed Jim Darrell, and he swung round furiously, his fists clenched. But before he could act a powerful pair of arms caught him from behind and gripped him as in a vice, while the unwavering menace of the second bandit's pistol emphasised the futility of resistance.

Jim subsided. His turn would come, he realised, and he resolved that when the chance did come he would make it decidedly unpleasant for the ruffian who had shot down Big Bill Harrigan in cold blood.

"Keep still, you young idiot!" snarled the man who was holding Jim. "Give me any trouble and I'll break your neck!"

"All right," replied Jim sullenly; "I know when I'm beaten."

"That's better," said the bandit, and

released his grip, though he held his gun ready for action if Jim should show further violence.

The footplate of 535 seemed suddenly to have become alive with men. Jim counted five of them, and without exception they wore masks, while turned up coat collars and the pulled-down peaks of tweed caps served still further to veil their identity. One of them, by his nasal twang an American, seemed to be the leader.

He shouted an order, and three of the bandits jumped out of the cab and disappeared in the teeming rain. The other bent over the prone form of Big Bill Harrigan and made a cursory examination of the wound in his head.

"Only a scratch," he reported in tones of quiet satisfaction. "I didn't shoot to kill, and he'll be all right in an hour or two. What's the next move, chief?"

"Stay and guard this stoker fellow," ordered the ringleader. "We'll be ready in a moment."

He climbed off the footplate and walked briskly back along the train, leaving Jim Darrell to take stock of a far from cheerful situation.

So brilliantly had the hold-up been planned and executed, that the bandits had met with scarcely any resistance. The train staff had been quickly subdued, while a fusillade of shots from silencer-fitted automatics had shown the detectives in charge of the bullion cars that to offer fight would be to court death.

At a glance Jim Darrell saw how complete was the mastery of the bandits. The spot they had chosen for the hold-up was ideal for their purpose, being in the middle of desolate, wind-swept veldt. The nearest station—closed that night—was two miles behind them; the nearest signal-box four miles away. With a sudden sense of utter hopelessness, Jim realised that there was no chance of rescue until the bandits had got safely away with the bullion.

Meanwhile, great activity was manifest farther back along the train. Tracey the guard was being driven by one of the bandits along the length of the train, reassuring such passengers as had been roused from sleep

by the sudden emergency stop. The five detectives guarding the bullion were lined up by the side of the track, woebegone figures of disaster.

Jim was wondering how the train-robbers proposed to remove their booty, when the return of the ringleader, accompanied by five other members of the gang, solved the problem for him.

The ringleader swung himself into the cab.

"Son, can you drive this engine?" he asked peremptorily, and Jim nodded sullenly. After all, what good purpose could be served by lying, and there was always a chance! There was always a chance with Jim Darrell; that was his creed.

"Get a move on, then!" snapped the bandit, and waved his pistol suggestively. "We've uncoupled the two vans that matter, and you can drive them down the line for us a little way. No tricks now, and stop when I tell you to, or—" He waved the gun again.

With a gesture of resignation Jim turned on his blast to get the pressure up again; then releasing the brake, he swung the regulator to quarter-port and 535 glided obediently forward. At the thought of driving a monster express and feeling the great engine move obediently to his hand, Jim Darrell would in ordinary circumstances have felt both proud and thrilled; now, the great disaster outweighed all else.

Slowly 535 and her load of two cars rolled down the track at about fifteen miles an hour. They had gone perhaps two hundred yards at this speed when the train-robber shouted, and obediently Jim closed the regulator and touched the air-latch. Protestingly, 535 came to a dead stand and stood with safety-valve roaring a column of steam skywards as the gauge needle quivered at the 200 mark.

One of the bandits covered Jim while the others clambered down from the cab. Then it was that Jim saw the motor-lorry standing, with lights extinguished, on a rough veldt track that ran alongside the railway line.

So that was it! The bandits would loot the two bullion vans, load their booty on to the lorry and drive away into the darkness,

leaving their victims helpless, with the train split in two and all the telegraph wires cut.

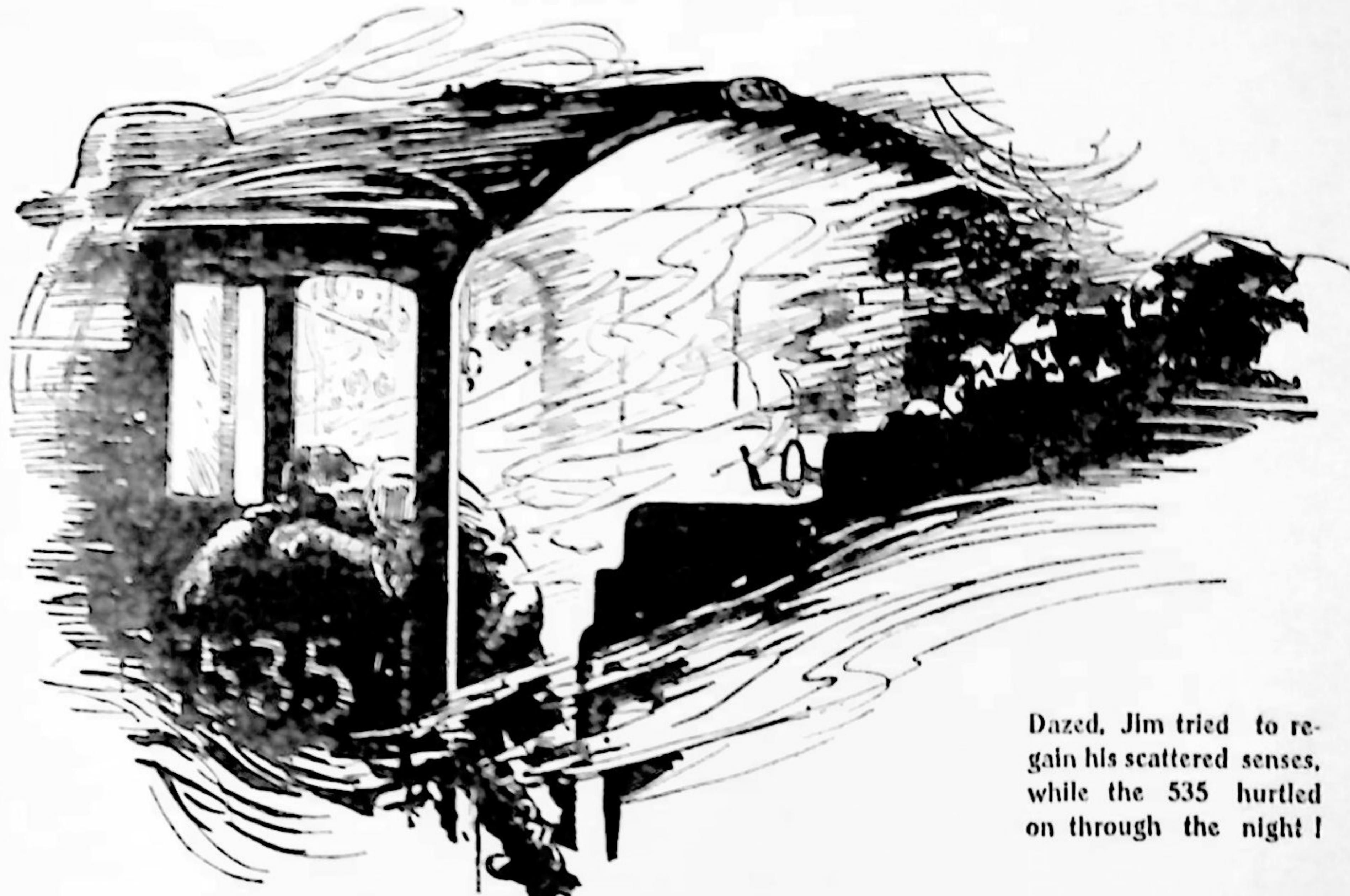
With the realisation of this dastardly plan came the determination to frustrate it if he could. But what could he do? Big Bill Harrigan lay sprawled among the coal in the tender, unconscious, and the pistol-barrel which covered Jim Darrell never wavered.

The bandits were opening the doors of the bullion vans now, and he heard the crashing of the heavy boxes as they were dragged towards the side of the vans. The motor-lorry

When he felt rather than saw that the bandit was looking at him, he screwed his face into an expression of surprise and fixed his gaze over the masked man's shoulder.

"Jump on him, Bill!" he yelled.

The trick was an old one, but it worked. For an instant the bandit hesitated, indecision written clear on his face. Then he turned to look over his shoulder—and the revolver dropped for a fraction of a second. Jim Darrell flung himself across the cab, his fist, swung from the shoulder, caught the



Dazed, Jim tried to regain his scattered senses, while the 535 hurtled on through the night!

was being moved up to the side of the two vans, so that the heavy gold boxes could be slid from the floor of the vans to the lorry.

Time was precious. For an instant panic seized Jim, as he realised the odds against him—and then inspiration came to him.

To attack his captor openly would be suicide; strategy was the only way. Jim's eyes narrowed as a brain-wave came to him. It was risky, but it was worth trying, and anything was better than standing there impotently while the train was sacked.

bandit on the point of the jaw and he rocketed headlong into the tender.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER Winning Through!

A CRY of alarm rose in the bandit's throat, but was stifled as Jim leaped upon him and gripped his lean throat between two brown, knotted fists. For a moment the pair rolled this way and that over the coal-dust and grime that covered the footplate, till the

bandit's head banged with sickening force against a stanchion and he relaxed, inert.

Grabbing the bandit's pistol, Jim leaped to his feet. Not an instant too soon, for the sounds of the struggle had alarmed the other members of the gang, and they came rushing out of the bullion-cars.

Jim was cool as ice. Covering the tender and the darkness behind it with his pistol, he snatched at the regulator and jerked it savagely open. A roar of steam burst from 535's dwarfed smoke-stack as her unleashed drivers slipped impotently on the greasy rails. Instantly Jim caught the sand-ejector and spun the little wheel till the big drivers caught, slipped, and caught again.

Slowly at first, then with rapidly increasing speed, 535 began to move. It seemed that she went forward with agonising slowness, and Jim slammed the regulator wide open. The engine lurched, swayed, and with a stertorous cough, leaped into her stride like a racing greyhound.

Crack! A shot snapped out, and something sang past Jim's head to hit the firebox roof with a ringing crash. Blindly, Jim fired over the back of the tender, and out of the darkness came a scream of agony.

Two of the bandits, Jim realised, had climbed on to the back of the tender. Another bullet whistled over his head, struck the steam-gauge with a shattering crash. Then something hit him in the arm, and he felt a sharp pain creep stingingly down the limb.

A fight to the death, he realised, and fired again. There was an answering crash from the back of the tender, and Jim took aim at a crouching form.

Then they were upon him, two raging bandits. Jim flung his pistol in the face of one, and heard him scream as he pitched over the side of the rolling, lurching engine. The other rushed down the banked coal on the tender, and Jim collared him low round the ankles, Rugger fashion. For a minute they rolled locked together over the footplate, the bandit scratching, snarling, biting, till Jim's clutching hand found a piece of coal, and he brought it down with all his force on the back of his enemy's head.

Dazed, he staggered to his feet and tried

to regain his scattered senses. Like a mad-dened tiger 535 was hurling herself through the darkness; steam from the broken gauge filled the cab, and with every sway of the flying train great lumps of burning coal came rolling through the open firebox door. Except for the prone form of the insensible bandit and the unconscious Harrigan, the lad had the footplate to himself.

Slamming the firebox door shut, Jim staggered to the throttle. His head was going round and round, his arm hurt him badly, and he knew he was losing consciousness.

"Hang on, old chap!" he muttered to himself, and for a moment new life coursed through his veins.

Cutting—station—bridge—tunnel—on tore 535 and the two bullion cars through the night.

"Hang on!" repeated Jim through parched, bleeding lips, and his bloodstained hand closed over the throttle.

Before him he saw the Junction lights; red from the flickering gantries that marked the way to the Rand. Red for danger! With a last effort Jim jammed shut the regulator, pulled down the air-latch, and fell, a tumbled heap, over the lever as 535 and her load dashed, steam-smothered, into a platform of the Junction.

They found him there when 535 came grinding to a stop; police, company officials, and detectives, all hastily summoned by telephone, crowding into the cab where Jim, Big Bill Harrigan, and the train-robber lay together in a crumpled heap.

"Dead!" was the awestruck verdict as they gazed at that tumbled heap of humanity.

But Jim Darrell's luck held. He wasn't dead—only exhausted—and neither was Big Bill Harrigan. They had saved the Mail and her load of bullion.

Every day now, when 535 pulls out of Northport on her run, with Big Bill Harrigan at the throttle, you can see Jim Darrell, the pride of the line, standing on the footplate—for he's now a full-blown fireman.

Back in the shed they call him "Lucky Jim," the boy who took his chance one stormy Christmas Eve!

THE END