

The Signal Tower

By Wadsworth Camp

From The Metropolitan

"I get afraid when you leave me alone this way at night."

The big man, Tolliver, patted his wife's head. His coarse laughter was meant to reassure, but, as he glanced about the living-room of his remote and cheerless house, his eyes were uneasy. The little boy, just six years old, crouched by the cook-stove, whimpering over the remains of his supper.

"What are you afraid of?" Tolliver scoffed.

The stagnant loneliness, the perpetual drudgery, had not yet conquered his wife's beauty, dark and desirable. She motioned towards the boy.

"He's afraid, too, when the sun goes down."

For a time Tolliver listened to the wind, which assaulted the frame house with the furious voices of witches demanding admittance.

"It's that----" he commenced.

She cut him short, almost angrily.

"It isn't that with me," she whispered.

He lifted the tin pail that contained a small bottle of coffee and some sandwiches. He started for the door, but she ran after him, dragging at his arm.

"Don't go! I'm afraid!"

The child was quiet now, staring at them with round, reflective eyes.

"Joe," Tolliver said gently, "will be sore if I don't relieve him on time."

She pressed her head against his coat and clung tighter. He closed his eyes.

"You're afraid of Joe," he said wearily.

Without looking up, she nodded. Her voice was muffled.

"He came last night after you relieved him at the tower. He knocked, and I wouldn't let him in. It made him mad. He swore. He threatened. He said he'd come back. He said he'd show us we couldn't kick him out of the house just because he couldn't help liking me. We never ought to have let him board here at all."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was afraid you'd be fighting each other in the tower; and it didn't seem so bad until dark came on. Why didn't you complain to the railroad when--when he tried to kiss me the other night?"

"I thought that was finished," Tolliver answered slowly, "when I kicked him out, when I told him I'd punish him if he bothered you again. And I--I was a little ashamed to complain to the superintendent about that. Don't you worry about Joe, Sally, I'll talk to him now, before I let him out of the tower. He's due to relieve me again at midnight, and I'll be home then."

He put on his great coat. He pulled his cap over his ears. The child spoke in a high, apprehensive voice.

"Don't go away, papa."

He stared at the child, considering.

"Put his things on, Sally," he directed at last.

"What for?"

"I'll send him back from the tower with something that will make you feel easier."

Her eyes brightened.

"Isn't that against the rules?"

"Guess I can afford to break one for a change," he said. "I'm not likely to need it myself to-night. Come, Sonny."

The child shrank in the corner, his pudgy hands raised defensively.

"It's only a little ways, and Sonny can run home fast," his mother coaxed.

Against his ineffective reluctance she put on his coat and hat. Tolliver took the child by the hand and led him, sobbing unevenly, into the wind-haunted darkness. The father chatted encouragingly, pointing to two or three lights, scattered, barely visible; beacons that marked unprofitable farms.

It was, in fact, only a short distance to the single track railroad and the signal tower, near one end of a long siding. In the heavy, boisterous night the yellow glow from the upper windows, and the red and green of the switch lamps, close to the ground, had a festive appearance. The child's sobs drifted away. His father swung him in his arms,

entered the tower, and climbed the stairs. Above, feet stirred restlessly. A surly voice came down.

"Here at last, eh?"

When Tolliver's head was above the level of the flooring he could see the switch levers, and the table, gleaming with the telegraph instruments, and dull with untidy clips of yellow paper; but the detail that held him was the gross, expectant face of Joe.

Joe was as large as Tolliver, and younger. From that commanding position, he appeared gigantic.

"Cutting it pretty fine," he grumbled.

Tolliver came on up, set the child down, and took off his overcoat.

"Fact is," he drawled, "I got held back a minute--sort of unexpected."

His eyes fixed the impatient man.

"What you planning to do, Joe, between now and relieving me at midnight?"

Joe shifted his feet.

"Don't know," he said uncomfortably. "What you bring the kid for? Want me to drop him at the house?"

Tolliver shook his head. He placed his hands on his hips.

"That's one thing I want to say to you, Joe. Just you keep away from the house. Thought you understood that when you got fresh with Sally the other night."

Joe's face flushed angrily.

"Guess I was a fool to say I was sorry about that. Guess I got to teach you I got a right to go where I please."

Tolliver shook his head.

"Not to our house, if we don't want you."

The other leered.

"You so darned sure Sally don't want me?"

Impulsively Tolliver stepped forward, closing his fists.

"You drop that sort of talk, or----"

Joe interrupted, laughing.

"One thing's sure, Tolliver. If it came to a fight between me and you I'd be almost ashamed to hit you."

Through his passion Tolliver recognized the justice of that appraisal. Physically he was no match for the younger man.

"Things," he said softly, "are getting so we can't work here together."

"Then," Joe flung back, as he went down the stairs, "you'd better be looking for another job."

Tolliver sighed, turning to the table. The boy played there, fumbling with the yellow forms. Tolliver glanced at the top one. He called out quickly to the departing man.

"What's this special, Joe?"

The other's feet stumped on the stairs again.

"Forgot," he said as his head came through the trap. "Some big-wigs coming through on a special train along about midnight. Division headquarters got nothing definite yet, but figure we'll have to get her past thirty-three somewheres on this stretch. So keep awake."

Tolliver with an increasing anxiety continued to examine the yellow slips.

"And thirty-three's late, and still losing."

Joe nodded.

"Makes it sort of uncertain."

"Seems to me," Tolliver said, "you might have mentioned it."

"Maybe," Joe sneered, "you'd like me to stay and do your job."

He went down the stairs and slammed the lower door.

Tolliver studied the slips, his ears alert for the rattling of the telegraph sounder. After a time he replaced the file on the table and looked up. The boy, quite contented now in the warm, interesting room, stretched his fingers towards the sending key, with the air of a culprit dazzled into attempting an incredible crime.

"Hands off, Sonny!" Tolliver said kindly. "You must run back to mother now."

He opened a drawer beneath the table and drew out a polished six-shooter--railroad property, designed for the defense of the tower

against tramps or bandits. The boy reached his hand eagerly for it. His father shook his head.

"Not to play with, Sonny. That's for business. If you promise not to touch it 'till you get home and hand it to mama, to-morrow I'll give you a nickel."

The child nodded. Tolliver placed the revolver in the side pocket of the little overcoat, and, the boy following him, went down stairs.

"You run home fast as you can," Tolliver directed. "Don't you be afraid. I'll stand right here in the door 'till you get there. Nothing shall hurt you."

The child glanced back at the festive lights with an anguished hesitation. Tolliver had to thrust him away from the tower.

"A nickel in the morning----" he bribed.

The child commenced to run. Long after he had disappeared the troubled man heard the sound of tiny feet scuffling with panic along the road to home.

When the sound had died away Tolliver slammed the door and climbed the stairs. He studied the yellow slips again, striving to fix in his mind this problem, involving the safety of numerous human beings, that would probably become his. He had a fear of abnormal changes in the schedule. It had been impressed upon every signalman that thirty-three was the road's most precious responsibility. It was the only solid Pullman train that passed over the division. This time of year it ran crowded and was erratic; more often than not, late. That fact created few difficulties on an ordinary night; but, combined with such uncertainty of schedule, it worried the entire division, undoubtedly, to have running, also on an uncertain schedule, and in the opposite direction on that single track, an eager special carrying

important men. The superintendent, of course, would want to get those flashy trains past each other without delay to either. That was why these lonely towers, without receiving definite instructions yet, had been warned to increase watchfulness.

Tolliver's restlessness grew. He hoped the meeting would take place after Joe had relieved him, or else to the north or south.

It was difficult, moreover, for him to fix his mind to-night on his professional responsibility. His duty towards his family was so much more compelling. While he sat here, listening to every word beaten out by the sounder, he pictured his wife and son, alone in the little house nearly a half a mile away. And he wondered, while he, their only protector, was imprisoned, what Joe was up to.

Joe must have been drunk when he tried to get in the house last night. Had he been drinking to-night?

The sounder jarred rapidly.

"LR. LR. LR."

That was for the tower to the north. It was hard to tell from Joe's manner. Perhaps that would account for his not having called attention to the approaching presence of the special on the division.

Pound. Pound. Pound. The hard striking of the metal had the effect of a trip-hammer on his brain.

"Allen reports special left Oldtown at 9.45."

Joe had certainly been drinking that night last week when he had got fresh with Sally.

"Thirty-three still losing south of Anderson."

He jotted the words down and sent his O.K.'s while his head, it seemed to him, recoiled physically from each rapid stroke of the little brass bar.

Sonny, sent by his mother, had come to tell him that night, panting up the stairs, his eyes wide and excited. Tolliver had looked from the window towards his home, his face flushed, his fists clenched, his heart almost choking him. Then he had seen Joe, loafing along the road in the moonlight, and he had relaxed, scarcely aware of the abominable choice he had faced.

"NT. NT. NT."

His own call. Tolliver shrank from the sharp blows. He forced himself to a minute attention. It was division headquarters.

"Holding twenty-one here until thirty-three and the special have cleared."

Twenty-one was a freight. It was a relief to have that off the road for the emergency. He lay back when the striking at his head had ceased.

It was unfortunate that Joe and he alone should be employed at the tower. Relieving each other at regular intervals, they had never been at the house together. Either Tolliver had been there alone with his wife and his son--or Joe had been. The two men had seen each other too little, only momentarily in this busy room. They didn't really know each other.

"LR. LR. LR."

Tolliver shook his head savagely. It had been a mistake letting Joe board with them at all. Any man would fall in love with Sally. Yet

Tolliver had thought after that definite quarrel Joe would have known his place; the danger would have ended.

It was probably this drinking at the country inn where Joe lived now that had made the man brood. The inn was too small and removed to attract the revenue officers, and the liquid manufactured and sold there was designed to make a man daring, irrational, deadly.

Tolliver shrank from the assaults of the sounder.

Where was Joe now? At the inn, drinking; or----

He jotted down the outpourings of the voluble key. More and more it became clear that the special and thirty-three would meet near his tower, but it would almost certainly be after midnight when Joe would have relieved him. He watched the clock, often pressing his fingers against his temples in an attempt to make bearable the hammering at his brain, unequal and persistent.

While the hands crawled towards midnight the wind increased, shrieking around the tower as if the pounding angered it.

Above the shaking of the windows Tolliver caught another sound, gentle and disturbing, as if countless fingers tapped softly, simultaneously against the panes.

He arose and raised one of the sashes. The wind tore triumphantly in, bearing a quantity of snowflakes that fluttered to the floor, expiring. Under his breath Tolliver swore. He leaned out, peering through the storm. The red and green signal lamps were blurred. He shrugged his shoulders. Anyway, Joe would relieve him before the final orders came, before either train was in the section.

Tolliver clenched his hands. If Joe didn't come!

He shrank from the force of his imagination.

He was glad Sally had the revolver.

He glanced at his watch, half believing that the clock had stopped.

There at last it was, both hands pointing straight up--midnight! And Tolliver heard only the storm and the unbearable strokes of the telegraph sounder. It was fairly definite now. Both trains were roaring through the storm, destined almost certainly to slip by each other at this siding within the next hour.

Where was Joe? And Sally and the boy alone at the house!

Quarter past twelve.

What vast interest could have made Joe forget his relief at the probable loss of his job?

Tolliver glanced from the rear window towards his home, smothered in the night and the storm. If he might only run there quickly to make sure that Sally was all right!

The sounder jarred furiously. Tolliver half raised his hand, as if to destroy it.

It was the division superintendent himself at the key.

"NT. NT. NT. Is it storming bad with you?"

"Pretty thick."

"Then keep the fuses burning. For God's sake, don't let the first in over-run his switch. And clear the line like lightning. Those fellows are driving faster than hell."

Tolliver's mouth opened, but no sound came. His face assumed the expression of one who undergoes the application of some destructive barbarity.

"I get afraid when you leave me alone this way at night."

He visualized his wife, beautiful, dark, and desirable, urging him not to go to the tower.

A gust of wind sprang through the trap door. The yellow slips fluttered. He ran to the trap. He heard the lower door bang shut. Someone was on the stairs, climbing with difficulty, breathing hard. A hat, crusted with snow, appeared. There came slowly into the light Joe's face, ugly and inflamed; the eyes restless with a grave indecision.

Tolliver's first elation died in new uncertainty.

"Where you been?" he demanded fiercely.

Joe struggled higher until he sat on the flooring, his legs dangling through the trap. He laughed in an ugly and unnatural note; and Tolliver saw that there was more than drink, more than sleeplessness, recorded in his scarlet face. Hatred was there. It escaped, too, from the streaked eyes that looked at Tolliver as if through a veil. He spoke thickly.

"Don't you wish you knew?"

Tolliver stooped, grasping the man's shoulders. In each fist he clenched bunches of wet cloth. In a sort of desperation he commenced to shake the bundled figure.

"You tell me where you been----"

"NT. NT. NT."

Joe leered.

"Joe! You got to tell me where you been."

The pounding took Tolliver's strength. He crouched lower in an effort to avoid it, but each blow struck as hard as before, forcing into his brain word after word that he passionately resented. Places, hours, minutes--the details of this vital passage of two trains in the unfriendly night.

"Switch whichever arrives first, and hold until the other is through."

It was difficult to understand clearly, because Joe's laughter persisted, crashing against Tolliver's brain as brutally as the sounder.

"You got to tell me if you been bothering Sally."

The hatred and the cunning of the mottled face grew.

"Why don't you ask Sally?"

Slowly Tolliver let the damp cloth slip from his fingers. He straightened, facing more definitely that abominable choice. He glanced at his cap and overcoat. The lazy clock hands reminded him that he had remained in the tower nearly half an hour beyond his time. Joe was right. It was clear he could satisfy himself only by going home and asking Sally.

"Get up," he directed. "I guess you got sense enough to know you're on duty."

Joe struggled to his feet and lurched to the table. Tolliver wondered at the indecision in the other's eyes, which was more apparent. Joe fumbled aimlessly with the yellow slips. Tolliver's fingers, outstretched toward his coat, hesitated, as if groping for an object that must necessarily elude them.

"Special!" Joe mumbled. "And--Hell! Ain't thirty-three through yet?"

He swayed, snatching at the edge of the table.

Tolliver lowered his hands. The division superintendent had pounded out something about fuses. What had it been exactly? "Keep fuses burning."

With angry gestures he took his coat and cap down, and put them on while he repeated all the instructions that had been forced into his brain with the effect of a physical violence. At the table Joe continued to fumble aimlessly.

"Ain't you listening?" Tolliver blurted out.

"Huh?"

"Why don't you light a fuse?"

It was quite obvious that Joe had heard nothing.

"Fuse!" Joe repeated.

He stooped to a box beneath the table. He appeared to lose his balance. He sat on the floor with his back against the wall, his head drooping.

"What about fuse?" he murmured.

His eyes closed.

Tolliver pressed the backs of his hands against his face. If only his suspense might force refreshing tears as Sonny cried away his infant agonies!

Numerous people asleep in that long Pullman train, and the special thundering down! Sally and Sonny a half mile away in the lonely house! And that drink-inspired creature on the floor--what was he capable of in relation to those unknown, helpless travelers? But what was he capable of; what had he, perhaps, been capable of towards those two known ones that Tolliver loved better than all the world?

Tolliver shuddered. As long as Joe was here Sally and Sonny would not be troubled. But where had Joe been just now? How had Sally and Sonny fared while Tolliver had waited for that stumbling step on the stairs? He had to know that, yet how could he? For he couldn't leave Joe to care for all those lives on the special and thirty-three.

He removed his coat and cap, and replaced them on the hook. He took a fuse from the box and lighted it. He raised the window and threw the fuse to the track beneath. It sputtered and burst into a flame, ruddy, gorgeous, immense. It etched from the night distant fences and trees. It bent the sparkling rails until they seemed to touch at the terminals of crimson vistas. If in the storm the locomotive drivers should miss the switch lamps, set against them, they couldn't neglect this bland banner of danger, flung across the night.

When Tolliver closed the window he noticed that the ruddy glow filled the room, rendering sickly and powerless the yellow lamp wicks. And Tolliver clutched the table edge, for in this singular and penetrating illumination he saw that Joe imitated the details of sleep; that beneath half-closed lids, lurked a fanatical wakefulness, and final resolution where, on entering the tower, he had exposed only indecision.

While Tolliver stared Joe abandoned his masquerade. Wide-eyed, he got lightly to his feet and started for the trap.

Instinctively, Tolliver's hand started for the drawer where customarily the revolver was kept. Then he remembered, and was sorry he had sent the revolver to Sally. For it was clear that the poison in Joe's brain was sending him to the house while Tolliver was chained to the tower. He would have shot, he would have killed, to have kept the man here. He would do what he could with his hands.

"Where you going?" he asked hoarsely.

Joe laughed happily.

"To keep Sally company while you look after the special and thirty-three."

Tolliver advanced cautiously, watching for a chance. When he spoke his voice had the appealing quality of a child's.

"It's my time off. If I do your work you got to stay at least."

Joe laughed again.

"No. It only needs you to keep all those people from getting killed."

Tolliver sprang then, but Joe avoided the heavier, clumsier man. He grasped a chair, swinging it over his head.

"I'll teach you," he grunted, "to kick me out like dirt. I'll teach you and Sally."

With violent strength he brought the chair down. Tolliver got his hands up, but the light chair crashed them aside and splintered on his

head. He fell to his knees, reaching out blindly. He swayed lower until he lay stretched on the floor, dimly aware of Joe's descending steps, of the slamming of the lower door, at last of a vicious pounding at his bruised brain.

"NT. NT. NT."

He struggled to his knees, his hands at his head.

"No, by God! I won't listen to you."

"Thirty-three cleared LR at 12:47."

One tower north! Thirty-three was coming down on him, but he was only glad that the pounding had ceased. It commenced again.

"NT. NT. NT. Special cleared JV at 12:48."

Each rushing towards each other with only a minute's difference in schedule! That was close--too close. But what was it he had in his mind?

Suddenly he screamed. He lurched to his feet and leant against the wall. He knew now. Joe, with those infused and criminal eyes, had gone to Sally and Sonny--to get even. There could be nothing in the world as important as that. He must get after Joe. He must stop him in time.

"NT. NT. NT."

There was something in his brain about stopping a train in time.

"It only needs you to keep all those people from getting killed."

Somebody had told him that. What did it mean? What had altered here in the tower all at once?

There was no longer any red.

"NT. NT. NT."

"I won't answer."

Where had he put his cap and coat. He needed them. He could go without. He could kill a beast without. His foot trembled on the first step.

"NT. NT. NT. Why don't you answer? What's wrong. No O. K. Are you burning fuses? Wake up. Send an O. K."

The sounder crashed frantically. It conquered him.

He lurched to the table, touched the key, and stuttered out:

"O. K. NT."

He laughed a little. They were in his block, rushing at each other, and Joe was alone at the house with Sally and the child. O. K.!

He lighted another fuse, flung it from the window, and started with automatic movements for the trap.

Let them crash. Let them splinter, and burn, and die. What was the lot of them compared with Sally and Sonny?

The red glare from the fuse sprang into the room. Tolliver paused, bathed in blood.

He closed his eyes to shut out the heavy waves of it. He saw women like Sally and children like Sonny asleep in a train. It gave him an impression that Sally and Sonny were, indeed, on the train. To keep them safe it would be necessary to retard the special until thirty-three should be on the siding and he could throw that lever that would close the switch and make the line safe. He wavered, taking short steps between the table and the trap. Where were Sally and Sonny? He had to get that clear in his mind.

A bitter cold sprang up the trap. He heard the sobbing of a child.

"Sonny!"

It was becoming clear enough now.

The child crawled up the steps on his hands and knees. Tolliver took him in his arms, straining at him passionately.

"What is it, Sonny? Where's mama?"

"Papa, come quick. Come quick."

He kept gasping it out until Tolliver stopped him.

"Joe! Did Joe come?"

The child nodded. He caught his breath.

"Joe broke down the door," he said.

"But mama had the gun," Tolliver said hoarsely.

The boy shook his head.

"Mama wouldn't let Sonny play with it. She locked it up in the cupboard. Joe grabbed mama, and she screamed, and said to run and make you come."

In the tower, partially smothered by the storm, vibrated a shrill cry. For a moment Tolliver thought his wife's martyrdom had been projected to him by some subtle means. Then he knew it was the anxious voice of thirty-three--the pleading of all those unconscious men and women and little ones. He flung up his arms, releasing the child, and ran to the table where he lighted another fuse, and threw it to the track. He peered from the window, aware of the sobbing refrain of his son.

"Come quick! Come quick! Come quick!"

From far to the south drifted a fainter sibilation, like an echo of thirty-three's whistle. To the north a glow increased. The snowflakes there glistened like descending jewels. It was cutting it too close. It was vicious to crush all that responsibility on the shoulders of one ignorant man, such a man as himself, or Joe. What good would it do him to kill Joe now? What was there left for him to do?

He jotted down thirty-three's orders.

The glow to the north intensified, swung slightly to the left as thirty-three took the siding. But she had to hurry. The special was whistling closer--too close. Thirty-three's locomotive grumbled abreast of him. Something tugged at his coat.

"Papa! Won't you come quick to mama?"

The dark, heavy cars slipped by. The red glow of the fuse was overcome by the white light from the south. The last black Pullman of thirty-three cleared the points. With a gasping breath Tolliver threw the switch lever.

"It's too late now, Sonny," he said to the importunate child.

The tower shook. A hot, white eye flashed by, and a blurred streak of cars. Snow pelted in the window, stinging Tolliver's face. Tolliver closed the window and picked up thirty-three's orders. If he had kept the revolver here he could have prevented Joe's leaving the tower. Why had Sally locked it in the cupboard? At least it was there now. Tolliver found himself thinking of the revolver as an exhausted man forecasts sleep.

Someone ran swiftly up the stairs. It was the engineer of thirty-three, surprised and impatient.

"Where are my orders, Tolliver? I don't want to lie over here all night."

He paused. His tone became curious.

"What ails you, Tolliver?"

Tolliver handed him the orders, trembling.

"I guess maybe my wife at the house is dead, or--You'll go see."

The engineer shook his head.

"You brace up, Tolliver. I'm sorry if anything's happened to your wife, but we couldn't hold thirty-three, even for a murder."

Tolliver's trembling grew. He mumbled incoherently:

"But I didn't murder all those people----"

"Report to division headquarters," the engineer advised. "They'll send you help to-morrow."

He hurried down the stairs. After a moment the long train pulled out, filled with warm, comfortable people. The child, his sobbing at an end, watched it curiously. Tolliver tried to stop his shaking.

There was someone else on the stairs now, climbing with an extreme slowness. A bare arm reached through the trap, wavering for a moment uncertainly. Ugly bruises showed on the white flesh. Tolliver managed to reach the trap. He grasped the arm and drew into the light the dark hair and the chalky face of his wife. Her wide eyes stared at him strangely.

"Don't touch me," she whispered. "What am I going to do?"

"Joe?"

"Why do you tremble so?" she asked in her colorless voice, without resonance. "Why didn't you come?"

"Joe?" he repeated hysterically.

She drew away from him.

"You won't want to touch me again."

He pointed to the repellant bruises. She shook her head.

"He didn't hurt me much," she whispered, "because I--I killed him."

She drew her other hand from the folds of her wrapper. The revolver dangled from her fingers. It slipped and fell to the floor. The child stared at it with round eyes, as if he longed to pick it up.

She covered her face and shrank against the wall.

"I've killed a man----"

Through her fingers she looked at her husband fearfully. After a time she whispered:

"Why don't you say something?"

His trembling had ceased. His lips were twisted in a grin. He, too, wondered why he didn't say something. Because there were no words for what was in his heart.

In a corner he arranged his overcoat as a sort of a bed for the boy.

"Won't you speak to me?" she sobbed. "I didn't mean to, but I had to. You got to understand. I had to."

He went to the table and commenced to tap vigorously on the key. She ran across and grasped at his arm.

"What you telling them?" she demanded wildly.

"Why, Sally!" he said. "What's the matter with you?--To send another man now Joe is gone."

Truths emerged from his measureless relief, lending themselves to words. He trembled again for a moment.

"If I hadn't stayed! If I'd let them smash! When all along it only needed Joe to keep all those people from getting killed."

He sat down, caught her in his arms, drew her to his knee, and held her close.

"You ain't going to scold?" she asked wonderingly.

He shook his head. He couldn't say any more just then; but when his tears touched her face she seemed to understand and to be content.

So, while the boy slept, they waited together for someone to take Joe's place.

FOOTNOTE:

[6] Copyright, 1920, by The Metropolitan Magazine Company.
Copyright, 1921, by Charles Wadsworth Camp.