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A WINTER'S

Night's Ride in the Sierra.

From Overland Monthly for June.

My medical friend had puffed away vigorously at his cigar for some minutes, in silence; and then, throwing away the stump, quietly began;

It was in the winter of 1868 9, when I had just been placed in charge of a division near the summit of the Sierra Nevada, on the half finished Central Pacific Railroad. After a long day's ride, I came back to the boarding house at ten o'clock in the evening, and was told that a messenger had been there from Camp No. ——, with a request that I would lose no time in hurrying over there to attend upon John Smith, who was in a very critical condition. The messenger had been very urgent, and it was evidently a case of life and death—nothing less. I took a few minutes to consider. I was tired out, and wanted sleep badly, but could, on a pinch, go a little farther without breaking down entirely. The moon would be up at eleven o'clock, and the night was still and clear, though the snow had only just ceased falling, and was from five to eight feet deep on the level, if you can use the expression properly where there is nothing like a level to be found, and the roads—or trails, rather—are obliterated by the drifts. I inquired about the location of Camp No. ——. It was twelve miles away, and directly over a ridge, or spur, of the mountains. My own horse could not stand the trip, but a big lubber of a cart horse, that they said was a good saddle horse, was offered me. I got supper, put on dry socks and an extra pair of fur lined overboots, and was in the saddle and off.

A good saddle horse! The brute belonged to the nightmare family, and his mother must have taken special pride in him. Great heavens, what a gait! He had traveled so long in the cart that the steady jolt had communicated itself to his spine, and become chronic. At every step he jerked his back up, as if expecting to feel the girth strap strike him underneath, and neither curses nor blows would induce him for a moment to recognize the fact that he was out of the shafts, and abandon his eternal hippytyhop. When I started out, there were hard lumps in the saddle, as large as chestnuts; before the twelve miles were half completed, the lumps had grown to the size of paving stones, and awfully sharp-edged and rasping. The snow which had just fallen filled the trail, but the old snow underneath being hard packed, and the trees along the route well blazed, I had no difficulty in keeping the track most of the time. But when about three miles from my place of destination, as near as I could guess, clouds obscured the moon for a time, and I lost the road. I kept on as well as I knew how, guessing at the location of Camp No. ——, and, after rolling down the steep side of a ravine, and working half an hour to get old Jerky back into the ridge, filling my overshoes with snow, and fairly exhausting myself in floundering through the drifts, I was rewarded with the sight of lights in some cabins half a mile away. Not doubting that this was Camp No. ——, I rounded a small canyon, worked my way over a point of rocks, Jerky stumbling and falling repeatedly, and reached the cabins at half past twelve o'clock.

The lights had disappeared. "Halloo the house, there!" No answer. "Halloo the house!" louder and longer than before. A panel in the side of the nearest cabin opened slowly and cautiously, and after time enough had elapsed to allow a critical examination of the party outside, a voice demanded: "Who you, John? What you wantee catchee here?" It was a Chinese wood cutters' camp, and there was not a white man about the place.

The Johns told me that there was a camp of white men on the other side of the ravine I had just crossed, and perhaps half a mile farther up the mountain; they thought it might be "Camp Numble ——." Half an hour's floundering through the snow brought me back to the point whence I had sighted the lights, and soon after 1 a. m. I was at the white men's camp. I roused the inmates more easily here, as they were indulging in a little friendly game of "pitch," or "draw"—that being Saturday night—and had not retired to their virtuous bunks. No, that was not Camp No. ——, my informer told me, and, what was worse, Camp No. —— was right over the summit of the mountain, a mile and a half away. I could go around by the trail, three miles, or ride up to the railroad track, tie my horse, and walk through the snow-sheds, a little more than a mile—it was contrary to the rules to take an animal inside the sheds.

I started up toward the track, and reached it at 2 a. m. The night was now clear and still; not the slightest noise could be heard, and the silence was something awful and oppressive. The last man and the last horse on earth will not feel more completely alone than Jerky and I did at that moment. As I was about to dismount and tie him to a tree, a thought struck me. I knew every regular train on the road, and there was none due for hours from either direction. I had a time table in my pocket, and I took it out and examined it carefully by the moonlight. The track was clear; why might I not venture to save my strength and that of my horse, and by saving time, perhaps save a valuable human life as well? Why not, indeed? The more I thought of it, the more satisfied I became that it was a safe thing to do.

The moon, now unobscured, was high in the heavens as I entered the snow shed, and it was not very difficult to keep the way, as the light came scintillating through a thousand cracks and crevices in the rough timber structure. Three or four culverts, to allow the passage of mountain streams when the snow is melting, blocked my progress for a brief time, but there was a plank across one or two, for the convenience of "foot passengers," and as the water was hard frozen, I got old Jerky around the others in safety.

The worst was over, and I was already beginning to chuckle over the adventure, and pride myself on my forethought and pluck in making the venture. I had, undoubtedly, saved at least an hour of hard work sweating through the snow, and possibly—not improbably, in fact—saved a life. Just then I heard a low, tremulous, humming noise running along the front laden rails, and instinctively checked my horse to listen. It had subsided for the moment, and I went on in silence. Suddenly it commenced again, and seemed louder and clearer than before. I halted again. God have mercy upon me! I exclaimed, involuntarily. It was the rumble of the wheels of a coming train, beyond a question. I sprang to the ground, and placed my ear to the rail. The train was coming from the west; it must be a "construction train," laden with materials for the road, and manned with laborers, as well. The track occupied the full width of the shed, allowing only for the overhang of the cars. A man might escape by lying down; but a horse was almost certain death, and if the train struck him, it must go off the track almost inevitably. I was upon it in a moment. Small as I was then aware of what I intended doing, and jumped down the grade, to the east side, as fast as my stiff and clumsy legs, urged by whipping spur, and the attraction of gravitation, could move him. Clearer and clearer came the humming notes, and I heard, although I was too flurried to notice the first, the whistle of the coming train sounded a signal, instead of a sharp curve, or [illegible] of a tunnel. It could not be more than a minute from the time I left the track, when old Jerky, plunged over the last bank, and I was safely ensconced behind a tolerable

patches, and floundered through the small snow drifts which had filtered in through the crevices in the shed work, but reckless of danger to limbs alone in presence of the greater danger to myself, and perhaps hundreds of my fellow men, I whipped and spurred unceasingly, and drove him on at the height of his speed. Nearer and nearer came the train; I could already hear the chough, chough, chough of the locomotive behind me. At last, I saw an opening in the side of the shed not many rods distant, and, with a triumphant yell, I urged my steed to put forth his utmost effort. Sixty seconds more and I would be saved, and the danger to the train avoided. The seconds seemed hours in the feverish excitement of the moment, but they were over at last, and I sprang off my horse on the instant that he reached the opening, and rushed, with the rein in my hand, through the aperture. Old Jerky snorted and sprang backward, throwing me down, and pulling the rein from my hand. I saw the trouble at a glance. The opening was not of sufficient height to admit of a horse going through it erect, and a heavy timber to which the planks were nailed, ran across the top. I sprang inside, and took a survey of the situation in an instant. The beam would have borne ten times the strain that I could have brought to bear upon it, as it was a foot thick, sound, and fairly placed. I threw all my strength and weight against the planking a little beyond the beam, and fell back upon the icy ground; the planks were imbedded in the frozen ground at their lower ends, and I could not start them in the slightest degree. I sprang up, and ran to the other side of the shed, to try if the planking on that side was less firmly secured. Through the crevices I saw a precipice running hundreds of feet, sheer down from the side of the shed. I could not escape that way, and if the train went off there, no person on it would survive to tell the tale.

I fell on my knees to pray, but, before I had uttered a word, the thought passed through my brain that I might throw the horse down, and pull him through the opening by main strength. I had the rope from the saddle in my hands in an instant, and throwing it around his fore legs, I sprang to one side, and with my whole strength attempted to trip him. The brute jumped backward, and refused to fall, while the rope ran through my hands, tearing the skin, and searing the flesh as if I had grasped a red hot iron. I remembered, at that moment, having seen a Mexican *vaquero* showing off his skill in horsemanship, at San Jose amid an admiring throng, and making the sneering remark to a friend, "And he is nothing but a bull driver, after all!" In that time of supreme agony, I would have sacrificed every advantage of birth, education, talent, and professional skill, and changed places with that uneducated, despised, bull driving Greaser, merely to have received in turn the gift of the ability to perform the trick of throwing down a horse. My foot struck a stick of wood, such as is used for burning on the locomotives, which was lying on the ground, and I instantly stooped to get it, determined to beat the brains out of the brute with it, or at least stun him into insensibility, and then pull him into the opening. It was frozen fast in the ice, and I could not tear it loose, though I put forth strength which seemed herculean, in the frenzy of my excitement. It occurred to me that I had a pocket knife, and I might cut his throat; but the train was almost upon me, and there was no time for him to bleed to death; this reflection did not consume a second and a half. In my despair, I gave one long drawn yell—Help! No answer came.

The train came on, as it seemed to me, with lightning speed, upon the down grade, and the light of the locomotive headlamp already fell upon me. Ten seconds more, and there would be a terrific crash, and a pile of broken cars; and crushed, bleeding, and dying men would burst through the side of the shed, and go rolling down the mountain side. Deadly faint, and convinced that all was nearly over, I staggered against the side of the shed, closed my eyes, and sank half down to the ground. I heard Jerky give a sudden snort of terror, and opened my eyes. He had discovered the danger at last, and comprehended it all in an instant. The train could not have been more than thirty feet from him, when he made one tremendous jump, and went through the opening. The beam caught the high Mexican saddle, tore it into fragments, and frightfully lacerated his back, but his weight, and the strength which mortal terror gave him, carried him through, and he fell in the snow, outside. I sprang after him just as the locomotive came abreast of me, and fell, trembling, exhausted, and fainting, beside him.

I don't think the engineer saw us at all. I did not see him so far as I could remember afterward. It was half an hour before I could gather strength enough to regain my feet. When I did so, I got my exhausted and bleeding horse upon his legs, and replaced the wreck of the saddle upon his lacerated back, securing it, as well as I could, with some thongs cut from the edge of the rein, and my pocket handkerchief, torn into strips, and prepared to resume my journey. In a canyon, filled with the black shadow of the mountain, I saw what appeared to be the dim outlines of several cabins. That must be Camp No. —! Pulling my limping steed after me by the bridle, I made my way slowly and painfully down to the nearest cabin, and knocked at the door. "Git!" was the response which came to the third or fourth knock. I repeated the knocking. "Git! you drunken son of a gun! You have been yelling around here long enough! Leave—or I'll put a bullet through you!" came in decided and most emphatic tones, from within. I called out that I was the doctor from Camp —, not the man they mistook me for, and wanted to know if that was Camp No. —, and if John Smith was there—John Smith, who was dying, and wanted the doctor so bad. There was a moment's debate, in whispers, between two or more persons inside, then I heard the scratching of matches, and the shuffling of heavy slippers over the floor, and, at last, the door was opened. "Be you the doctor? Well, you are a powerful weak looking chicken, for a doctor!" said John Smith—for it proved to be him—after he had held the candle to my face, and deliberately scrutinized my person for some seconds.

"You sent for me, I think, Mr. Smith?"

"Well, yes, I did send for you, but I'm kinder sorry now that I did, for I have concluded to go over that, to-morrow, on business, anyhow."

"But the messenger said you were dying, or the next thing to it—almost dead, I think he said."

"Well, yes, I was pretty considerable scared at the time. You see, I had an attack some out right bad on my leg, and I was afraid that it might be pleurisy, or new pneumonia, or gyrsiphus, or suthin o' that sort, and if I come over in the snow and catched cold in it I might a' gone in."

He sat down on the side of his bunk, and pulled up the quilt from his right shin: there was a patch of ringworm there, about the size of a silver dollar—and that was all. I made use of some expressions. I don't often swear, but I felt aggravated under all the circumstances, and considered myself justified. I still am considerably. Mr. Smith heard me through. Then he [illegible] city to his [illegible] "Young man, I'm sorry you have had this ride on account of my ringworm, but I'm glad you have come, for I feel much easier in my mind now that I know I'm able to ride over to Camp No. — to-morrow. I've been a long day on this business, and I'm called on again to night on a job that I'm going to be able to do by the time you get back, you bet!" I [illegible] the door [illegible] the stove, [illegible] a chair, and [illegible] a cigar, [illegible] the door [illegible] the door [illegible] door [illegible] door [illegible]