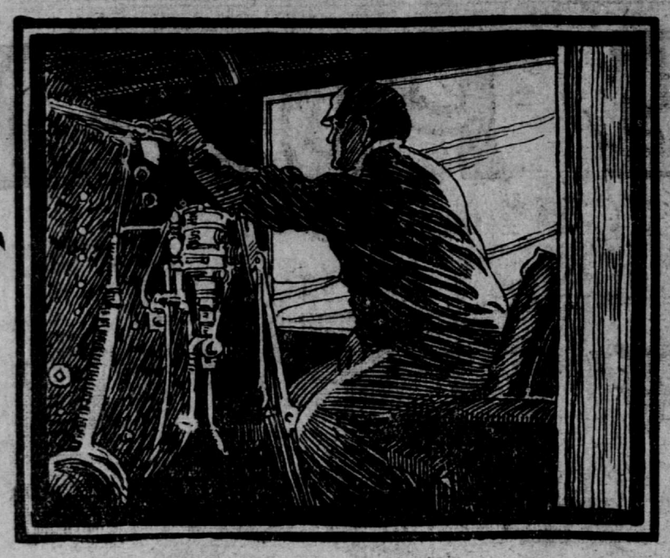
SONS OF THE RED ROSE

A STORY OF THE RAIL IN THE '80's

BY M·B·DE COURCY



The story of the Sons of the Red Rose began in The Sunday Call May 28 and will continue for several weeks. This is the best story of railroad life that has appeared for years.

JOHN GRAY thought as he looked upon the swift flow of the straggling landscape of the change that had come into his life.

"Well," said Howe, "we are really started. Now, when we get to Baltimore it will be no use to try to get out of there in a coach. I'll have to try a new racket. It's one I've thought out and I know it will work."

"All right," said Gray. "You are the captain."

It seemed only a few minutes to John when, after a confused mixture of Druidic groves, quick-angling country country homes, they ran into a maze of sidetracks through a long, sulphurous tunnel, to emerge under a smoky train-shed resonant with clanging bells and rushing feet.

"Come on," said Howe, passing into the station. He crossed to the ticket window and from a tin case extracted a long slip of cardboard.

"Our compass," he remarked with a laugh. "Let's go to some quiet place and map out our campaign."

In a corner they found a pile of boards. Howe took out his "compass."

"Now, this is what is called a passenger time card," he remarked. "The true time card is called the working card. It contains the arriving and leaving time of all regular trains—both freight and passenger—at all stations; this is a non-official imitation used by the passenger department for the benefit of the traveling public. Of course, it's correct as far as passenger trains go, but some smart Alecks think it is the real thing. There is a great difference in the big sheet carrying on its face all of the regular trains passing over a division. Strings of black, snaky figures that, cobra-like, bite swift and deep when you ignore or disregard them. But you will absorb that soon enough. Now, what I want of this card is this: You see here," placing his finger at the bottom, "is a train No. 3, leaving here at 8:01 p. m. Now, follow up—where time is shown opposite station names the train makes a stop—you see this row is filled to Harrisburg—that means the train is a local accommodation, stopping at all stations. Now, see, she stops here at 8:23—if the engine is an inside oiler we are O. K."

"What do you mean by an inside oiler?" asked Gray.

"Why, this. The valves that admit steam to the cylinders are moving across their seats continually when the engine is in motion, and, of course, the pistons in the cylinders, too. There is lots of friction, and they must get oil. Until very lately the only way to do this was to take a pot of melted tallow and pour it into cups placed upon the steam chests—a dangerous piece of business that has put many a poor fireman under the daisies. You pitch over a grade, wind blowing a gale, air full of sleet, running board a sheet of ice, your eyes full of fire—the dazed blind of the white hot furnace that you have been punching and slashing for an hour—and start with a gallon of hot tallow and your lantern in one hand clinging to the hand-rail with the other. Then step down on the hot steam chest, balance yourself—kick the cup open—pour in the precious grease—then clutching the headlight bracket—step over the black gulf to the pilot beam, work your way over the pitching, plunging front to repeat the process on the other side, knowing that at any moment you may form a cushion against the smoke box for the accommodation of a prowling cow—it forms a bad combination.

"To avoid this some bright fellow has put the cups in the cab piping them to the steam chests. I heard some of the engineers laughing over the report that somebody had invented a thing that would feed tallow automatically drop by drop against steam pressure. I guess it's on a par with that automatic air brake. What I meant was this. I expect we will go into Harrisburg on the pilot of No. 3 to-night if she is a cab oiler. That will avoid a grimy smoke artist falling over us the first hill we start down."

"You surely don't intend to ride the cow-catcher!" gasped John.

"Yes," answered Howe, "and see here, John. The railroad man calls that piece of furniture a pilot. Don't forget it, it might get the firm into trouble. Now the plan is this: We will stroll up to that station, get there a few minutes before the train is due. If the platform is on the engineer's side, and she is our kind of oiler we are O. K. We stand close to the track on the left side. When she stops the fireman will do one of two things. Either be working on his fire to get it in good shape to stand the heavy mauling of starting and regaining speed or will cross to the engineer's side to inspect the feminine population. It is immaterial to which his temperament leads him, it will leave a clear coast for us to climb on. Once there under the headlight, it's the darkest, slickest place to 'beat' on the train."

"But cattle," said John.

"Never mind about mights or mays," interrupted Howe quickly. "If you let them paddle around in your gray matter you will prove a disgrace to your devoted teacher."

John brought a heavy hand down on his shoulder, and arising the laughing couple set out for "their kind" of a station.

When after an hour they reached it, it happily came up to expectations; a long reach of boards on the right side, a clump of carefully tended flowers nestled in the dark green lawn on the left. Avoiding the boys and men decorating the railing and trucks they strolled to the upper end. It was a dark moonless night. "Just right," John commented.

Down the line sounded the musical chime of a whistle.

"Cross over," said Howe.

Gray followed, his heart beating rather quicker than he liked. They had gauged it well, the pilot stopped nearly opposite them.

"Crawl up, take your time; that's it. Now catch your heels in the cross bars," commanded Howe as they quickly clambered up.

"Now we are 'It,'" he exclaimed as they settled on the pilot beam. "Come on old smoke wagon."

As if in answer to the taunt a hoarse roar tore through the smoke box, the air was filled with the fiery uprising of red cinders, the beam swung from side to side over a heavy "slip" of the grinding drivers. John clung to his beam—despite its swing it seemed refreshingly solid. Then silence for a second, then with a heavy exhaust they were off.

"I wish I had that idiot by the neck," howled Howe nearly standing on his head in a frantic effort to dislodge a "hot one" from under his collar.

"Never drop sand at a stop, they rip an engine wide open. I wish I was his master mechanic—scare you, John?"

"I decline to answer questions coming from a man in your mental condition," responded John dryly.

"All right, young man, just wait until you get a pound of red hot fire down your back and then I'll do the Ben Franklin act."

Meanwhile the train had gathered headway. To John it was very strange, very awesome, yet delightfully fascinating—the divergent rays of the headlight glowing in quick broken ripples against ghostly cuts, darting amid the swaying festoons of reeling bridges, or mirrored momentarily, like a free, swift-flying bird, in the sudden outflashing of cottage windows—the unspringing into spectral prominence and fleeting flight into the night of all things. The heavy bound from the curve to tangent—the grinding backward return; the sense of a mighty, irresistible power; rioting in thrust of piston or grim dance of rods; the meteor flight of lighted hamlets, their lights streaming back like stripes on a wide-flung banner, and over all the sheet of living fire, punctuated by the hoarse tear of the eager, crowding exhaust.

"How do you like it?" asked Howe.

"I'm just beginning to live," came the answer. Howe noticed the vibrant ring in the voice and clasped the hand resting near his, approvingly.

A long whistle, then the clatter of valves, replaced the tumult of rushing steam.

"Won't the people at the station see us?"

"No, indeed; this is the darkest place on the train. Haven't you ever noticed how people will stare at the headlight until it is on them and then drop their blinded eyes while the engine passes? Watch now!" and John saw he was right.

"Our only trouble will be at York, where the cinder throwing high priest will probably anoint the combination. There is a coal bin a little way this side, but we will be safe there—too much coal scattered on the ground for the oil artist. Now, when we get to York we will watch which side he gets down on, crawl up on the running board on the opposite side, crouch down, and when he gets through and is getting up with the torch flare in his eyes we will regain our places. No danger of the fireman seeing us; it only takes about four minutes to get water."

Howe proved a good prophet. At York things worked like clockwork. Dodging the burly old engineer proved an easy task. The strong face, torch illumined, peering for oil holes, passing unsuspecting a foot from his own, gave John a great inclination to laugh aloud.

Then they came upon a long silver line with misty oval emeralds on its bosom.

"That's the Susquehanna," said Howe. "We will soon be in Harrisburg. It's a rough place on people in our peculiar line, so as soon as we stop, dodge off and run back on the track side; then we can cross over the coach platform and join the passengers as they get off."

This, too, worked all right. As the engine stopped they dropped quickly to the ground. Only a car inspector noticed them. Laughing as he observed their move he muttered "Rather a slick pair; beat old John all right."

After a few minutes in a lunch room they made a detour to the freight yards, where they came to a great engine house. On an outgoing track stood a long row of simmering machines; standing with banked fires awaiting their turn to leap into strenuous life. The stack emitting now only a faint shadowy wisp of vapor soon to wave a sable plume—red woofed in threaded fire over the stars glimmering in the long stretches of the "Blue Juanita" or "Lordly Susquehanna."

"Now these are engines soon to go out," said Howe as they rested upon the edge of a friendly truck. "They are all freights, but there comes the one we rode here on. This winds up her trip. Now the engineer leaves her and the house gang takes her in charge. The fire and ash pans are cleaned, a full supply of coal, water and sand put on. All repairs reported attended to, then she is groomed like a race horse.

"Now look at her, standing there her shining rods resting high against the big drivers with the dainty disdainful grace of a woman holding up her skirts on a muddy crossing. Then at those dirty old freight pelicans, and I will tell you something about a queer idea that came to me when in an art gallery. There was an ancient, earth-stained statue, the work of some old Greek, dead thousands of years, I think they call it Apollo. The forceful, forward bend of the eager form, the proud poise of the undaunted head, the direct, challenging eyes and faint, reckless dash of smile lurking in the corners of straight, firm lips—a face to which soft sunshine or bitter sleet were things of equal naught—the predestined type of all who die with smiling lips, and I thought it the incarnation of the truest symbol of the rail—the passenger engine.

"In the same room stood another, of the old Hun who organized the first personally conducted Italian excursion—Attila—the heavy lumbering shoulders and sullen, determined face reminded me of those freight engines; low, but strong in the momentum of mighty force. If stalled suddenly taking the slack again and again until the caboose moved or a drawhead pulls out. But there is the fireman lighting the headlight on that head engine; let's go over and hit him."

"The foot braces against the boiler head and * * * the lever latches in the last backward notch."

The pair moved across the track.

"Do you go north?" asked Howe of the fireman.

"Yes," answered the big, frank-faced young man pleasantly. "Want to go up—well, I can't carry you on the engine, and as for asking the conductor, it's like this: We have a fellow on the rear who has just got back from a long suspension and a first-class jacking up. I'd rather not ask him. It's warm weather, try a side-door sleeper. I can queer the brakeman. Come up. When we go up in the yard I'll show you the train."

Then a big burly fellow crowded into the cab, silently raised his seat box lid, after carefully depositing his lunch basket and coat, took out a greasy suit of overalls and still preserving a surly silence proceeded to put them on. An equally dingy cap being dug up he put it on the back of his head, took a torch, jerked the firebox door open—banging John's leg as he did so—thrust it down against the fire, withdrew it lighted, reached a long spouted oil can and with a preparatory flirt against the coal boards grimly crawled down to "oil around."

"Who is that?" asked John, ruefully rubbing his bruised leg. "The King of the Cannibal Islands, I reckon."

"Only old Jack, my side partner," answered the fireman. "It always makes his hair pull to get out this time in the morning. He's all right."

"That's nothing, John," said Howe. "The pilot of an incoming steamer and a locomotive engineer cultivate that manner—it's the unwritten law of their profession."

The subject of their remarks crawled up on the opposite side, blew out his torch, replaced the can on the boiler-head, then throwing his reverse lever ahead, growled to his associate, "Sand and water all right?"

"Both full to the neck," responded the fireman.

"All right, we will go up in the yard, we ought to have a good run—got a peach special."

Settling himself on the seat box he added: "What are you trying to do, turn the cab into a stock car?"

"Yes," answered Howe, quickly, before the firemen could speak, "and a double decker at that—sheep and hogs—sheep on the lower deck."

The engineer said nothing, but reaching his torch shoved it into the gauge lamp and then under the flare surveyed Howe keenly.

"All right, my boy, I see what you are now, thought you a pair of young hobos. Crawl up on the box and make yourselves to home. You can ride here until daylight, anyhow."

As they passed through the yard the fireman standing in the gangway touched Howe's shoulder.

"You certainly killed him—you are the first man he ever carried a train length."

Soon they backed against a train.

"The tail lights seem comfortably close," said the fireman. An exchange of orders, "go ahead," indicated by a flirt of a lamp, then they pulled easily off. John enjoyed it hugely—the hollow roar in the fire-box, rising and falling with the swing of the door, the broad back diving continually between it and coal board, flirting the heaping shovel of coal deftly into corner and sides; the heavy figure slouching carelessly on the right seat box, the quiet eyes resting ever on the rails, the great hand on the throttle—made a wide contrast to the old life.

"Judging from the way he is running her he must have had a train of peaches spoil on his hands some time," remarked Howe to the fireman as that worthy straightened himself for a brief survey of the steam gauge, his only answer an appreciative grin.

Dawn was breaking. John put his head out in the keen rush of the morning wind and was taking in this strange northland, and as his eyes fell over the broad, black river, now faintly white-lined in dashing ripple, white-sprayed rocks or stretching in long, silent reaches between low blue mist-flecked mountains, sweetly strange thoughts ran across his mind. Again he heard Madge Dean's low, sweet voice reading the great "tinker's immortal allegory." "And they came from the mountain down into a great river" was unconsciously forming upon his lips, when a voice hoarse in ringing command came across the deck:

"Hit the grit! Quick, boys, quick!"

The fireman lets the shovel go into the firebox, dashes, a streak of checked overshirt, between the backboard and tank, then is gone. John looks across the deck; the slouching, inert figure has disappeared; in its place moves with quick, masterful energy a dashing form, the incarnation of resolute action; even as he looks the stocky leg flies over the reverse lever, the foot braces against the boiler head, then as the broad back sways ahead under the pull of the links against the unlatched lever, he sees it straighten with an effort that brings the veins out turgid on the brawny neck, the lever latches in the last backward notch, a darting lunge and the sand lever is back over the throttle, its fractured brass handle to fall on the deck as the heavy shoulders and white face disappear back from the tank step.

"Look out for the side rods, she is in the harness and wide open," yells Howe, catching John by the collar he jerks him from the seat. "Jump and run back, jump, boy, jump!"

Thus adjured, John jumps—straight out! A fleeting graze of the swift-flying earth against his foot follows, then a grinding, pounding knock on the head, then grass, stones and mixed red and blue lights. He raises his heavy head in time to see the lunging, shivering engine smash into a huge rock. Then as the tank shoots over her, to graze to the left down into the river. Cars are apparently falling around in all sorts of shape and conditions for the mere fun of the thing. An arm is thrown around him, jerking him swiftly back. Vaguely wondering its wherefore, he sees a car roll easily where he had been sitting, to break into splinters in the most unaccountable manner.

"Sit there and let the whole train roll over you! I'd like to break your infernal neck," yelled Howe, "and after my telling you how to run backward. I'll have to get you a wetnurse. But say, old boy, you got out lucky. Can you stand up? Good. Now take a step; now move your fingers; now clasp your hands behind your head. Good, I wouldn't have given two cents for you a few minutes since."

"Yet you put your life at the same valuation," answered John, extending his hand.

"Let's forget it," said Howe, "I wonder how the rest came out."

The fireman came over the wreck.

"Yes, I am O. K.," he answered, "but where is the old man?"

"Here," sounded a hearty voice from the ditch, "with my boot heels in China and my hip bones cutting my ears off."

They soon got him on his feet. "I'm all right; only a little groggy."

"Better go see how Hulda is," he growled.

Howe directed John's eyes to the two heavy sanded rails, saying admiringly: "He is a good one; did his work in shape; plugged her on sand in a second after he saw the rock. We will have to lie for him. We were on the pilot and he knew nothing about it."

"All right," answered John. Making a detour, they passed to where the engineer stood looking down into the river.

"Old Hulda," a stripped wreck, was lying nearly covered with water.

"One good thing," said the engineer, looking on the rising steam, "we won't have to pull any fire, but I want my grub basket. I think I'll go down and look for it."

"All right," said the conductor a moment later. "I'll walk up to Brands and send for the wreck train and a doctor—yes, better do it; it doesn't cost the company anything."

A pleased shout came from the river. "Here it is, as good as when the old lady put it up—come on, boys." The engineer proudly held up his precious basket. However, Gray and Howe were not hungry. They sat looking over the river, when John put his hand on Howe's shoulder.

"Frank," he said, in a low, strained voice, "last year I heard Mr. Deane preach a sermon on 'In the midst of life we are in death.' I couldn't understand it then, but I do now. This new knowledge and what you said about that engineer and what I saw, have, I think, made me a man."

"It didn't need smashing up an engine and ten cars to do it, though," Howe answered, dryly.

With the wreck came the doctor. He said John was badly bruised and had better go to Hallam Hospital. This the boys decided to do. A transfer was soon made and at 2 p. m., after a good bath and unlimited arnica the tired pair were asleep in the railroad ward of the hospital at Hallam. John awoke refreshed. It was after midnight. It seemed he would never want to sleep again. He waked Howe and they being the only occupants of the ward, decided to dress and sit up until breakfast. The door into the hall was open. Looking out they saw a faint shaded light illuminating the center of a long dark hall.

A nurse sat quietly undisturbed by the pain waves swaying in pitiful cadences through the dimly seen doors. Suddenly there was the sharp whir of a telephone; marking her place she lays aside her book and crossing the room she holds a brief conversation. With the last "Yes, doctor," she hangs up the receiver.

The pressure of a button and in a few minutes a hastily dressed young man appears, slippered feet shambling uncertainly as he drowsily wrestles with his coat.

"What is it now, nurse?"

"Oh, another of those Northern cases—an engineer on his fast mail; from what Dr. Blake says, he is pretty well done up."

With a muttered "Damn slaughter pen of a road, I don't see how they find fools enough to man it," he follows the girl into the operating room. The great coronal of incandescents above the grim table are growing as though in fierce delight, the myraid rays dancing with devilish mirth over the flashing cruel edges, remorseless set of pincer jaws, as if in anticipated revel.

The sound of heavy footfalls, then enter four men, their faces set in awesome sympathy—bearing a stretcher. Behind them the indifferent face of the company doctor.

"Easy, boys, set him down here, easy, easy." Poor fossil, his cheap sympathy and mock assumption is wasted here, the poor broken body is in the care of his comrades. Every moan or pitiful grasp of straying hands falls upon hearts whose depths are beyond his comprehension. Tenderly the cot is placed upon the floor, the nurse takes her place beside the doctor, the house surgeon lifts the blanket, the little group of railroad men fall back. A great blue denimed form, the face cut, gashed and blood covered, the thick hair full of mud and cinders and ever the hands wander over the broad breast. The doctor watches the gasping swollen lips, then stooping runs quick deft fingers over breast and sides, arises saying, "No use he is crushed internally." The nurse hides a yawn behind her hand, the callow youth in slippers wonders, "How long the 'case' will last."

"Who is he?" asks the doctor.

"One of our best men," answers one of the group. "Old Terry Riley, he has pulled fast mail for years—sidewiped a cut of runaway cars in the lower yard. Is he alliin'?"

"Yes," answered the doctor.

"I tell you, boys, I've fired my last trip for old Ed." It was the injured man who spoke. The doctor looked at him in surprise, the "boys" drew involuntarily back—it seemed like speech from the dead. The tortured lips moved bravely, doggedly on. Something like a youthful ring came into the broken voice. "I hate to buck on the old man, but he is getting my ride, his bar stays wherever it strikes, up hill or over the level, it's all the same to him and the injection—well, it stays on away from stations and all until the water runs out of the stack, then off until I've got to let the fire go out to save her blowing up. Dry valves all the time and the bar playing 'Home, Sweet Home.'"

"He is back to his firing days," murmured one of the group.

The others nodded understandingly.

"Some injury to the great nerve centers," remarked the doctor to his satellites.

"Yes, he may keep us up here an hour; there is no calculating on the wonderful vitality of these fellows, they are all picked men physically."

"Yes, Annie," resumed the plodding voice, "it's our home, not what you were used to but all our own and paid for, not what Frank could have given you, but I'll try to make it up to—the case is like this, Mr. Maley, the boys, myself included, absolutely refuse to clean brass bugs and hot cab work any longer. How any company can ask men to crawl up on top of a hot boiler in a close roundhouse on a hot summer day to polish two or three hours is more than I can understand—yes, I know what it means to buck pp against you people, but I'm willing to lose three years firing if it comes to a showdown for the benefit of the boys—Well, John, I'm glad I got you, it means a whole lot to a fellow on his first trip to have an old fireman with him. I'll take her up Banks and Allens and let you play eagle eye; keep your eye on your main pin, it's Old Bill's pet and if we burn it up, I'll stand to block the extra list—See if you can see anything of them back there, we are five minutes late now—Say youngster, what do you mean coming out in the street a day like this with a pair of shoes like that. Eh? that's the why is it, a very good why, too, come in here with me before I give you a good licking—Say, mister, fit this mite out with a pair of shoes and dry stockings, take it out of this and give her the change—No, my friend, you are off your base," the listeners noticed an ominous metallic ring in the voice—"I've been playing a section of the wheel all night, one chip on all except the 23d and that five straight, it is my money and I've got to have it—what's three to one with you kind of cattle, why son, I could take three more such thin-legged banana-necked dudes like you fellows and break you all across my knee—no, they wanted a rough house and they got it and it's up to you to pay that bet or take the same dose.

"That's Pap's little girl—why, mamma, she is worth the whole outfit of the rest put together. Lost my pipe—no one knew where it was until this small girl came from school. Pap knows a girl about so high who is to have a coat—a new one with big buttons and fur and all kinds of do-funnys, sure, pay day."

"Wonder how long he is going to keep up that gabble," asked the nurse of her partner in misery.

"The Lord only knows," he answered gloomily. "Long enough to freeze my feet in these slippers," but the "gabble" ran on.

"Mr. Jasper, there is no use to prolong this investigation. I am all to blame and no one else. The boy flagged me all right. I was fighting the old jack to catch time, and I assumed I knew what he wanted. It's up to me to stand it—Bill, I know it is a hard deal, fired and business down all over the country, but take this and tell the wife that Terry Riley is working, and that there is something home in the stocking that will stand for her and the babies until you get on your feet again—Mrs. French, we can't understand these things, but the Old Master knows. What I came to see you about is this. If you need anything the boys stand ready to help you, and don't hesitate to call and we'll be here—Mr. Rudd, you have asked my opinion and I'll give it. Ed Lloyd is no good. I've cussed him until I've been ashamed of myself—he can burn more coal and make less steam than any fireman I ever had, and no difference how far back the pointer is, he always has time to light a cigarette. I've seen him fall over coal in the deck until he would have to kick it back to swing his furnace door."

Then the voice trailed off into silence. The doctor stood eyeing him intently, his fingers closed lovingly on a cigar in his vest pocket, but only to release it reluctantly. Back from the choking death damp, from under the very lights of the city, came again the broken, hollow murmuring:

"John, it's been a good run, better than such an old scrap could be expected to do. Cover your headlight. How cold it is, no warmth in these asbestos logged boilers. Drop the curtain and put your shaker bar on it, and keep the wind out. Get a little sleep, I'll watch the fire—say, John, that was a queer thing just now. Right there out in the night I saw my mother with little John in her arms, and they dead for twenty years. How cold it is. It must be the river wind. I never was so chilled in my life. It seems that I can't stand it. Well, the lights are out and we are into clear.

"Why, father, I'm so glad to see you. I knew you would come when it got dark. I've had a heavy load all day and my feet are sore and so very tired. You will take the sack—I knew you would. Your hands feel so strong and warm. I was so cold I was afraid I'd never make it. My throat seems choked, but yes—I'll be brave. I don't feel so bad when I can walk with you."

Here he tried to stir, but an ugly black stain dyes his lips. At a signal from the doctor the nurse replaced the blanket. Out into the night passed four burly forms, quivering tear-stained faces, set bravely to where awaits the woof of their strong lives.

The doctor crossed to the telephone. "Give me Murray's undertaking establishment."

"Hello, Murray! Excuse me for calling you at this unearthly hour. I'm at the Loving Arms Hospital. I just had another railroad case—died on our hands. He is a big, dirty fellow, brought here from his engine in a dying condition, so it's up to you, and I don't envy you your job."

"Miss Keane, give me a light, please."

Then under the trailing odor of his superior's perfecto the embryo medico shambled off to resume his disturbed rest, the nurse with a contented sigh settles back into her chair to resume her equally interrupted story, while in a distant city "Pap's girl" sleepily asks: "Mamma, what does the caller want? Pap's out."

Then the drowsy head snuggles into the pillow—in the brief interval before the rush of flying feet and wails of anguished horror—to dream of a great, kindly eyed form, on whose broad breast, in the circle of strong arms, a weary child can rest so quietly and so long.