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The Kid Engineer

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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It was three days before McNeil was able to report for work, though he received full time just the same. Even then he wasn't fit for duty, but he begged Neighbor for his run until he got it. The strikers were jubilant while the boy was laid up, but just



The boy reached for his throttle through a rain of iron bolts.

what Dad thought no one could find out. I wanted to tell the old growler what I thought of him, but Foley said it wouldn't do any good and might do harm, so I held my peace.
 One night he thought that the injustices and brutality of the thing would have roused him, but men who have repressed themselves till they are gray headed don't rise in a hurry to resent a wrong. Dad kept as mute as the sphinx. When McNeil was ready to go out the old fireman had the 244 shining; but if the pale face of his engineer had any effect on him he kept it to himself.

As they rattled down the line with a long stock train that night neither of them referred to the break in their run. Coming back next night, the same silence hung over the cab. The only words that passed over the boiler head were "strictly business," as Dad would say.

At Oxford they were laid out by a Pullman special. It was 3 o'clock in the morning and raining hard. Under such circumstances an hour seems all night. At last Dad himself broke the unseparable silence.

"He'd have waited a good bit longer if he had waited for me to talk," said the boy, telling Foley afterward.
 "Heard you got licked," growled Dad after tinkering with the fire for the twentieth time.

"I didn't get licked," retorted Georgie. "I got elbowed. I never had a chance to fight."
 "These fellows hate to see a boy come out and take a man's job. Can't blame 'em much neither."

"Whose job did I take?" demanded Georgie angrily. "Was any one of those cowards that jumped on me in the dark looking for work on this engine?"
 "There was nothing to say to that. Dad kept still.

"You talk about men," continued the young fellow. "If I am not more of a man than to slug a fellow from behind, the way they slugged me, I'll get off this engine and stay off. If that's what you call men out here, I don't want to be a man. I'll go back to Pennsylvania."

"Why didn't you stay there?" growled Dad.
 "Why didn't you?"
 "Without attempting to return the shot Dad pulled nervously at the chain. "If I hadn't been fool enough to go out on a strike, I might have been running there yet," continued Georgie.
 "Ought to have kept away from the postoffice," grumbled Dad after a pause.
 "I got a letter twice a week that I think more of than I do of this whole road, and I propose to go to the postoffice and get it without asking anybody's permission."
 "They'll pound you again."
 "George looked out into the storm. "Well, why shouldn't they? I've got no friends."

"Got a girl back in Pennsylvania?"
 "Yes, I've got a girl there," replied the boy as the rain tore at the cab window. "I've had a girl there a good while. She's gray headed and sixty years old—that's my girl—and if she can write letters to me I can get them out of the postoffice without a guardian."

"There she comes," said Dad as the headlight of the Pullman special shone faint ahead through the mist.
 "I'm mighty glad of it," said Georgie, looking at his watch. "Give me time for a nap before breakfast."

A minute later the special shot over the switch, and the young runner, crowding the pistons a bit, started off to the siding. When Dad, looking back for the hind end brakeman to lock the switch and swing on, called all clear, Georgie pulled her out another notch, and the long train slowly gathered headway up the slippery track.

As the speed increased the young man and the old relapsed into their usual silence. The 244 was always a free steamer, but Georgie put her through her paces without any apology, and it took lots of coal to square the account.

In a few minutes they were ponding along up through the Narrows. The track there follows the high bench between the bluffs, which sheer up on one side, and the river bed, thirty feet below the grade, on the other.

It is not an inviting stretch at any time with a big string of gondolas behind. But on a wet night it is the last place on the division where an engineer would want a side rod to go wrong, and just there and then Georgie's rod went very wrong indeed.

Halfway between centers the big steel bar on his side, dipping then so fast you couldn't have seen it even in daylight, snapped like a stick of ice-cream. The hind end ripped up into the cab like the nose of a swordfish, tearing and smashing with appalling force and fury.

Georgie McNeil's seat burst under him as if a stick of giant powder had exploded. He was jammed against the cab rod like a link pin and fell sprawling, while the monster steel flail thrashed and tore through the cab with every lightning revolution of the great driver from which it swung.

It was a frightful moment. Anything thought of or done must be thought and done at once. It was either to stop the train, and quickly, or to pound along until the 244 jumped the track and lit in the river, with thirty cars of coal to cover it.

Instantly—so Dad Hamilton afterward told me—instinctively his boy, scrambling to his feet, reached for his throttle—reached for it through a rain of iron bolts, and staggered back with his right arm hanging like a broken wing from his shoulder. And back again after it—after the throttle with his left; slipping and creeping carefully this time up the throttle lever until, straining and twisting and dodging, he caught the latch and pushed it tightly home, Dad whistling vigorously while for brakes.

Believed of the tremendous head on the cylinder, the old engine calmed down enough to let the two men collect themselves. Rapidly as the brakes could do it, the long train was brought up standing, and Georgie, helped by his fireman, dropped out of the cab, and they set about disconnecting the engine with his one arm—the formidable ends of the broken rod.

It was a slow, difficult piece of work to do. In spite of their most active efforts the rain chilled them to the marrow. The train crew gave them as much help as willing hands could, which wasn't much, but by every man doing something they got things fixed, called in their flagmen just before day-break and started home. When the sun rose Georgie, grim and silent, the throttle in his left hand, was urging the old engine along on a derrick across the Blackwood flats, and so, limping in on one side, the kid brought his train into the Zanesville yards, with Dad Hamilton unable to make himself helpful enough, unable to show his appreciation of the skill and the grit that the night had disclosed in the kid engineer.

The hostler waiting in the yard sprang into the cab with amazement on his face and was just in time to lift a limp boy out of the old fireman's arms and help Dad get him to the ground, for Georgie had fainted.

When the 244 reached the shops a few minutes later they photographed that cab. It was the worst case of rod smashing we had ever seen, and the West End shops have caught some pretty tough looking cabs in their day.

The boy who stopped the cyclone and saved his train and crew lay stretched on the lounge in my office waiting for the company surgeon. And old Dad Hamilton—crabbed, irascible old Dad Hamilton—flew around that boy exactly like an excited old rooster, first bringing ice and then water and then hot coffee and then fanning him with a time table. It was worth a small smashup to see it.

The one sweep of the rod which caught Georgie's arm had broken it in two places, and he was off duty three months. But it was a novelty to see

that boy walk down to the postoffice and hear the station step up and ask him how he got on, and to see old Dad Hamilton the proud "sawed-off" man who was "pounding" the old engine!

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