

A RUNAWAY TRAIN

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In the Public Domain (1910)

Hurry in, Al, or the lamp will blow out!" Alex Ward closed the station door behind him and laughingly flicked his rain-soaked cap toward the day operator, whom he had just come to relieve. He had been at Foothills, his first permanent station, three months.

"Is it raining that hard? You look like the proverbial drowned rat," said Saunders, as he prepared to depart.

"Wait until you are out in it, and you won't laugh. It's the worst storm this spring," said Alex, throwing off his dripping coat.

"And you wait until you see the fun you have with the wire. The heavy rain has had it out of commission to the east for an hour. Haven't had a dot from the despatcher since six o'clock."

"There is someone now," said Alex, as the instruments suddenly began clicking. "It's somebody west—IC, I think. Yes; Indian Canyon," said Saunders, pausing as he turned toward the door. "But he certainly can't make himself heard by X if we can't."

"X, X, X," rapidly ticked the sounder, calling Exeter, the despatching office. X, X! Qk! Qk!"

Alex and Saunders turned toward one other with a start. Several times the operator at Indian Canyon repeated the call, more urgently, then as hurriedly began calling Imken, the next station east of him.

"There's something wrong!" said Alex, stepping to the instrument-table. Saunders followed.

"IM, IM, IM! Qk! Qk!" clicked the sounder.

"I, I, IM," came the response. The two operators at Foothills leaned forward expectantly.

"A wild string of loaded ore-cars just passed here," the instruments were saying. "They're going forty miles an hour! They'll be down there in no time! If there is anything on the main line, for heaven's sake get it off! I can't raise X for orders!"

Alex and Saunders exchanged glances of alarm and anxiously awaited Imken's reply. For a moment the instruments made a succession of inarticulate dots, then clicked excitedly, "Yes, yes! OK! OK!" and closed.

“What do you suppose he meant by that?” said Saunders. “That there was something on the main track there?”

A minute the wire remained silent, then again snapped open and whirred: “I got it off—the yard engine! Just in time! Here they come now! Ten of them! All loaded! Going like an avalanche! Thank goodness we got—”

Sharply the operator at IC cut in to as hurriedly call Terryville, the next station east.

“But the runaway won’t pass Terryville, will they?” exclaimed Alex, with a new anxiety. “Won’t the grades between there and Imken stop them?”

Saunders shook his head. “Ten loaded ore-cars traveling at that rate would climb a stiff grade.”

“Then they’ll be down here in twenty or twenty-five minutes! And there’s the accommodation coming east, and we can’t reach anyone to stop her!”

“Well, what *can* we do?” said Saunders, hopelessly.

Terryville answered, and breathlessly they awaited his report.

“Yes, they are coming! They are going past now,” he added a moment after. “They’re past!”

“They’ll reach us! What shall we do?” gasped Saunders.

Alex turned from the instrument-table, and, as IC hastily called Jakes Creek, the last station intervening, began striding up and down the room, thinking rapidly.

“If they only had more battery—could make the current in the wire stronger!” Instantly he recalled the emergency battery he had made at Watson Siding, and with an ejaculation spun about toward the water-cooler. But only to utter an exclamation of disappointment. This cooler was of tin—of course useless for such a purpose.

Hastily he began casting about for a substitute. “Billy, think of something we can make a big battery of,” he cried. “To strengthen the wire!”

“A battery? But what would you do for bluestone? I used the last yesterday,” said Saunders.

Alex returned to the table and threw himself into the chair.

“Say, perhaps one of the other fellows on the wire has some, and could make the battery.”

With a shout of “That’s it!” Alex seized the telegraph key, broke in, and called Indian Canyon. “Have you any extra battery material there?” he sent quickly.

“Why...no. Why?”

Abruptly Alex cut him off and called Imken. He also responded in the negative. But from Terryville came a prompt “Yes. Why—”

“Have you a big stoneware water-cooler?”

“Yes; but wh—”

“Do you know how to make a battery?”

“No.”

“Well, listen—”

Suddenly the instruments failed to respond. A minute passed, and another. Five went by, and Alex sank back in the chair in despair. Undoubtedly the wire had been broken somewhere.

“Everything is against us,” he exclaimed bitterly. “And the runaways will be down here now in fifteen or twenty minutes. What can we do?”

“The only thing I can think of is throwing the west switch and trying to run them onto the siding,” said Saunders. “But there’s not one chance in ten of their making it—probably they’d only pile up in an awful smash.”

“If there was any way of getting aboard the runaways—” Alex broke off sharply. Would it not be possible to board them as he and Jack Orr had boarded the engine the day of the forest fire? Say from a hand-car?

He started to his feet, and exclaiming, “Billy, get me a lantern, quick!” ran for his coat and hat.

“I’m going to run for the section boss and see if we can’t board that wildcat from the hand-car,” he explained, struggling into the coat. “I did that once at Bixton—boarded an engine.”

“Board it? And what then?”

“Why, put on the brakes and bring it to a stop, of course; then run ahead and flag I8!”

Saunders hastened for the lantern, and quickly lighting it, Alex dashed for the door, out across the platform, and off up the tracks toward the lights of the section foreman’s house. Darting through the gate, he ran about to the kitchen door and without ceremony flung it open. The foreman was at table, at his tea. He sprang to his feet.

“Joe, there is a wild ore-train coming down from the Canyon,” said Alex, breathlessly, “and the wire has failed east, so we can’t clear the line. Can’t we get the hand-car out and board the runaways by letting them catch us?”

An instant the section boss stared, then, with the promptness of the old railroader, seized his cap, and exclaiming, “Go ahead!” dashed out after Alex, in the direction of the tool-shed.

“Where did they start from? How many cars?” he asked as they ran.

“Indian Canyon. Ten, and all loaded.” The section man whistled. “They’ll be going twenty-five or thirty miles an hour. We’ll be taking a big chance. But if we can catch them just over the grade beyond the sand-pits, I guess we can do it. That will have slackened them.”

“Here we are.”

As they halted before the section-house door, the foreman uttered a cry. "I haven't the key!"

Alex swung the lantern about and discovered a pile of ties. "Smash it in," he said, dropping the lantern; and, one on either side, they caught up a tie, swung back, and hurled it forward; there was a crash, and the door was open.

Catching up the lantern, they ran in, threw from the car its collection of tools, placed the light upon it, and seizing it on either side, staggered out with it to the rails.

"Do you hear them?" asked Alex, as he threw off his coat.

The foreman dropped to his knees and placed his ear to the rails, listened a moment, and sprang to his feet. "Yes; they are coming. Come on!"

"Run her a little first!" They pushed the little car ahead, quickly had it on the run, and springing aboard, seized the handles, one at either end, and began pumping up and down with all their strength.

As they flew toward the station, the door opened, and Saunders ran to the edge of the platform and shouted: "I cut off the west, and just heard Z pass I8. He reported the superintendent's—"

They whirled by, and the rest was lost. "Did you catch it?" shouted Alex to the foreman above the roar of the wheels.

"I think he meant...the 'old man's' car...attached to the accommodation," shouted the sectionman, as his head flew up and down. "Heard he was coming ... worse for us...we need every minute. Old Jerry, the engineer...will be breaking his neck ...to bring the accommodation...through on time!"

"Do you hear ... the runaways yet?"

"No," shouted Alex.

On they rushed through the darkness, bobbing up and down like demon jumping-jacks, the little car screaming and screeching, and bounding forward like a live thing.

The terrific and unaccustomed strain began to tell on Alex. The perspiration stood out on his brow, his muscles lagged and his breath shortened.

"How much farther?" he called hoarsely. "Here's the grade now! Half a mile to the top!"

As they felt the resistance of the incline, Alex began to weaken and gasp for breath. But grimly he clenched his teeth and fought on; and at last the section boss suddenly ceased pumping, peered aside into the darkness, and announced: "Here we are! Let up!" And with a gasp of relief Alex dropped down to a sitting position.

A moment after, he straightened up and listened. From the west came a sound as of distant thunder.

"It's coming! How long before it'll be here?" he panted.

"Five minutes, perhaps. And now," said the sectionman, "just how are we going to

work it?”

“Well,” said Alex, getting his breath, “when we boarded the engine at Bixton, we simply waited at the top of a grade until she was within about two hundreds yards of us, then lit out as hard as we could go, and just as she bumped us we jumped.”

“All right. We’ll do the same.”

As the foreman spoke, the rain, which had decreased to a drizzle, suddenly ceased, and the moon appeared. Instantly he and Alex glanced toward the station and uttered a common exclamation. Just beyond was a long black snake-like object, shooting along the rails toward them.

The runaway!

On it swept over the glistening irons, the rumble quickly increasing to a roar. With an echoing crash it flashed by the station, and on.

Nearer it came, the cars leaping and writhing; roaring, pounding, screeching.

“Ready!” said the foreman, springing to the ground behind the hand-car. Alex joined him, and peering back over their shoulder, watching, they braced themselves for the shove.

The runaways reached the incline; swept on upward. Anxiously they gazed. Would the grade materially check them?

“Are they slowing?” asked Alex, nervously.

“Some, I think. But it will tell most near the head of the grade,” said the foreman.

“But get ready! We can’t wait to see!

“Go!” he cried, and rushing the car forward, they leaped aboard, seized the handles, and quickly were again pumping madly.

For a few moments the roar behind them seemed to decrease. Then suddenly it broke on them afresh, and the head of the train swept over the rise behind them.

“Now pull yourself together for an extra spurt when I say,” shouted the foreman, who manned the forward handles and faced the rear, “then turn about and get ready to jump.”

Roaring, screaming, clanking, the runaways thundered down upon them.

“Hit it up!” cried the sectionman. With every muscle tense, they whirled the handles up and down like madmen. “Let go! Turn!”

Alex sprang back from the whirling handles and faced about. The foreman edged by them and joined him. Nearer, towering over them, rushed the leading car. “Now be sure and jump high and grab hard,” shouted the foreman.

“Ready! JUMP!”

With a bound they went into the air, and the great car flung itself against them. Their outstretched hands reached the top of the end-board, and momentarily they hung, clutching desperately, while the car leaped and bounded beneath them. Getting

their feet on the brake-beam, they struggled upward. And in another moment, tumbling headlong within, they were safely aboard.

Alex sank down on the rough ore, utterly exhausted, gasping; but the seasoned foreman immediately got to his feet, seized the near-by brake-wheel, quickly tightened it, and scrambling back over the bounding train, one by one put on the remaining brakes.

Soon the pressure on the wheels began to tell, and ten minutes later, screeching and groaning protestingly, the runaways came finally to a stop.

Another ten minutes later, when a quarter-mile distant, the engineer aboard the flying accommodation suddenly “threw on his air,” as he discovered a lantern between the rails ahead of him. His train came to a stand, and he was greeted by a shout from the foreman.

“And I say, Jerry,” added the latter, humorously, as he went forward, “you’re not good enough for a passenger run. You’re to push ore-cars. There’s a string just ahead of you.”

When he explained, the engineer stepped down from his cab, wiping the cold moisture from his forehead, and on catching sight of Alex he sprang forward to grasp his hand.

“Oh, it was more the foreman than I,” said Alex, modestly. “I couldn’t have worked it at all without him.”

At that moment the division superintendent himself appeared.

“Why, let me see!” he exclaimed. “Are you not the lad I helped fix up an emergency battery at Watson Siding last spring? and who has engineered two or three other similar clever affairs?”

“Well, my boy, young as you are, if I don’t give you a try-out at the division office before the month is out, my name’s not Cameron. We need men there with heads like yours.”