

RUN, KATE SHELLEY, RUN

by Julia Pferdehirt

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KATE SHELLEY'S HOME stood on a hill above Honey Creek and the railroad line that led to Moingona, Iowa. All her life Kate had heard the rush of water and the whistle of trains. All her life she had watched the Chicago and Northwestern Railway cars and heard the hissing, black steam engines *clack-clattering* over Honey Creek Bridge.

Every train had a number and a whistle. When Kate's pa was alive, he had taught her to recognize each train engine by the sound of its whistle. He'd been a section foreman for the Chicago and Northwestern until his death three years earlier in a railroad accident. After that, Kate and her mother fed the livestock, planted the garden, and sent the little ones off to school.

Kate was fifteen years old in July 1881, when the great storm began. It rained on Friday. By Saturday, market day, the ground was muddy, and still the rain poured down. On Sunday the roads were thick, brown sponges, sucking at boots and wagon wheels. The rain fell day and night. The following Wednesday, the sky paused to catch its breath. The day was oven-hot. Kate rushed to hang laundry to dry before the rain came again. Sure enough, by afternoon she saw more clouds, dark as midnight, rolling toward Honey Creek.

After nearly a week of rain, the creek was a wild bull, roaring and leaping, crashing against the high bluffs that caged it in on either side. Fence posts, rocks, and entire trees rolled and tumbled down the creek bed, colliding with the pilings of the bridge, causing it to creak and sway. Then the storm broke, and rain poured from the sky. The water rose.

The rising floodwaters began to seep into the barn, and Kate hurried down the hill to rescue the stock. She turned the animals out to higher ground and scrambled to save the baby pigs huddled on a haystack surrounded by water. Then Kate went up to the house and stared anxiously out the windows with her mother and nine-year-old sister, Mayme. The younger children were asleep.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Kate heard Number 11's whistle. Long, short—long, short—screaming into the wind. The rumble of the engine grew louder as it crept along the line from Moingona to Boone, checking for washouts on the track.

Suddenly Kate heard a *crack* like thunder, and another and another. With a sound like cannon fire, the Honey Creek trestle bridge, the engine, and four terrified crewmen crashed into the roaring water twenty feet below.

Kate pulled on her barn coat and a battered straw hat. "I'm going," she said.

Kate's mother gripped her arm. "No, Kate. You could be killed in that storm!"

Kate grabbed Pa's railroad lantern. "If Pa were out there, I'd go," she said. "I have to do it, Ma." With shaking hands, she lit the lantern and ran into the downpour and darkness to Honey Creek.

The water tossed trees and twisted metal like toys. Two men clung to branches surrounded by the wreckage; they were screaming for help. The two other crewmen had been washed away. Kate waved her lantern to say, "Hold on. Just hold on. I'll do something."

Before Kate could think of a way to help the men, a terrible thought struck her. The midnight express was scheduled to come through here in less than an hour. The train, its crew, and two hundred passengers were right now, right this minute, headed toward Honey Creek, not realizing that the bridge was out. It had sounded like cannon fire when Number 11 went down. It would sound like an entire war if the midnight express crashed into Honey Creek. Over two hundred people could die. She had to stop that train!

Kate gripped the lantern tighter and stumbled along the rails, following them like a road into the blackness and storm. She ran and fell, slipped and stumbled, toward the Moingona railroad station over a mile away.

Kate's chest burned. She was wet clear through and shaking with cold, but she could not stop. If it were Pa hanging on in Honey Creek or driving the midnight express, she would keep going. I must reach the station in time, she thought.

Between Honey Creek and the Moingona station, the railroad crossed the Des Moines River. The trestle bridge was high above the water and nearly seven hundred feet long. Kate dared not think of the railroad ties, a pace apart, only rain and sky between them and the river below.

The storm shook the Des Moines River bridge until it swayed and trembled. The rain fell even harder. Mud and water made the crossties slick and treacherous. How could anyone cross this bridge—caught between the wind, the rain, and the boiling, angry river?

Kate knelt down and crawled forward on her hands and knees. If it were Pa driving the midnight express toward Honey Creek, she would keep crawling. She

could crawl for those two hundred people.

The wind blew her lantern out. She crept forward in the dark, feeling the railroad ties with her hands, using the cold metal rails as a guide.

Suddenly lightning flashed, and Kate saw a tree hurtling toward the bridge. Its tangled branches and massive trunk rolled and bounced in the current. It would hit the bridge! She remembered the crack of the pilings at Honey Creek and the cannon shot as the trestle collapsed. Kate clung to the crossties and prayed.

At the last second the current flipped the tree so the great trunk and its reaching limbs slipped between the pilings. Even then the branches tried to pull Kate from her perch above the river. She held on tighter and trembled.

“Only a little farther,” Kate told herself when her hands finally felt mud and stones instead of empty air between the ties. She was safe across the bridge now; it was a half-mile to the station.

When she saw the station lights, Kate ran like a wild woman. Her wet skirt slapped and caught against her legs. Every breath hurt. She crashed into the station door and fell inside.

“Stop! Stop the train!” she gasped. “The engine—Honey Creek. Stop the train.”

“The girl’s crazy!” said one of the railroad men.

“Not on your life!” said the station agent. “That’s Shelley’s girl Kate.”

Between gasps for air, Kate told them the Honey Creek bridge had collapsed. “Two men are still alive,” she said. “And the midnight express must be stopped.”

The station agent telegraphed six miles west to Ogden to be sure the midnight express would not be allowed to continue in the storm. Then the railroad men and Kate boarded a pusher engine and headed toward Honey Creek, blowing the whistle all the way, calling to the two stranded men to hold on a little longer.

At Honey Creek the bluffs had collapsed into the water. Kate led the rescuers to another bridge where they could cross and finally reach the engineer and brakeman. The two men were half-dead with exhaustion.

After that, Kate did not remember the engine puffing away toward the station. She did not remember her mother leading her to bed or piling blankets over her shaking body. She did not remember the gray-and-rose sky of dawn.

The same telegraph that had warned Ogden Station to hold the midnight express sent news of Kate’s bravery from city to city. Within days, newspapers all over the nation were calling her the “Iowa heroine.”

While Kate lay in bed recovering from that terrible night, every train passing the farmhouse blew its whistle in her honor. Then the people of Iowa awarded her a gold medal, and the railroad gave her one hundred dollars and a lifetime railroad pass.

The nation honored Kate, too. However, the honor most dear to her came from the railroad men themselves. As long as she lived in Moingona, Iowa, they recognized brave Kate in their own special way. Whenever she wanted to ride the Chicago and Northwestern, they stopped the train just for her. A station stop was not good enough. They stopped the train right in front of the little farmhouse on Honey Creek.

In 1900 a new bridge was built across the Des Moines River and named for Kate Shelley. And after her death, the Order of Railway Conductors and Brakemen placed a memorial to their Iowa heroine. "Hers is a deed bound for legend... a story to be told until the last order fades and the last rail rusts."