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RUNNING "PILOT."

"Who is standing pilot this evening?" said the Superintendent, or "boss" as he was called.

"Seth Martin," was the foreman's reply. "Tell him to come here, will you?" and hurried off.

The foreman fastened away, and both he and Seth Martin must have "spread themselves," as the former said, for in a few minutes the engine driver stood before his chief.

"The great man took a comprehensive look at the engineer, who flinched not a muscle. His clear steady eyes were as blue as the sky; a handsome brown beard ornamented his face, which, albeit rather dirty, was full of character and determination. To use the popular expression, "he was pure gold down to bedrock."

The Superintendent, satisfied with his scrutiny, nodded to the engine driver and said:

"There's a specie train up out of Collinsville to-night, Seth."

"I know that," was the curt response.

"And it will require close watching," continued the chief.

"I s'pose so—I know that," repeated Seth.

"You are mighty knowin' this evening," said the Superintendent, smiling, "but there is one thing you don't know, sonny. You don't know that you are going to run pilot to that train."

"Yes, I do," replied the engine driver.

"Who in thunder told you, then? I didn't know it myself till ten minutes ago."

"You told me this minute, then I knew it," replied Seth, smiling, and disclosing his white, even teeth.

"I'm ready, boss."

"Seth Martin, you ought to be a judge; your talents are thrown away on this line. But listen; we've no time to spit straws in chaff. There's a very festive gang of desperadoes hanging about up Dartford way. They nearly wrecked the through Pacific last week. Fortunately, the passengers were handy with their shootin'-irons, and bullets was rainin' 'prety thick, else there would have been something unpleasant."

"Wal," said the engine driver, "go ahead."

"Now, you must run pilot to the specie train and see that the line's clear up as far as Dartford City. Ye can't shunt at the trestle bridge siding, and wait to pull the wagons up the Bunker incline through the cuttings. Once safe there, ye can rattle along, and mind ye keep a good lookout."

"You bet!" was Seth's reply. "I'd better take my six-shooter, I s'pose. We'll have to fight, maybe?"

"Most likely," replied the Superintendent, coolly. "Keep this quiet. I've got men on the look out along the line. Who's your mate?"

"English Tom Atkins," was the reply. "He's the grit!"

"All right, then," said the chief. "Now don't drink; keep a full head of steam; bring back the specie safe, and—"

"Wal?" drawled the other, coolly.

"I'll provide for your family if you're hurt or shot; if not, I'll reward you."

"Is that all, then? Well, good-night, boss, and thank ye."

"Good luck," was the reply; "I'll not forget you."

Seth Martin turned away with a nod of acknowledgment and directed his steps to the shed where his engine was "standing pilot." This means the engine had steam up (or was "in steam," to speak technically), and was ready for any sudden emergency. The driver was just as well pleased to run a couple of hundred miles on a dark night, even with the chance of being shot, as to have an invitation to the "White House" itself.

"Tom!"

"Hallo!" came back in an unmistakable English voice.

"Fire up a bit; we're bound west; specie pilot; 10 o'clock. Keep it quiet."

A man unseen by the driver put up his head to listen.

Seth was a man of action, and so was his mate, Tom Atkins. They looked to the engine and their revolvers; put a dozen cartridges in a tin can; filled a similar can with some old Bourbon whiskey at a saloon close by, whither they were followed by the man who had been listening to their conversation, and who had their preparations.

After communicating with some accomplices, this mysterious individual left the saloon and made his way toward the signal box which stood some distance down the line. As soon as the engine driver and his mate were recognized, they were warmly welcomed, for they were favorites. Many drinks were tendered for their acceptance, and declined on various pleas, till at length one man declared the Britisher wanted to fix an insult on a free-born citizen. He offered Seth and Tom a glass apiece, saying:

"What's up, mate? Twore off, eh!"

"For this evening," replied Seth, "but as I'd rather drink than fight just now, I'll take your treat. So the men each took the proffered glass, but scarcely tasted it; and soon afterward Seth, fearing that inkling of his intended mission might leak out, beckoned to his fireman to follow as soon as possible, and then left the saloon. He lit a cigar, climbed up into the "cab" of his engine (all American locomotives are protected and closed in), and began to smoke.

He smoked in comfort for about a quarter of an hour, then he felt "queer." "These is stronger cigars than usual," he muttered, and he threw it from him. But the oppression on his brain became heavier; he felt very sleepy now.

"I think I'll have a nap; it's only about 9 o'clock. I must; there's an hour yet. I wonder where Tom is. It's my opinion Tom will drink too much or—"

His train of thoughts was suddenly interrupted. All at once it flashed upon him that he himself had been "drugged" in the saloon!

"That's it; what a thundering idiot I am!" He essayed to rise, but felt quite bewildered. He made hopeless attempts to stand upright, but could do nothing. He was as useless as a child, but, worse than all, he was conscious of his inability to do his duty. Ten o'clock rang out. He struggled to his feet. His head was spinning around, his feet were heavy as leaden weights. He opened the sliding door, but ere he could descend a blow from behind sent him flying into space—a splash, and down he sank into a large pond containing a quantity of surplus water for the locomotive tanks.

At the same moment three men climbed up on the engine and, with a low but hearty chuckle, started it out from the siding.

"I think we did that neat," said the shortest of the party. "I didn't listen to the boss for nothin' this time. The specie train will run after all, you see. Oh! they couldn't catch me tepping. No, sir!"

"The Savage will do the bridge, I s'pose," said another. "He's to work on the up line, isn't he?"

"Aye, only on that side. Ye did that Britisher pretty, I must say. He and Seth was kinder cautious too."

"I mixed it strong," said the other, with a savage laugh. "Did you settle the signals, aye?"

"Aye; telegraphed ourselves on special, and then cut the wires and smashed the instruments. We're clear now to Dartford City. What's that?" he asked, hastily, as the engine lurched for a second and then lifted.

"Only the points. We're out now. We can run easy, I s'pose. She won't bust, I hope. Here goes."

The speaker, who knows very little about engine driving, turned on the steam and away they went. He turned his head for a moment.

"There's something moving yonder; they've found Seth, likely."

But this portion of the gang of desperadoes had met their match in English Tom Atkins. For a moment or two he had been overcome by the drugged whisky, but a simple and very effective remedy cured him at the cost of a few moments' sickness. Creeping along the ground, for he could not walk, he conceived the idea of following these men; so he held the points open and sent the "braves" away into the night on the up line. He proposed to give the alarm and follow (on the down metals) with a superior force. But fate was drawing the fugitives to destruction. The up line was cut at the bridge.

"Lead a helping hand, mate. I'm drownin'!" This is what Tom heard as he crawled rather than walked across the metals to seek assistance.

"Seth—Seth Martin; what's happened to you?"

"Them varmints tossed me in here when I was half stupid, but the water has done me good. Help me out, Tom, and we'll fix them yet."

Tom, who was rapidly recovering, lent all the assistance he could; and then the dripping driver, quickly wringing the water from his clothes said, when his mate had told him what he had done—

"Don't breathe a syllable to mortal man. I know Bob Franklin's engine is in steam by now for the cross traffic. We'll fire her up and run them down. We may save the specie yet. Hurry down to the signal box while I get out the engine."

Tom hastened away as desired, but soon came back with the intelligence that the box was empty and the wire cut.

"We darsen't say a word now," said Seth. "What fools we were to take them drinks! Now, Tom, shove in some wood while I oil the cranks. I'll leave word for the foreman; we must trust him."

All these preparations were made almost as quickly as they are described. In ten minutes the engine was ready, and as noiseless as possible the great locomotive was brought out of the shed, but tender first.

"Never mind," said Seth, when Tom objected. "We can run about as quick. Now, are ye ready?"

The foreman came up at that moment. "If ye do succeed," he said, "your fortunes are made. If you fail I wouldn't answer for your lives. Take my revolver," he added, "and be off."

Seth thanked him, adding gloomily, "If we fail, we'll never come back alive. For us to be hounded with 'Bourbon' is disgrace enough."

A whistle! The foreman opened the points and the engine sped away on the down line in full pursuit of the desperadoes, to save the specie train, if possible.

"We've no head-lamp?" exclaimed Tom, suddenly.

"So much the better; we don't want to advertise ourselves to-night. There is a flash of something; guess we'll have a storm."

The remark was not called for. The gleam of lightning every now and then appeared to rest upon the steel handles and glint along the rails. There was a moaning sound in the air, a feeling of oppression while occasionally a heavy splash of rain would drop upon the roof of the "cab" in which the men journeyed.

"They absolutely flew along the track. Over the apparently boundless prairie the line was laid. Not a station for miles. A few watering places at intervals alone broke the level character of the prospect when the fitful lightning lit up the surroundings. Pitch dark overhead except when the flashes came; and the only light below the rapidly moving glare of the furnace fire on the "road."

"It's past 11," said the driver. "We ought to have pulled them up. We've run this thirty miles in the half-hour. There's Buffalo Creek, he added, as they skimmed past.

"Well, then, Dartford is only another thirty, and the trestle siding on the edge of the cutting is only twenty-five."

"We must pass them at the curve, below. Hallo! look out, mind that hand-lamp."

Tom turned the slide and looked ahead. Seth shut off the steam.

"There they are! lucky we are running tender foremost, or they would have seen our fire. We'll wait on them gently till they get out to the trestle curve. Then we'll 'wire in' and drop them. Steady, mate!"

Then engine came silently to a stand-still. The gentle hiss of the steam, which was just raising the wheels, was the only audible sound. Broad flashes of sheet lightning lit up the heavy masses of cloud, but no thunder followed. Seth looked to his revolver.

Tom fed the fire and they waited; it was their only chance—a surprise.

For quite twenty minutes the men waited. The engine in front had long ago disappeared. At last Seth said, "Now, Tom, is our time. I'll run them a race to Dartford City, and if I get there first there'll be scalps to sell to-morrow. We'll round that curve before they see us, and come in all flying. Are you ready?"

Tom signified his consent, and away darted the great engine across the boundless prairie at top speed. On! on! never mind the rough track; it's death if you leave it; it's death most likely, if you remain. There is one chance, and that one—if you reach Dartford City and give the alarm.

"Yes, it's night mid-night." So whistled Tom, as the engine swung round the sharp curve. There, seemingly motionless, was the other engine. Faster and faster rattled the pursuer. They were seen at last. The men were visible through the glass for an instant.

Only just in time. Two bullets came crashing overhead; another hit the handle of the steam whistle and sent out a seraph of defiance into the night. Seth rose slowly, and, pistol in hand, watched the foe.

"He's going to race us, but he don't know the trick of him!" No. 20, "Tom. We'll pass him, and then—"

Seth's face, as he spoke, and clutched his revolver, was sufficient to explain his meaning without words.

On, on, speeding across the prairie! Now, Seth was gaining, now the other shot ahead. More wood into the furnace; pile it in, Tom," cried Seth—"that's it—now!"

A bullet from Seth's steady hand passed through the glass of the other engine, and shattered the driving arm of the man who held the regulator.

"Bully!" exclaimed the delighted Seth. "Now for another log. The fire was blown up, and like an arrow the engines flew along; but no more shots were exchanged, for as they were running neck and neck for one instant Seth perceived a light on the line ahead, and before his companion was aware of his intention shot off the steam. The other engine fled away into the darkness, leaving Seth and Tom far behind.

"What did you shut off for?" cried Tom in amazement.

"Look ahead and you'll know," was the grim reply.

Tom looked ahead. A weird light was playing on the track, a halo of unearthly appearance. It shimmered and moved like a will-o'-the-wisp. It was a ghastly white mist—a ghastly warning.

"What can it be?" said Tom, his superstitious terrors being now excited.

"What is it?"

"It's a light, that's all," said Seth with a fiendish grin. "I know it though; I've seen it before. There's somebody underneath the rails in the bridge, and you bet they're cutting the track for the specie train!"

"Gracious heaven, and that engine!"

"That engine will be in the river in two minutes," said Seth Martin. "Oh! hurry up and save them if we can," exclaimed Tom. Go ahead. "Gently, mate, gently; let them get on a bit." He turned on steam, but ere they had passed half the distance in the direction of the light a loud crash was heard, and amid screams of human agony the trestle bridge sank down—down—gently, slowly, but surely to the stream below. The ponderous engine, tipped forward, gave one heavy lurch, righted again, and then turning completely over, fell with a thundering noise into the canyon below.

The lights were suddenly extinguished, and the piercing screams of wounded and scattered men arose, mingled with the hissing steam and the dull roar of thunder. The storm had burst.

"Caught in their own trap," exclaimed Seth. "Serves them right! Poor critters, I'm kinder sorry, too."

"Let us help them," cried Tom. "Help! yes; let us run on to Dartford, and stop the traffic; the specie is due in ten minutes."

"Cross that bridge!" exclaimed the foreman.

"Yes, sir, across that bridge. I'm a-goin' to try it," replied Seth.

"Will you chance it?"

"Yes, the brave answer; 'it's kill or cure!'"

"Here goes, then; shake hands. God bless ye, mate; if we don't meet again, tell them I died at my post like a man."

The driver and fireman clasped hands in silence, and Seth, turning on the full pressure of steam, the engine gathered itself up for a final race.

Not a sound escaped either of the men. Side by side they stood. As they approached they could see a red glare. The bridge had caught fire. As they shot past, a form or two hurried quickly out of sight—some of the desperate band now cowed and crushed. In a moment more the bridge was in full view. The crackling timbers of the up line were all burning around the mighty monster engine, which still emitted smoke and flames. As a flash of lightning lit in one brief second reveal all surrounding objects distinctly, so the glare of the engine furnace lit up the scene below. The engine dashed along—a roar, a creaking noise, the flames leaped up beneath—and the danger was over. The down line had not been undermined.

As they slackened speed a long, deep whistle was heard, and a dim speck was seen like a pin's head on the line in front.

"There's the specie, Tom. We've done our duty. Run down easy and see if we can't help the unfortunate loafer under the bridge. It was a narrow squeak."

It was, indeed. The specie train was all burning around the mighty monster engine, which still emitted smoke and flames. As a flash of lightning lit in one brief second reveal all surrounding objects distinctly, so the glare of the engine furnace lit up the scene below. The engine dashed along—a roar, a creaking noise, the flames leaped up beneath—and the danger was over. The down line had not been undermined.

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