

Progress' Short Stories.

Sketches of Personal Adventure Submitted in Competition for a Prize of Five Dollars.

NO. 118.

Oh, yes, I remember the time when the trestle over Thompson's Reach canted over on one side. Don't tell me; I guess I have a good reason for remembering it, for I had as exciting an experience just there as ever a man had! How was it? Well, now, let me see! Yes, I was fireman in those days on old 118, and old Joe — you remember Joe, well, he was engineer.

Yes, it all comes back to me now, when I begin to talk about it! That old trestle was getting mighty shaky; heavy freight trains did it, I know.

Thompson's Reach is that long stretch of quivering bog or quick-sand about ten miles south of W —, down the grade.

A long trestle resting on forged steel bars crosses it at its greatest breadth. This was because the banks were too steep to be practicable and the line had to connect somehow.

So, an expert engineer sounded the quagmire and having found bottom after a long search, he built the trestle on the aforesaid ribs.

As I said, forty years of pounding the trestle was getting pretty rackety, and we engineers and firemen had no desire to cross it oftener than absolutely necessary.

I remember the day as plainly as it were yesterday. We were, Joe and I, running old 118 on the Central Division with train 26.

We had a crossing order on No. 45 at Brockton station, and were standing on the siding waiting till 45, which had on the rear an extra car of emigrants, arrived, before we pulled out.

We had arrived about three minutes before and had taken the siding. In about five minutes we heard her whistle down the grade, and soon she came in sight, laboring up the cutting.

The train was so long that the last car, which contained fully 100 emigrants, was half over the beginning of the decline when 45 came to a halt.

Just as I gave the bell cord a jerk to warn the straggling passengers, and just as the big driving wheels began to revolve, a bareheaded telegraph-operator dashed out of his little office, and with a white face, sprang on the step of 118.

Thrusting a yellow paper into Joe's hand he cried: "Stop her!" and darted back to his den again.

The engineer promptly reversed her and looking over his shoulder, I read:—"Hold train 26 and all others. Trestle over Thompson's Reach has sunk on one side. Chief."

"Phew!" I whistled, "45 did it, I'll wager!"

"Yes," says Joe, glancing toward the offending object.

Suddenly a cry of horror pealed from his lips, and he seized my arm and pointed toward the emigrant car, which was disappearing down the hill at a lively rate.

"My God!" he screamed, "the coupling has broke, and Thompson's trestle down! Pull the pin!"

With the energy of despair I leaped to the rear of the tender and pulled the coupling-pin. Then quickly scrambling over the coal in the tender, into the caboose, I shouted,—

"Let'er jump, Joe, an' catch that car!"

With a comprehensive glance Joe signalled to the switchman, and threw the throttle wide.

The switchman instantly catching his meaning threw the switch over to the siding, and with a trembling leap, the mighty engine rolled out onto the main line, and so our chase for the runaway began.

Already the flying car had a start of a mile and a quarter, and was rocking to and fro on the metals, away down the grade in a terrible manner.

Sometimes we really thought that she would leave the rails, but somehow she hung on, and a tremor passed through the old engine as she shot ahead under the increased steam pressure.

Seizing the shovel I pulled open the furnace door and threw in three shovelfulls on the already roaring blaze. A glance at the gauge told me she would take twenty pounds more of steam, and I shouted to Joe, who with his hand on the throttle, was peering out the window.—

"Let'er go twenty pounds, Joe, old man!" and seizing the bell cord, I hauled away till the big bell jangled again.

Suddenly the bell rope parted at the roof of the cab, and fell over the side of the boiler outside.

"You'll have to get it, old man," said Joe, in a ghastly tone, as he glanced into the cab.

"Shake, anyhow, for fear I go off!" I said, and after wringing his grimy paw I shoved open the end window and leaped out on the running-board at the side of the engine.

A fearful lurch just then flung me against the hand-rail, but grasping it with a leg and an arm, I managed to crawl back and capture the broken rope.

Hastily knotting it to a piece of rope passing through the caboose window, I

slipped back to my post and once again gave her a little to chaw.

We were fast gaining on the runaway car, which was rocking away on the metals at a frightful rate only a mile ahead. The end of the grade was reached at last, and a level stretch of three miles intervened between the car and that fatal trestle.

"Rush her, for God's sake, Joe!" I cried. "Let her down a notch!" as the car disappeared around a curve.

Joe hauled the throttle out and dropped the lever a notch.

The next moment we swung around the curve above Sanford's crossing.

With a shriek of the whistle 118 was bearing down on the crossing, when suddenly Joe gave a gasp and once more tooted the whistle.

"Good Lord!" he gasped as an old woman in a buckboard team, drawn by a dilapidated horse, attempted to cross ahead of the engine.

A howl of the whistle made her look toward us, and to our disgust, she urged the funeral forward, instead of turning back, as anyone but an old countrywoman would have done.

Joe's face was a study for about two seconds. Then a look of resolution settled down on his dusty features and he cried:—"One life again a hundred! To the devil with her," and lowered the lever to another half notch.

The old woman shrieked frantically, "Hi! Stop! Daon't run over me! I've got six dozen aigs an'—"

Crash! and the pilot struck that old rattletrap at the hind wheels, and the last we saw of that old woman was a shadowy form shooting into the ditch, while the horse sat down abruptly in the ruins of the engine.

On we rushed with a howl and a roar like a thousand devils and many and many a time, I thought we were off the track altogether.

But everytime 118 seemed to pull herself together and hum ahead, like the faithful old girl she was.

Gradually we crept up on the swinging car, and, as though she knew what was wanted of her, the sturdy old machine flew ahead with a rush and a roar of triumph.

On and on we crept till the distance between us and the car gradually lessened and only a few feet intervened.

Then I saw that my time was come, and I don't mind admitting that I felt kind of frightened.

"Joe, old boy," I said, hurriedly, "I'll go out on the pilot and couple her. When I whistle you reverse her and I'll work the brake on the car. We'll stop her that way, I hope."

"God bless you Tom, old chap!" said Joe, dear old Joe, with tears in his eyes. "We've always been good friends, and I hope and trust you're not going to blow out your boiler-heads this trip."

"All right," I cried, and hurried along the running board. Hanging like grim death to the handrail while the old girl plunged and rocked, I crept along till I reached the smokestack.

Here I stopped to get my breath and see how the land lay.

Five feet away was the car, and we were slowly but surely closing up the gap. Soon my turn would arrive, and so slipping down on the pilot I raised the link and waited.

All at once, peering along the line, I saw that the trestle was only 400 yards away. What it we couldn't stop her in time? Good heavens, the idea was appalling, and I waved my disengaged hand to Joe to let her out one more notch.

A thrill and a leap which flung me back on the pilot told me that Joe understood and with a gentle bump the link ran into the draw-bar and I dropped the pin into the hole.

Then, hanging to the link I climbed on the platform and seizing the break gave a piercing whistle.

The immediate jar and roar, as the driving wheels flew round and omitted showers of sparks, told its own tale and slowly but none the less surely the runaway slowed up, till she came to a dead standstill not twenty feet from the beginning of the trestle.

I walked through the car and aroused the emigrants, who, tired with their long ocean voyage the day before, were all, or nearly all, drowsing in their seats.

When I explained the situation I had to run for the engine to escape the embrace of the grateful people.

We towed them back, and on the way we pulled the egg-dealer, whose stock we had demolished.

She was plastered with mud from head to foot, and she had a whole quarry of small rocks with which she began to bombard us.

The horse, still harnessed to half the buckboard was browsing in an adjoining haystack, and three eggs intact were set out on a flat rock near by—evidently all that had survived.

A small mountain crashed through the cab window and struck me on the back.

"Joe," said I don't you think we're in bad company?

"Yes," he said laughing and so we left her "alone in her glory."

She really looked rather odd, for one egg had stuck her on her aquiline nose, and breaking had spread to her eyebrows.

Oh, yes! we received an ovation, and were presented with a very handsome purse. So for me, well, I was made engineer shortly after and ran old 118 till I left the service. Then I received a pension for life.

The paper fellows took it up and made me out to be a hero, but, Lord bless you, I didn't do anything but my duty.

EX-ENGINEER

APPEARANCES ARE DECEITFUL.

It was a cold, grey day in early spring when I boarded the nine o'clock train bound for Montreal. I had come to Boston by the night express from Bangor, and had been waiting a long two hours in the handsome station on Causeway street. In that time I had fully realized what it was to be a stranger in a strange land, with absolutely no one I knew to speak to, and it was with satisfaction I settled myself in the comfortable parlor car.

Much to my relief, the polite little conductor told me my tickets were all right, a point on which I had been enduring the most harrowing doubts.

There were very few passengers, owing, I suppose, to the disagreeable season.

A comfortable looking matron and a young Frenchwoman were the only ladies beside myself.

The matron had an equally comfortable looking husband, there was an elderly gentleman and a pair of young men.

As I got out my novel I overheard the two older men saying:

"Of course we must get up a game, it would be intolerable to travel all day without a little amusement. I dare say that young lady over there plays, I'll ask her, anyhow."

I had always heard so much against people who played cards on the train that I wondered if I had fallen into a nest of sharpers.

I was utterly alone, exceedingly inexperienced and had more money in a little leather bag, hung around my neck than I would care to have any one know of.

Perhaps these people, in the explicable manner, known only by themselves, had guessed of my riches and were laying a plot to rob me.

I sternly resolved that nothing could induce me to play with them.

Presently, footsteps down the aisle that paused beside my chair, warned me to grasp my resolution with both hands.

"Madam, will you do us the honor of playing whist with us, we cannot make up a table without you?" said a pleasant voice and looking up I encountered the respectful and almost beseeching gaze of a fresh looking man, whose middle aged, respectable appearance was most assuring.

"Oh, pray excuse me!" I said, "I know so little of the game and am very much out of practice."

This was a down right false hood and he knew it. He continued to urge me and cut off every excuse. The French lady could not play and the two young men were only going to the next station and he would be so disappointed if I refused.

This last was delivered in such a pathetic manner that I meekly consented.

It was a great temptation, for I dearly loved the game and was tired to death of holding my tongue. "I suppose you don't want to play for money?" I blurted out.

A very comprehending look, strongly tinged with amusement, flashed over his face.

"Certainly not" he replied with emphasis and then introduced himself as a merchant of Boston, giving name and address.

The other rather elderly man had something to do with the steamers between Vancouver and Japan and the fourth place was supplied by his son, who came in from the smoking compartment.

He was a tall, fine looking young man, but very bashful, never spoke unless addressed and always called me "man."

Then we settled down at one of the little tables and played till noon, but it was a very easy sort of game. We conversed and passed frequently to admire the scenery.

When the train stopped for lunch, one of the gentlemen went out on a forage and returned with some very substantial sandwiches and tea.

The taste of the butter strongly suggested that various kinds of unsavory herbs had been boiled in an old boot. By this time we were all great friends and chatted and laughed in the most agreeable manner.

The French lady had long since disappeared and there was left, just we four and the merchant's wife.

She, poor thing, had been fully occupied all the morning in fighting a sick headache and shortly after lunch she curled up on the sofa and went fast asleep.

After the gentleman had enjoyed their post-prandial cigars they proposed resuming our game.

We did so, but the pleasure of it had in some way vanished. As I bent my head over the cards I could feel they were looking at me in rather a peculiar manner and more than once I caught them exchanging glances.

My fears, lulled for a while, sprang into fresh life. I looked critically at my companions, could guilt lurk behind such pleasant countenances?

But yet "a man may smile and smile and be a villain."

Under pretext of arranging my collar I felt for my money bag; yes, it was there all right, but how long would it stay so?

I was assured by the frequent appearance of the conductor till I saw him glancing at the merchant and saying something in an undertone, to which I caught the answer, "Not just yet."

Was he also in the plot? The young man at my left seemed very uneasy whenever I met his eye, he was evidently an unwilling accomplice.

I began to feel faint and dizzy, could that nauseous draught of tea have been drugged?

Good heavens! if so how completely I was in their power. At last I could stand the suspense no longer and throwing down the cards declared I was too tired to play any more.

I had quite made up my mind to quietly gather up my belongings and slip into the ordinary car where the number of people would be sufficient protection. But would they permit their victim to escape in this easy manner?

Ah, there was the rub. However, they acquiesced politely and the steamboat man and his son retired to the other end of the car.

Elated with the apparent success of my plan, I was just about to move away, when the merchant stretched out a detaining hand and with a very determined look said, "My dear madame, please excuse me, I have wished to call your attention to it all the afternoon, but hardly know how; there is most dreadful black smutch on your face."

I rushed to the large mirror and there, sure enough it was. The blackness, which I thought I detected in my companion's characters had no existence, there was only that on my own countenance.

As I turned away to remove it, my eye was caught by the motto engraved on the brass frame of the glass. It was in latin, and freely translated ran, "Appearances are deceitful."

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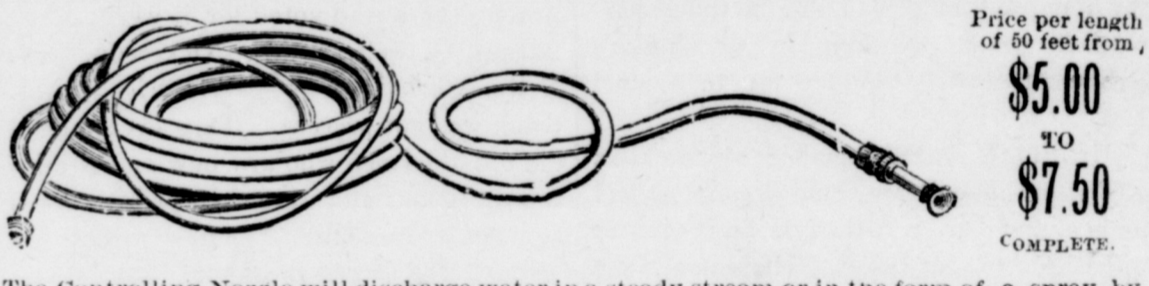
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