

LOST LOCOMOTIVE NO. 67.

THE SUPERINTENDENT'S STORY OF A DISAPPEARANCE.

A New Engine That Just Threw Its Engineer and Vanished—Affidavits That It Left a Ghost Which Ran Over the Country—Fate of the Engineer.

“One of the most beautiful traits of my character,” began the division superintendent, “is an overwhelming love of truth. For that reason your demand for a story places me in an unpleasant predicament, since the only story I know is one which no one has ever believed. But you shall have it.

“Some years ago I was yardmaster at Great Plains, Neb., then the western terminus of the Missouri, Nebraska and western Railway. Along in December we received three new engines from the Baldwins. One was a yard engine, another a twelve-wheel freighter, and the third a big compound to haul the California and Chicago express. Sixty seven was the number of the last engine, and she was a beauty! For a week or so she was put at jerking the big freights between Great Plains and Millersburg just to get her wind, and then—Dec. 24, it was—she was fired up in the afternoon preparatory to making her first trip with the express from the West. An engineer of the name of Gabbert was to take her out, and a young Irishman, Tom Brine, was to fire. Bill Gabbert was an old hand and one of the best on the road, and we knew that if any man was capable of getting the best licks out of an engine he was that man.

“There was quite a crowd in the roundhouse that night when the time came for running 67 out and down to the station. She stood, with her brass work shining brightly in the dim light, humming and stewing as though eager for the road. Bill Gabbert looked her carefully over from pilot to coupler, and then stepped aboard and disappeared in the cab. A moment later we loiterers outside saw him stagger out and fall back against the tender and stand there looking ahead with terror on his face.

“‘What is it, Bill?’ I cried. He turned toward us, his features drawn and ghastly, passed his hand across his face, and staggered to his feet. He moved as though to leave the engine, and then, pulling himself together, stood there looking down, dazed and white and trembling.

“‘What’s up, Bill?’ cried a dozen voices. He shook his head; then said: ‘Boys, I’ve seen my death,’ he said, in a voice low and hoarse. ‘I was studying the gauge when all of a sudden I seemed to be looking out of a cab window, and to see something on the track ahead. I jerked the whistle cord and tried to down brakes, but couldn’t. Then the engine was over the thing, and I saw that it was me. It was all as plain as day. There was a mile post nigh, and the number was 126. I tried to yell and couldn’t make a sound, and then—then—it all went away again.’ He passed his hand across his face. ‘Boys I’ve seen my death.’

“‘Nobody spoke for a minute. Then: ‘Aw, chase yerself Bill. It’s indigestion you’ve got,’ cried one of the boys, and ‘Brace up, Bill,’ cried another, ‘twas drammin’ ye were.’

“‘Bill,’ said I, ‘you’re not feeling fit. Go home and lie down and let me send another man out this run. Brinker here will go, eh?’

“‘That will I,’ growled Brinker, just in from a long freight run. ‘Go home, man, and rest a bit. Ye’ll be all right by morning. But Gabbert shook his head.

“‘No, sir thanks. I’ll take her out. I’m better already. I dare say I was a bit dizzy like. Maybe there’s nothing in it.’ He went back to the cab and leaned out the window. Where’s Brine sir?’

“‘He’s not back from supper yet, Bill. He said to tell you you’d find him at the switch.’ Gabbert nodded and waved a hand.

“‘Good bye, lads,’ he cried.

“‘Good-by,’ we answered, without enthusiasm. Then 67 gave a twang of her bell, her drivers slowly revolved, and she ran slowly out through the big doorway on to the two glistening rails which curved away into the darkness to the left.

“It was probably a desire to steady his nerves that led Gabbert to pull wide the throttle as he did, for when clear of the house the big wheels bit at the rails, a shower of sparks shot off into the night, and 67’s tender went whisking around the curve like a can on a dog’s tail. It was a good quarter of a mile to the station, and owing to the long curve, 67 was out of sight when a third of the distance had been travelled. One or two of the men and myself walked down the track to the paint shop, which, after a moment’s talk with the foreman, I left just as the whistle of the express sounded outside of town. Under the shadow of the water tank, a figure hurried past me.

“‘Is that you, Brine?’ I called.

“‘Yes, sir. Where’s 67, sir? They telephoned from the roundhouse that she came down ten minutes ago.’

“‘So she did; Gabbert took her out.’

“‘We can’t find her.’

“‘Can’t find her! Nonsense! What’s that down on the switch?’

“‘That’s an M. P. special, sir. I’ve looked all over the yard and so has Chase. Some one said she went by the station a while ago running thirty miles a hour.’

‘What! Come on; I’ll telephone down to the east tower. Look out!’

‘We stepped aside and the express went by, her shoes grinding the wheels as she slid down the frosty track to the platform. Two minutes after I was in the baggage room telephoning to the eastern switch tower.

‘Yes,’ came the answer. ‘67 went east running light at 7:04. What you mean I don’t know, but if you’re going to run any more wildcats around here let me know and I’ll resign. There’s an extra freight at—’

I banged the receiver into place and ran to the platform. Brine, with a scared face, met me at the door.

‘They’ve found Bill Gabbert, sir, down the track with his head knocked open. They’re bringing him up. What’s it mean, sir?’ I shook my head. Down the track a little bunch of lights flashed to and fro, coming nearer.

‘Take a switch engine,’ I said, ‘run up to the house and bring down 34 or 37. Tell Brinker he’ll have to take the run. If Brinker’s not there, find someone else.’

Then, as Brine rushed off, I turned and sprang up stairs to the dispatcher’s room. A minute or two later all traffic to the east was stopped and side tracked. Then the dispatcher wired Millersburg, sixty miles away, to ditch 67 in a good soft bed and for God’s sake to keep the track clear.

‘The California and Chicago express pulled out of Great Plains four minutes late, drawn by engine 44. Brinker at the throttle and Tom Brine firing. Bill Gabbert, with a cracked skull, lay, in the hospital two weeks before he spoke. Then it was little enough he told. He had opened the throttle for a spurt down the yard and when about 300 feet shy of the station had put his hand out to slow down when a fit of dizziness seized him. He clutched at the side of the cab, felt as though some one was pushing him from the cab, found himself falling and knew no more. That was all he could—or would—tell us. The blow had left him not quite right in the head, it was thought, and two months later he was made foreman of section 12 and went down the road to live in the section house. His engineering days were over.

‘Engine 67 was never again seen—at least not in the flesh. Somewhere between Great Plains and Wilson’s, twenty-three miles east, she disappeared as completely as though she had sunk into the earth or flown away through the sky. Never was there a more astonished set of officials than those of the M. N. and W.’

‘But she must be somewhere,’ shouted the general superintendent. ‘Of course she must,’ shouted everybody else. ‘She had no wings,’ growled the traffic manager. ‘Nor legs,’ grumbled the chief dispatcher.

‘Between Great Plains and Wilson’s,’ the division superintendent went on, ‘are two branches, one leading north and connecting at Centre City with the A. N. O. and G. for New Orleans, and another running northwest to the Black Hills. The agent at Byer, distant from Great Plains nine miles, reported that a light engine had passed through a little after 7 of the night of the 24th. He had been in the station at the time and did not see her number. A few minutes later a trackwalker on section 13 saw her pass, observing her number plainly. He saw no one in the cab. There a trace ended.

No. 67 never reached Wilson’s. She had not left the track nor jumped the one bridge on the way. She might have broken a switch and gone south or northwest, but no one on either branch saw her. Inquiries were sent to all connecting lines, and two car hunters travelled the country for a month at the end of which period 67’s disappearance was as great a mystery as ever. Of course, during that time we heard plenty of stories of light engines running about the country. A letter from a place in Kansas bore the signatures of eight reputable citizens who swore before a notary to having seen an engine number 67 running west over the main line of the Kansas Pacific Railway at 12 o’clock at the rate of a mile a minute and with all lights burning. Young Burns, who was then assistant freight agent, made quiet a scrapbook out of the stuff that came by mail and wire, until the general superintendent borrowed it—and burned it. For the company kept the escapade of 67 very quiet, and, for a wonder, the papers never got hold of it to any extent.

‘One day—67 had been gone then nearly two months—I met Bill Gabbert in town, and dragging him into the Brunswick, bought a beer for him.

‘Bill,’ said I, where in the name of a cow’s horn, is 67? The old engineer’s hand shook as he sat down his glass and turned to me with a white face.

‘For God’s sake, sir, don’t say nothin’ about her.’

‘Look here, Bill,’ I continued. ‘You know more than you’ve ever told. What’s up? What did you see in the cab of 67 after you pulled out of the roundhouse that night?’

‘But he only shook his head and turned to go. Then he hesitated, and, facing me again, said, ‘I know this, sir; 67 is still running. I’ve seen her twice—once in the Big Cut; again on bridge 6. The next time I’ll not live to tell of it. Good-by, sir.’

The division superintendent paused to light a fresh cigar, then continued: ‘But I’m making a long dog of a short tail, friends. So for what I have told may be corroborated by referring to the company’s officials, though they won’t care to say much. What follows was seen by but two men of whom one is dead, the other here before you.

‘It was the anniversary of 67’s exodus, Christmas eve. The night was cold, dark, and still, and smelt of snow. I had gone

down to Wilson’s in the afternoon to take supper with a friend, and now, at 10.30, I found myself some four miles from home speeding through the darkness on my railroad bicycle. No trains were due until almost midnight, and I paid small heed to the track ahead or behind, but buckled tightly down to business and made the little wheels fairly fly. Through the Big Cut I flew with deafening clatter, crossed a little bridge, and a moment later sighted the lights of the section house twinkling far up the track.

‘Suddenly above the noise of my own locomotion I distinctly heard the hum of an approaching train behind me. Astonished, I looked backward over my shoulder. Nearer and nearer came the sound, and then a flood of light rounded the curve behind, out of the Big Cut came a flaring headlight, and instantly the track became two long, curving needles of light. It was useless to attempt to reach the section house. I applied the brake, swung my bicycle off the rails into a gully, and, drawing back, watched the oncoming train. What it could be I could not think. Possibly some related freight, though, for the matter of that, I was almost certain that all the trains had passed. Louder and louder grew the rattle and jar, higher and higher sang the rails, and more distinct each moment came the bang-bang, thump-thump of the great wheels. Then I noticed a strange unsteadiness of the headlight. From side to side it swayed, like a mast head light in a heavy swell, and with a queer tremor at my heart I knew that the engine approaching me was light; running light, and at such a terrific speed as threatened each moment to hurl her from the track. And at the same instant Bill Gabbert’s strange tale came back to me. With a gasp I crouched back against the further bank of the ditch. I felt faint, and then my sight cleared, a glare of intensely white light was all about me, a deafening noise filled my ears and I saw quite plainly the black figures of 67 against the light, caught a fleeting glimpse of the empty and dimly illumined cab, saw the tender piled high with coal, and then found myself running blindly down the track in a cloud of dust and cinders in the wake of the monstrous swaying shape. Nearly opposite the section house I slackened my pace and tried to pierce the gloom. The engine was only a faint echo of sound in the back distance.

‘I stumbled over some obstacle, and fell to my knees. With fingers that trembled I drew forth a match and lighting it, held it aloft. A man’s body lay directly across the rails. As the little flame brightened I looked about me. A few feet distant within the dim circle of light, stood a milepost, white and ghostlike, and the black figures on it stood forth distinctly, 126. Gathering courage, I dropped my gaze and looked into the wide, unseeing eyes of Bill Gabbert.’

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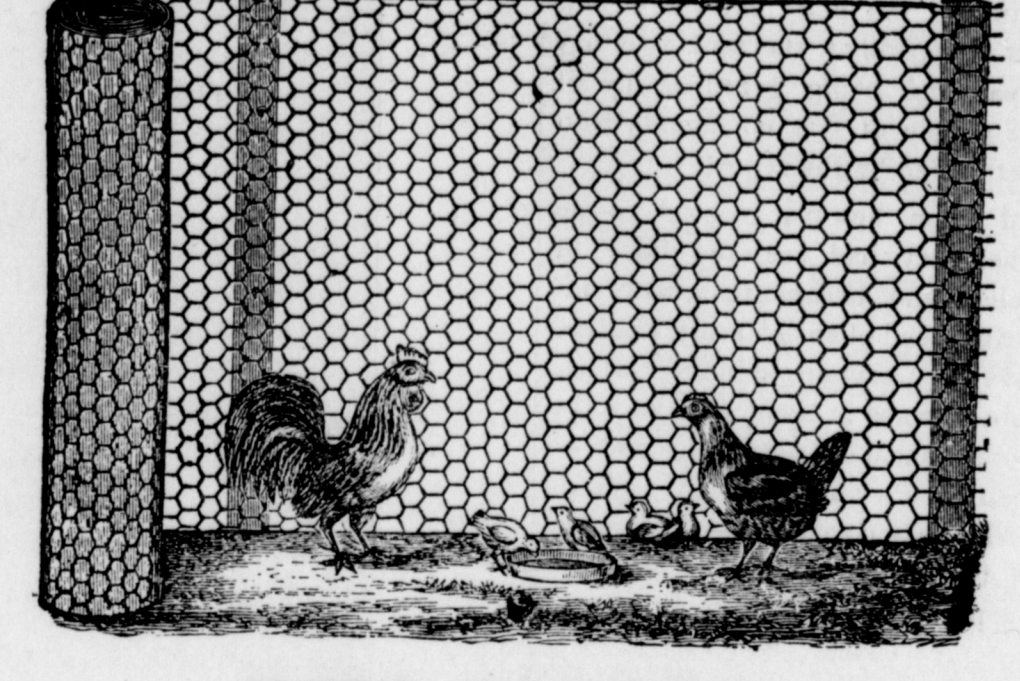
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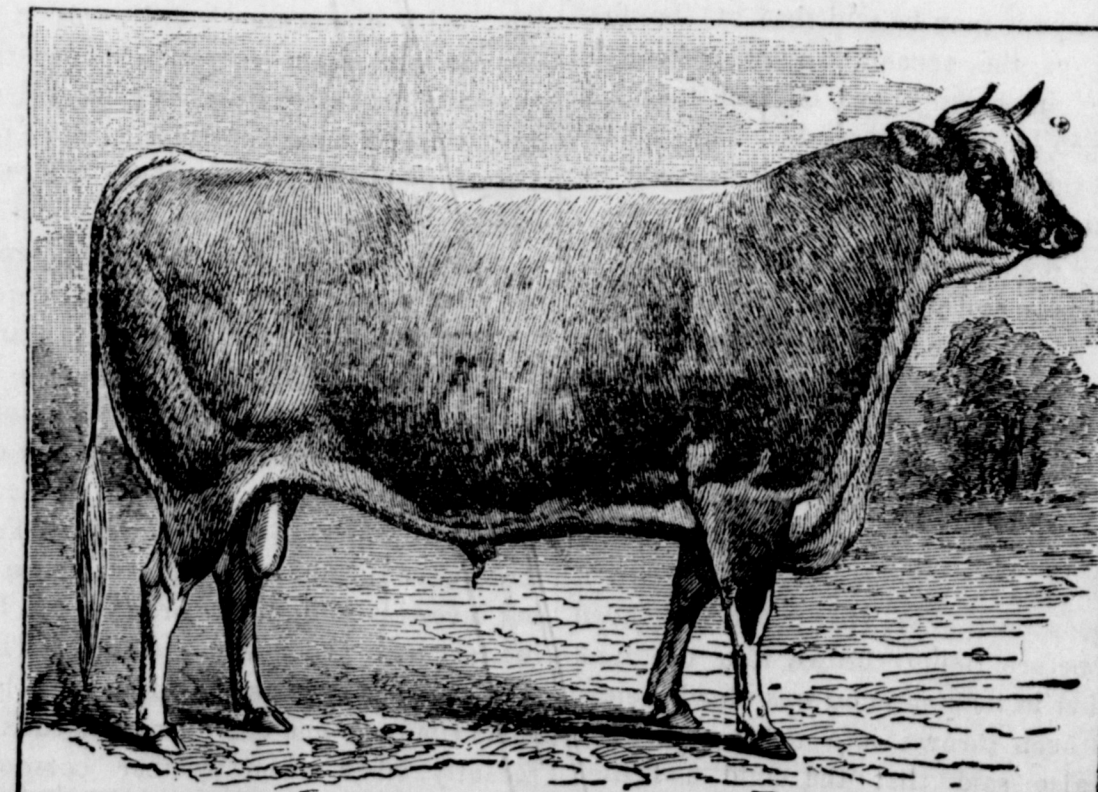
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