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He Omitted The "Extra"

by James Norman Shreve

A STALWART, BLACK-CAPPED FIGURE, TORCH IN HAND.

THE timekeeper struggled feverishly for several moments to catch at least a few of the letters that were sprayed out in what seemed to him a hysterical blur of dots and dishes from the white, deft fingers of Alfred Winter, second-trick despatcher of the Pecos Valley Lines.

Finally a breath of the cool June night

breeze from the open window behind him doubled over the sheet of clip he was writing on, and he lost track of the meanings. He shook his head, threw down his pencil, and leaned back, watching admiringly the swift work of the despatcher.

In a moment the latter closed his key, looked up at the clock, and jotted down "10.20 P." on the train-sheet. Then he smiled thinly at the timekeeper. "Get any?" The timekeeper grinned sheepishly. "Oh, some. I got 'C. & E.' all right, and an 'assist.' and 'extra' and-1et's see— 'over all' and 'trains.' Gee! You must have gone at a sixty-a-minute hike."

"Hardly that. About forty-five. Farquehar, at Canadian, isn't a fast man. Here he comes with the repeat. Try it. He sends slow."

The timekeeper grabbed his pencil and again bent over his pad. When the despatcher handed the train-order copy-book over the long glass partition to Korby Browning, his young night operator, the timekeeper walked around and peered over Korby's shoulder. For a moment he compared his slip with the book. Then he slapped his leg explosively.

"By gracious!" His voice was triumphant. "Look-a here!"

He shoved the paper under Korby's nose.

"What do you think of that now! Say, only whisper to me, friends—only whisper. I see your finish, Korby. Me for your job, all right, all right. Say the word, Alfred, and you can have me."

The despatcher threw his thin, ungenial smile at the operator. "Get it, did he?"

Korby nodded. "Sure thing. All except the date." He got up and offered his chair to the timekeeper. "Here you are, Shervin. I resign. You're it. When you get Alfred's job, there, gimme mine back, will you?" He reached for his pipe. "Got a match?"

Shervin carefully folded his sheet of paper. "This is a precious thing. In future years I shall look upon its frayed and worn edges and say to one K. Browning, still a struggling operator tolerated in my office, 'Young man, remember that? Why, oh, why haven't you taken a leaf out of my book?'"

He handed over the match. "Well, I gotta go to bed. 'Night, both. Bet you I dream of head-end collisions; No. 202 in the ditch; forty people passed in their checks—and me asleep at the key!"

The night operator at Canadian sat for a moment staring at the train-order pad before him, a shaggy frown roofing his tired, pleasant eyes.

"Humph! Funny business, that. '*All* trains,' hey? Oh, all right, all right. Reckon they know what. But all the same—" He tore off the top sheet and limped to the door.

Pusher 292 stood on the passing track, breathing deeply and evenly, as if gathering strength for the stiff climb up Glazier Hill behind the thirty-seven loads of Extra 18 that waited on the main line ahead, just beyond the switch. A stalwart, black-capped figure, torch in hand, overalled, and jacketed in grease-smeared faded blue, was leisurely oiling round, now stooping a little to peer back of the big drive-wheels, now reaching over with long-scouted oil-can to satisfy some thirsty cup.

"Hi, Redding! You Belvedere, you! Come here and get your orders!"

The black-cap faced about and the flaring torch showed clear eyes set in clean-looking whites, cheeks that, even in the yellow, smoky light, were pink as a girl's—what you could see of the natural color—and strong white teeth in an amiable grin at the operator's pet classical allusion when speaking to this particular black-cap.

Frank Redding knew nothing of Apollo, or Hercules, or Mercury, or Venus, except, perhaps, as euphonistic titles to sundry Pullman sleepers that he aspired to whip around curves

behind him.

If he had had even a faint knowledge, can't I see him blush, and jump for his cab, and swear fluently from the safe retreat of his cushion, where the spluttering hiss of dripping water-cocks and the subdued roar of fire-box would drown all answering retorts to the operator?

At the door he caught the little lame man by the elbows, carried him over to the desk, and plumped him gently down into the rickety armchair.

"You stop your 'Belvy-dearing me, or I'll tell your wife you're thinking of some other girl."

It was an old threat that always brought a chuckle from Farquehar—a chuckle a trifle puzzling to the young engineer, indicative somehow of amusement at his expense.

"Gimme that order." He bent down close to the dingy station-lamp. In a moment he had straightened up and looked quickly at the operator. "Sam Hill! Why, this says—say, you sure you got this right?"

"Sure thing. A. W., O. K.'d my repeat."

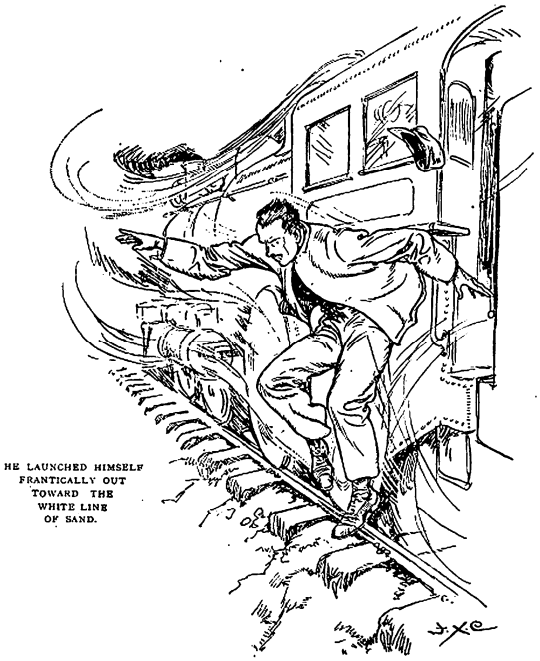
Redding studied the sheet a full minute longer.

"Humph! We're the moguls tonight. I suppose if the old man himself was out in a special we'd be over him, too—what?"

An impatient screech from far up the track made him thrust the order into an inside pocket.

"Well, see you later. Friend Josiah's saying 'What the deuce!'"

He ran out to his engine and swung up the steps. A clang or two of the bell, a quick snort of the whistle, a few soft expulsions of the exhaust, and 292 moved slowly up the siding, out across the switch, and coupled neatly onto the rear end of Extra 18.



HE LAUNCHED HIMSELF FRANTICALLY OUT TOWARD THE WHITE LINE OF SAND.

One hour later Redding whistled "good by." He and his fireman watched the caboose fade out of the headlight's ken, and the green eyes of the rear lanterns grow smaller and nearer together and suddenly blot out altogether as the train swept around a curve.

Redding pulled back the reverse, but before opening the throttle once more referred to the thin waxy sheet of the train-order.

"Can't make anything else out of it. Can you, Carl?" He handed it over to the fireman, at the same time gently pulling at the throttle. As the steam dropped hissing into the cylinders and the drivers grumbled into sullen, clanking; motion, the fireman shook his head and passed the paper back. "Nope. We're the folks tonight."

"All right. Here goes."

He glanced out along the track, slipping sluggishly under them through the thick yellow light from the rear of the tender, braced himself comfortably against the window-jamb, and with right hand on air-brake lever, opened the throttle wider for the slight incline to the top of Glazier Hill. The engine lurched to the crest, then, with steam shut off, started on the five-mile coast

downward.

The hand of the indicator jerked steadily to thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty, sixty, seventy, and stayed there. The right wind whistled shrilly through the cab, whipping the bell-cord viciously against the roof, and swaying the bell itself till it protested plaintively. The headlight case, sharply outlined against the fan of light beyond, described unsteady arcs as the tender swung this way or that; while at every lurch the iron apron between tender and engine scraped and rasped and clattered truculently.

The telegraph-poles to the right of the track, grimly cross-armed far ahead against the star-shot velvet of the prairie sky, lengthened swiftly to the dim outer edge of the light-shaft, hurtled gigantic through it, were swallowed voraciously by the hungry night.

Ragged splotches of mesquit, left unscarred by fire-guards beyond the right of way, lumbered gloomily past, while now and then, still farther out, a tufted Yucca, cleanly silhouetted from the summit of some gentle rise, paced slowly to the rear.

A mile was gone! Two miles! A third. Through Huelger's Cut a swirl of fine gravel stormed the cab. "Look what you done!" yelled Carl, ducking his head.

Redding roared, spitting vigorously, "I forgot!" Then he grinned, and with his free hand put thumb to nose and wiggled his fingers amiably at his fireman. "Wouldn't that gravel you!"

The latter got off his seat, spat on his hands, and made certain according-to-code motions as to what he wanted to do to somebody's head. Happening to glance at the steam-gage, he grabbed the chain and jerked open the furnace-door, shooting in a couple of shovelfuls of coal with such gusto and self-evidence as to whom he wished they were, that he climbed again onto his seat, smiling, and took a fresh chew of tobacco.

A fourth mile whipped past, blurredly, blotchily, streakily, and over sixty feet of low trestle they roared splittingly into the fifth. Now the damp wind slapped their faces. Somewhere ahead was the Canadian River. Redding pressed over ever so little the brass lever under his right hand. Straightway a high, thin wail cut into the harsher sound chaos, and the cab felt a slight tremor.

He pressed farther. The wail rose to a scream, the tremor to a shudder. The driver brake-shoes clamped closer and the big wheels, fretted hot, struggled impotently to shake off that relentless embrace. Back dropped the hand of the indicator, sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, and at the bridge, fifteen.

The headlight speared a stretch of black sluggish water, sullenly menacing, where it had cut deep into the bank at the farther end of the bridge, just where the track elbowed in a sharp curve.

Redding looked back as the engine took this curve. He spat contemplatively. "The treacherous son-of-a-gun!"

For half a mile beyond the bridge the track was on a flat level. Then it took a slight dip and swerved around The Council—a group of ragged rocks quaintly up-tossed to form a circle of squatting figures. From there on the rise in the land, unevenly sand-duned and hillocked, was such as to conceal for a full mile the bed of the railroad.

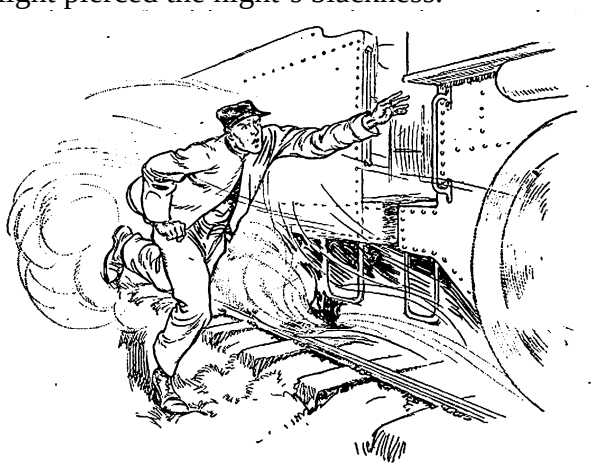
Half-way to the dip the fireman suddenly jerked himself upright and stared wildly out into the night—not down the track, but across the space bound by the coming curve. His face whitened under the coal-dust and grease. Hi rubbed his eyes—then swung off his cushion with a shrill yell.

"There's 202's light! For Heaven's sake, jump, Frank!"

The last word was hardly past his lips before he was out on the cab-step. He hung a fraction of a second by the handrail, and then

launched himself frantically out toward the white line of sand ten feet from the track.

Redding had dropped to his feet. He peered out. From beyond the faint outline of a rounded hummock a long thin shaft of mellow light pierced the night’s blackness.



HIS OUTSTRETCHED HAND COULD NOT TOUCH THE RAIL.

“He’s right. It’s 202!”

Snap! The lever shot to the emergency notch, but the grinding, furious, upheaval for which he braced himself tautly did not occur!

For the first time in her life, 292's air would not work!

Only one thing to do. He slammed forward the reverse lever, and, as a shower of slivered sparks shot from under the wrenched drivers, opened the throttle to its widest.

Then he ripped the mild summer night back and across and up and down with a misery of sound from the raucous throat of the whistle.

Straightway it was answered, and Redding knew what could be done was being done by 202. His own engine was all atremble with the battle of the drivers to grip the rails and the thunder of the unshackled steam.

The gage showed eight miles an hour as 292 skidded down the dip at The Council and, rounding the curve, shivered into the full glare of the east-bound passenger’s headlight.

Redding saw they must come together, but felt that no serious damage would be done. He hung on to the cab handrail till but a score of feet away, then dropped. He stumbled, rolled off into the ditch, and sat up just as 292 bumped into the other engine.

There was a splintering of wood from a shattered pilot, a clang of both bells, a tinkle of smashed headlight glass. No. 202 shoved the pusher forward a few feet and came to a standstill. Not so 292.

Redding rubbed his eyes. Then he remembered, and leaped to his feet. He had thrown over the reverse-lever, and full steam was on!

The exultant wheels, with the help of 202, had at last come into their own. Still slipping at times in a blur of spokes, they clung enough to the rails to send the engine forward faster with every stormy, sputtering breath from the cylinders.

Redding raced silently at the side of the cab-step, but, strain as he might, his outstretched hand could not touch the rail that would offer him grip. More frequently the huge drivers bit sure, and the rocking engine gathered speed.

The panting young engineer saw pictures. He saw the half-mile stretch of straight, smooth track ahead. No. 292 would end it at seventy-five miles an hour. He saw the sharp swing to the track as it met the bridge. When his engine struck this—Heaven! What a thing to see! A black, raging thing of the night in a flying leap—up, out, down, down into that bottomless hole, into arms patient a hundred years for this! He saw himself, his hopes—her! A thick, dry sob wrung from his lips. Then his toe struck a tie and he was hurled sprawling—to reach at length the hand-rail. His fingers snapped tight. His legs were whipped across the rough ties for a few yards, then he drew himself up into the cab.

With steam shut off, and new-gained freedom lost, the engine slowed sullenly to a clanking, grumbling, curse-the-luck stop. A scared voice spoke from out the darkness.

"Frank! You there? What's happened!"

A white, scratched face peered up into the cab. Bits of cinder and sand clung to the yellow foretop.

The engineer looked down. He solemnly put thumb to nose and wiggled his fingers. "Wouldn't that gravel you!"

The timekeeper was playing his usual afternoon game of solitaire, sorting time-slips. The door opened and a big-shouldered, spruce figure entered.

"Hallo, Frank—Mr. Redding, I should say. Why, is to-day the big day? Didn't know it was so soon!"

The pink cheeks grew somewhat pinker, but the teeth gleamed in the usual wide, attractive grin.

"Shucks! Naw! Can't a fellow wear a new pair of pants once in a while?" He laid a cigar on the desk. "That's for my time. Gimme it. Last month's, I mean."

"Huh! When *is* the day, then?"

The engineer again protested. "Honest! Just want to take a lay-off. Since night before last my—er—nerves have been—er—upset, doncherknow."

The timekeeper grunted, but reached for his engineers' record. "Explanation's bum. But, seriously, I heard about your doings. Close shave, wasn't it."

"Yep. I'm in the clear all right, though. But poor Farquehar has got the can, I hear. I'm sorry. He's decent. But he made a bad bust."

"Bull the order, did he?"

"Um-hm. Got it 'right over all east-bound trains' instead of 'east-bound extra trains'."

The other turned quickly. "What's that?"

Redding reached for his wallet, and took out a thin, crumpled sheet. "My copy. See what it says."

The timekeeper smoothed it out flat.

6-7. 10.20 P.

C. & E, No. 18. Engineer, Engine 292.

C. & E, all trains east.

Engine 292 will assist No. 18, Canadian to Glazier, and will run extra Glazier to Canadian with right over all east-bound trains.

. G. D.

"Well?"

"Why," slipping it back into his wallet, "Farquehar left out the one word that cut the mustard— 'extra.'"

The timekeeper rumpled his hair. "Oh—he did, did he!"

"Sure. Mr. Winter's record shows that, he says. But I'm sorry for Farquehar. He's got some dandy kids. And his wife ain't very strong. Well, I gotta go up-stairs and see the chief. Have that for me when I come down?"

The timekeeper nodded and opened the record. But for some time he stared down unseeing at the figures. "Farquehar! What'll he do now?"

He spread out his own particular scrap of clip—his "precious thing." Word for word, it read as Redding's copy.

The timekeeper struck the desk a loud blow with his clenched fist.

"Curse A. W., for a rotten, cowardly sneak! Oh, he'll get his, all right; he'll get his!"

He began furiously to write out the engineer's time-check.