

THE LUCK OF THE NORTHERN MAIL.

BY ALF. MILTON KERR.

Boiled, sunburned and gray with dust, he reluctantly entered the gate leading to a small house not far from the railway. A gray-haired woman bending over some sewing sat in a rocking chair upon the porch of the house. The dusty youth approached her timidly, his battered hat in hand. The woman started, looked up and peered hard at him over her glasses. "We don't want any tramps 'round here," she said, in dry, severe tones.

The boy hesitated, twisting and rolling up his hat in embarrassment. "I'm not a tramp, missus. I'm a thief—that is, they charged me with stealing money that I didn't steal, an'—an' I'm trying to get away," he stammered. "I ain't got a cent, an' I ain't had any thing to eat since yesterday mornin'. I don't like to beg, but—"

"Mercy!" exclaimed the woman. "You do look weak an' awfully pestered out. Come in here and set down."

The youth approached and sank down upon the porch steps. "Come up an' set on a cheer," said the woman, "an' I'll get you somethin' to eat."

The boy stirred restlessly. "No, thank, yeh, I ain't—I ain't so very clean," he said. "I'd rather set here."

The woman's face softened as she turned and entered the house. Presently she returned, bringing several dishes of food. "I'll just set 'em before you here on the steps," she said. "I reckon you'll enjoy things best that way."

"Oh, missus—" the boy began, a world of gratitude and eagerness in his voice, then suddenly fell to eating in wild, half-famished fashion. The woman, mercifully, did not look at him but continued her sewing. When the wayfarer had finished she placed the empty dishes on a chair, and again seated herself. "Did you come through Borpee?" she inquired, a smile hovering about her mouth.

"The town about two miles back there?"

"Yes, that's Borpee."

"Yes, I came through it. I didn't stop long," in a rueful tone.

The woman laughed. "I reckon you didn't," she said. "It's awful the way they treat tramps up 't town. You see the town board has a fuss with the railroad. They passed an ordinance that the railroad must stop all trains at Borpee, on account of the town havin' give 'em the right of way. So the railroad men got up a scheme to make the town sick of its bargain by bringin' every tramp from the North that they can get hold of an' dump 'em out in Borpee. Sometimes there's a hundred put off the train there at one time, folks say. The town folks try to make the tramps stay on the trains and they have a great time."

"I understand now," said the youth. "That's why the trainmen was good to me all the way from Portland an' then kicked me off at the town. I tried to get on but one of 'em kicked me in the face, an' I had to let go."

"Is that how you got that bruised place on y'r cheek?"

"Yes," and his soiled fingers clenched involuntarily.

"It's mean as—as dirt," said the woman hotly. "What might y'r name be?"

"Saul Banks. The boys back in Painter District used to call me Sorrel, 'cause my hair's red."

"Tain't so very red," said the woman gently. "Where's Painter District?"

"Back in Wisconsin. It's a school district in the country. It's most all woods there." A wistful look came into his eyes.

"Y'r people live there?"

"Not many now, only a uncle."

"Where's y'r father an' mother live?"

"I ain't got any, they're dead."

"Long?"

"Since I was five or six years old. They was—was burned in a big forest fire back there."

"But you didn't steal?" queried the woman, looking at him over her glasses.

A flush came into the youth's freckled, dusty face. "No, on'y sometimes melons or apples 't eat, jus' for fun. Most boys do that, yeh know."

"Yes, but you was charged with stealin' somethin' else, you said."

Sorrel hesitated a moment. "Yes, that was money," he said. "I run off from Uncle Reuben's early this spring an' come West. I wanted to get to Aunt Lucy's—she's mother's sister, an' lives down at Sacramento, in California—an' so I got to St. Paul, an' beat my way over the railroad out into Washington State. I had a awful hard time. I went 't work on a wheat ranch up in the Palouse country 't get money 't pay my way down the coast to Aunt Lucy's. There was a lot of men workin' on the ranch, an' one young feller, Sime Sauer, 'bout my age an' size.

His an' me run together all the time. 'Bout two weeks ago, Mr. Young, the ranch man, was goin' 't pay the man off, an' brought a lot of money out from the bank—three or four hundred dollars, I guess. That night somebody stole it. They suspected Sime an' me, an' took me over to a town on the railroad an' jailed me. The jail wasn't much account, though, and the second night I got out and made tracks for California. I've got this far. I want 't get down to Aunt Lucy's, but I don't know. I s'pose the sheriff'll be there watchin' for me." He ended with a note of hopelessness in his voice.

"Did the folks at the ranch know about y'r wantin' 't go to Sacramento?"

"Sime did, an' mebbe some of the others did, too. I'm goin', anyhow. I've made up my mind. He rose stiffly to his feet. "I'm much obliged, to you, missus. I was mighty hungry."

"Wait just a minute," said the woman, hastily rising and entering the house.

Sorrel stood fidgeting. After a little time the good soul returned. In her hand some bread and butter and pickles, for—for I was awful hungry."

"When the vittles are gone, you can have the handkerchief," she said kindly, "and here's a little money. It's all I got in the house just now, or I'd give you more. I hope they won't never find you."

Sorrel's lips began to quiver. "I don't want the money," he said huskily. "I couldn't take that. But I'd like the vittles, for—for I was awful hungry."

She reached the money toward him. "You'd best take it, you'll need it," she said.

"No, I'm all right," he replied, and started hastily toward the gate. Then he turned and awkwardly took off his hat. "I'm much obliged. I'll tell Aunt Lucy how—how good yeh was," he said.

"Goodby, take keer of yourself," said the woman.

Sorrel trudged southward along the track, a fugitive from the law, but happier than he had been for days. Near sundown he came to a little boxcar station in a narrow gulch, but there seemed to be no one in charge.

"I reckon the train don't stop here," he said wearily, and after a moment's rest plodded onward. Twilight descended, purple and shadowy, and slowly merged into darkness. He sat down and took some food from the handkerchief, and ate it; then stumbled onward again. "I must find a place where the train stops," he kept saying to himself, and pushed onward.

At last he came to a strip of benchland, a side-track, and long racks of corded wood. "Here's where trains wood-up," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction, and crept in behind a rack and laid down to wait. He was dead tired, and despite all his efforts to beat back the numbing tide of sleep, its soft waves flowed over and engulfed him. Presently he sat up with a thud of fear and expectation; a train was drawing in on the siding. He cautiously drew himself up, and peered over the top of the rack. The train was a long one, a string of flat cars loaded with some light gleaming. Sorrel could dimly make out that the conductor was standing on the front steps of the caboose. The rear brakeman was going forward.

"Hello out for hoboes, Jim," shouted the conductor. "If you see any of 'em tryin' to get on, just paralyze 'em!"

Nevertheless, when Sorrell had noted the conductor's withdrawal into the caboose, and had listened a moment to the men plugging the wood into the engine tender, he crept round the end of the rack and up into one of the flat cars. Sinking prone on his stomach he hastily scraped back some of the earthy conglomerate from along one of the side boards of the car, rolled into the depression, and covered himself up as best he could with the broken stuff. After a little time the mogul roared "off brakes," the couplings clanked sharply, and the train jarred and rumbled away through the echoing defiles.

Sorrel, lying snugly and, save for his face, quite covered by the crushed and mealy matter, smiled and whispered, "I'm all right. This must be a train of low grade ore goin' down to the reduction works in California, or some place else," in which apprehension Sorrel did not err.

After a time Sorrel's busy thoughts fell quiet, and he slept. Twice a brakeman passed his rough couch, wading through the yielding mass of crushed volcanic rock toward the caboose, but without dreaming that a human being lay almost under his feet. Hours passed, and finally the tired fugitive awoke.

They were still in the mountains; but while he slept the train had made its way out of one mountain district, had traversed the valley of the Rogue River, and was now climbing into the Klamath Range. Sorrel could not say whether they had entered California, or were still in Oregon. He sighed, dropped his head back on its pillow of stone, and lapsed into a doze.

When Sorrel awoke again, he saw a world of mountain tops below him, heaped and strangely beautiful in the yellow glory of the early morning. He partly turned his body and, propping his chin in his hands, looked ahead. He could see the top of the cab and the smokestack of the mogul swaying softly. Evidently they had passed over the summit, for the speed of the train was momentarily increasing. He wondered where they were. Had he known, and could he have foreseen what lay before them he would not have slipped his hand into the handkerchief and cautiously drawn forth a piece of meat and munched it, as he did thinking gratefully of the meal he had just given. The meat tasted sweet in his mouth. "Wish I had a mother like her," he mumbled. "Wonder how Aunt Lucy looks? Hope she's good."

The denouement of the track was very pronounced. For thirty miles ahead of the train there was a continuous fall, a tremendous whiplash of steel winding around the mountain sides, over streams, through tunnels, down cañons, through abyses, until it fell at last across the waters of the Klamath, and began to climb away to mount the base of snow-capped Shasta. Like some sort of jointed monster with mighty iron head, the long train went downward, roaring and swaying like a racing snake, as it followed the never-ceasing curves. Sorrel munched at the meat contentedly. It was not half a minute, he thought, before he would be out of the steep of the swelling range.

Suddenly there came a pealing roar from the mogul, a wild shout for brakes! The drawheads crashed together along the train and involuntarily Sorrel jumped to his feet. The train was rounding a shattered shoulder of the mountain, a point where the footing for the track had been blasted from the rock. On the left a splintered wall of stone swept upward; on the right the ground fell downward, thick with pines and the strewn debris of the blasting. Not fifty feet ahead of the engine Sorrel saw a huge wedge of stone protruding from the shattered wall; with the same look he saw the fireman leap out from the gangway of the mogul and turn in the air as he went downward among the trees. The next instant, with a tearing crash, the smokestack, hand chest, whistle, bell and cab were swept from the top of the engine. Sorrel saw the engineer whirled backward in the flying wreck of the cab and caught a glimpse of something red gushing from the man's mouth. The next moment the boy flung himself face downward on the crushed stone in the car. He threw out his arms and caught a glimpse of the protruding tongue of rock flashed above him, then turned his head and saw the caboose meet it. With a splintering crash it sheared half way through the sturdy car, flinging a brakeman into the air from the crushed top of the car. Sorrel's heart throbbed with a terrible sense of doom. The next moment Sorrel lost sight of it as the train passed around the bend.

Quivering from head to foot, he got to his feet and looked round him. On the right the mountainside swept downward by gentle slopes and sharp plunges for seemingly the distance of a half mile; on the left it towered upward beyond his vision. The train was rushing along a deadly jump over the mountainside. With a cold thrill of fear and horror he realized that he was alone on the runaway train. Smoke was pouring from the hole in the engine, which had become a plume of white hissing plume of steam spurted from the whistle pipe, the cars rocked and battered together and all went roaring headlong, entirely without control. "I must get off this train," said Sorrel, turning round and round. "First thing I know I'll jump the track an' go down the mountain."

With staring eyes he climbed over the sideboard, looking wildly for a place where he might jump clear of the ties. "It'll kill me sure if I jump among them rocks," he half whispered. "I better stay here."

But a moment later he saw a long dump of dirt and gravel, and dropping his body low over the sideboard flung himself outward. With a swimming awful sense he went over and over through the air and struck the yielding slope, shot downward. Bruised and half conscious, he scrambled to his feet among some bushes fifty feet from the track. In his excitement he turned and made directly up the dump, grasping his toes in the shaly mass and gasping for breath. In a few moments he was on the track, brushing the dirt from his mouth and eyes.

Some of them fellows must 'a been kind of back there," he panted, then suddenly held his breath and listened. He could still hear the doomed train madly following the great groove downward. As he turned about excitedly

his mind in a mass of emotions and half formed purposes, he saw the cuts and Sime and shining rails of a track on the mountain side below him. Seemingly it was a thousand feet below the ground where he was standing. He looked puzzled.

"Oh, I see," he panted, "the track runs clean around the mountain's top and comes out lower down. That same train will go by down there in a few minutes. What's that down there on the bench? That's a side track an' a woodyard. Why, there's a passenger train comin' up the mountain!"

An invisible hand seemed to clutch Sorrel's heart and take it from him; his pulses seemed to stop. "That runaway train'll go plumb through that passenger," he gasped. "It'll never leave a thing of 'em on the track!"

The imperiled train was possibly two miles distant, but seen through the clear mountain air it looked to be much nearer. It was the Northern Mail, scheduled to meet the train the mogul was pulling at the spur on the mountain side. The ore train would reach the spur in time, but the hand whose function it had been to close the mogul's throttle was lifeless now, and the brakeman who had expected to throw the switch was lying among the rocks with a gashed forehead and a broken leg.

Sorrel stood still a moment, all unconscious of the glory of the morning on the mountain heights, and the vast panorama spreading away from his feet. The picture of the Northern Mail, curving and straightening, glinting and hiding and reappearing, as it climbed toward the summit, enthralled him. A burning flight of awful things swept through the mind. In a few minutes the beautiful scene would darken with unspeakable tragedy. The monster mogul would crush through the oncoming train and hurl everything into ruin. A hundred happy human beings would be rent and battered, some protruding from the wreckage and rock would be reddened with blood.

Like one breaking from a horrible dream, Sorrel suddenly started, paused hesitatingly, then plunged down the gravelly slope into the woods. His stretched face looked white, his dust-rimmed eyes were wide and glowing. "If I can only get down to that spur in time an' can get the switch open," he was saying, as he lunged through fallen tree-tops and over bowlders and down shelving breaks. He seemed in consternation; he had all but rushed over the edge of a break which dropped sheer downward for apparently fifty feet. It looked as if he might step from the edge directly into the top of the pines below. With a strange whirling cry he ran along the brink of the precipice, looking wildly for some place where he might descend. He was only a few seconds in the search; then, flung himself over the edge and began hurriedly working his way downward, clinging to vine and bramble and ledge as he went. In his heart burned so hot a haste, he need of speed was so great, the responsibility that lay upon him was so overwhelming, he could not be careful. Suddenly his feet slipped, his clinging fingers jerked the vine-growth from the rocks and he whirled backward into space. The unconscious cry which springs of mortal terror had scarcely left his throat when he felt himself strike and a dizzying pain shot through his frame. He grasped some object and turned himself; he was hanging in the fork of a tree! Instantly he pulled himself loose and slipped rapidly to the ground. Here he found the wood more open and the railroad track in sight, and he ran forward with all his might, stooping half-way to the ground. Something was the matter with his side. He was dimly conscious of terrible pain, but he could not stop. He bent, beat the mogul to the switch, and was running a race with death.

Almost falling, he came down upon the track. As he crossed it he heard the thunder of the runaway train. With a half-dozen mad bounds he was at the switch. He tore at the lock in a kind of insanity. How should he ever get it loose? Suddenly he snatched up a heavy stone and delivered blow upon blow beat the lock to pieces. Jerking out the pin, he threw the lever round and pinned it again, leaped back, all his features wild and working. The next moment the train burst round a bend in a storm of noise. Some of the upper works of the huge engine were lying along the boiler-track and she looked like some mighty animal rushing forward with ears laid back in rage. Sorrel drew farther away, bending almost double, his mouth white and puckered, his eyes starting. With deafening roar the engine and train rushed on to the spur. Nothing short of a solid mountain wall seemed capable of stopping these unbridled bolts of force. The bunting-post at the end of the spur was swept away like a reed and the whole train, led by the great ram, went headlong down the sloping mountain-side.

Should Sorrel Banks live a thousand years he would not forget that spectacle. Trees leaped from their roots, great sprays of ore-bearing stone shot into the air, about the mogul whirled clouds of broken things, a cracking thunder followed it, torn bent forward, gasping, speechless. Down, down the train plunged, cutting through

everything, until, a quarter of a mile away, he saw the mogul leap clear of the earth and, streaming fire from her open furnace-door, turn once in the air; and then he heard her fall with an appalling crash at the bottom of a canyon. A number of cars leaped upon her, some rolled over sideways near the brink. Then silence fell.

Sorrel, pale and laboring for breath, turned toward the track. The Northern Mail stood not 200 feet south of him. A dozen men were running toward him. He turned round and round; he seemed somewhere in a horrible dream. The engineer of the mail was first to reach him.

"Tell us! What's going on here?" he panted.

Sorrel stood bending forward, his hands clutching his side. His twisted mouth worked dryly; his poor, soiled clothes were sadly torn; his hands and face were streaked with blood. "I turned her down the mountain," he whispered hoarsely. "I s'pose that banked-chief with 'th' bread an' meat in it went down there too. I didn't get through eatin'."

He turned his gaze eyes round at the wondering men, put one of his hands to his throat, and suddenly plunged forward upon his face. The blue-clad conductor pushed through the crowd, followed by the sheriff from Palouse. At the same moment a dusty youth crept from his hiding place on the forward track of the mail car and came up the track. The conductor and most of the others were panting. There were wild shrieks and exclamations. Sorrel lay limp and still.

"I was hunting for that boy," said the sheriff. "I've been down to Sacramento; couldn't find him and was coming back."

The conductor of the ore train, hatless, white-faced, and with a dangling arm, burst out from the trees and came suddenly down upon the track. "Hello, Andy," cried the conductor of the Northern Mail. "What is this? Where's your train?"

The pale fellow looked wildly about him. "Some one throwed the switch then. I was trying to get here to do it. She's gone down the mountain! I'm glad of that. I expected 't find you all killed. A rock slipped out of Twiller Head, and tore the top works of the engine off and wrecked the caboose. Several of the boys hurt—maybe killed; I didn't wait to see. Who turned the switch?"

"That boy lying there."

"Why, that's the young hobo that

was hid in the slack. I told Jim not to disturb him." The conductors looked at each other.

"He's a good one," said the Northern Mail man.

The other nodded. "I guess I'll let 'em all ride after this," he said.

"Hello, he's come to," said the sheriff, bending over Sorrel. "Young feller, are you ready to go back and tell where the money is?"

Sorrel stared, running his blood-blotched fingers through his tumbled hair.

"Yeh needn't bother him," said a voice at the sheriff's elbow. "I got the money here, every cent of it. I'm takin' it back to Mr. Young."

"Well, if it ain't Sime!" said Sorrel, a smile lighting his ashen face.

"Yes, I found out they was after you, Sorrel, so I brung th' money back. I didn't want it nohow; I'd rather work for it. I've beat my way and rid on 'th' trucks ruther 'n spend it. Here 'tis, sheriff."

Investigation disclosed the fact that Sorrel had a pair of broken ribs, but never was a prince cared for with greater tenderness. He completed his journey to Sacramento in a Pullman sleeper, and found Aunt Lucy a "good mother." Today he holds an enviable position in the employ of the great railway system in whose interest he displayed such masterly courage that morning when he saved the Northern Mail.

\$3,000 FOR 1,236 KISSES.

Tittemore's Pledge of Affection Carefully Noted by Miss Pettit.

BALLISTON Spn. N. Y., May 14.—Did Miss Francis Pettit have a trolley-car fare register concealed about her while James P. Tittemore courted her? Did she ring up a kiss every time Tittemore kissed her? If not, how did the lady know that Tittemore kissed her 1,236 times during the 14 years of their courtship?

Miss Pettit says Tittemore kissed her that number of times, and Tittemore does not deny it. A jury in the supreme court believed Miss Pettit, and assessed Tittemore \$3,000 of the \$5,000 damages asked for.

It is said that a firm of Yankee manufacturers is making a fortune out of a machine called the "Kiss-ketcher," which in addition to recording kisses, sets down a great variety of vows and declarations, such as "I love you," "I would die for you," "I cannot live without you."

"I think of you every taking minute and dream of you the livelong night." "Life would be a desert without you." "When can I speak to your pa?" and many other old-familiar that leap unbidden to the lips of enthusiastic lovers.

"I always kept an accurate account of everything," said Miss Pettit in court, and no one doubted her. She knew how many meals Tittemore ate at her house during the period of his love-making. She had lived in one of Tittemore's houses for nine years, and when the break came he asked her for nine years' rent. Miss Pettit answered him by bringing out the account for meals, and showed him that he owed her more than his bill for rent. People who heard the queer suit wondered how Tittemore allowed such a gem of a woman to escape him. Tittemore loved another, that's the answer.

Tittemore is fully 50 years old. Miss Pettit is 35 years younger. Tittemore is said to have married a 14 year old Williamstown (Mass.) girl in 1887, but there was soon a separation. He met Miss Pettit while on an excursion last summer. Miss Pettit heard that he was paying attentions to another girl of Galway, where she lived, and when she tried to get him to the altar he balked. Then came the breach of promise suit, the suit for rent and the counter-suit for meals. Now Tittemore must pay the woman he courted so long and whose meals he ate \$3,000.

A BOYCOTTED PREACHER.

Jason Mason—There goes that city preacher who's thinkin' uv acceptin' a call here. His church in the city was boycotted.

Hiram Huskinsby—What? Great Gosh! A church boycotted? What for?

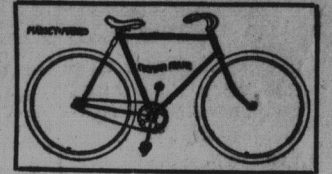
Jason Mason—Yew see, the street railway strikers darn near killed a non-union feller, an' that thoughtless preacher went an' comforted the poor chap durin' his last hours!—Fuck.

PAID WHAT HE COULD.

Everbroke—I want to pay you somethin' on account.

Tailor (rubbing his hands)—Ah, I'm glad to see you.

Everbroke—Yes, I want to pay you a compliment on account of your artistic way of dunnin'. Sh—not a word—you deserve it. Good morning.—Kansas City Journal.



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