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The Daily Short Story

WRECK OF THE 10.10

By Harold Carter

It was a slack evening in the office. I remember, and a group of us were sitting chatting around the reporters' table farthest from Dunning, the night editor, who had looked around rather frowningly once or twice, as if the conversation disturbed him. He was always busy enough; he was the kind of man who made work, silent, uncommunicative, though rather, I think, from shyness than owing to any unsympathetic quality.

Broad's fiancée was to arrive that evening on the 10.10 from Washington, and Broad, who had been celebrating in honor of the event, was telling us all the details of their recent quarrel and reconciliation. She had gone down to the capital to visit a sister, and they had parted without saying good-by, for some cause flimsy enough, but very serious in the minds of two lovers. Then she had written forgiving him, and so—that evening they would be united again.

That was all, Broad was telling it with a whole wealth of detail.

"Dunning is a Washington man too," said Broad, flourishing his hands expressively. "But he doesn't care. If he knew that I must get off to-night, likely as not he'd pick a special assignment for me out of spite. But I don't bear him malice—poor old Dunning! I hear his wife and he fight like dogs and cats."

"Sh-h!" said some one; and just then a boy entered with a late edition of the "Planet," wet from the press, and handed it to Dunning. We saw him glance at it, then suddenly rivet his attention on the starting black letter that covered one-third of the front page. He looked round and his eye searched our ranks.

"Mr. Broad!" he said sharply, and then, changing his mind, left his seat and hurried toward us. "Mr. Broad,

I want you to go out to Crayfield instantly. The 10.10 from Washington has been wrecked outside the station. Hurry and telephone all the news. And say, try to get a list of the dead."

"My God!" said Broad, and sank down into his seat. He buried his face in his hands and his shoulders shook convulsively. Somebody explained the situation in a few words, and Dunning's face took on an expression of intense sympathy. He placed one arm about Broad's shoulders and drew him to his feet.

"Too bad, old man," he said. "But I guess you'll be crazy now unless you get to Crayfield as soon as possible, so perhaps it would be the kindest thing to let you cover the assignment. You had better take a taxi from the office and you ought to be there in three quarters of an hour."

"Yes, I'll go," cried Broad, putting himself together. There was no longer any trace of the influence of liquor about him. "You're right, Dunning, I'll go at once and telephone you all particulars. You'll have a good story, no matter—what happens."

He pulled his overcoat from its hook and clapped on his hat. As he was nearing the door Dunning called after him:

"Don't forget to telephone a list—a full list of the casualties," he said. "That's the main part, I think. There'll be many half crazy people in town to-night until they know. The 'Planet' says that 14 were killed. But it may be exaggerated." And he went back to his seat, while Broad disappeared through the doorway.

Then, one after another, he detailed us; one to the railroad offices, another to the president's house, another to catch the general manager at his club. I was among the few not assigned and, retreating to my desk, waited.

It was Dunning's custom to throw the papers upon the floor, when he



had glanced over them, but on this occasion he folded the "Planet" carefully and laid it away in his desk. This act seemed strangely significant to all of us.

"Do you think her name is in the 'Planet's' list?" asked Kemp, the newspaper reporter. "Good Lord! If it were—would he have let Broad go there on an assignment?"

We did not like to think about the subject. It was too ghastly for conversation. There was nobody but liked Broad, big, generous-hearted, free-handed. Even his occasional lapses into insobriety had never affected his status with the paper. And some of us had met Miss Phayre. She was just the kind of girl who would make a proper wife for Broad and keep him straight. I had seen her at dinner with him; the thought of that fragile, high-spirited girl crushed under the wheels of the Washington Flyer seemed too sickening to contemplate.

Three-quarters of an hour elapsed. Dunning sat stiffly at his desk, writing indefatigably, glancing over fancies and casting copy aside. His face was blanched; the situation seemed to have affected him as much as any of us. Once in a while the telephone would ring, but it was always local news or a report from some of the

men on assignment. There was no word from Broad.

"If she's among them," began Kemp—and we knew he meant the dead—"Broad won't telephone."

"O yes, he will," I answered confidently; and at that moment the telephone rang so sharply that somehow I knew it was Broad calling from Crayfield. Dunning took up the receiver and held it to his ear a moment. Then he called me.

"It's Broad," he said. "He's calling and says he has a good story. Don't go into a booth; take it down here. I've told him to go slow. And say," he added, "don't let him get away without giving you the list of the casualties."

I took up the receiver and at the first sound I knew that Miss Phayre was safe.

"How is she?" I called. "Fine," answered Broad's voice, I thought there was the suspicion of a sob in it. "Are you ready? O, Miss Phayre? Just a trivial injury, thanks, old man. Now then." I began taking down the story, while Dunning looked over my shoulder.

"The 10.10 train from Washington to New York was ditched on the far side of Crayfield at 10.02," I wrote. "A broken rail is believed to have been the cause of the accident. The engine and the first three cars plunged down an embankment; the remaining cars left the track, but did not overturn. The passengers all escaped with minor injuries except one unidentified man who—"

Suddenly Dunning pitched over and fell to the ground. He had fainted. Kemp ran to raise him, and, temporarily diverted from the telephone by the occurrence, I found myself glancing at the copy of the "Planet" in Dunning's half-opened drawer of his desk. On the page facing me I read, among the list of the dead:

"Mrs. George Dunning, of Washington."

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