

The Open Track

By George Randolph Chester

"And the semaphore was clear—clear as a crystal!"

He seemed quite anxious that the other man, tho a stranger met casually at breakfast in the dining car, should bear this seriously in mind, and he waited for a grave nod of comprehension before he went on.

"This is the first time I've been over the route in daylight since then, and that was ten years ago," he resumed. "When I have to come this way I always travel by night, but this time I couldn't help myself. When we hit the Edgarville curve, I'm not going to look out of the window. No matter how green the grass might be, I should see it splashed with red, where fifty-eight of them—men, women, and children—lay moaning, or worse than that, quiet. And it wasn't my fault; the company exonerated me after they had investigated. The semaphore was clear."

"It was this very train, too. They called her Number Eight then, and she's Number Eight now. I am not boasting myself too much when I say I was a good engineer in those days. A man had to be, to run Number Eight; for at that time she was the fastest in the world, and a man with a touch of yellow any place in him had no right to climb into the cab of her engine. Up grade or down grade, curve or straight away or shaky track, she had to be pushed along with the throttle wide open, and my fireman Jimmie Dale—he's running this train today—feeding her every jump. I hadn't a nerve in my body, those days, and I loved my seat in the cab just next to my love the old wooden rocker at home, with the wife and the babies around me. I loved the sweep of the wind, the pull of the curve, the onward rush of the straight, level stretch, even the very sway and rock of her, as old Four Hundred and Two spun over crooked beds and rotten ties and kinked rails—but all that was before I lost my nerve; in the days when I pulled her in on schedule to the split second."

"Jimmie Dale, up ahead there, is doing the same thing today, but he didn't see what I saw. He stuck to the cab, as I did, but he was lucky; he scarcely knew when we struck, and he never woke up until four weeks afterward in the hospital. All he remembers is that just around the curve three miles this side of Edgarville we saw the engine of Number Seventeen looming up before us, and seeming to swell in size until, in the two seconds that were left us to say our prayers if we had thought of such a thing, she seemed to be as big as Niagara, to tower over us, to stretch up into the clouds and then to fall on us!"

"As the crash came, I seemed to have a curious, soft sensation all inside of me, as if I were made of nothing but loose feathers. I remember, all right! I can't forget it; I wish I could. I—I sometimes wake up in the night thinking about it."

II

The ex-engineer looked about him curiously as he spoke, turning his somber eyes furtively from side to side as if in constant dread of what they might rest upon.

"It was a morning just like this, and about this time of year. We were three

minutes late at Gordon Junction, waiting for the St. Louis connection, and that's why I didn't slow down much as we came to the Edgarville curve. It's a nasty bend just there, sharper than they make a curve now, with not enough dish to the road bed, and with trees running right up to the signal tower, so that you couldn't see a foot beyond. That's why they had put a semaphore there. It was the semaphore that killed my passengers, not me, for that morning it was clear. We never heard of the semaphore man again; he cut right off across country, and I suppose he changed his name."

"His skipping out that way helped to clear me, and as soon as I got out of the hospital the company offered me my old job back; but I couldn't take it. I knew my nerve was gone. They shifted me to the St. Louis branch and gave me their best train, but I couldn't make schedule. I had my hand on the lever, trembling, ready to reverse her, all the time, and I couldn't even pull in a slow train within a half-hour of her time. I had a streak running thru me the size of a telegraph pole and the color of a banana, and I couldn't fight it down. I was all in, and I had to step down and

well have tried to reverse a cyclone. Death was there, grinning and spitting at us, and there was no escape."

"It isn't the hissing of the steam nor the clang and clash of iron that I hear when I think of that awful minute, but the horrible grind, grind, grind! It was all over in a flash. The two engines seemed to heave up like a volcano, and then I was numb some place or other, I couldn't tell just where, and I seemed to float very gently down upon the ground, out in the field. I suppose I must have been unconscious for a minute or two after I lit, but it wasn't for longer than that. I think the shrieks and moans around me must have waked me up. I didn't know I was hurt. I didn't even wonder why I had so much trouble in getting to my feet, nor why, when I walked, I limped, and let my left arm hang straight down, and held my other hand upon my back; nor did I know that there was an ugly cut upon my forehead. All I thought about in that first moment was the semaphore, and I looked up. It was still clear."

"Have you any idea what it means to be responsible for the death of fifty-eight people? Of course you haven't. I hadn't even then, until I began to

somehow connected with that terrible day out there in the field. I took it as a sort of punishment, altho God knows I shouldn't have been punished more than this memory is a punishment, for it wasn't my fault. The semaphore was clear, and it wasn't my business to know what was beyond it. But it was my hand on the lever, just the same, and if the damned suffer worse agony than I did as I looked from one to the other of those poor, maimed, helpless creatures, we have a cruel God. It's the women and children that I can't get over. There was one little girl just the age of my Elsie, with the same brown curls, and—"

His voice choked and he stopped, but the stranger did not look at him. He knew that the tears were smarting upon the ex-engineer's lower eyelids, and his own eyes were moist. There was a little girl like that in the lid of the watch case, and just now she was over a thousand miles away. There was quite a long silence.

"You are not to blame for losing your nerve," was the stranger's commonplace remark, after he had cleared away a certain huskiness that was in his throat.

"I lost it in one second," replied the other, unsteadily. "I that had always been the coolest man of the crew in a wreck, was no use this time. Like a crazy man I went from one to another of them where they lay on the ground, all the living and some of the dead. I guess, telling them over and over again that it wasn't my fault, that the semaphore was clear—clear as a crystal!—I made them look to where both its useless arms, the red and the white, hung limp in the sunlight. One man laughed when I told him, then he cursed me, and died with the curse upon his lips. And it was his little girl that looked like mine!"

III

Mile after mile sped away and the two travelers sat silently looking out of the window and thinking gravely. There was a long stop by and by, and the stranger spoke of it.

"Yes," agreed the ex-engineer, "we ought to be out of here. This is Gordon Junction, and the St. Louis train is in ahead of us."

The conductor presently came bustling into the car.

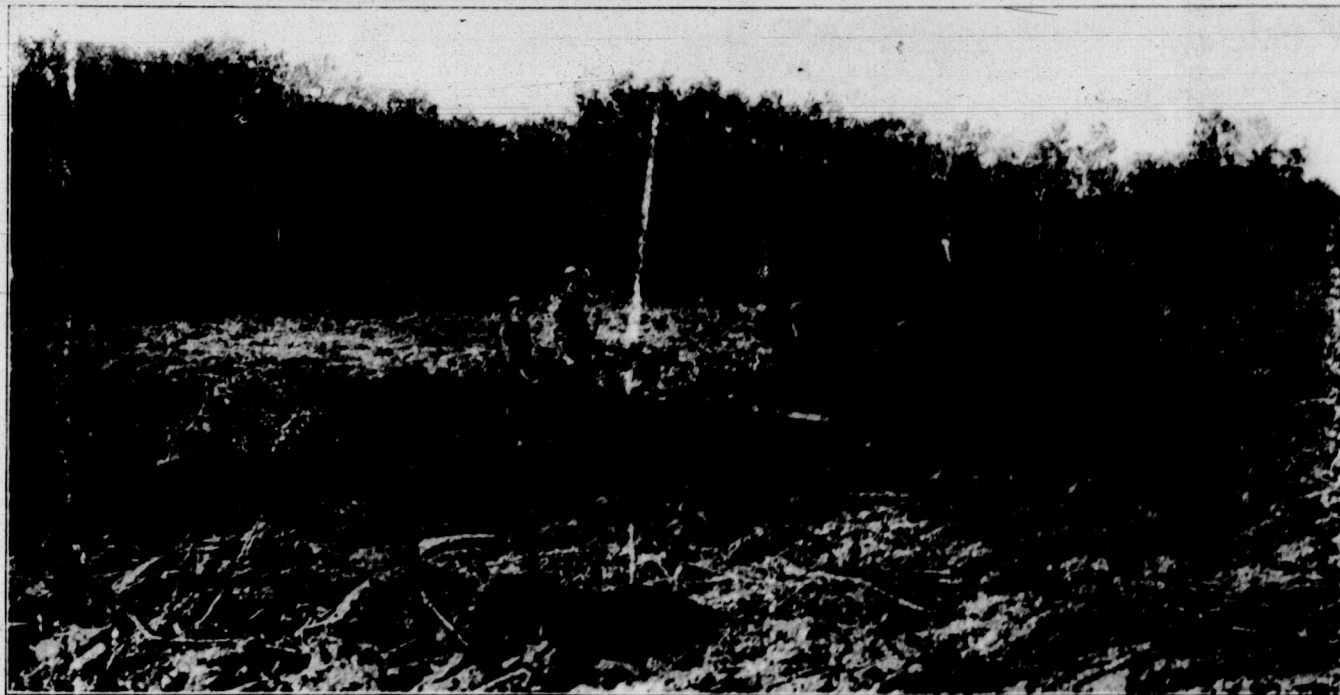
"Lucky you're aboard, Billy," he said, mopping his brow. "Jimmie Dale has just taken sick in the cab, and you'll have to pull us in to the end of the division. I'll report to headquarters that you're in charge."

There was no vehement outburst of refusal, such as the stranger had expected. Instead, the ex-engineer sat silent for some time, moistening his lips alternately, with a curious, slow deliberation.

"You know where we are, don't you, Murphy?" he finally returned, and the conductor gave a smile of understanding indulgence. "Can't Jimmie last until we pass the Edgarville curve? I won't mind running her in from there."

"Last!" repeated Murphy. "He's in the baggage car on a cot now, with a doctor that we got out of the Cincinnati sleeper. Acute gastritis, he calls it. Nothing to it, Billy—you'll have to for-

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BREAKING AMONG THE BLUFFS
A scene on the farm of Mr. Page, near Gladstone, Man.

out. The company was very kind to me; they gave me a good job on the ground, and I've held it ever since. I can't seem to leave the railroad entirely, tho I could make more money outside; and perhaps, too, I could forget a little bit better."

"As I said we were three minutes late that morning, and as we turned into the head of the grade I yelled across to Dale: 'We're all right this morning, Jimmie; the semaphore's clear—clear as a crystal!' and I threw her open to the last notch. We came fairly singing down that grade, old Four Hundred and Two rocking and tottering as if she were drunk, and I can see that stretch to the foot of the grade as plain as I could see it this minute. The sun was shining as brightly as it is right now; there was enough breeze to keep the green leaves waving gently, and out in front of his door, smoking his pipe under his clear semaphore, and looking up at us lazily, with both hands in his pockets, stood the semaphore man. I wish he had been in the middle of the track!"

"The next minute we hit the curve and swung around her, and then—we met Seventeen! Of course I tried to reverse her. I didn't even have to think to do that; my hand had grabbed for the lever even before my brain knew what was the matter, but I might as

move among them. I am not going to tell you what it looked like. You may imagine it for yourself, and be thankful that your imagination will not reach."

"There was one woman who came up and screamed at me furiously because she had lost her hair—her false hair—while right at her feet lay men, all cut to pieces but conscious, who never whimpered. A great big brute of a fellow, with a brow not an inch high and a neck as thick as his head, one whom you would have picked out as a cold-blooded thug, had thrown himself face forward upon the ground and was sobbing like a child, tho he wasn't hurt a particle, nor had he an acquaintance on the train. A dressy young fellow who would have been classed as a sissy turned out to be a doctor, and with a crushed leg and internal injuries that would have killed an ordinary man at once, he dragged himself around, with a white face and his jaws clenched, and bound up one wound after another until he died."

"But it wasn't the men that gripped me so hard; it was the women and children. You see, I had my wife and three babies at home, and you know what that means, for I saw just such a group inside the lid of your watch a minute ago. Mine have all been taken from me since then, one at a time, all four of them, and as each one left me it seemed to be