

The Fireman's Experience

The trainmen on the main line called the L. & B. Branch "the fam-ly cinch." It was a twenty-mile run, running north from the State central, and connected Lovell Junction with the village of Baxter. Its trains were four a day: passenger in the morning, mixed back at noon, mixed down at half past three in the afternoon, and passenger back at six.

One train crew did all the work, and the crew was all in the fam-ly. Jotham Hale was the engi-ner, and had tooted for cows and crossings on the branch ever since the days of the "cow-hy-stack" wood-burners. Seth Hale, his eldest son, was fireman, and another son, Ira, was station agent at Baxter, where all the Hales lived.

Asa was seventeen years old, and was the family pride on account of his ingenuity, a word that expresses a great deal in Yankee land. From the time when he could first run about he had devoted to the trains, and the station all the hours he could get from his school.

So it came about that even before he was hired as fireman he could "spell" any member of the fam-ly, which was convenient for the fam-ly, for the father-and-sons had sev-eral rather engrossing personal in-terests, such as gardens and horses and positions in the village fire de-partment.

"Old Man" Hale was, quite natu-rally, the chief engineer of the steam-er. Seth was foreman of Hoss No. 2, and the station agent, Ira, was chairman of the citizens' committee, whose duty it was to look after prop-erty removed to the street during a fire.

We are now qualified to understand what happened when the "big Baxter fire" broke out.

The noon train had been in at the station ten minutes. Jotham Hale had backed the uncoupled engine down opposite his house below the station. He owned a tract of land half a mile down the line, and his big barn was close beside the track. Morning noon and night the train ar-rangement exactly suited his chore time.

Half an hour before leaving time in the morning he was in the habit of loading his pails of swill into the cab and running his locomotive down to the barn. Noon and night he did the same. The neighbors used to smile and say that pretty soon "Old Man" Hale would be using the en-gine to pull his mowing machine and his harrow.

Now on this day the engineer was just hoisting two pails of steaming powder into the cab. All at once came a clamor of voices from up in the village. Then—bang! bang! bang! the Methodist bell boomed out. It was followed, clang! clang! clang! by the bell on the Congregational church.

"Fire, boys!" shouted the chief engineer, running to the house for his rubber coat. As he came out he cried to Asa, "Look out for Old Hoss!" "Old Hoss" was the fam-ly name for the locomotive.

Behind his father ran Seth, button-ing his fire coat. "Look up my tick-et-box, Asa!" he yelled back.

Then Ira, of the fire committee, bolted out of the station and came running down the long platform.

"Tend the office while I'm gone, Asa!" he gasped, as he ran past. "Keep your ear-out for messages."

Asa was quite accustomed to be-ing sole ruler in the station. He took a look at the gages in the engine, sprinkled fresh fuel on the quivering beds of coals, slowed down the pump till it breathed its "oo-o-o wough!" as slowly as a tired man asleep, and then he went up to the station.

"That fire looks rather savage," he thought. A great dun column had gone straight up, pushing a mighty, balloon-shaped, yellow and black knob. The knob had begun to "blos-som" into rolling, puffy, ominous convolutions that tumbled high above in the upper air-currents.

Ten minutes later, the first select-man came slewing around the corner of the station in his Concord wagon. He sprang out before the horse had fairly stopped and thrust a telegram under the wicket.

"Here, Asa!" he shouted. "Send it as quick as lightning, will take it!" "Hurry, Asa!" he said.

Asa clicked the Lovell office call, he read aloud:

"Chief Fire Department, Lovell. Baxter burning up. Can you send help on special? O. Burr, Select-man."

"That's right!" corroborated the select-man. "Hurry it!"

As the message went rattling away the select-man explained, "It caught in the sawmill and leather-board fac-tory, and they're afire from stem to stern. The grease in the leather-board place flashed up like powder and oil. All the main street blocks this side are ablaze, and clots of fire

are dropping everywhere out of that first smoke cloud. There's no telling where it's going to stop."

"We ought to hear in five minutes!" said Asa. "They'll telephone it to the chief."

He watched the smoke rolling higher and more dense. The select-man kept his eye on the mite telegraph—a permit for the special, to load and run up here, will take a good part of an hour, best they can do. But I'll slip Old Hoss of the main line now, to make sure." He hurried down and climbed into the cab. There were the pails of swill.

"Those poor critters ought to be fed!" he muttered, remembering the plight of the patient stock at the barn. Asa was a sympathetic and thoughtful youth in all cases where animals were concerned, and only a country-bred boy realizes the importance of chores.

"I can do it in a jiffy," he thought. "There's no knowing when they will get fed if I don't take the time right now."

Without hesitation he pulled the throttle and started for the barn. True railroad man that he was, Asa realized that he ought to be at the telegraph instrument, but he hoped these few moments' stolen for the sake of the beasts, would make no difference.

Almost before the engine came to a halt at the barn he was out and down with the pails and inside the door. He slopped the swill into the troughs, frantically jammed hay into the mangers, and then ran out.

There was a heart-chilling blank in the landscape where Old Hoss had stood. Rods away down the track the locomotive was lumbering along slowly, its faint and moderate chuff! ugh! chuff! telling that the throttle-bar was out a notch, or so.

Whether in his haste he had failed to drive the lever in securely, or whether the engine had started to roll on the grade and had jarred the throttle open, Asa's sudden, frantic conjecture could not determine.

But he fully realized that it was a case where haste had made waste. Old Hoss was travelling off leisurely, and was already rolling out upon the trestle and taking the long curve by the river.

Now the topography of the land below Baxter is peculiar. On minor branch roads contractors build around hills and dodge ravines. Just below the village the L. & B. track is especially sinuous. It comfortably follows the river, which sweeps around a great hill and curves back toward the village like the tail of the letter S.

The distance around the hill to South Baxter is five miles by the railroad. Across lots, and along one those old New England highways of the forefathers that went straight ahead regardless of hill or valley, it is less than two miles.

Asa, standing there by the track with the empty pails in his hand, thought quickly and desperately. It was useless to pursue Old Hoss down the track. Probably the station agent at South Baxter was then at dinner; otherwise Asa could have called him on the wire and asked him to shunt the engine.

With a great thrill of fear Asa took a stride from its peg in the barn, fiercely pulled an astonished horse from his dinner, and the next instant was clattering down the dusty road, pounding with fists and heels, and shouting into the frigh-tened animal's flattened ears.

Already from the country to the south the farmers were hurrying up toward Baxter, summoned by the signal smoke of the conflagration. Rattling wagons were kicking clouds of dust behind, and under the drifting cover of it men and boys were running and puffing.

Yelling as he galloped, Asa nar-rowly missed riding down dozens of these dust-hidden pedestrians. Aston-ished farmers jerked their horses to one side as he thundered past.

When he galloped down the hill to-ward the white crossing-post at South Baxter, his hands were clutch-ing the mane and his heels were hooked against the animal's steam-ing flanks. The horse was fairly run-ning away.

Time and time again was Asa nearly dislodged, for he was riding bare-back without stirrups. But he gathered all his strength, and when the horse's hoofs struck the crossing planks he dragged the snorting beast back on his haunches.

He looked up and down the line. The curve about shut off the view except for a short half-circle. Below was a two-mile tangent. Old Hoss was not in sight. There was not even a whiff of smoke down the tan-gent.

"She hasn't passed!" was the sudden, wild, thrilling flash of thought that steadied Asa's swim-ming head. Then he galloped beside the track to the small station build-ing. The agent poked his head out of the window.

"Has Old Hoss gone past?" gasped Asa.

"No, but it ought to be going past," snapped the agent; "that is, if your family expect to keep their jobs! Seems from what I hear that they got in too much of a hurry down in the Lovell yard, and the en-gine bumped off the track at the Y-switch frog as they were making up. There's no other spare engine in reach on the division, and they've been drumming Baxter to send down your engine. Reckon the division super must be in a padded cell by this time if the operator has told him. Hear?"

Out from the open window came the angry chacker! chacker! of the instrument. Asa wheeled his horse. "Break in and report special south according to orders!" he cried, and he dashed away up the track on the shoulder of the gravel bed, the horse's laboring hoofs throwing the sand in jets like a fountain. He had seen Old Hoss just rounding the curve.

As he approached the advancing de-linquent, he whirled about and wait-ed till the engine rumbled down on him. Then, as the cow-catcher came abreast of the plunging horse, he drove his heels against the animal's ribs and raced along for a few feet.

The locomotive was travelling leisurely. As the step came past, Asa threw down the bridge-reins, grabbed for the hand-rails, and dragged himself into the cab. The horse swung away into the field.

The next instant, throttle wide open, engine throbbing, and the white flames in the fire-box quivering with the exhaust blasts, Old Hoss roared past the South Baxter station, the whistle screaming for the crossing.

The station agent stared from his platform after the locomotive, till it was far down the tangent.

"Well, I swan!" he gasped. "Has the Hale family got Old Hoss so well trained that they let him go out for a stroll alone?"

It occurred to him that he ought to report, and he hastened to his instrument. The sounder had been quiet for a little while, but now, just as he was about to call Lovell, that point called Baxter once more with impatient racket. Failing to get a response, the Lovell operator called South Baxter. It was a cau-tion message.

"Hold track clear for fire special. Left her 1.22."

The South Baxter agent gasped; then he grabbed his sender-key and rattled this message:

"Special engine just left Lovell."

"Hold at South Baxter," clacked Lovell, very naturally not dreaming that a special could have been un-reported as leaving the Baxter termi-nal, a special that had not as yet offi-cially acknowledged receipt of orders to start.

"Has already passed," clicked South Baxter, with a tremble in the sending hand. Between South Bax-ter and Lovell there was only pre-sentations, without agents or instru-ments.

"That's what comes of dipping in where you don't belong," said the South Baxter man, drawing a quiv-ering finger across his perspiring brow. "It's going to be the worst smash-up ever was on this road!" he moaned. "And there's nothing to do but just sit here and let things go. Reckon I'd better go climb a tree and then pull the tree up."

Again the sounder began to rattle. It snapped bitter reproach at the South Baxter agent as the only vic-tim in reach at the time. He broke in and sought partially to justify his action.

The man at the Lovell end was the local agent. He informed the South Baxter man that not only was the division superintendent on the fire train, but the general manager of the system as well. In fact, it was owing to the general manager's pres-ence that the difficulty of the engine had been arranged.

The Lovell operator explained that the manager's special had come along on the main line a little before, and when he learned of the fire and the delay, he ordered his engine to take the fire train. Naturally, he went along, too.

All at once the fierce "chack" of this long-range colloquy was inter-rupted by a "break-in." The two white-faced men who were sitting fifteen miles apart listened with drooping jaws to the nervous clack! clack! clack! As the staccato jerked out its information, each man start-ed from his chair and shouted with joy.

And this was what had happened: All the way down the tangent be-low South Baxter Asa had been stoking and stoking his gages. As the jolting engine swung around the first curve he climbed to the en-gineer's cushion and put his head out. The billowing wind swept against his streaming face. His troubles were clearing.

But suddenly he thought of the situation at the Baxter station that he had been compelled to desert un-der such desperate necessity. He re-alized that if telegraph calls were not answered at such a critical time, and that if the superintendent ar-rived there and found the place deserted by all the Hales, the family would in all probability be retired to think the matter over.

In some way his people must be apprised. Some one must be called to that telegraph instrument. The livelihood of the whole family de-pended on it.

Again Asa's ingenuity was equal to the emergency. Tucked in the box under his cushion he always carried a roll of wire, a telegraph instru-ment, wire-cutters and climbers—a loneman's outfit.

He jammed down the throttle, set the brake, and as soon as the loco-motive grated to a halt he seized his tools, and in thirty seconds was up a telegraph pole. A few minutes suf-ficed for him to install his relay box.

The wire was still busy as the im-mediate chatter of his instrument in-digated, and he waited a bit to learn the condition of affairs before he acted. His intention was this: To ask the agent at South Baxter to send a messenger post-haste to Bax-ter and hurry his brother Ira to the station.

"But Asa heard with bristling hair the despairing lament and bitter taunts—passing between the two op-erators. He heard that the special had started from Lovell, and was then coming up the rails at a mile-a-minute speed.

With nervous haste he broke in. His hand trembled so with fear, joy and excitement that he could hardly work the key. But his few jerky sentences sent two men out of their chairs, shouting their delighted sur-prise.

It must now be a race between lumbering Old Hoss, with only one slender youth as both engineer and fireman, and the great engine of the general manager's train, with its seven-foot drivers and its mighty reach of piston-rod.

Asa left his instrument still click-ing, ran to his engine, swung into the cab, threw down the reverse lever and started, his drivers throwing sparks as they whirled for a clutch.

He glanced at the chronometer now. The fire train must be close on him. His swaying, drooping trail of smoke obscured the vista down the track, but he knew that just beyond the veil the pursuing engine was quivering at the head of its train.

He screamed a shrill whistle for the crossing at South Baxter. When he roared past the station he flung a gesture of greeting to the agent, who swung his cap and danced in delight on the platform.

As Old Hoss wheeled around the curve, Asa, through the shredded smoke, perceived the fire special far down the tangent. By the white jets puffing against the pall of its smoke, he knew that it was hooting at his fleeing engine in hoarse and fierce protest at its presence on the right of way.

But Old Hoss gathered herself in renewed effort, and thundered on de-sperately along the snaky five miles between South Baxter and the ter-minal. The sign-board at the south end of the trestle warned "Slow!" But Asa rushed the engine across the groaning structure, and drove up the track in the yard limit to the round-house siding. Then he reversed and pulled Old Hoss to a stop that jarred her in every fiber.

Jerking out his keys as he ran, he flew to the switch-post, and in two minutes had his engine safely off the line. He stood there, still with his hand on the switch-lever, when the fire train rumbled past, men crowd-ing its "flats" and massed around the gleaming steamer and hose-trucks.

The station yard was full of citi-zens, who were down to assist in un-loading the equipment of their neigh-bors to the south. Asa hurried through the crowd and burst into the telegraph room. Ira was there at the instrument.

"I didn't hear you had cleared out and left till twenty minutes ago!" Ira grumbled. "I happened to come down with the rest and found the office open. Since then Lovell and South Baxter have been filling me up on what has happened, and what will probably happen as soon as the di- vision super gets at us. What have you been trying to do?"

Asa interrupted his brother's com-plaints. "Old Hoss got away from me and I chased her, that's all there is to it," he panted, wiping the per-spiration out of his eyes. "I just did the best I could, Ira, but I'm afraid the way things look now, there's going to be trouble when the management begins to investigate. There's no use talking; we've run things rather slack up here on the branch."

Then he told his story hurriedly, Ira listening with mingled wrath and amazement. Outside were the shouts of hurrying men, the squeak of pulleys and a tumult of excitement.

As the equipment was unloaded, Over all rolled the smoke from the conflagration that now had swept half-way down Main street.

"There'll be no questions asked un-till after this is over," said Ira. He grabbed the telegraph-key, call-ed both South Baxter and Lovell, and rattled off a long message. Asa listened, occasionally scrubbing his sleeve across his sooty forehead.

"Dou you think that is the best way?" he asked, finally, his ques-tion inspired by the discussion over the wire.

"I don't know. Both of them say they'll back up any story we give 'em," said Ira. "They know just as well as we do that if the manager gets to ripping things up on this branch it may mean a clean sweep. Just those two operators know how close a shave it really was. The only thing we need stick to, I sup-pose, is that we got the orders, sent the engine to South Baxter, and came back when the signals there blocked us. I don't want to do it, though. I never lied out of a scrape yet, and I don't like to begin now. Think it over, Asa, and I'll see you tonight."

Asa was very thoughtful during the remainder of the busy day.

That evening, while the steamers were extinguishing with hissing streams the last red fires among the blackened beams, Asa had his talk with the general manager in the lat-ter's private car on the side-track. The manager had summoned him.

"Young man," said he, "I have been making some inquiries, and I find that your relatives left you to run this whole branch today, and that they have been doing the same thing for some time. Local public spirit is a good thing, but sometimes we need our men ourselves. I find that you got the engine out alone and ran as far as South Baxter. You were here attending to your business so I now promote you to the en-gineer's job."

"At the same time, I think we shall give the rest of your family an extended vacation, so that they can catch up in their public and private affairs."

The general manager swung around in his revolving chair and began talking with the division super-in-tendent, signifying that Asa might retire. But Asa stayed, rolling his cap in his hands.

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