

Dick's Dilemma

By Percy M. Westerman

"HOW is she, pater?" Mr. Croxton shook his head sadly. "Very bad, Dick, I'm sorry to say. Dr. Welsh is here now. But I want you to go on a very important errand; I would have sent Jenkins with the car, but the wretched thing is out of gear, as it always is when it's wanted in a hurry. Take your bicycle and ride over to Solbury as hard as you can; call at Rose's, the chemist, and ask him to let you have a flask of oxygen. Don't attempt to ride back with it on your cycle, but take a cab. You understand?" "Yes, pater."

"Then off you go, and don't waste time. It's a matter of life or death."

Dick Croxton needed no second bidding. His sister's life was in great danger, and, as Dr. Welsh had announced, the administration of oxygen was of extreme importance.

It was a good ten miles of hilly road to Solbury, and to make matters worse there was a hard wind accompanied by a drizzling rain, while the short autumn evening was already beginning to draw in.

black expanse of country was there a friendly light to be seen, although far away, beyond the dark outlines of a pine forest, he could just distinguish a faint light in the sky that indicated the town lamps of Solbury.

Suddenly the powerful rays of Dick's lamp fell upon a sinister patch in the miry road.

"Stone-breakers have been at work here, worse luck," he grumbled, and, riding towards the left-hand edge of the road, he sought for a possible path by the side of the track of sharp flints.

Yes, there was a narrow track, barely a foot in width, and, save for an occasional displaced stone, comparatively even. This state of things continued for another quarter of a mile, till, with a sigh of relief, Dick found that the road resumed its former muddy appearance.

"What's that?" he muttered anxiously, as the rim of the rear wheel appeared to bump on the soft road. "Not a puncture, surely?"

But it was. A few more revolutions of the cranks revealed the unfortunate fact.

bridge a foot-path followed the railway line, thereby cutting off a good mile and a half of the distance to Solbury. True, there was a notice board warning trespassers that they would be liable to a fine of forty shillings under the company's by-laws, but, in the circumstances, Dick ignored the prohibition.

"The bike will be all right till I come back in the cab," he said, as he placed it behind some bushes. "I may as well take the lamp, though."

A slippery path led from the roadway down the steep declivity to the railroad. Here Dick was comparatively sheltered from the wind, that howled dismally through the pine trees on either side of the cutting; but, on the other hand, the rain had increased from a steady drizzle to a heavy downpour.

Keeping the lamp shining on the permanent way, Dick broke into a steady trot. Well it was that he had brought the lamp, for its light was of immense service, since the path was beset with signal wires on one side and the ends of the sleepers that supported the gleaming metals on the other.

"There's one blessing," thought the lad; "I'm on the right side of the railway. Consequently there's no danger of being overtaken by a train, and I can see ahead all right."

On and on he ran, his breath coming in quick, labored gasps, for though he was in excellent training Dick found that the

For one brief instant the object of his errand flashed across his mind.

It was a matter of life and death to his sister; but, on the other hand, there was also the appalling fact that the lives of possibly two hundred people were in direct peril.

"It can't be helped," he muttered grimly. "This must claim my first attention. The train must be stopped."

But how? Dick looked at his lamp. The brilliant white light would be visible for a considerable distance, even in the rain; but would the driver pull up for a white light? Like most cycle lamps, it had a small red diamond-shaped glass on one side and green on the other; but the red light would not be sufficiently strong to be observed except at a very short distance.

Had Dick known, there was a signal box at less than two hundred yards' distance round a curve in the cutting, while close to where he stood was a signal-post used only to pass the trains from Solbury. An alarm there could be telephoned to the next box, a couple of miles away, and the signals would promptly be set against the train. But being ignorant of the existence of that particular signal-box, Dick resolved to retrace his footsteps and endeavor to attract the attention of the driver by waving his lamp.

Lurching breathlessly, Dick regained the bridge from which he had descended to the line. On the other side the rails



Canadian Alpine Club holding Divine Service at the Camp Fire.

Yet the prospect of a long, cheerless ride did not enter into the lad's mind. He had to go, he wanted to go, and that was enough.

"It's lucky I charged my acetylene lamp this morning," soliloquised Dick, as he donned his poncho, and wheeled his cycle past the ponderous body of the, at present, useless motor-car. "But what a beast of a night!"

Swinging easily into the saddle, Dick pedalled down the path, through the wide-open gate, and into the main road.

Here he encountered the head wind, and, bending low over the handle-bars, he was compelled to pedal his hardest, the icy-cold rain streaming down his face and collecting in shallow pools in the folds of his poncho.

Soon the wooded country gave place to a bleak undulating moorland, across which the wind swept with redoubled violence, while the surface of the road, already ankle-deep in mud, was of so greasy a nature that once or twice Dick's tyres skidded. Only by the utmost good fortune was the lad able to keep his saddle, and setting his teeth tightly, he slackened his pace, realizing that a side-slip would prove the truth of the proverb "More haste less speed."

It was indeed a desolate scene. Five miles of bad road were already covered, but since leaving the outskirts of the village in which he lived, Dick had not met a single human being, nor in all that

Dick jumped off and felt the wet rubber cover with ill-concealed despair, then looking around he saw a stunted bush against which he could place his cycle while he pumped the tyre.

"I'll get it up as hard as I can," he exclaimed. "Perhaps it will last me another mile or so." Thirty-nine, forty—that's enough. Hastily he unscrewed the connection, replaced the pump and sprang into the saddle, so as not to lose a second. But ere another hundred yards were covered the ominous bump again became evident.

The lad once more dismounted. Now he could distinguish the gentle yet appalling hiss of the escaping air.

Repairing the inner tube in the existing circumstances was quite out of the question. Much valuable time would be lost, and in addition there was a chance that the puncture would, after all, be undiscoverable in the darkness.

"Over four miles to go," groaned Dick—then suddenly a brilliant idea struck him. "I'll ride it on the rim!"

Alas for his idea! His resolution was not equal to the physical strain and the adverse conditions of the weather and the road. In spite of his utmost efforts the cycle gradually came to a standstill, the flabby tyre skidding hopelessly in the slimy mire, as the road began to ascend a long and steep hill.

Then he remembered that only a short distance away was a bridge across a railway cutting. On the other side of the

weight of his saturated poncho, the slippery state of the path, and the additional task of carrying the lamp were beginning to tell.

Suddenly the lad came to an abrupt halt, and gazed with wide-open eyes at a sight that filled him with consternation. Across the left-hand pair of metals was an enormous piece of timber. Closer inspection showed that it was a telegraph pole, its thickest portion lying upon the rails, while its tapered end was supported by the bank of the cutting.

At first Dick thought it had been displaced by the gale, but the absence of the cross-bars and insulators proved otherwise. Then the truth flashed across his mind. Someone had made a deliberate attempt to wreck a train.

Even as Dick bent over the ponderous mass of tarred timber he fancied he heard footsteps crashing through the brushwood, but reasoning that it might have been the noise of the wind amid the tree-tops, the lad took courage.

"If the rascals are up there they won't know who it is, so long as I keep the light turned in their direction," he thought; and setting the lamp on the ground he sought to remove the obstruction.

He might as well have tried to lift a ton weight. Not the faintest impression did he make upon the heavy pole.

"And the seven forty-five is about due," he gasped; then, thinking for a moment, he exclaimed resolutely, "It must be stopped."

ran in a perfectly straight direction for nearly a mile. Dick listened, but above the moaning of the wind he failed to distinguish the rumbling of the London express.

A slight manipulation of the water supply and the light of his lamp increased in intensity. Then the haunting doubt again reasserted itself, "Would the driver pull up for a white light?"

"It's too risky," thought Dick; then setting the lamp on the ground he muttered determinedly, "Yes, I'll do it."

Out came his pocket handkerchief; out came his knife. Unflinchingly the lad opened the sharp blade and applied it slowly and deliberately to his thumb.

In a minute the handkerchief was sufficiently saturated with the crimson fluid to form a red screen for the lamp, and to the lad's unbounded satisfaction he realized that his experiment was not likely to be in vain.

At that moment the distant rumble of the express caught his ear, and, a few seconds later, the glare of the furnace thrown upon the trailing cloud of steam became visible against the dark rain-laden background.

Standing by the side of the permanent way, Dick waved his red light with a vigor that the keen, alert driver could not fail to notice, and ere the express thundered past the spot where the lad stood the speed was rapidly decreasing, the sparks flying in showers from the brakes.