

Reinstatement of Dolan

By FRANCIS J. DICKIE

DOLAN, chief train despatcher of the G. T. P. at Edmonton, woke to agonizing soberness. He had been drunk for a week. Crawling out of bed he shuffled across the floor to the wash-stand and half emptied the hotel pitcher of luke-warm water.

With throbbing head Dolan finished dressing, walked downstairs and out of the hotel, to the ramshackle temporary buildings of the new railway's division headquarters, which lay just across the track.

Entering the outer office of the superintendent's two-room shanty, Dolan was greeted by Stanley, the chief clerk.

"The old man's inside and he wants to see you," Stanley remarked, in a low voice.

After a precautionary knock Dolan entered and stood just inside the door, and for a long moment the superintendent eyed the despatcher in silence.

They were old timers, these two. For the last ten years now wherever had been a new "front" there had come superintendent Dennis and always Dolan had been upon the division. It was a part of their lives now, this following of new lines in a dozen parts of the continent.

Together they had seen the U. P. grow, and when the work was done and the "front" no longer existed they had hied themselves on to the Western Pacific and then on again once more to this new, big Canadian road which was fast throwing its bands of steel across a continent.

"Well, Dolan, it's happened again. Now, I think a couple of months up at Butze will just suit you."

Dolan nodded in silence and breathed a little sigh of relief. At least he was at work again, which, in his present financial state, was a great deal. Dolan was a good railroad man, and the associations of the past went for something even with so stern a man as Dennis.

So Dolan took the night train to Butze, and the lights and life of Edmonton and the soft voice of Hazel King, the train master's daughter, were left behind.

If you look carefully on the map of the great transcontinental railway you will, after a little time, find Butze. It is a mere point of the road lying midway between divisions of the prairie section most westerly toward the mountains. Just a sidetrack and a dismantled box-car are there, the latter made habitable with added windows and sundry boards, for the lone man who acts as night and day operator, ticket, freight and baggage agent, in fact

the one and only representative of the road.

The second week of Dolan's exile had drawn almost to a close. Darkness had fallen and as he sat listlessly smoking, he was very lonely, sick already of the monotony of this little sun-scorched spot. Being roasted by day, mosquito-pestered by night, always alone, had brought quick realization to him of the value of his late held position in Edmonton. And, too, a strange hunger was on him, a hunger for the sound of a voice and a little rippling laugh. And the days were more utterly void now that Hazel King had passed out of his life.

Suddenly the clattering of the keys caught his attention. Q.D...Q.D...Q.D... the keys clicked out. It was Artland, first station east, calling Chauvin, another flag stop, twenty miles westward from Butze. To an experienced telegrapher the key's clattering is more than mere unemotional sound, and in that quick, repeated calling, Dolan sensed danger and listened.

"Flag No. 1 and sidetrack her. Light engine running wild just passed here making sixty miles an hour."

For a minute there was silence, then the operator at Chauvin pounded back: "No. 1 just gone through hitting the grit forty miles an hour."

With a perception quickened by years of train despatching Dolan grasped the details almost before the sounder ceased.

The passenger had passed Chauvin on time, and running on her schedule was due to pass Butze in thirty minutes, while the runaway under her own steam and aided by the long, gradual drop in grade, which existed between Artland and Butze, would cover the ten miles between these points in twelve minutes at the outside, and passing meet the passenger almost halfway between Butze and Chauvin.

And as Dolan grasped these facts he realized with horror the helplessness of his own position.

Had his sidetrack been clear the simple throwing of the East switch would have deflected the runaway into the sidetrack, where in all probability it would, after running the length of the siding, derail upon striking the closed points of the West switch. But standing upon this track were two cars of dynamite for the One Girl mine, and Dolan shuddered at the thought of the havoc that would be created should the engine strike these. Endless yards of both siding and mainline would be twisted and torn, and he, too, would be blown to pieces. And the upcoming passenger train, unwarned, would rush into this twisted steel and derail with perhaps even more fearful results than the head-on collision that now portended.

For a minute Dolan sat striving for some solution, some way to avert the danger, but there seemed none. Then suddenly he leaped to his feet, set the board against No. 1, and grabbing a hammer that lay on the near window sill, rushed out and started down the track in the direction of the approaching runaway.

The remembrance of the deserted gravel pit, which joined the mainline a little over a mile east-

ward from Butze, had come to him. And he prayed that there was time.

There was now little more than ten minutes left before the runaway would pass the gravel pit. As he ran he wondered if he could make it. Cover the mile and a quarter that lay between him and the old abandoned switch.

For half a dozen telegraph pole lengths he ran easily, light-footed. Then his breath shortened. The vocation of operating does not tend to make a man's wind either lasting or sound and his late debauch had weakened him, left his tissues flabby.

A little farther on he slackened his pace. Though every second was precious he realized that he could not last the distance at this speed.

It was black dark. At first his legs had responded easily, his strides were long and his feet lifted high, but as the yards diminished he grew heavy-footed and stumbled often. The larger stones that were mingled with the new-placed gravel hurt his feet and unevenly tamped ties threw him out of step sometimes, almost overbalancing him.

Dolan got his second wind, but now the pace was telling, and he breathed in panting gasps. Once he fell, and falling, tore his hand cruelly on the sharp edge of a half-driven track-spike.

Before half the distance had been covered every step and quick-drawn breath seemed to drive his lungs painfully against his shoulder blades, and his diaphragm was a dead, leaden weight.

A drop of blood fell from his nose, then another, till the fast-flowing stream choked his breathing, forcing him to gulp the air through the mouth. And the running blood poured over his open lips into his mouth and dripped down his jaws like a slaver's bloodhound.

From away down the track came the rumbling roar of the engine. Could he make it? His legs seemed impossible of faster movement, but terror and the nearness of the goal brought new life and he ran on faster.

He did not think collectively now.

The switch, the switch, repeated over and over in his brain till it seemed almost that the words were being roared into his ears.

Gasping, breathing laboredly, half sobbingly, he stumbled sideways across the steel. The red switch stand was reached.

And near, so near that the hissing exhaust seemed beside him, was the fast-driving engine.

With quivering arm he raised the tight-clutched hammer and smote the heavy padlock. Twice he struck before it gave. Then grasping the switch-bar and raising it off the catch, Dolan lunged with all his weight and remaining strength upon it. Old, long-disused and rusty, it stuck. Once more Dolan pulled, every last ounce of muscular power despairingly put forth, and it gave suddenly, swinging clear around to the notch so quickly that Dolan slipped and fell, hands still gripping the bar.

And there he lay only half conscious of the rushing locomotive, that striking the open switch, lurched heavily, and still holding the rails went tearing, with screaming of wheels on rusty steel, down the sharp incline into the pit below.

Dazed and weak as a child, now that the ordeal was over, Dolan got to his feet, and, resetting the switch, started slowly up the track for the shack.

A little regretfully, now that the danger was over, he remembered that the semaphore was set against No. 1. The passenger was a mail train, and with her, time was precious. With this thought uppermost the operator quickened his pace a little, though every step now was agony. His leg muscles ached with a burning ache that increased with each step.

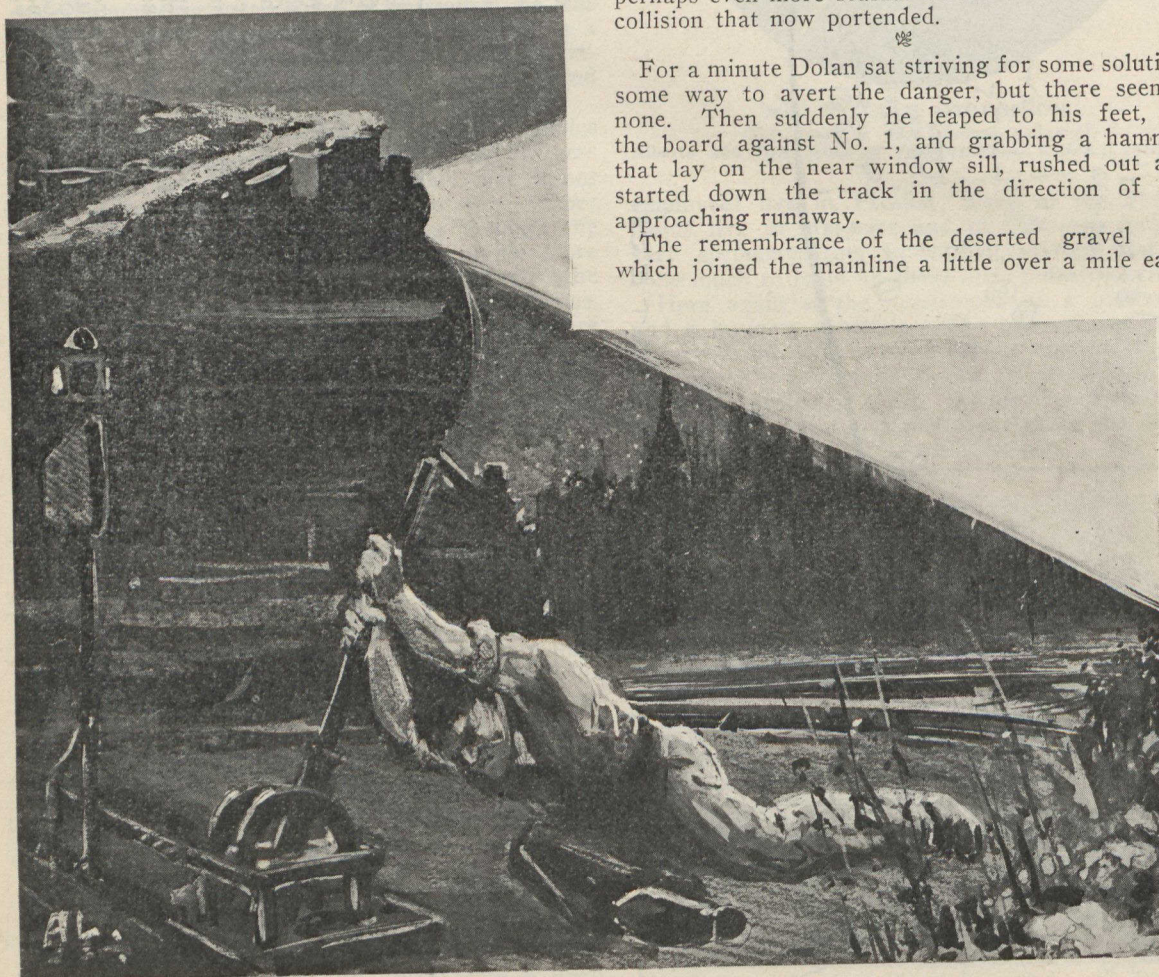
It was a very heavy-eyed, blood-bespattered creature that greeted the astonished conductor and the few passengers from the day-coaches who were still awake and walking up and down the platform. And Dolan, with a little tired gesture waved them aside, as they started to crowd about him, and went within the shack to wire that the line was clear. As he entered he heard his call being rapidly repeated and opening up he began to send. It was a terse message and to the point, for Dolan was very tired.

To division headquarters he flashed: "Light engine ditched into old gravel pit. No. 1 on mainline here awaiting orders."

And when the conductor had received his orders and the train rumbled off into the night, Dolan washed the blood from his face, bound his hand and, stripping off the clammy, clinging clothes, he rolled into bed and fell asleep with the medley songs of myriad frogs and the long, mournful whistling call of the night birds for a lullaby.

It was two days later that the conductor of the accommodation local brought him two O. C. S. letters. One a long, official envelope, but the other—

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"And there he lay, half-conscious of the rushing locomotive."