

Then Speckles had been promoted to the post of sweeper in the roundhouse, and occasionally, under Healy's critical inspection, to washing out boiler-tubes. Fresh fuel thereby added to the fire of his ambition, he began to figure how long it would be before he got to wiping, then to firing, and after that—even Speckles' boundless optimism did not have the temerity to specify any particular date—the time when he would attain his goal and get his engine.

Now, instead, at the age of sixteen, he found himself seated on a cracker-box, his dreams for the future rudely shattered—thanks to Healy, old Sour Face Healy!

So Speckles sighed, and as he sighed the shop whistle blew. It was noon, and the men began to pour out of the big gates. Then Speckles, remembering that the schools were also "letting out," hurried down the platform and up the main street. He would confide in Madge. Madge would understand.

Madge Bolton was the daughter of the ticket agent at the station, and between Mr. Bolton and Speckles there existed a standing feud, the *casus belli* being fifteen-year-old, blue-eyed Madge. Speckles kicked his heels on the corner until she appeared; then he turned and fell into step beside her, reaching a little awkwardly for her strap of books.

"Hallo, Dol!" was Madge's greeting. She was the only person in Big Cloud who did not call him Speckles.

"Hallo, Madge!" he returned.