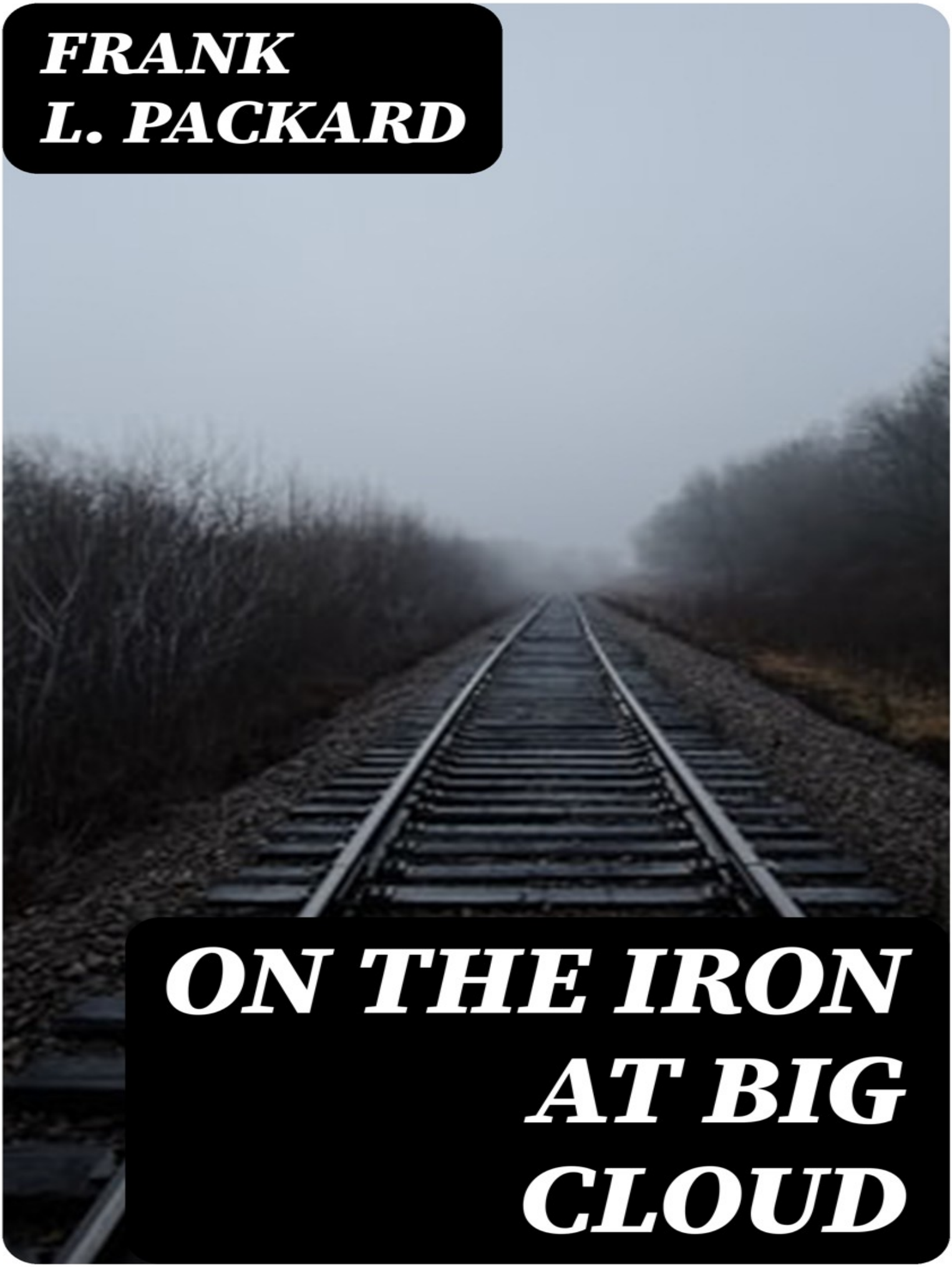
FRANK L. PACKARD



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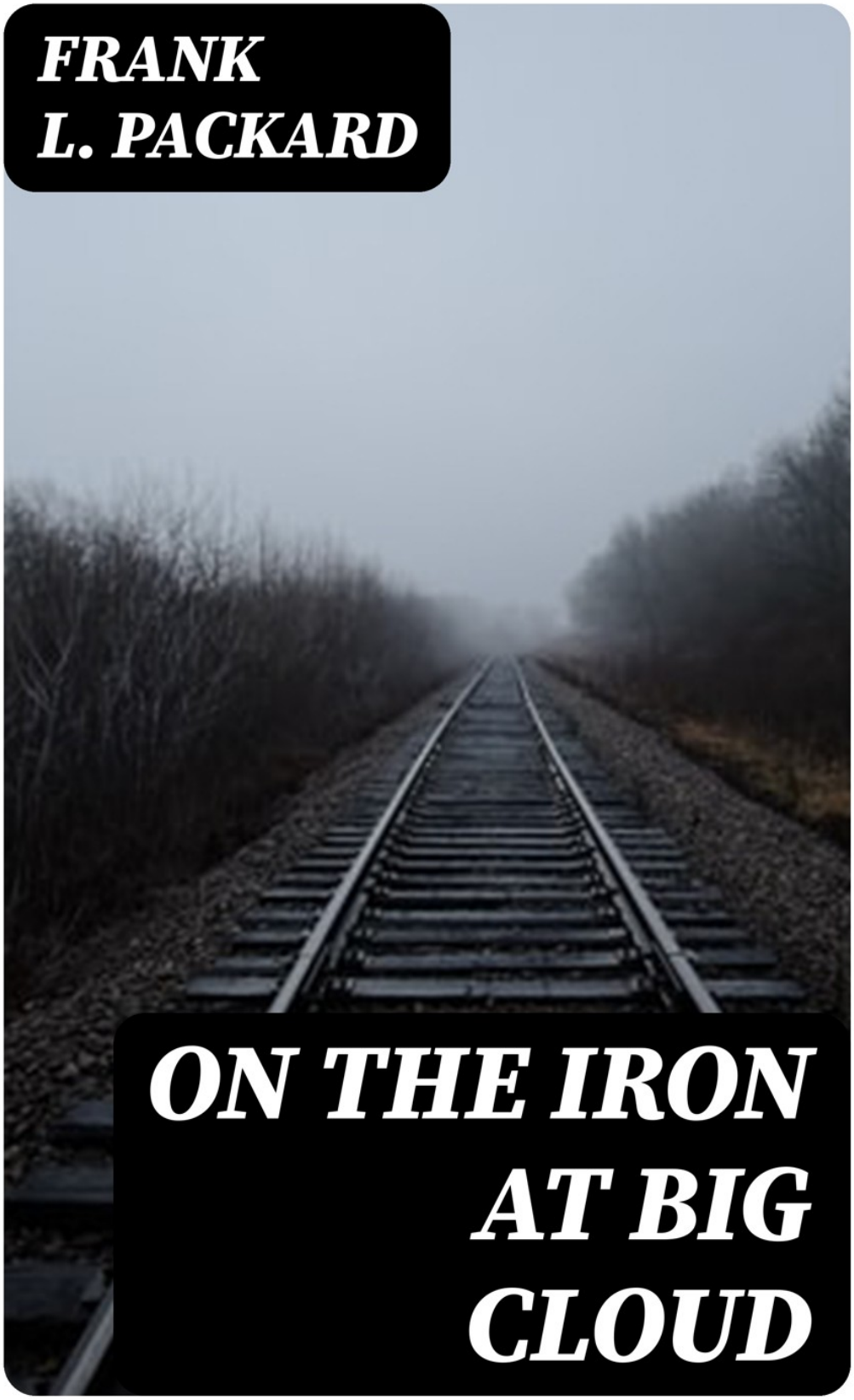

ON THE IRON AT BIG CLOUD

Frank L. Packard

On the Iron at Big Cloud

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I—RAFFERTY’S RULE

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The General Manager of the Transcontinental System glared at the young man who stood facing him across the office desk. “Why, you wouldn’t last three months!” he snapped.

“I’d like to try, uncle.”

“Humph!”

“I’m qualified for the position,” young Holman went on. “I’ve done my stint with the construction gangs and I’ve spent four years in the Eastern shops. You promised me that if I’d stick I’d have my chance.”

“Well, if I did, I didn’t promise to put you in the way of making a fool of yourself and a laughing-stock of me, did I? You may be qualified technically, I don’t say you’re not. In fact, I’ve been rather pleased with you; that’s one reason why you’re not going out there to tackle something you

can’t handle. If men like Rawson and Williams can’t hold down the job, what do you expect to do?”

“No worse than they, at least,” Holman answered, quietly. “Look here, uncle, that’s just the point. There aren’t any of the men want the position, so I’m not jumping anybody to take it. I’ll not make any laughing-stock of you, either. I’m not going out as the Old Man’s nephew; just plain Dick Holman. If I don’t make good you can wash your hands of my railroad career.”

“Young man,” said the General Manager, severely, “don’t make rash statements.”

He pushed the papers on his desk irritably to one side. Then he frowned. Two years ago, when the road had dug, blasted, burrowed, and trestled its right of way through the mountains, they had built the repair shops for the maintenance of the rolling stock, and from the moment the first brass time-check had been issued the locomotive-foremanship of the Hill Division was no subject to be introduced with temerity anywhere within the precincts of the executive offices. One man after another had gone out there, and one after another they had resigned. “Hard lot to handle,” Carleton, the division superintendent, had replied to the numerous requests for explanation that had been fired at him. And now Dick wanted to go. The general manager’s fingers beat a tattoo on the desk and his frown deepened into a scowl. “You’re a young fool,” he grunted at last.

And Holman knew that he had gained his point “That’s very good of you, uncle,” he cried. “I knew you’d see it my way. When may I start?”

“I guess you’ll get there soon enough,” his uncle answered grimly. He rose from his chair and accompanied Holman to the door. “Well, go if you want to, but remember this, young man, you’re going on your own terms. When you resign from *that* position, you resign from the road, understand!”

“All right, uncle,” Holman laughed in reply. “It’s a bargain.”

Three days later, as Number One pulled into Big Cloud, Holman swung himself to the platform. Up past the mail and baggage cars, the steam drumming at her safety, a big ten-wheeler was backing down to couple on for the run through the Rockies. There was the pride of proprietorship in his glance as his eyes swept the great mogul critically, for in his pocket was his official appointment as Locomotive Foreman of the Hill Division, vice Williams, resigned.

It was not until the last of the Pullmans had rolled smoothly past him that he turned to take stock in his surroundings. The first impression was not prepossessing. Before him, just across the yard filled with strings of freight cars, were the low, rambling, smoke-begrimed shops and running shed, while beyond these again the town straggled out monotonously.

To the westward, through the mountains, were the curves and grades that wrenched and racked and tore the equipment he would hereafter be accountable for. To the eastward—but “eastward” was only two hundred yards away, for there his eye caught the “Yard Limit” post, that likewise marked the end of the division.

If after this cursory survey there still lingered any illusions of the picturesque in Holman's mind, they were rudely dispelled by the interior of the barn-like structure at the side of the platform that did duty for station, division headquarters, general storeroom, and anything else that might seek the shelter of its protecting roof. The walls were adorned with such works of art as are afforded by the Sunday supplements, interspersed here and there with an occasional blue-print and time schedule. The furnishings bore unmistakable evidence of having seen service with the construction staff when the road was in the making. At the right of the door, as Holman entered, the despatcher was poring over the train sheet.

"Sure," said he in answer to Holman's inquiry, "that's the super over there."

Holman crossed the room and proffered his credentials.

"Glad you've come," was Carleton's greeting, as he rose and extended his hand. "We've been expecting you. Williams went East this morning on Number Two. Sit down. That's your desk there."

Holman glanced at the battered table toward which the other pointed, then back again to the four days' growth on the super's face.

Carleton grinned. "Fixings aren't up to what you boiled-shirt fellows down East are used to. Out here on the firing line most anything goes. I've been requisitioning office fixtures for months. Ain't seen any way-bill of them yet, Davis, have you?" he called across to the despatcher.

Davis got up with a laugh and joined the other two. "No," said he, shaking hands with Holman, "not yet."

“And not likely to, either,” continued the super. “It’s rough and ready out here, Holman. The staff quarters up there,” he jerked his thumb toward the ceiling, “are all-fired crude, and the Chinese cook is a gilt-edge thief and most persuasive liar; but we’ve got the finest division of the best railroad in the world, and we’re pushing stuff through the mountains on a schedule that makes Southern competition sick. We’re young here yet. Some day, when the roadbed’s shaken down to stay, we’ll build the extras.”

The enthusiasm and bluff heartiness of the super was contagious. Holman put out his hand impulsively. “We’ve heard a lot of you fellows down East,” he said, “and I’m glad I’ve got a chance to chip in.” His eyes swept around the room and came back to meet the super’s smilingly. “Even if accommodations *are* below ‘Tourist Class,’” he added.

So Holman came to the division and joined the staff. Spence, chief dispatcher, had shaken his head. “Twenty-eight and locomotive foreman of *this* division with the roughest, toughest bunch on the system’s pay-roll to handle! Hanged if he isn’t a decent sort, though, even if he will shave and wear collars. Imagine Williams with creased trousers! And say, his wardrobe—he’s actually got a dress suit with him! Wouldn’t that ground the wires! Who is he, Carleton? Got a pull with the Old Man?”

“Didn’t inquire,” returned Carleton bluntly. “Let him try out.”

If the super waited before passing judgment on the latest addition to the staff of the Hill Division, the shop hands did likewise—but for another reason. They waited for Rafferty. Rafferty was boss. Who Rafferty’s boss was, was his affair,

and it did not concern them. What Rafferty said—went. It was two weeks before he delivered his verdict.

“A damned pink-faced dude!” he announced and terminated his remark with a stream of black-strap juice by way of an exclamation mark.

The fiat had gone forth!

Down in the pits, stripping the engines of their motion gear, the fitters passed resolutions of confidence in Rafferty’s judgment, and among the lathes and planers the machinists did likewise. The concurrence of the forge gang was expressed by a vicious wielding of the big sledges that sent showers of sparks flying from the spluttering metal whenever Holman was sighted coming down the shop on a tour of inspection—a significant intimation to him to keep his distance. And that the sentiment of the shops might not be lacking in unanimity, the boilermakers, should Holman have the temerity to pause for an instant before a shell on which they were at work, would send up a din from their clattering hammers intolerable to any but the men themselves whose ears were plugged with cotton waste.

As for Holman, he might have been entirely unconscious of the hostility and ill-will of his subordinates for all the evidence he gave of being aware of it. He was busy mastering the routine and details of his new position. For a month he said nothing; then one morning over at headquarters he turned to Carle-ton, who was reading the train mail that had just come in.

“Why did Williams resign?” he asked quietly.

“Eh?” said Carleton, startled out of his calm by reason of the suddenness of the question.

“Why did Williams resign?” Holman repeated.

“Oh, I don’t know. Tired of the life out here, I guess,” Carleton evaded.

“Was it Rafferty?”

Carleton turned sharply to scrutinize the other’s countenance. Holman was gazing out of the window.

“It was Rafferty,” Carleton admitted after a moment.

Holman’s gaze never shifted from the window. “Why wasn’t Rafferty fired?” he asked in the same quiet tones, but this time there was just the faintest tinge of accusation in his voice.

Carleton’s face flushed. An instant’s hesitation, then he answered bluntly: “He weighed more, that’s why!”

“Oh!” said Holman significantly. “Then why didn’t you recommend Rafferty for the position long ago and save all the trouble?”

“I would have if he could do anything more than sign his name.”

Holman turned angrily to face the super. “So,” he cried, “when a fellow comes out here he has to play a lone hand, eh? A show-down with Rafferty, shop hands, and the whole division drawing cards against him. You, Carleton, I didn’t put you down as a man with a pet.”

Carleton got up and put his hand on Holman’s shoulder. “Don’t do it, either,” he said quietly. “Don’t run off your schedule that way, son. It has always been man to man, and I wasn’t appealed to. So far it has been all Rafferty. It’s easier to get a new foreman than a new shop crew, so I haven’t interfered.”

“I don’t understand,” said Holman blankly.

The super laughed shortly. “Rafferty has the men where he wants them. If he got on his ear he could tie us up so quick we wouldn’t know what happened. A nice thing for me to admit, isn’t it? But it’s so. I suppose I should have nipped the whole business in the bud, but I kept on hoping that each new man would beat Rafferty at his own game. Has he got you going, too?”

Holman gathered up the repair reports from his desk and started for the door. “Game’s young yet,” he flung over his shoulder as he went out.

From the office Holman walked up the yard to the spur tracks at the end of the shops where three or four engines were waiting their turn for an empty pit. He glanced at their numbers, comparing them with the papers he held in his hand, then turned and walked back, pausing on the way to inspect an engine, bright and clean as fresh paint and gold leaf would make her, that had been hauled out of the shops that morning. He passed in through the upper doors to the fitting-shop. Already another engine had been shunted in to replace the one that had gone out. Her guard-plates, links, cross-heads, main and connecting rods were lying on the floor beside her, and the labor gang were jacking and blocking her up preparatory to running the wheels out from underneath her.

There was a trace of heightened color in Holman’s face as he turned to look for Rafferty.

The boss fitter was in his usual place. Down the shop, hands dug deep in his trousers pockets, legs spread wide apart, he swung slowly round and round on the little iron turntable that intersected the handcar tracks where they

branched out in all directions through the shops. As Holman approached he stopped the motion indolently by allowing the toe of his boot to trail along the floor around the table.

Holman's manner was quiet and his voice was soft, almost deferential, as he spoke: "I see you have 483 finished, Mr. Rafferty."

Rafferty looked down from his superior two inches and said: "Yis."

"And," continued Holman, "you've run in 840 in her place?'

"Yis," said Rafferty again, this time even more indifferently than before.

"Well, now, really, Mr. Rafferty, I'd like to know why you did it? You know I told you yesterday to be particular to take 522 next." Holman's tones were more nearly those of apology than of expostulation.

For answer Rafferty gave a little shove with his foot and the turntable began to revolve slowly. During the circuit Rafferty coolly gave some directions to the men nearest him, and then as he once more came round facing Holman he stopped. "Fwhat was ut you was sayin', Mr. Holman?" he drawled.

"This is the biggest division on the system, isn't it?" Holman asked inconsequently.

"Eh?" demanded Rafferty.

"Longest division—most mileage—covers quite a stretch of country," Holman amplified.

"Oh!" returned the other with a grin. "Well, you'll be thinkin' so if you ever sthay long enough to git acquainted wid ut."

“Perhaps that’s the reason I am beginning to feel cramped—I’ve only been here a month, you know,” Holman smiled.

“Fwhat d’ye mean?”

“Why, curiously, it doesn’t seem big enough or wide enough or long enough for even *two* men.”

Holman purred his words in soft, mild accents, and Rafferty, understanding, sneered in quick retort: “Was you thinkin’ av lavin’, Mr. Holman?”

“No,” said Holman, slowly, “I don’t know that I was. I thought perhaps the matter might be adjusted, and I’d like to ask your advice. Now, if you were locomotive foreman and you found that the foreman of this shop, in a dirty, low, underhanded fashion was discrediting you with the men, and furthermore flatly disobeyed your orders, what would you do, Mr. Rafferty?”

By the time Holman had completed his arraignment, Rafferty was mad—fighting mad. “I’ll tell you fwhat I’d do,” he yelled, shaking a great horny fist under Holman’s nose. “I’d plug him good an’ hard, that’s fwhat I’d do! See!”

“Rather drastic,” Holman commented after a pause, during which Rafferty drew back and with hands on hips stood scowling belligerently. “But desperate cases sometimes require desperate remedies, and I don’t know—but—that—” his fist shot out and caught Rafferty fairly on the point of the jaw—“you’re right!”

Rafferty, staggering back from the impact of the blow, set the table whirling. His feet went out from under him and he fell sprawling to the floor. As he picked himself up, Holman sprang toward him and swinging twice landed two

vicious smashes on Rafferty's face. Then, except for a confused recollection of a rush of men, that was all Holman remembered until he opened his eyes to find himself in his bunk at headquarters with Carleton bending over him.

"You're a sight," Carleton commented grimly. "What was the muss about?"

Holman explained. "I took Rafferty's advice and plugged him, you see, and after that———"

"After that if it hadn't been for old Joe, the turner, running over here to tell us, they'd have killed you. Don't you know any better than to stack up against Rafferty like that, let alone the whole gang? Did you expect to do them all up?"

"No, not exactly. I expected there'd be something coming to me, but I had to do it. I'll admit, Carleton, I was in a blue funk, but I just *had* to. Moral effect, you know."

"Yes," said Carleton savagely, "the moral effect is great! It will be as much as your life is worth to put your head inside those shops again. You don't know the men you're dealing with out here."

"You're wrong, dead wrong, Carleton, I do. You said it was man to man, didn't you? Well, then, either I'm running the shops or Rafferty is. Rafferty has the men with him because he's a bully and they're afraid of him. It was mere force of habit made them pile on to me. You wait until they're cooled off a bit and see."

But Carleton shook his head. "You're a bloomin' fool," he summed up judicially, "but here, shake! You've got your grit with you, if you did leave your sense behind."

For the rest of the morning Holman nursed his injuries, but at one o'clock he was at his desk again. Five minutes

afterward Rafferty came in. He was not a pretty sight with his cut lip and battered eye as he limped past both Spence and Holman. With a vindictive glare at the latter he marched straight across the room to where Carleton sat. He leaned both hands on the super's desk.

"Ut'll be just a show-down, Mr. Carleton, that's all there is to ut. Me or him, which?" he announced.

Carleton tilted his chair back, put his feet up on the desk and his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. "State your case; Rafferty," he said calmly.

"Case!" Rafferty spluttered. "Case is ut? I'm sick av bein' bossed bye kids out av school that was buildin' blocks whin I was buildin' enjines. I quit or he does!" Rafferty jerked his thumb in Holman's direction.

"Is that all you have to say, Rafferty?"

"That's about the size av ut."

"Very well, Rafferty, you can get your time," said Carleton quietly.

For a moment Rafferty stared as though he had not heard aright, then he swung round on his heel only to turn again and face the super with a short laugh. "All right, Mr. Carleton, you're the docthor. It's satisfied I am. Whin I go out, every bloomin' man in the shops 'ull go out wid me!"

Carleton's feet came off the desk like a shot, his chair came down to the floor with a bang, and the next instant he was standing in front of the boss fitter.

"See here, Rafferty," he blazed, "you know me—the men know me. While I've held the bank there's been fifty-two cards in the case and every mother's son of you has had a square deal. You know it, don't you? No man on this division

ever came to me with just cause for complaint but had a chance to state his grievance on a clear track and no limit on his permit either. Now, I'm entitled to the same line of treatment I hand out, and I won't stand for threats!"

Rafferty shifted uneasily and to hide his confusion reached for his "chewing."

"We've nothin' agin you, Mr. Carleton, an' I'm givin' you fair warnin'," he mumbled as his teeth met in the plug.

"When you make trouble on this division you make trouble for me," said Carleton bluntly. "As for warning, I give you warning now that if you start any disturbance in those shops it will be the worse for you. Now go!"

They watched him through the windows as he crossed the tracks. Finally, as he disappeared inside the shops, Carleton turned with a grave face.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a bad business," he said.

"You don't mean to say," Holman burst out, "that the men are fools enough to quit just because one man with a grouch says so, do you?"

"I told you that you didn't know the class of men out here—they're partisan to the core—it's bred in them. I'm not blaming you, Holman—not for a minute! As I said this morning, I've seen it coming for a long while—long before Williams gave up the ghost. Now it's here, we'll face the music, what?"

"It's mighty good of you to say so, old man," said Holman, slowly, "but I've put you in a bad hole, and it's up to me to get you out of it. Inside of two weeks with the repair shops on strike our rolling stock won't be able to

handle the traffic.” He put on his hat and started for the door.

“Where are you going?” Carleton demanded.

“Rafferty’s not going to have this all his own way. The men have no grievance, and I don’t believe they’ll follow him out if they’re talked to right. I’m going over.”

“Not if I know it, you’re not,” said Carleton grimly. “There may be a coroner’s inquest before this affair is settled, perhaps more than one if things get nasty, but I’m hanged if I propose starting in that way this afternoon.”

“That’s all right,” Holman replied doggedly.

“Just the same, I’m—Eh? What’s up, Carleton? What’s wrong?”

Spence had bent suddenly over the key, and Carleton, with a startled exclamation, was staring at the words the dispatcher was hastily scribbling on the pad. Holman leaned over the super’s shoulder and even as he saw Carleton reach to plug in the telephone connection with the roundhouse, he read the message: “Number Two wrecked Eagle Pass. Send wrecker and medical assistance at once.” The next instant he was flying across the yard to the shops.

As he burst in through the door he was greeted with a snarl. The men were massed in a body around one of the locomotives in the fitting-shop, and Rafferty, from the cab, was talking in fierce, heated tones. At sight of the master mechanic he stopped short and with an oath leaped from his perch straight for Holman. The crowd divided, making a lane between the two men, then, with startling suddenness, breaking the ominous silence that had fallen, there came three short blasts from the shop whistle—the wrecker’s

signal. It halted Rafferty when but an arm's-length from the locomotive foreman. Then Holman spoke:

"You hear that, men? Number Two has gone to glory up in Eagle Pass. You, Rafferty, get the wrecking crew together, *quick!* The rest of you get back to work."

"You're a liar!" Rafferty yelled. "A measly, putty-faced, starch-shirted liar, d'ye hear? Ut's a plant! You can't work any sharp trick loike that on me!"

There was a low, menacing growl from the men and they edged in close. But Holman gave them no heed; he took a step nearer Rafferty, looking straight into the other's eyes.

"Rafferty," he said quietly, "you've a wife and kids, haven't you? And you're a railroad man, aren't you? Well, there's wives and kids and mates up there in that wreck. The other affair can wait until we get back. Now, will you go?"

And Rafferty went—at the head of the wreckers—out into the yard where the switching crew were working like beavers making up the relief train. Two passenger coaches to serve as ambulances, behind them a flat, then the wrecking crane, the tool car, and a caboose. As Rafferty was piling his men into the train, Holman raced across the tracks to the station. On the platform the doctors, hastily summoned, were crowded around Carleton. Holman stopped beside them. "We're all ready, Carleton," he announced; then to the others: "You fellows had better get aboard; we'll be off as soon as we get the track."

"Spence will have the line clear in a minute," said Carleton, as the doctors started for the coaches. "I'm

sending a dispatcher up with you; he can tap in on the wires. How many men did you scrape up?”

“The regular crew.”

“And Rafferty?”

“He’s going along.”

“I don’t know how you did it, and there’s no time for explanations now; but I think, Holman, you’d better leave Rafferty behind.”

“And have the whole crew quit, too? It’s no use, Carleton, he’s got to go. That’s all there is to it.”

Carleton shook his head doubtfully. “I don’t like the idea of you two getting up there together. There’s no need of you going, and you’d better not go. You don’t know the man; if you think he’ll forget——”

“You’re wrong, I do. I told you so before; anyway, it’s too late now—we’re off. Here’s Spence with the orders.”

Before Carleton could reply, Holman had grabbed the tissue and was running for the train. As he swung himself into the cab of the engine and handed Hurley, the driver, his orders, Rafferty climbed in from the other side.

At sight of Holman, Rafferty hesitated and half turned around in the gangway to go back to the caboose; but Holman reached out and caught his arm.

“Stay where you are, Rafferty,” he said quietly. And during the nerve-racking thirty-mile run to Eagle Pass no other words passed between them. Sometimes in the mad slur of the locomotive as she hit the tangents their bodies touched; that was all.

Holman, by virtue of railroad etiquette, had climbed to the fireman’s seat and once or twice he had glanced around

at the great bulk of the man behind him, at the grim, set features, at the eyes that would not meet his, and wondered at his own temerity in inviting a physical encounter. And what good had it done? Was Carleton right after all? Perhaps. And yet behind the stubbornness, the self-will, the purely physical, there must be the other side of the man. If he could only reach it—only touch it. He *had* touched it. His appeal for the injured.

Hurley was eating up the miles as only a man at the throttle of a wrecker with clear rights could do it. A long scream from the whistle that echoed through the mountains above the pounding, deafening rush of the train brought Holman back to his immediate surroundings. Another minute and they had swung round the curve and thundered over the trestle that made the approach to the Pass.

Half a mile ahead of them up the track they saw the horror. Hurley latched in his throttle and began to check. As the brake-shoes bit into the tires, Holman slipped off his seat and faced Rafferty. There was a curious look in the other's eyes, and Holman understood. Understood that here Rafferty was his master—and knew it. So this was the meaning of it. This was how he had touched the other's better nature! Rafferty had cunningly seized the opportunity of placing him at an even greater disadvantage than before. For an instant he hesitated as he bit his lip, then he canceled the personal equation. "Go ahead, Rafferty," he said quietly, answering the unspoken challenge, "you're better up in this sort of thing than I am. You're in charge."

And Rafferty without a word swung himself from the cab.

To Holman the first five minutes was unnerving. It was his first bad wreck. Down East it had never been his province to go out with the crew—nor was it here, he reflected grimly, and at that moment was grateful for the veteran Rafferty. It was like some hideous nightmare to him. All along the line of burning wreckage lay the dead, their silence the more awful by contrast with the shrieks and cries of the wounded still imprisoned in the wreck. And then the feeling passed and he worked—worked like a madman.

Once a woman had caught his arm and, sobbing, dragged him toward the stateroom end of one of the Pullmans. Through the smoke and scorching heat of the flames he had fought his way in, then back with the child. The woman had thrown her arms hysterically around his neck.

It was all a mad, furious turmoil, and he gloried in it. The crunch of the ax through glass and woodwork, the wild rush into the heart of things to stagger back blinded and choked with his helpless burden. The fierce joy if life still lingered; the tender reverence if life were gone.

Up the track toward the engine there was a crash and a chorus of excited cries. He rushed in that direction. A half-dozen of the wrecking crew were grouped around the forward baggage-car. As Holman reached them, disheveled, clothes torn and scorched, face blackened with smoke and daubed with blood where glass and splinters had cut him, the men drew back aghast, staring white-faced.

“By God!” one cried. “It’s *him!*”

“Of course it’s me! Are you crazy? What’s the matter with you?”

The man pointed to the blazing car. “Some one said you was in there, and he went in after you just before she crumpled up.”

“Who?” Holman shouted.

“Rafferty.”

Holman made a dash for the car. The men held him back. “Don’t try it, sir; it’s too late to do any good.”

He shook them off, and with his arms crossed in front of his head to protect his face he half stumbled, half fell through the opening that had once been a door. The car was half over on its side. The trunks, dashed into a heap on top of each other when the car had left the track, were all that supported the burning roof timbers. Between the trunks and the edge of the car there was a little space with the floor at an angle of forty-five degrees, and along this, head down, Holman crawled blindly. The floor was already beginning to smolder, the metal-bound edges of the trunks blistered his hands as he touched them. His senses reeled, but on and on he crawled, and in his mind over and over again the one thought: “Rafferty! My God, Rafferty!”

Then his hands touched something soft, and slowly, painfully, inch by inch, he struggled back dragging Rafferty after him. Somehow he reached the door, then a confused jumble of noises and nothing more until he returned to consciousness, and to the knowledge that he was back in his room at Big Cloud with the almond-eyed factotum in attendance.

“Belly much better? Likee eat?” inquired that individual solicitously.

Holman grinned in spite of the pain. “No,” he answered; then as he closed his eyes again he muttered: “Tell Carleton I was right.”

And he was, for two days afterward Rafferty publicly abdicated. He gathered the men in the fitting-shop and mounted to the cab of an engine jacked halfway up to the ceiling as before, only on this occasion it was at noon hour and not in the company’s time. His words were few and to the point, delivered with a force and eloquence that was all his own:

“I sed he was a damned pink-faced dude, so I did. Well, I take ut back, d’ye moind? An’ fwhat’s more, I’ll flatten the face av any man fwhat sez I iver sed ut!”

II—THE LITTLE SUPER

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Tommy Regan backed the big compound mogul down past the string of dark-green coaches that he had pulled for a hundred and fifty miles, took the table with a slight jolt, and came to a stop in the roundhouse. As he swung himself from the cab, Healy, the turner, came up to him.

“He’s a great lad, that av yours,” Healy began, with a shake of his head—“a great lad; but mind ye this, Tommy Regan, there’ll be trouble for me an’ you an’ him an’ the whole av us, if you don’t watch him.”

“What’s the matter this time, John?”

“Matter,” said Healy, ruefully; “there’s matter enough. The little cuss come blame near running 429 into the pit a while back, so he did.”

“Where is he now?” Regan asked, with a grin.

“Devil a bit I know. I chased him out, an’ he started for over by the shops. An’ about an hour ago your missus come down an’ said the bhoy was no-wheres to be found, an’ that you was to look for him.” Regan pulled out his watch. “Six-thirty. Well,” he said, “I’ll go over and see if Grumpy knows anything about him. Next time the kid shows up around here, John, you give him the soft side of a tommy-bar, and send him home.”

Healy scratched his head. “I will,” he said; “I’ll do ut. He’s a foine lad.”

Regan crossed the yard to the gates of the big shops. They were still unlocked, and he went through into the storekeeper’s office. Grumpy was sorting the brass time-checks. He glanced up as Regan came in.

“I suppose you’re lookin’ fer yer kid again,” he said sourly.

“That’s what I am, Steve,” Regan returned, diplomatically dispensing with the other’s nickname.

“Well, he ain’t here,” Grumpy announced, returning to his checks. “I’ve just been through the shops, an’ I’d seen him if he was.”

The engineer’s face clouded. “He must be somewhere about, Steve. John said he saw him come over here, and the wife was down to the roundhouse looking for him, so he didn’t go home. Let’s go through the shops and see if we can’t find him.”

“I don’t get no overtime fer chasin’ lost kids,” growled Grumpy.

Nevertheless, he got up and walked through the door leading into the forge-shop, which Regan held open for him. The place was gloomy and deserted. Here and there a forge-fire, dying, still glowed dully. At the end of the room the men stopped, and Grumpy, noting Regan’s growing anxiety, gave surly comfort.

“Wouldn’t likely be here, anyhow,” he said. “Fitting-shop fer him; but we’ll try the machine-shop first on the way through.”

The two men went forward, prying behind planers, drills, shapers, and lathes. The machines took grotesque shapes in the deepening twilight, and in the silence, so incongruous with the usual noisy clang and clash of his surroundings, Regan’s nervousness increased.

He hurried forward to the fitting-shop. Engines on every hand were standing over their respective pits in all stages of demolition, some on wheels, some blocked high toward the rafters, some stripped to the bare boiler-shell. Regan climbed in and out of the cabs, while Grumpy peered into the pits.

“Aw! he ain’t here,” said Grumpy in disgust, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. “I told you he wasn’t. He’s home, mabbe, by now.”

Regan shook his head. “Bunty! Ho, Bunt-*ee*” he called. And again: “Bun-*tee!*”

There was no answer, and he turned to retrace his steps when Grumpy caught him by the shoulder. The big iron door of the engine before them swung slowly back on its hinges, and from the front end there emerged a diminutive pair of shoes, topped by little short socks that had once been white, but now hung in grimy folds over the tops of the boots. A pair of sturdy, but very dirty, bare legs came gradually into view as their owner propelled himself forward on his stomach. They dangled for a moment, seeking footing on the plate beneath; then a very small boy, aged four, in an erstwhile immaculate linen sailor suit, stood upright on the foot-plate. The yellow curls were tangled with engine grease and cemented with cinders and soot. Here and there in spots upon his face the skin still retained its natural color.

Bunty paused for a moment after his exertions to regain his breath, then, still gripping a hammer in his small fist, he straddled the draw-bar, and slid down the pilot to the floor.

Grumpy burst into a guffaw.

Bunty blinked at him reprovingly, and turned to his father.

“I’s been fixin’ the ‘iger-’ed,” he announced gravely.

Regan surveyed his son grimly. “Fixing what?” he demanded.

“The ‘iger-’ed,” Bunty repeated. Then reproachfully: “Don’t know w’at a ‘iger-’ed is?”

“Oh,” said Regan, “the nigger-head, eh? Well, I guess there’s another nigger-head will get some fixing when your

mother sees you, son.”

He picked the lad up in his arms, and Bunty nestled confidingly, with one arm around his father’s neck. His tired little head sank down on the paternal shoulder, and before they had reached the gates Bunty was sound asleep.

In the days that followed, Bunty found it no easy matter to elude his mother’s vigilance; but that was only the beginning of his troubles. The shop gates were always shut, and the latch was beyond his reach. Once he had found them open, and had marched boldly through, to find his way barred by the only man of whom he stood in awe. Grumpy had curtly ordered him away, and Bunty had taken to his heels and run until his small body was breathless.

The roundhouse was no better. Old John would have none of him, and Bunty marveled at the change.

He was a railroad man, and the shops were his heritage. His soul protested vigorously at the outrage that was being heaped upon him.

It took him some time to solve the problem, but at last he found the way. Each afternoon Bunty would trudge sturdily along the track for a quarter of a mile to the upper end of the shops, where the big, wide engine doors were always open. Here four spur-tracks ran into the erecting-shop, and Bunty found no difficulty in gaining admittance. Once safe among the fitting-gang, the little Super, as the men called him, would strut around with important air, inspecting the work with critical eyes.

One lesson Bunty learned. Remembering his last interview with his mother, he took good care not to be locked in the shops again. So each night when the whistle

blew he fell into line with the men, and, secure in their protection, would file with them past Grumpy as they handed in their time-checks. And Grumpy, unmindful of the spur-tracks, wondered how he got there, and scowled savagely.

When Bunty was six, his father was holding down the swivel-chair in the Master Mechanic's office of the Hill Division, and Bunty's allegiance to the shops wavered. Not from any sense of disloyalty; but with his father's promotion a new world opened to Bunty, and fascinated him. It was now the yard-shunter and headquarters that engaged his attention. The years, too, brought other changes to Bunty. The curls had disappeared, and his hair was cut now like his father's. Long stockings had replaced the socks, and he wore real trousers; short ones, it is true, but real trousers none the less, with pockets in them.

When school was over, he would fly up and down the yard on the stubby little engine, and Healy, doing the shunting then and forgetting past grievances, would let Bunty sit on the driver's seat. In time Bunty learned to pull the throttle, but the reversing-lever was too much for his small stature, and the intricacies of the "air" were still a little beyond him. But Healy swore he'd make a driver of him —and he did.

The evenings at the office Bunty loved fully as well. Headquarters were not much to boast about in those days. That was before competition forced a doubletrack system, and the train-dispatcher, with his tissue sheets, still held undisputed sway. They called them "offices" at Big Cloud out of courtesy—just the attic floor over the station, with

one room to it. The floor space each man’s desk occupied was his office.

Here Bunty would sit curled up in his father’s chair and listen to the men as they talked. If it was anything about a locomotive, he understood; if it was traffic or bridges or road-bed or dispatching, he would pucker his brows perplexedly and ask innumerable questions. But most of all he held Spence, the chief dispatcher, in deep reverence.

Once, to his huge delight, Spence, holding his hand, had let him tap out an order. It is true that with the O. K. came back an inquiry as to the brand the dispatcher had been indulging in; but the sarcasm was lost on Bunty, for when Spence with a chuckle read off the reply, Bunty gravely asked if there was any answer. Spence shook his head and laughed. “No, son; I guess not,” he said. “We’ve got to maintain our dignity, you know.”

That winter, on top of the regular traffic, and that was not light, they began to push supplies from the East over the Hill Division, preparing to double track the road from the western side of the foothills as soon as spring opened up. And while the thermometer crept steadily to zero, the Hill Division sweltered.

Everybody and everything got it, the shops and the road-beds, the train crews and the rolling-stock. What little sleep Carleton, the super, got, he spent in formulating dream plans to handle the business. Those that seemed good to him when he awoke were promptly vetoed by the barons of the General Office in the far-off East.

Regan got no sleep. He raced from one end of the division to the other, and he did his best. Engine crews had