

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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(Continued from Wednesday.)

A purring sound issued from the squat throat of the engine. It was sending aloft wreaths of light gray smoke and softly spitting red-hot cinders.

Dan climbed upon the tender and inspected the tank. Last of all he went forward and lit the headlight, and his preparations were complete. He jumped down from the cab and stood beside Joe on the platform.

"Now," he said cheerfully, "where's that fireman, Joe?"

"He's gone home, Mr. Oakley. He lives at Carson, too, same as Baker," faltered the operator.

"Then there's another man whose services we won't require in future. We'll have to find some one else."

"I don't think you can," ventured Durks reluctantly. Instinct told him that this opinion would not tend to increase his popularity with Oakley.

"Why not?"

"They just won't want to go."

"Do you mean to tell me that they will allow Antioch to burn and not lift a hand to save the town?" he demanded sternly.

He couldn't believe it.

"Well, you see, there won't any one here want to get killed, and they will think they got enough trouble of their own to keep them home."

"We can go uptown and see if we can't find a man who thinks of more than his own skin," said Dan.

"Oh, yes; we can try!" agreed Durks apathetically, but his tone implied an unshaken conviction that the search would prove a fruitless one.

"Can't you think of any one who would like to make the trip?" Durks was thoughtful. He thanked his lucky stars that the M. and W. paid half his salary. At last he said:

"No, I can't, Mr. Oakley."

There was a sound like the crunching of cinders underfoot on the other side of the freight car near where they were standing, but neither Durks nor Oakley heard it. The operator's jaws worked steadily in quiet animal enjoyment of their task. He was still canvassing the Junction's adult male population for the individual to whom life had become sufficiently burdensome for Oakley's purpose. Dan was gazing down the track at the red blur in the sky. Back of that ruddy glow, in the path of the flames, lay Antioch. The wind was in the north. He was thinking, as he had many times in the last hour, of Constance and the Emorys. In the face of the danger that threatened he even had a friendly feeling for the rest of Antioch. It had been decent and kindly in its fashion until Ryder set to work to ruin him.

He knew he might ride into Antioch on his engine none the worse for the trip, except for a few burns, but there was the possibility of a more tragic ending. Still, whatever the result, he would have done his full part.

He faced Durks again.

"Any man who knows enough to shove coal will do," he said.

"But no one will want to take such long chances, Mr. Oakley. Baker said it was just plain suicide."

Dan swore like a brakeman out of temper in the bad, thoughtless manner of his youth.

At the same moment a heavy, slouching figure emerged from the shadow at the opposite end of the freight car and came hesitatingly toward the two men. Then a voice said in gentle admonition:

"Don't swear so, Dannie. It ain't right. I'll go with you."

It was his father.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANTIOCH had grown indifferent to forest fires. They were of almost annual recurrence, and the town had come to expect them each fall. As the Hon. Jeb Barrows remarked with cheerful optimism, voicing a popular belief, if it was intended Antioch should go that way it would have gone long ago.

But this summer the drought had been of longer duration than usual. The woods were like tinder, and the inevitable wadding from some careless hunter's gun or the scattered embers from some campfire far up in the northern part of the state had started a conflagration that was licking up miles of timber and moving steadily south behind a vast curtain of smoke that darkened half the state. It was only when the burned out settlers from the north began to straggle in that Antioch awoke to a proper sense of its danger.

It was then that Antioch sent out its first call for help. It needed fire engines and hose, and it needed them badly, especially the hose, for the little reservoir from which the town drew its water supply was almost empty.

Antioch forgot the murder of Ryder. It forgot Roger Oakley, the strike and all lesser affairs. A common danger threatened its homes, perhaps the lives of its citizens.

A score of angry men were stamping up and down the long platform across from the shops or pushing in and out of the ugly little depot, which had taken on years in apparent age and decay in the two days during which



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no trains had been running.

They were abusing Holt, the railroad and every one connected with it. For the thousandth time they demanded to know where the promised relief train was—if it had started from Buckhorn Junction, and, if it hadn't started, the reason of the delay.

The hurried assistant treasurer answered these questions as best he could.

"Are you going to let the town burn without making a move to save it?" demanded an excited citizen.

"You don't think I am any more anxious to see it go than you are?" retorted Holt angrily.

"Then why don't your road do something to prevent it?"

"The road's doing all it can, gentlemen."

"That's a whole lot, ain't it?"

"We are cut off," said Holt helplessly. "Everything is tied up tight."

"You can wire, can't you?"

"Yes, I can wire; I have wired."

"Well, where's the relief train, then?"

"It's at the Junction."

"It's going to do us a lot of good there, ain't it?"

"They'll send it as soon as they can get together a crew."

"Stir them up again, Holt. Tell 'em we got to have that hose and those engines or the town's gone. It's a matter of life and death."

Holt turned back into the depot, and the crowd dispersed.

In the ticket office he found McClintock, who had just come in from uptown. The master mechanic's face was unusually grave.

"I have been investigating the water supply with the city engineer. Things are in awful shape. The mains are about empty, and there isn't pressure enough from the standpipe to throw a thirty-five foot stream."

"I wish Oakley was here," muttered Holt.

"So do I. Somehow he had a knack at keeping things moving. I don't mean but what you've done your level best, Byron," he added kindly.

"They've laid down on me at the Junction," said the younger man bitterly.

He stepped to the door, mopping his face with his handkerchief, and stood looking down the track in the direction of Buckhorn.

"They made it so Oakley couldn't stay, and now they wonder why the relief train is hung up. All Durks says is that he can't get a crew. I tell you if Oakley was here he'd have to get one."

"It was a mistake to send the yard engine up to Parker's Run. If we had it here now—"

"How was I to know we'd need it? I had to try to save those ties, and we thought the wind was shifting into the south," in fierce justification of his course.

"That's so, all right," said McClintock. "We did think the danger was past. Only we shouldn't have taken any chances."

At this point they were joined by Dr. Emory.

"Anything new from Buckhorn?" he inquired anxiously.

"No; it's the same old story. Durks ain't got anybody to send."

The doctor, like Holt, fell to mopping his face with his handkerchief.

"Don't he know our danger? Don't he know we can't fight the fire without engines and hose—that our water supply is about exhausted and that we'll have to depend on the river?"

Holt nodded wearily.

"It looks as though we were to be left to face this situation as best we can, without help from the outside," said the doctor uneasily.

Holt turned to McClintock.

"Isn't there some method of back firing?"

"It's too late to try that, and, with this wind blowing, it would have been

too big a risk."

He glanced moodily across the town to the north, where the black cloud hung low in the sky. He added:

"I have told my wife to keep the young ones in, no matter what happens, but, Lord, they will be about as well off one place as another when it comes to the pinch."

"I suppose so," agreed the doctor. "I am at a loss to know what precautions to take to insure the safety of Mrs. Emory and my daughter."

It was only 4 o'clock, but it was already quite dark in the town, a strange half light that twisted the accustomed shape of things. The air was close, stifling, and the wind, which blew in heavy gusts, was like the breath from a furnace. The somber twilight carried with it a horrible sense of depression. Every sound in nature was still. Silence reigned supreme. It was the expectant hush of each living thing.

The three men stepped out on the platform. Holt and the doctor were still mopping their faces with their limp handkerchiefs. McClintock was fanning himself with his straw hat. When they spoke they unconsciously dropped their voices to a whisper.

"Those families in the north end should move out of their homes," said the doctor. "If they wait until the fire gets here they will save nothing but what they have on their backs."

"Yes, and the houses ought to come down," added McClintock. "There's where the fire will get its first grip on the town, and then heaven help us!"

Night came, and so imminent seemed the danger that Antioch was roused to something like activity.

A crowd composed almost exclusively of men gathered early on the square before the courthouse.

They had by common consent given up all hope that the relief train would be sent from Buckhorn Junction. The light in the sky told them that they were completely cut off from the outside world. The town and the woods immediately adjacent formed an island in the center of an unbroken sea of fire. The ragged red line had crept around to the east, west and south, but the principal danger would be from the north, where the wind drove the flames forward with resistless fury.

To the south and east Billup's Fork interposed as a barrier to the progress of the fire, and on the west was a wide area of cultivated fields.

At regular intervals waves of light flooded the square as the freshening gusts fanned the conflagration or whirled across the town great patches of black smoke. In the intervals of light a number of dark figures could be seen moving about on the roof of the courthouse. Like the square below, it was crowded with anxious watchers.

The crowd jostled to and fro on the square, restless and excited and incapable of physical quiet. Then suddenly a voice was raised and made itself heard above the tramp of feet.

"Those houses in the north end must come down!" this voice said.

There was silence and then a man-tongued murmur. Each man present knew that the residents of the north end had sworn that they would not sacrifice their homes to the public good. If their homes must go they much preferred to have them burn, for then the insurance companies would have to bear the loss.

"Those houses must come down!" the voice repeated.

It was McClintock who had spoken.

"Who's going to pull them down?"

"Another voice asked. "They are ready to fight for them."

"And we ought to be just as ready to fight if it comes to that," answered the master mechanic. "It's for the common good."

The crowd was seized with a noisy agitation. Its pent up feelings found vent in bitter denunciation of the north end. A man—it was the Hon. Jeb Barrows—had mounted the courthouse steps and was vying endeavorously to make himself heard. He was counseling delay, but no one listened to him. The houses must be torn down whether their owners wanted it or not. McClintock turned up the street.

"Fall in!" he shouted, and at least a hundred men fell in behind him, marching two abreast. Here and there as they moved along a man would forsake the line to disappear into his own gate. When he rejoined his neighbors he invariably carried an ax, pick or crowbar.

From the square they turned into Main street and from Main street into the north road, and presently the head of the procession halted before a cluster of small frame houses resting in a hollow to their right.

"These must come down first," said McClintock. "Now, we want no noise, men. We'll pass out their stuff quietly as we can and take it back to the square."

He swung open a gate as he spoke. "Williams keeps a team. A couple of you fellows run around to the barn and hook up."

Just then the front door opened, and Williams himself appeared on the threshold. A dog barked, other doors opened, lights glared in a score of windows, and the north end threw off its cloak of silence and darkness.

"Keep quiet and let me do the talking," said McClintock over his shoulder. Then to the figure in the doorway:

"We have come to help you move, John. I take it you will be wanting to leave here shortly. We'll give you a hand." And the master mechanic pushed through the gate and took a step down the path.

"Hold on!" cried Williams, swinging out an arm. "I got something to say about that!"

There was a sound as of the clicking of a lock, and he presented the muzzle of a shotgun.

"Oh, say," said McClintock gently, "you had better not try to use that! It will only make matters worse. Your house has got to come down. We got to save what we can of the town."



He presented the muzzle of a shotgun. Williams made no answer to this, but McClintock saw him draw the butt of the gun up toward his shoulder.

The men at his back were perfectly still. They filled the street and, breathing hard, pressed heavily against the picket fence, which bent beneath the weight of their bodies.

"You'd better be reasonable. We are losing precious time," urged McClintock. "In an hour or two this place will be on fire."

"I've got no kick coming if it burns, but it shan't be pulled down."

"Put up your gun, and we'll give you a lift at getting your stuff out."

"No, you won't."

McClintock kept his eyes on the muzzle of the shotgun.

"It ain't the property loss we are thinking of—it's the possible loss of life," he said mildly.

"I'll chance it," retorted Williams briefly.

"Well, we won't."

Williams made no reply. He merely fingered the lock of his gun.

"Put down that gun, John!" commanded McClintock sternly.

At the same moment he reached around and took an ax from the hands of the nearest man.

"Put it down," he repeated as he stepped quickly toward Williams.

The listening men pressed heavily against the fence in their feverish anxiety to miss nothing that was said or done. The posts snapped, and they poured precipitously into the yard. At the same moment the gun exploded, and a charge of buckshot rattled barnlessly along the pavement at McClintock's feet.

Then succeeded a sudden pause, deep, breathless and intense, and then the crowd gave a cry—a cry that was in answer to a hoarse cheer that had reached them from the square.

An instant later the trampled front yard was deserted by all save Williams in the doorway. He still held the smoking gun to his shoulder.

(To be continued.)

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