

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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(Continued from Wednesday.)

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Roger Oakley appeared on the platform at Buckhorn Junction Durks started violently, while Dan took a quick step forward and placed a warning hand on the old convict's arm. He feared what he might say. Then he said to the operator: "He'll do. Go see if you can get Antioch. Try just once more. If you succeed tell them the engines and hose will be there within an hour or they need not look for them. Do you understand?"

"All right, Mr. Oakley." And Durks moved up the platform with alacrity. He was relieved of one irksome responsibility. He had his own theories as to who the stranger was, but he told himself it was none of his business.

As soon as he was out of hearing Dan turned to his father and said earnestly:

"Look here, daddy, I can't allow you to do it. We are neither of us popular. It's bad enough for me to have to go."

"Why can't you allow it, Dannie?" And his son recognized the same cheerful tone with which he had always met and overruled his objections.

"It will end in your arrest, and we don't want that."

"It's more than likely I'll be arrested sooner or later, anyhow," he said, with a suggestion of weariness, as if this were a matter it was a waste of time to consider. "The Lord has set his face against me. It's his wish I should return. I've been stubborn and headstrong and wouldn't see it, but look there." And he nodded toward the red western sky. "It's a summons. I got to obey whether I want to or not."

"It won't be safe. No telling what they will do with you."

"That ain't the question, Dannie; that ain't at all the question. It's not what they'll do to me." And he softly patted the hand that rested on his arm.

Dan saw that his clothes hung loosely to his mighty frame. They were torn and stained. He had the appearance of a man who had endured hardship, privation and toil. His glance was fugitive and anxious. "Where have you been all this while?" he asked. "Not here?"

"No; I have been living in the woods, trying to escape from the country, and the fires wouldn't let me. Wherever I went they were there ahead of me, driving me back."

"Why did you kill him? How did it happen?" Dan asked. "Or is it all a mistake? Did you do it?"

The smile faded from the old convict's lips.

"It was a sort of accident, and it was sort of carelessness, Dannie," he explained, with a touch of sullessness. "I hit him—not hard, mind you. I know I shouldn't have done it, but he was in the wrong, and he wouldn't listen to reason. I don't know when I ever seen a man so set in his wickedness."

"And now you want to go back. Do you know what it means if you are arrested? Have you thought of that?" Roger Oakley waved the query aside as though it concerned him not at all.

"I want to be with you," he said wistfully. "You may not get through alive, and I want to be with you. You'll need me. There's no one you can trust as you can me, for I won't fall you no matter what the danger is. And there's the girl, Dannie. Have you thought of her?"

Dan set his lips. "My God, I can't think of anything else."

There was a moment's silence.

"Here," said Dan, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "I am going to give you what money I have. It isn't much."

"What for, Dannie?"

"You are sure to be seen and recognized if you stay about here. Your description has been telegraphed all over the state. For that reason I'll take you with me part way. Then I'll slow up, and you can hide again. It's your only chance. I am sorry I can't do more for you. I wish I could. But perhaps we can arrange to meet afterward."

His father smiled with the unconscious superiority of the man who firmly believes he is controlled by an intelligence infinitely wise and beyond all human conception. No amount of argument could have convinced him that Providence was not burning millions of feet of standing timber and an occasional town solely for his guidance. In his simple superstition he saw nothing absurd or preposterous in the idea. He said:

"I've wanted to escape, Dannie, for your sake, not for mine. But when I see you tonight I knew the Lord intended we should keep together. He didn't bring us here for nothing. That ain't his way. There's no one to go with you but me, and you can't go alone."

"I can—I will!" And Dan swore under his breath. He realized that no word of his could move his father. He would carry his point, just as he always had.

Durks came running along the platform from the depot.

"It's no use," shaking his head. "The wire's down. Say, you want to keep your eyes open for the freight. It may be on the siding at Parker's Run, and it may be on the main track."

Dan made a last appeal to his father. "Won't you listen to what I say?" sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper. "They'll hang you—do you hear? If ever they lay hands on you they will show no mercy!" It did not occur to him that his father would be returning under circumstances so exceptional that public sentiment might well undergo a radical change in his favor.

Roger Oakley merely smiled as he answered, with gentle composure: "I don't think we need to worry about that. We are in his hands, Dannie." And he raised his face to the heavens.

Dan groaned.

"Come, then," he said aloud.

"I'll throw the switch for you!" And the operator ran down the track. He was quite positive he should never see Oakley again, and he felt something akin to enthusiasm at the willing sacrifice of his life which he conceived him to be making.

Father and son stepped to the engine. The old convict mounted heavily to his post, and Dan sprang after him. His hand groping for the throttle lever. There was the hiss of steam, and Joe cried from the darkness:

"All right, come ahead!" And the engine, with its tender and two cars, began its hazardous journey.

As they slipped past him the operator yelled his goodby and Dan pushed open the cab window and waved his hand.

Roger Oakley on the narrow iron shelf between the engine and the tender was already throwing coal into the furnace. His face wore a satisfied expression. Apparently he was utterly unmoved by the excitement of the moment, for he bent to his work as if it were the most usual of tasks and the occasion the most commonplace. He had taken off his coat and vest and had tossed them up on the tender out of his way. Dan, looking over the boiler's end, could see his broad shoulders and the top of his head. He leaned back, with his hand on the throttle.

"Father!" he called.

The old convict straightened up instantly.

"Yes, Dannie."

"You are going with me? You are determined?"

"I thought we settled that, Dannie, before we started," he said pleasantly, but there was a shrewd, kindly drop to the corners of his mouth, for he appreciated his victory.

"I want to know, because if I am to slow up for you I'll have to do it soon or I'll be leaving you in worse shape than I found you."

To this his father made no direct reply. Instead he asked, "Do you think we'll reach Antioch in time to do them any good?" Dan faced about.

They slid into a straight stretch of road beyond the Junction, and the track shone yellow far ahead, where the engine looked down upon it with its single eye. Each minute their speed increased. A steady jarring and pounding had begun that grew into a dull and ponderous roar as the engine rushed forward. Dan kept a sharp watch for the freight.

As Durks had said, it might be on the siding at Parker's Run, and it might not. In the latter event his and his father's troubles would soon be at an end.

He rose from his seat and went to the door of the cab.

"We'll take it easy for the first ten miles or so, then we'll be in the fire, and that will be our time to hit her up."

Roger Oakley nodded his acquiescence. In what he conceived to be worldly matters he was quite willing to abide by Dan's judgment, for which he had profound respect.

"How fast are we going?" he asked. Dan steadied himself and listened, with a finger on his pulse, until he caught the rhythmic swing of the engine as it jarred from one rail to another. Then he said:

"Twenty-five miles an hour."

"It ain't very fast, is it, Dannie?" He was evidently disappointed.

"We'll do twice that presently."

The old convict looked relieved. They were running now with a strip of forest on one side of the track and cultivated fields on the other, but with each rod they covered they were edging in nearer the flames. At Parker's Run the road crossed a little stream which doubled back in the direction of Buckhorn Junction. There was nothing after that to stay the progress of the fire, and the rest of their way lay through the blazing pine woods.

Just before they reached the ten mile all they came to the strip of burned timber that had sent Baker back to Buckhorn earlier in the day. Here and there a tree was still blazing, but for the most part the fire had spent its strength.

As they swung past Parker's Run a little farther on Dan saw the freight, or, rather, what was left of it, on the siding. It had been cutting out four flat cars loaded with ties, and he understood the difficulty at a glance. On the main track a brick and stone culvert spanned the run, but the siding crossed it on a flimsy wooden bridge.

This bridge had probably been burning as the freight backed in for the flat cars, and when it attempted to pull out the weakened structure had collapsed and the engine had gone through into the cut. It rested on its forward end, jammed between the steep banks, with its big drivers in the air. Of the cars there remained only the trucks and ironwork. Near by a tool shed had formerly stood, but that was gone too. The wheels and gearing of a hand car in the midst of a heap of ashes marked the spot.

Dan turned to his father. "Are you all right, daddy?" he asked.

"Yes, Dannie."

"Mind your footing. It will be pretty shaky back there."

They were still in the burned district, where a change in the wind that afternoon had driven the fire back on itself. It had made a clean sweep of everything inflammable. Luckily the road had been freshly ballasted, and the track was in fair condition to resist the flames. But an occasional tie smoldered, and from these the rushing train thrashed showers of sparks.

Dan kept his eyes fastened on the rails, which showed plainly in the jerky glare of the headlight. It was well to be careful while care was possible. By and by he would have to throw aside all caution and trust to chance. Now he increased his speed, and the insistent thud of the wheels roared every other sound, even the faroff roar of the flames. At his back at intervals a ruddy glow shot upward into the night when Roger Oakley threw open the furnace door to pass in coal. Save for this it was still quite dark in the cab, where Dan sat with his hand on the throttle lever and watched the yellow streak that ran along the rails in advance of the engine. Suddenly the wall of light ahead brightened visibly, and its glare filled the cab. They were nearing the fire.

Dan jammed the little window at his elbow open and put out his head. A hot blast roared past him, and the heat of the fire was in his face. He drew the window shut. It was light as day in the cab now.

He leaned across the boiler's end and, with a hand to his lips, called to his father, "Are you all right?"

The old man drew himself erect and crept nearer.

"What's that you say, Dannie?" he asked. His face was black with coal dust and grime.

"Are you all right? Can you bear the heat?"

"I am doing very nicely, but this ain't a patch on what it's going to be."

"Yes, it will be much worse, though this is bad enough."

"But we can stand it. We must think of those poor people at Antioch."

"We'll stick to the engine as long as the engine sticks to the rails," said Dan grimly. "Hadn't you better come into the cab with me? You'll be frightfully exposed when we get into the thick of it."

"Not yet, Dannie. I'll give you steam, and you drive her as hard as you can."

He turned away, shovel in hand.

Then, all in a second, and they were in the burning woods, rushing beneath trees that were blazing to their very summits. The track seemed to shake and tremble in the fierce light and fiercer heat. Burning leaves and branches were caught up to be whirled in fiery eddies back down the rails as the train tore along, for Dan was hitting her up.

Tongues of fire struck across at the two men. Smoke and fine white ashes filled their mouths and nostrils. Their bodies seemed to bake. They had been streaming wet with perspiration a moment before.

Off in the forest it was possible to see for miles. Every tree and bush stood forth distinct and separate.

Roger Oakley put down his shovel for an instant to fill a bucket with water from the tank on the tender. He plunged his head and arms in it and splashed the rest over his clothes. Dan turned to him for the last time.

"It isn't far now," he panted. "Just around the next curve and we'll see the town if it's still there off in the valley."

The old convict did not catch more than the half of what he said, but he smiled and nodded his head.

As they swung around the curve a dead sycamore which the fire had girdled at the base crashed across the track. The engine plunged into its top, rolled it over once and tossed it aside. There was the smashing of glass and the ripping of leather as the sycamore's limbs raked the cab, and Roger Oakley uttered a hoarse cry—a cry Dan did not hear, but he turned, spitting dust and cinders from his lips, and saw the old convict still standing, shovel in hand, in the narrow gateway that separated the engine and tender.

He had set the whistle shrieking, and it cut high above the roar of the flames, for off in the distance under a canopy of smoke he saw the lights of Antioch shining among the trees.

Two minutes later and they were running smoothly through the yards, with the brakes on and the hiss of escaping steam. As they slowed up beside the depot Dan sank down on the seat in the cab limp and exhausted. He was vaguely conscious that the platform was crowded with people and that they were yelling at him excitedly and waving their hats, but he heard their cries only indifferently well. His ears were dead to everything except the noise of his engine, which still echoed in his tired brain.

He staggered to his feet and was about to descend from the cab when he saw that his father was lying face down on the iron shelf between the engine and tender. He stooped and raised him gently in his arms.

The old convict opened his eyes and looked up into his face, his lips parted as if he were about to speak, but no sound came from them.



Dan turned, spitting dust and cinders from his lips.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONSTANCE EMORY and her mother, waiting quietly in their home, heard the cheers when the noise from Dan's shrieking engine reached the crowd of desperate men on the square. Then presently they heard the rattle and clash of the fire engines as they were dragged through the street and were aware that the relief train had arrived, but it was not until the doctor came in some time long after midnight that they knew who had been the savior of the town.

"It's all over, dear. The fire is under control," he said cheerfully, addressing his wife. "I guess we can go to bed now and feel pretty sure we won't be burned out before morning."

Constance put down the book she had been trying to read and rose tiredly and stiffly from her chair beside the table.

"Then the train did come, after all?" she said.

"Yes, but not a moment too soon. I tell you we can't be grateful enough. I've been with Oakley and his father. That's what kept me," he explained. "Oakley!" Constance cried in amazement. "You don't mean—"

"Yes. Didn't you know that it was Oakley and his father who brought the relief train? The old man is dead. He was killed on the way. It's a miracle that either of them got through alive. Hadn't you heard?"

Constance put out her hands blindly, for a sudden mist had come before her eyes.

"Father, you don't mean that Mr. Oakley has returned to Antioch—that he is here now?"

"Yes, it seems no one else would come. Oakley was in Chicago when he first heard of the fire and started immediately for Buckhorn, where he found the relief train. Oddly enough, he found his father there too."

(To be continued.)

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