The Master Mechanic's Story

DELAROO

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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"YOU tell it. I can't tell it," growled Neighbor.

"Oh, no. No. That's your story, Neighbor."

"I ain't no story teller"—

"Just an able jawed liar," suggested Callahan through a benevolent bluish haze.

"Delaroo's story wasn't any lie, though," muttered Neighbor. "But a fellow would think it was to hear it. Now, he would, for a fact, wouldn't he?"

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If you want him, quick and short, it would be—whiskers, secret societies, statistics and plug tobacco, the latter mostly worked up. That was Maje Sampson.

Bluntly, a wind bag; 270 pounds of atmosphere, up on benevolent fraternities, up on politics, up on the money question, up on everything. The seven financial conspiracies engaged Maje Sampson's attention pretty continually and had for him a practical application. There were never less than seven conspiracies afoot in Medicine Bend to make Maje Sampson pay up.

Pay? Indeed, he did pay. He was always paying. It was not a question of paying; not at all. It was a question of paying up, which is different.

The children—they were brickbats, tow headed, putty faced, wash eyed youngsters of all sizes and conditions. About Maje Sampson's children there was but one distinguishing characteristic—they were all boys, nothing but boys, and they spread all over town. Was there a baby run over? It was Maje Sampson's. Was there a child lost? Maje Sampson's. Was there a violently large headed, coarse featured, hangdog, clattering sort of a chap anywhere around—in the street, station, roundhouse, yards, stock pens? It was a brickbat, sure—one of Maje Sampson's brickbat boys.

The Sampsons were at the end of the street, and the end of the street was up the mountain. Maje Sampson's lot "raised," as Neighbor put it—stood on its hind legs. His house had a startling tumble over aspect as you approached it. The back end of his lot ran up into the sheer, but he marked the line sharply by a kind of horizontal fence, because the cliff just above belonged to the corporation that owned everything on earth around Medicine Bend.

[illegible] Sampson did not propose to let [illegible]sping corporation encroach on [illegible], so he built, and added to from [illegible] time, a cluster of things on the [illegible] end of his lot—an eruption of small buildings like pimples on a boy's face, running down in size from the barn to the last drygoods box the boys had heaved up the slope for a doghouse. To add to the variety some one of the structures was always getting away in the wind, and if anything smaller than a hotel was seen careening across lots in a Medicine Bend breeze it was spotted without further investigation as Maje Sampson's. When the gale abated Joe McBracken, who conducted the local dray line, was pretty sure to be seen with a henhouse or a wood shed, or something likewise, loaded on his trucks headed for Maje Sampson's. Once the whole lean-to of the house blew off, but Joe McBracken stood ready for any emergency. He met the maverick addition at the foot of the grade, loaded it on his house moving truck, hitched on four bronchos, crawled inside the structure and, getting the lines through the front window, drove up Main street before the wind had gone down. Joe was photographed in the act, and afterward used the exhibit in getting judgment against Maje Sampson for his bill.

Now, a man like Maje wouldn't be likely to have very much of a run nor any much of an engine. He had the 264, an old pop bottle, with a stack like a tepee turned upside down. For a run he had always trains Nos. 29 and 30, the local freights, with an accommodation coach east of Anderson. There were times of stress frequently on the West End, times when everybody ran first in first out, except Maje Sampson. He always ran Nos. 29 and 30 west to Silver River and back. A pettifogging, cheap, jerk water run with no rights to speak of, not even against respectable handcars.

The only things Maje Sampson did not have to dodge were tramps, blanket Indians and telegraph poles; everything else sidetracked Nos. 29 and 30 and Maje Sampson. Almost everybody on through trains must at some time have seen Maje Sampson puffing on a siding as Moore or Mullen shot by on No. 1 or No. 2. Maje was so big and his cab so little that when he got his head through the window you couldn't see very much of the cab for shoulders and whiskers and things. From the car window he looked like a fourteen-year-old boy springing out of a ten-year-old jacket. Three things only made Maje tolerable. First, the number of benevolent orders he belonged to; second, Delaroo; third, Martie.

Maje Sampson was a joiner and a getter up. He would join anything on the West End that had a ritual, a grip and a password, and he would sit up night after night with anybody that had a broken leg or a fever, and, if nothing better offered, Maje, rather than go to bed, would tackle a man with the stomach ache. This kind of took the cuss off, but he was that peculiar he would sit up all night with a sick man and next day make everybody sick talking the money question—at least everybody but Delaroo. If Delaroo was bored he never showed it. As long as Maje would talk Delaroo would listen. That single word was, in fact, the key to Delaroo. Delaroo was a listener; for that reason nobody knew much about him.

He wasn't a railroad man by birth, but by adoption. Delaroo came from the mountains; he was just a plain mountain man. Some said his father was a trapper; if so, it explained everything—the quiet, the head bent inquiringly forward, the modest unobtrusiveness of a man deaf. Of a size and shape nothing remarkable. Delaroo—but a great listener, for though he looked like a deaf man he heard like a dispatcher and saw marvelously from out the ends of his silent eyes. Delaroo for all the world was a trapper.

He came into the service as a roundhouse sweeper; then Neighbor, after a long time, put him at wiping. Delaroo said nothing, but wiped for years and years and was in a fair way to become liked when instead he became one morning pitted with umbilical vesicles, and the doctors, with Delaroo's brevity, said smallpox. The boarding house keeper threw him out bodily and at once. Having no better place to go, Delaroo wandered into Steve Boyer's saloon, where he was generally welcome. Steve, however, pointed a hospitable gun at him and suggested his getting away immediately from the front end of it. Delaroo went from there to the roundhouse with his umbilicals and asked Neighbor what a man with the smallpox ought to do with it. Neighbor wouldn't run, not even from the smallpox, but he told Delaroo what it meant to get the smallpox started in the roundhouse, and Delaroo wandered quietly away from the depot grounds, a pretty sick man then, staggered up the yards and crawled stupid into a box car to die without embarrassing anybody.

By some hook or crook, nobody to this day knows how, that car was switched on to Maje Sampson's train when it was made up that day for the west. Maybe it was done as a trick to scare the windbag engineer. If so, the idea was successful. When the hind end brakeman at the second stop came forward and reported a tramp with the smallpox in the empty box car Maje was angry, but his curiosity gradually got the upper hand. This man might be by some distant chance, he reflected, a P. Q. W. of A., or a frater, or a fellow, or a knight or something like, and when they stopped again to throw off crackers and beer and catchup, Maje went back and entered the infected car like a lion tamer to try lodge signals and things on him. Maje advanced and gave the countersign. It was not cordially received. He tried another and another and another; his passes were lost in the air. The smallpox man appeared totally unable to come back at Maje with anything. He was not only delirious, but by this time so frightfully broken out that Maje couldn't have touched a sound spot with a Mason's signal of distress. Finally the venturesome engineer walked closer into the dark corner where the sick man lay—and, by heaven, it was the Indian wiper, Delaroo!

When Maje Sampson got back into the cab he could not speak—at least not for publication. He was tearing mad and sputtered like a safety. He gathered up his cushion and a water bottle and a bottle that would explode if water touched it and crawled with his plunder into the box car. He straightened Delaroo up and out and gave him a drink and by way of sanitary precaution took one personally, for he himself had never had the smallpox—but once. When he had done this little for Delaroo he finished his run and came back to the Bend hauling his pest house box car. The fireman quit the cab immediately after Maje exposed himself. The conductor communicated with him only by signals. The Anderson operator wired ahead that Maje Sampson was bringing back a man with smallpox on 30, and when Maje, bulging out of the 264 cab, pulled into the division yard nobody would come within a mile of him. He set out the box car below the stock pens, cross lots from his house up on the hill, and, not being able to get advice from anybody else, went home to consult Martie.

Though there were a great many women in Medicine Bend, Maje Sampson looked to but one, Martie, the little washed out woman up at Sampson's—wife, mother, nurse, cook, slave—Martie.

No particular color hair; no particular color eyes; no particular color gown; no particular cut to it. A plain bit of a woman, mother of six boys, large and small, and wife of a great big wind bag engineer—big as three of her by actual measurement. By the time Maje had taken counsel and walked downtown prominent business men were fending off his approach with shotguns. The city marshal from behind a bomb proof asked what he was going to do with his patient, and Maje retorted he was going to take him home. He wasn't a M. R. W. of T. nor a P. S. G. of W. R., but he was a roundhouse man, and between Maje and a railroad man, a wiper even, there was a bond stronger than grip or password or jolly business of any kind. The other things Maje, without realizing it, merely played at, but as to the railroad lay, if a railroad man was the right sort he could borrow anything the big fellow had—money, plug tobacco, pipe, water bottle, strong bottle—it made no odds what. And, on the other hand, Maje wouldn't hesitate to borrow any or all of these things in return. The railroad man who got ahead of Maje Sampson in this respect had claims to be considered a past grand in the business.

The doughty engineer lifted and dragged and hauled Delaroo home with him. If there was no hospital, Martie had said, no pest house, no nothing, just bring him home. They had all had the smallpox up at Sampson's except the baby, and the doctor had said lately the baby appeared to need something. They had really everything up at Sampson's sooner or later—measles, diphtheria, croup, everything on earth except money. And Martie Sampson, with the washing and mending and scrubbing and cooking, nursed the outcast wiper through his smallpox. The baby took it, of course, and Martie nursed the baby through and went on just the same as before—washing, mending, cooking, scrubbing. Delaroo when he got well went to firing; Neighbor offered the job as a kind of consolation prize, and he went to firing on the 264 for Maje Sampson.

It was then that Maje took Delaroo fairly in hand and showed him the unspeakable folly of trying to get through the world without the comradeship and benefits of the B. S. L.'s of U. and the fraters of the order of the double barreled star of MacDuff. Delaroo caught a good deal of it on the sidings, where they lay most of their time dodging first class trains, and evenings when they got in from their runs Delaroo, having nowhere else to go, used to wander after supper up to Sampson's. At Sampson's he would sit in the shade of the lamp and smoke while Maje, in his shirt sleeves, held forth on the benevolent orders and one boy crawled through the bowels of the organ and another pulled off the tablecloth, Delaroo always saving the lamp, and a third harassed the dog and a fourth stuck pins in a fifth—and Martie, sitting on the dim side of the shade, so the operation would not appear too glaring, mended at Maje's mammoth trousers.

Delaroo would sit and listen to Maje and watch the heave of the organ with the boy, and the current of the tablecloth with the lamp, and the quarter in which the dog was chewing the baby, and watch Martie's perpetual motion fingers for a whole evening, and go back to the boarding house without passing a word with anybody on earth, he was that silent.

In this way the big, bluffing engineer gradually worked Delaroo into all the secret benevolent orders in Medicine Bend. That meant pretty much every one on earth. There arose always, however, in connection with the initiations of Delaroo one hitch. He never seemed quite to know whom he wanted to leave his insurance money to. He could go the most complicated catechism without a hitch every time, for Maje

He straightened Delaroo up and gave him a drink.

spent weeks on the sidings drilling him, until it came to naming the beneficiary. There he stuck. Nobody could get out of him to whom he wanted his money to go.

Had he no relations back in the mountains? Nobody up in the Spider country? No wives or daughters or fathers or mothers or friends or anything? Delaroo always shook his head. If they persisted, he shook his head. Maje Sampson, sitting after supper, would ask, and Martie, when the dishes were side tracked, would begin to sew and listen, and Delaroo, of course, would listen, but never by any chance would he answer, not even when Maje tried to explain how it bore on 16 to 1. He declined to discuss any ratio or to name any beneficiary whatsoever. The right honorable recording secretaries fumed and denounced it as irregular, and Maje Sampson wore holes in his elbows gesticulating, but in the matter of distributing his personal share of the unearned increment Delaroo expressed no preference whatsoever. He paid his dues; he made his passes; he sat in place. What more could be required? If they put him in a post of honor he filled it with silent dignity. If they set him to guard the outer portal he guarded well. It was perilous, rather, for a visiting frater or even a local brother to try getting past Delaroo if he was rusty in the ritual. Not Maje Sampson himself could work the outer guard without the countersign. If he forgot it in the hurry of getting to lodge he had to cool his heels in the outer air till it came back. Delaroo was pitiless.

In the cab he was as taciturn as he was in the lodge or under the kerosene lamp at Sampson's; he just listened. But his firing was above any man's who ever stoked the 264. Delaroo made more steam on less coal than any man in the roundhouse. Neighbor began to hold him up as a model for the division, and the boys found that the way to jolly Neighbor was to say nice things about Delaroo. The head of the motive power would brighten out of a sulk at the mention of Delaroo's name, and he finally fixed up a surprise for the Indian man. One night after Delaroo came in Neighbor, in the bluff way he liked to use in promoting a man, told Delaroo he could have an engine; a good one, one of the K class, as much finer a machine than the old 264 as Duffy's chronometer was than a prize package watch. Delaroo never said aye, yes or no; he merely listened. Neighbor never had a promotion received in just that way; it nearly gave him the apoplexy.

But if Delaroo treated the proposal coolly, not so Maje Sampson. When the news of the offer reached him, Maje went into an unaccountable flutter. He acted at first exactly as if he wanted to hold his man back, which was dead against cab ethics. Finally he assented, but his cheeks went flabby and his eyes hollow, and he showed more worry than his creditors. Nobody understood it, yet there was evidently something on and the major's anxiety increased until Delaroo, the Indian fireman and knight companion of the Ancient Order of Druids and Fluids, completely took Neighbor's breath by declining the new engine. That was a West End wonder. He said if it made no odds he would stay on the 264. The men all wondered. Then something new came up, and the thing was forgotten. Maje Sampson's cheeks filled out again, he regained his usual nerve and swore on the money question harder than ever.

After that it was pretty generally understood that Delaroo and Maje Sampson and the 264 were fixtures. Neighbor never gave any one a chance to decline an engine more than once. The boys all knew, if Delaroo didn't, that he would be firing a long time after throwing that chance by, and he was.

The combination came to be regarded as eternal. When the sloppy 264 hove in sight little Delaroo and Big Maje Sampson were known to be behind the boiler pounding up and down the mountains, up and down year in and year out. Big engines came into the division and bigger. All the time the division was crowding on the motive power and putting in the mammoth types until when the 264 was stalled alongside a consolidated or a mogul skyscraper she looked like an ancient beer glass set next an imported stein.

With the 264 when the 800 or the 1,100 class were concerned it was simply a case of keep out of our way or get smashed, Maje Sampson or no Maje Sampson, money question or no money question. Benevolent benefits fraternally proposed or anteroom signals confidentially put forth by the baldheaded 264 were of no sort of consequence with the modern giants that pulled a thousand tons in a string up a 2,000 foot grade at better than twenty miles an hour. It was a clear yet cold, "You old tug, get out of our way, will you?" And the fast runners, like Moore and Hawksworth and Mullen and the Crowleys, Tim and Syme, had about as much consideration for Maje and his financial theories as their machines had for his machine. His jim crow freight outfit didn't cut much of a figure in their track schedules.

So the Maje Sampson combination, but quite as brassy as though it had rights of the first class, dodged the big fellows up and down the line pretty successfully until the government began pushing troops into the Philippines and there came days when a Rocky mountain sheep could hardly have kept out of the way of the extras that tore, hissing and booming, over the mountains for Frisco. For a time the traffic came hot—so hot we were pressed to handle it. There was a good bit of skirmishing on the part of the passenger department to get the business and then tremendous skirmishing in the operating department to deliver the goods. Every broken down coach in the back yards was scrubbed up for the soldier trains. We aimed to kill just as few as possible of the boys en route to the islands, though that may have been a mistaken mercy. However, we handled them well. Not a man in khaki got away from us in a wreck, and in the height of the push we put more live stock into South Omaha, car for car, than has ever gone in before or since.

It was November and great weather for running, and when the rails were not springing under the soldiers westbound they were humming under the steers eastbound. Maje Sampson, with his beer kegs and his crackers and his 264 and his beknighted fireman, hugged the sidings pretty close that week. Some of the trains had part of the rights and others had the remainder. The 264 and her train took what was left, which threw Maje Sampson most of the time on the wornout, rundown scrap rails that made corduroy roads of the passing tracks. Then came the night that Moulton, the Philippine commandant, went through on his special. With his staff and his baggage and his correspondents and that kind, he took one whole train. Syme Crowley pulled them, with Ben Sheeer conductor, and, whatever else may be said of that pair, they deliver their trains on time. Maje Sampson left Medicine Bend with 29 at noon on his regular run and tried to get west. But between the soldiers behind him and the steers against him he soon lost every visionary right he ever did possess. They laid him out nearly every mile of the way to the end of the run. At Sugar Buttes they held him thirty minutes for the Moulton special to pass, and, to crown his indignities, kept him there fifteen minutes more waiting for an eastbound sheep train. Sampson afterward claimed that Barnes Tracy, the dispatcher that did it, was a gold Democrat, but this never was proved.

It was nearing dark when the crew of the local freight 29 heard the dull roar of the Moulton special speeding through the canyon of the Rat. A passenger train running through the canyon at night comes through with the far roll of a thousand drums, deepening into a rumble of thunder. Then out and over all comes the threatening purr of the straining engine breaking into a storm of exhausts until, like a rocket, the headlight bursts streaming from the black walls, and Moore on the 811, or Mullen with the 818, or Hawksworth in the 1110, tear with a fury of miles and a sweep of noise over the Butte switch, past caboose and flats and boxes and the 264 like fading light. Just a sweep of darkened glass and dead varnish, a whirl of smoking trucks beating madly at the fishplates, and the fast train is up and out and gone!

Twenty-nine, local, was used to all this. Used to the vanishing tail lights, the measured sinking of the sullen dust, the silence brooding again over the desert with, this night, fifteen minutes more to wait for the eastbound stock train before they dared open the switch. Maje Sampson killed the time by going back to the caboose to talk equities with the conductor. It was no trick for him to put away fifteen minutes discussing the rights of man with himself; and with an angel of a fireman to watch the cab, why not? The 264 standing on the siding was chewing her cud as sweet as an old cow, with maybe 140 pounds of steam to the right of the dial, maybe 150—I say maybe, because no one but Delaroo ever knew—when the sheep train whistled.

Sheep—nothing but sheep. Car after car after car, rattling down from the short line behind two spanking big engines. They whistled, hoarse as pirates, for the Butte siding, and, rising the hill a mile west of it, bore down the grade throwing Dannah coal from both stacks like hydraulic gravel.

No one knew or ever will know how it happened. They cat hauled men on the carpet a week about that switch. The crew of the Moulton special testified, the crews of the stock train testified, Maje Sampson testified, his conductor and both brakemen testified, the roadmaster and the section boss each testified, and their men testified—but however or what it was, whether the Moulton special fractured the tongue, or whether the pony of the lead engine flew the guard, or whether the switch had been opened, or whether, in closing, the slip rail had somehow failed to follow the rod, the double headed stocker went into that Butte switch, into that Butte siding, into the peaceable old 264 and the 29, local, like a lyddite shell, crashing, rearing, ripping, scattering two whole trains into blood and scrap. Destruction, madness, throes, death, silence; then a pyre of dirty smoke, a wall of sickening bleats and a scream of hissing steam over 1,000 sheep caught in the sudden shambles.

There was frightened crawling out of the shattered cabooses, a hurrying up of the stunned crews and a bewildering count of heads. Both engine crews of the stock train had jumped as their train split the switch. The train crews were badly shaken. The head brakeman of the sheep train lay torn in the barbed wire fencing the right of way, but only one man was missing, the fireman of 29, Delaroo.

"Second 86 jumped west switch passing track and went into train 29, engine 264. Bad spill. Delaroo, fireman the 264, missing," wired Sugar Buttes to Medicine Bend a few minutes later.

Neighbor got up there by 10 o'clock with both roadmasters and the wrecking outfit. It was dark as a canyon on the desert that night. Benedict Morgan's men tore splintered car timber from the debris and on the knolls back of the siding lighted heaping bonfires that threw a light all night on the dread pile smoking on the desert. They dug by the flame of the fires at the ghastly heap till midnight. Then the moon rose, an extra crew arrived from the Bend, and they got the derrick at work. Yet with all the toil when day broke the confusion looked worse confounded. The main line was so hopelessly blocked that at daylight a special with ties and steel was run in to lay a temporary track around the wreck.

"What do I think of it?" muttered Neighbor, when the local operator asked him for a report for Callahan. "I think there's two engines for the scrap in sight—and the 264, if we can ever find anything of her—and about a million sheep to pay for"— Neighbor paused to give an order and survey the frightful scene.

"And Delaroo," repeated the operator. "He wants to know about Delaroo"—

"Missing."

At dawn hot coffee was passed among the wreckers, and shortly after sunrise the Medicine Bend gang arrived with the second derrick. Then the men of the night took hold with a new grip to get into the heart of the pile; to find—if he was there—Delaroo.

None of the Medicine Bend gang knew the man they were hunting for, but the men from the Bend [illegible] them about Maje Sampson's [illegible]

[illegible] he ever gave, not a piece of tobacco he ever passed, not a brief word he ever spoke to one of the battered old heads who cut and slashed and [illegible] and cursed with Benedict Morgan, was forgotten then. Heavy browed, twisted, weather beaten, [illegible] gin shivered old wreck of a wrecker—they were hard men—had something to say about Delaroo. And [illegible] their hair [illegible] and their faces streaked and their shirts [illegible] and their elbows in blood, they said it—whatever it was, much or little—of Delaroo.

The picks swung, the derricks worked, and all day with the heaving and the calling they toiled, but the sun was sinking before they got to the middle of it. Then Benedict Morgan, crawling under the drivers of the hind mogul partly uncovered, edged out with a gray face; he swore he heard breathing. It was shouted to the wings of the double gang. Neighbor himself went in and [illegible] stayed to fasten a grapple to pull the engine truck off the roof of a box car that was jammed over and against the mogul stack.

The big derrick groaned as the slack drew, and the truck crashed through a tier of [illegible] and swung whirling into the clear. A giant wrecker dodged the suspended wheels and [illegible] bit a hole into the jammed roof. Through that they passed a second grapple, and presently it gave sullenly, toppled back with a crash, and the foremost axman peering into the opening saw the heart of the wreck. Bending forward, he picked up something struggling in his arms. They thought it was a man, but it was a sheep, alive and uninjured, under all the horror; that was the breathing they heard. Benedict Morgan threw the man and his burden aside and stepped himself into the gap and through. One started to follow, but the chief of the wreckers waved him back. Close by where the sheep had been freed stood Delaroo. He stood as if with ear alert, so closely did the counterfeit seem the real. So sure was the impression of life that not until Morgan, speaking to the fireman, put his hand on his shoulder did he realize that the Indian stood quite dead just where the shock had caught him in his cab.

Stumbling over the wreckage, they passed him in the silence of the sunset

Stumbling over the wreckage, they passed him from hand to hand.

from hand to hand into the open. A big fellow, pallid and scared, staggered after them, and when they laid the dead man down half fell at his side. It was Maje Sampson.

It surprised everybody the way Maje Sampson went to pieces after Delaroo was killed. The Indian was carried back to the Bend and up to Sampson's and laid out in the God forsaken parlor, but Maje wasn't any good fixing things up that time. He usually shone on like occasions. He was the comforter of the afflicted to an extraordinary degree. He gave the usual mourner no chance to let up. But now his day was as one that is darkened. When Neighbor went up next night to see about some minor matters connected with the funeral and the precedence of the various dozen orders that were to march he found Maje Sampson and Martie alone in the darkness of the parlor with the silent Delaroo.

Maje turned to the master mechanic from where Delaroo lay. "Neighbor, you might as well know it now as any time. Don't you say so, Martie? Martie, what do you say?" Martie burst into tears, but through them Neighbor caught the engineer's broken confession. "Neighbor, I'm color blind." The master mechanic sat stunned.

"True as God's word. You might as well know it now. There's the man that stood between me and the loss of my job. It's been coming on me for two years. He knew it. That's why he stayed in my cab. He stayed because I was color blind. He knowed I'd get ketched the minute a new fireman come in, Neighbor. He watched the signals. Delaroo. I'm color blind, God help me."

Maje Sampson sat down by the coffin. Martie hushed her crying. The three sat in the darkness.

"It wouldn't [illegible] wasn't f'r the family, Neighbor. The woman—and the boys. I ain't much a-carin'; you know that. If [illegible] off my job [illegible]

(Continued on page six.)