

The Operator's Story

DE MOLAY FOUR

By
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VERY able men have given their lives to the study of Monsoon's headlight, yet science, after no end of investigation, stands in its presence baffled.

The source of its illumination is believed to be understood, "he believed," because in a day when I commit myself personally to theory, whether it is a thing living or dead, whether malignant or beneficent in its influence on imperfectly understood atmospheric phenomena, I do not know. I doubt whether any man knows, except maybe Monsoon himself. I know only that on the West End, Monsoon's headlight from every view stands high, and that on an occasion it stood between Ab Monsoon and a frightful catastrophe.

There have been of late studied efforts to introduce electric headlights on the Mountain division. But there are men in the cab who look at the thing with a silent, yet distinctly distrustful, eye. While Monsoon's headlight does not work—as it has done even long before Monsoon followed it to the West End—why, they say, and really enough, take on new and theoretical substitutes?

While the discussion deepens and the faces in the Wickup, Monsoon himself is silent. Brave men are modest. Among ourselves we don't use adjectives. Where Monsoon is not necessary to put any name ahead of his name, except maybe a month on the payroll, when the accountant adds A. or Ab Monsoon, just as he happens to be for the time, Monsoon's name in itself stands for a great deal. When his engineers, men who have been in every weather and in every storm, put up their voices for Monsoon's headlight, or when talkative passengers, who servilely follow the favor of the high, speak for Monsoon, Ab Monsoon himself is silent. His light is there; let them take it as they will. If the sun should throw it out for the new arrangement Monsoon would feel that it was not the first he had gone wrong, and for neither he nor anybody else could it be.

The baby opens on Bob Duffy. Bob Duffy was what I call a big, broad, and being the oldest boy, had more of the swing anyway. When Martin came along his mother said that over thinking about Bob, she was kind of overshadowed. Bob was by clicking in the postoffice and giving mail to all the pretty girls, and sympathy for the girls was so great that after awhile he began passing out letters to them whether they were addressed to the girls or to some other else. This gradually weakened his influence with the government.

Martin began work in the telegraph office. He really learned the whole thing at there at the Bend under Callahan, who was carrying Western Union stock in his waist under a heavy leather belt. In those days, when he had no responsibility, a formidable brown hat that appeared bent on swallowing his ears. It was about the time that his trousers and eleven. No one but Slinkers ever beat Martin Duffy, covering messages, and nobody, bar Bullhead, McTerza, anybody—beat him eating pie. It was by this pie that he was able to wear the hat so long, and you may take that for my way. But I speak gladly of the pie because in the usual course of things there isn't much pie in a dispatcher's life. There is, by very large measure, more anxiety than pie, and I find the pie not to give weight to the incidents that follow, but rather to lighten them, though as Duffy has more than admitted this was not always the effect of the pie itself.

A quiet, somber little woman in a shawl and a bonnet of no special shape or size—just a shawl and a bonnet, that's all. Anyhow, the Duffy boys' mother was that way, and there's a lot more like her. I don't know what gets the fathers. Maybe very often the scrap. But there's almost always somewhere a mother. So after Martin began to make a record, to help his mother and his brother both, he spoke for Bob. Callahan didn't hesitate or jolly him, as he used to do with a good many. He thought the company could not have too many of the Duffy kind. So he said, "Yes, sure." And Bob Duffy was put at work—same thing exactly, carrying messages, reading hair destroyers and blowing his salary on pie.

But pie acts queer. Sometimes it makes a man's head solid and his heart big, and again it makes a man's head big and his heart solid. I'm not saying anything more now, except that pie certainly acts different.

Bob Duffy was taller than Martin and, I would repeat, handsomer, but I can't, because Martin had absolutely no basis of beauty to start with. He was parchmentlike and pallid from sitting night after night and night after night over a sounder. Never a sick day in his life, but always over the sounder until, sleeping or waking, resting or working, the current purred and purred through his great little head like a familiarity-taking old tomat. He could guess more off a wire than most men could catch after the whole thing had tumbled in.

So up and up ladder he went. Messenger, operator—up to assistant dispatcher, up to a regular trick dispatcher, up to the orders and signing the "J. M. C.," the letters that stood for our superintendent's name and honor; up to the trains and their movements, up to the lives, then chief, with the honor of the division all clutched in Martin Duffy's three quick right fingers on the key and his three quick left fingers on the pen at the same instant scratching orders across the clip. Talk about ambidexterity! Martin didn't know what it would be like to use one hand at a time. If Martin Duffy said right, trains went right; if he said wrong, trains went wrong. But Martin never said the wrong; he said only the right. Giddings knows; he copied for him long enough. Giddings and plenty more of them can tell all about Martin Duffy.

Bob didn't rise in the service quite so fast as Martin. He was rather for having a good time. He did more of the social act, and that pleased his mother, who on account of her bonnet-and-shawl complexion didn't achieve much that way. Martin, too, was proud of his brother, and as soon as Bob could handle a wire—which was very soon, for he learned things in no time—Martin got Callahan to put him up at Grant as operator. Bob got the place because he was Martin's brother; nothing else. He held it about two months; then he resigned and went to San Francisco. He was a restless fellow. It was Bob up and Bob down. For a year he wandered around out there, telegraphing; then he hopped up again in Medicine Bend out of a job. He wanted to go to work, and—well, Callahan—Martin's brother, you know—sent him up to Montair as night operator. Three months he worked steady as a clock; then one night the dispatchers at the Bend couldn't get Montair for two hours. It laid out No. 6 and a special with the general manager and made no end of a row.

Martin said right off he ought to go; but there was the little mother in home, silent, I expect, but pleading like. It was left largely to Martin, for the young fellow was already chief, and that was the trouble. He hated to bear down too hard, so he compromised by asking his superintendent not to fire Bob, but to set him back. They sent him up as night man to Rat River, the meanest place on the whole system. That was the summer of the Templars' conclave at San Francisco.

We worked the whole spring getting things up along the line from Omaha to the Sierras for that conclave. Engines were overhauled, rolling stock touched up, roadbed put in shape, everything shaken from end to end. Not only were the passenger records to be smashed, but beyond that a lot of our big general officers were way up Masons and meant that our line should get not merely the cream of the business, but the cream of the advertising out of the thing. The general tenor of the instructions was to nickel plate everything, from the catpaws to the target rods. For three months before the conclave date we were busy getting ready for it, and when the big day drew near for it, and when the big day drew near on which we were to undertake the moving and feeding of 6,000 people one way on one track through the mountains the cartkins smoked crosscut and the Russian section men began to oil their hair.

Callahan was superintendent under Bucks, then general manager, and Martin Duffy chief dispatcher. Neighbor, superintendent of motive power and Doubleday division master mechanic, and with everything buttoned up on the West End we went that Sunday morning on the string line to take the first of the Templar specials.

Meine Bend had the alkali pretty bad out of its eyes, and never before in its history had it appeared really gay. The old Wickup was decorated till it looked like a buck rigged for a ghost dance. Right after day-break the trains began rolling in on Harold Davis' trick. Duffy had annihilated all local freights and all through odds and evens, all stock tramps east and all westbound empties—everything that could be had suspended for that Sunday, and with it all there were still five times more trains than ever before rolled through Medicine Bend in twenty-four hours.

It was like a festival day in the mountains. Even the Indians and the squaw men turned out to see the fun. There was a crowd at the depot by 5 o'clock, when the first train rolled up the lower gorge with St. John's commandery, No. 3, from Buffalo, and the Pullmans were gay with bunting. The Medicine Bend crowd gave them an Indian yell, and in two minutes the Knights, with their scalps in their hands as a token of surrender, were tumbling out of their sleepers into the crisp dawn. They were just like schoolboys, and when Shorty Lovelace—the local curiosity who had both feet and both hands frozen off the night he got drunk with Matt Cassidy at Goose River Junction—struck up his mouth organ, "Put Me Off at Buffalo," they swayed seven dollars odd and three L-shaped checks into his hat while the crews were changing engines.

All day it was that way—train after train and ovation after ovation. The day was cool as a watermelon—August—and bright as a baby's face all through the mountains, and the Templars went up into the high passes with all the swing and noise we could raise. Harold Davis took it all morning steady from 4 a. m. at the dispatcher's key. He was used up long before noon, but he stayed, and just at 12 o'clock, while a big Templar train from Baltimore was leading its commandery in front of the Wickup after an early dinner and a big Templar band played a tingling two-step, Martin Duffy struck his dry, parchment face into the platform crowd, elbowed his way unnoticed through it, climbed the Wickup stairs, walked into the dispatcher's room and, throwing off his hat and coat, leaned over Harold Davis' shoulder and took a transfer.

Young Giddings had been sitting there in a perspiration half an hour then. He copied for Martin Duffy that day. At noon they figured to get the last Templar over the Eagle pass with the set of the sun. When Duffy took the key he never looked his face cleaner, only he was tired. Giddings could see that. The regular man had been sick a week, and Martin had been filling in. Besides that, all Saturday, the day before, he had been spiking the line—figuring what could be annulled and what couldn't, what could be run extra and what could be put into regulars. Callahan had just got married and was going out to the coast on his wedding tour in Bucks' car. He had refused to look at an order after Saturday night.

A minute after Martin Duffy sat in the conductor of the train below registered out. There was a yell pretty soon, and away went the Baltimore crowd—and they were crackers, too, those Baltimore fellows, and traveled like lords.

At 5 o'clock in the evening the trains in the West division were moving just like clocks on the hour and the half—thirty minutes, thirty minutes, thirty minutes—and, as far as young Giddings could see, Duffy, after five booming hours, was fresher than when he took the chair. The little dispatcher's capacity for work was something enormous. It wasn't till after supper time, with the worst of the figuring behind him and in the letting down of the anxiety, that Martin began to look older, and his dry Indian hair began to crawl over his forehead. By that time his eyes had lost their snap, and when he mentioned Giddings to the key and got up to walk up and down the hall in the breeze he looked like a wilted potato vine. His last batch of orders was only a little one compared with those that had gone before, but with the changes to the different crews they read about like this:

Telegraphic Train Order No. 65, Mountain Division, Aug. 5, 1902. Superintendent's Office, Aug. 5, 1902. For Medicine Bend to C and E of Engines 654, 735, 819, 125 and 126. Engines 654, 735, 819 and 125 will run as four specials, Medicine Bend to Bear Dance. Engine 126 will double head Special 326 to summit of Eagle pass. First No. 80, Engine 179, will run two hours thirty minutes late Bear Dance to Medicine Bend. Second No. 80, Engine 264, will run three hours and fifteen minutes late Bear Dance to Medicine Bend. Third No. 80, Engine 210, will run four hours and thirty minutes late Bear Dance to Medicine Bend. J. M. C.

When young Giddings sat in, the sun was dropping between the Tetons. In the yard the car cleaners were polishing the plates on Bucks' private car and the darky cook was pulling chickens out of the refrigerator. Duffy had thirteen conclaves moving smoothly on the middle trick. The final one was due, and the hostlers were steaming down with the double header to pull it over the pass. This, the last of the commandery trains, was to bring De Molay commandery, No. 4, of Pittsburg, and the orders were to couple Bucks' car on to it for the run west. De Molay—and everybody had notice—was Bucks' old commandery back in Pennsylvania, and he was going to the end of the division that night with the cronies of his youth. Little fellows they were in railroading when he rode the goat with them, but now mostly, like him, big fellows. Half a dozen old salts had been pounding ahead at him all day over the wire. They were to join him and Mr. and Mrs. Callahan for supper in the private car, and the yellow elder lay on the thin shaved bed and the mountain grouse curled on the grill

irons when De Molay Four, Pittsburg, pulled into Medicine Bend. We had seen a good many swell trains that day, the swiftest that ever pounded our fishplates, Pullmans solid, and the finest kind of people, Boston, Washington, New York, Philadelphia sent some pretty gorgeous trains. But with at least half the town on the platform, when De Molay Four roared in it took their breath so they couldn't yell till the Sir Knights began pouring from the vestibules and gave Medicine Bend their own lordly cheer.

Bucks' old gang spied him. Modestly back under the portico he stood, near the ticket window, and they broke through at him solid. They pulled him and hauled him and mauled him and passed him from hand to hand. They stood him on his head and on his hands and on his feet again, and told him of something they wanted and wanted right off.

Bucks looked the least bit uncertain as he considered the opening request. It wasn't much in some ways, what they asked; in other ways it was a good deal. He laughed and bantered and joked as long as they would stand it. Then he called up to Martin Duffy, who was leaning out the dispatchers' window, "We'll see how he talks," laughed Bucks in his great big way. "But, boys, it's up to the chief. I'm not in it on the orders, you know. Martin," he called as Duffy bent his head, "they want fifteen minutes here to stretch their legs. Say they've been tramped in the alkali all day. Can you do anything for the boys?"

The boys! Big fellows in fests, Shriner style, and slim fellows in duck, sailor style, and bowlegged fellows in chevrot, any old style. Chaps in white flannel and chaps in gray and chaps in blue. Turkish whiskers and Key West cigars and crasaders' togs—and, between them, Bucks, his head most of the time in chimney.

You know about what it meant and about how it went; how it had to go. What could Martin say to the man who had made him all he was and who stood, now a boy again, among the boys of his boyhood and asked for fifteen minutes, a quarter of an hour, for De Molay Four? It threw the little chief completely off his schedules; just fifteen minutes was more than enough to do that. All the work was done, the anxiety nearly past, Martin had risen to rest his thumping head. But fifteen minutes; once in a lifetime—Bucks asking it.

Duffy turned to big Jack Moore standing at his side ready to pull De Molay over the pass, and spoke him low. Jack nodded, everything that stuck with other engineers. Martin in his shirt sleeves leaned out the window and, looking down on the turbulent and turbulent mob, spoke so Bucks could hear.

"What is it?" demanded the most puissant commander of De Molay excitedly. "What does he say, Bucks?" "What says the slave?" growled a second formidable crusader. "Out with it!"

"All we want is fifteen minutes." "You wouldn't turn us down on fifteen minutes this far from an oasis, would you, Bucks?" protested a glass eyed Shriner.

Bucks looked around royally. "Fifteen minutes?" he drawled. "What's a quarter of an hour in a lifetime, Jackman, on the last oasis? Take off your clothes, you fellows, and take half an hour. Now will you be good?"

De Molay put up a Templar yell. They always get the good things of life, those Pittsburg men; things other fellows couldn't begin to get. They passed the word through the sleepers, and the women began pouring from the vestibules. In two quick minutes out came the Duquesne hand in red ponpoms, duck trousers and military jackets, white corded with black. The crowd broke, the band marched down the platform and, striking up the "Washington Post," opened ranks on the grass plot above the Wickup to receive the De Molay guard. One hundred Knights Templars in fatigue debouched into a bit of a park and in the purple of the sunset gave a commandery drill to the honor of Bucks—Bucks and the West End.

It was Sunday night and still as August could make it. The battalion, moving silent and mobile as a streamer over the grass, marched, deployed and rested. They broke, to the clear cut music, into crosses and squares and crescents and stars until small boys went cross eyed, and wheeling at last on the line they saluted Bucks, himself a past grand commander, and the railroad men yelled.

Meantime the general manager's private car had been pisted on the tail end of De Molay Four, and a pusher edging up stuck its nose into the rear vestibule. On the head end Jack Moore and Oyster were backing down on the olive green string with the two smoothest moguls on the division. Bucks and Neighbor had held back everything good all day for De Molay Four down to engines and runners and conductor. Pat Francis carried the punch, and the little chief sat again in the dispatchers' chair for De Molay Four.

And while the lovely women strolled in the cool of the evening and the odor of mountain sweetness, and the guard drilled and the band played, the chief knitted his brows over his train sheet. It looked now, rearranged, reordered, and adjusted and reorganized, as if a Gila monster had crawled over it without wiping his feet, and when De Molay Four began to pull out, with Moore and Oyster on the throttles and old John Parker in the baggage, where he had absolutely nothing to do but drink cigars and smoke champagne, and Pat Francis in the aisles, and Bucks, with Mr. and Mrs. Callahan and their crowd, in private No. 12—there was that much shouting and tooting and waving that Martin Duffy simply couldn't think for a few seconds, yet he held them all

for life or for death, every last one, in the curve of his fingers.

So they stood ready in the gorge while Duffy studied wearily how to handle first, second and third eighty against them.

First, second and third eighty! If they could only have been wiped off the face of the rails as easy as they might have been wiped off a train sheet! But there they were, three sections, and big ones, of the California fast freight—high class stuff for Chicago and New York that couldn't be held or laid out that Sunday, not for a dozen conclaves. All day first, second and third eighty had been feeling their way east through the mountains, trying to dodge the swell commanderies rolling by, impudent as pay cars, but all the final plans to keep them out of everybody's way, out of the way of fat and turban and chapane and Greek crosses and crimson splashed sleepers, were now dashed by thirty minutes at Medicine Bend for De Molay Four.

Order after order went from under his hand. New meeting points for first, second and third eighty and De Molay Four, otherwise Special 326. Pat Francis snatched the tissues from Duffy's hand, and after the best tation had dispersed among their wives and sisters and among the sisters of the other fellow, after the pomped chairs had chucked the trombones and cymbals and drums at old John Parker's shins, after the last alroek had been tested and the last huzzard crusader thrown forcibly aboard by the protest guard, the double header tooted "Out!" and with the flutter of an ocean liner De Molay Four pulled up the gorge.

The orders buttoned in the reefers gave De Molay a free sweep to Elcho, and Jack Moore and Oyster were the men to take it good and hard. Moreover, there was glory aboard. Pennsylvania nob, way up railroad men, waiting to see what for motive power we had in the woolly west, how we climbed mountains and skirted canyon walls and crawled down 2 and 3 per cent grades. Then with Bucks himself in the private car what wonder they let her out and swung De Molay through the gorge as maybe you've seen a particularly buoyant kite snake its tail out of the grass and drag it careening skyward. When they slowed for Elcho at nightfall, past first and second eighty, and Bucks named the mileage, the Penns refused to believe it for the hour's run. But, fast as they had sped along the iron rail, Martin Duffy's work had sped ahead of them, and this order was waiting:

Telegraphic Train Order No. 79. C and E Third No. 80, Rat River. Third No. 80, Engine 210, and Special 326 will meet at Rock Point. J. M. C.

With this meeting point made it would be pretty much over in the dispatchers' office. Martin Duffy pushed his sawtooth back for the last time, and leaving young Giddings to get the last O. K.'s and the last complete on his trick, got out of the chair.

It had been a tremendous day for Giddings, a tremendous day. Thirty-two specials on the dispatchers, and Giddings copying for the chief. He sat down after Duffy, filled with a riotous importance because it was now in effect all up to Giddings personally—at

least until Barnes Tracy should presently kick him out of the seat of honor for the night trick. Mr. Giddings sat down and waited for the signature of the orders.

Very soon Pat Francis dropped off De Molay Four, slowing at Elcho, ran straight to the operator for his order, signed it, and at once Order 79 was throbbing back to young Giddings at Medicine Bend. It was precisely 7.54 p. m. when Giddings gave back the complete, and at 7.55 Elcho reported Special 326 "out," all just like clockwork. What a head Martin Duffy has, thought young Giddings, and behold, all the complicated everlasting head-work of the trick and the day and of the West End and its honor was now in the signature of third eighty at Rat River. Just third eighty's signature for the Rock Point meeting, and the biggest job ever tackled by a single track road in America. Giddings thought, was done, and well done.

So the ambitious Giddings by means of a pocket mirror inspected a threatening phantasm on the end of his chubby

nose, painting the glass skillfully so Barnes Tracy couldn't see it even if he did interrupt his eruption, and waited for Bob Duffy, the Rat River nightman, to come back at him with third eighty's signature. Under Giddings' eye as he sat ticked Martin Duffy's chronometer, the watch that split the seconds and chimed the quarters and stopped and started so dependably and ran to a second a month—the watch that Bucks, who never did things by halves, had given little Martin Duffy with the order that made him chief. It lay at Giddings' fingers, and the minute hand wiped from the enameled dial 7 o'clock fifty-five, fifty-six, seven, eight—nine. Young Giddings turned to his order book and inspected his entries like a methodical bookkeeper, and Martin Duffy's chronometer chimed the four-quarter, 8 o'clock. One entry he had scribble to make. Book in hand, he called Rat River.

"Get third eighty's signature to Order 79 and hurry them out," he tapped impatiently at too loudly.

There was a wait. Giddings lighted his pipe—the pipe Callahan always lighted to catch all the perfume and blowing the first cloud away wearily, as Callahan always did wearily. Then he twirled the match meditatively and listened and got suddenly this from Bob Duffy, at Rat River: "I forgot Order 79," came Bob Duffy's message. "I let third eighty go without it. They left here at 7.50—fifty something, Giddings never heard fifty what. The match went into the ink, the pipe into the water pail, and Giddings, before Bob Duffy finished, like a drowning man, was calling Elcho with the life and death, the 10 call.

"Hold Special 326!" he cried over the wire the instant Elcho replied.

But Elcho, steadily, answered this: "Special—326—left—here—7.55."

Giddings, with both hands on the table, raised up like a drunken man. The West End was against it. Third eighty in the open and going against the De Molay Four! Bucks, Callahan, blind-siding everybody—and Rock Point a blind side that no word from anybody on earth could reach ahead of third eighty. Giddings sprang to the open window and shouted to anybody and everybody to call Martin Duffy. But Martin Duffy spoke behind him.

"What do you want?" he asked. It came terribly quick on Giddings as he turned.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Martin, looking into the boy's face. "Speak, can't you? What's the matter, Giddings?"

"Bob forgot Order 79 and let third eighty go without it—and Special 326 is out of Elcho," choked Giddings.

"What?"

"Bob at—Rat River—gave third eighty a clearance without the Order 79."

Martin Duffy sprang straight up in the air. Once he shut his lifted hands; once he looked at Giddings, staggering again through the frightful news, then he dropped into the chair, looked wildly around, seized his key like a hunted man, stared at his train sheet, grabbed the order book and listened to Giddings cutting off one hope after another of stopping Special 326. His fingers set mechanically, and he made the Rat River call; but Rat River was silent. With Barnes Tracy utopian to behind on the instant of trouble and young Giddings shaking like a leaf, the chief called Rat River. Then he called Elcho, asked for Special 326, and Elcho again repeated steadily:

"Special—326—left—here—on—order—79—at—7.55 p. m."

Martin Duffy bent before the message, young Giddings, who had been whispering to Tracy, dropped on a stool and covered his face.

"Don't cry, Giddings." It was Duffy who spoke, dry and parched his voice. "It's nothing you could help." He looked around and saw Tracy at his elbow. "Barnes," he said, but he tried twice before his voice would carry. "Barnes—they will meet in the Cinnamon cut. Giddings told you? Bob forgot—forgot my order. Run, Giddings, for Benedict Morgan and Doubleday and Carhart—quick!"

Giddings ran, the Rat River call echoing again down the hall behind him. Rat River was closest to Rock Point—would get the first news of the wreck, and Martin Duffy was calling his recent brother at the River, but the River was silent.

Doubleday and the company surgeon, Dr. Carhart, rushed into the room almost together. Then came with a storm the wrecking boss, Benedict Morgan. It was only an evil hour that brought Benedict Morgan into the dispatcher's office. Stopped and silent, Martin Duffy, holding the chair, was calling Rat River. Carhart watched him just a moment, then he took Barnes Tracy aside and whispered, and, going back, bent over Duffy. The chief pulled himself up.

"Let Tracy take the key," reported the doctor. "Get away from the table a minute, Martin. It may not be as bad as you think."

Duffy, looking into the surgeon's face, put his hand on his arm. "It's the De Molay train, the Special 326, with Bucks' car, double headed. Oh, my God, I can't stop them. Doctor, they will meet!"

Carhart unfastened the fingers on his arm. "Come away a minute. Let Tracy have the key," he urged. "A head ender, eh?" croaked Benedict Morgan from the counter, and with a frightful oath, "A head ender!"

"Shut up, you brute!" hissed Carhart. Duffy's hands were creeping queerly up the sides of his head.

"Sure," growled Benedict Morgan loweringly, "sure shut up. Of course shut up."

Carhart was a quick man. He started for the wreck, but Duffy, springing, stopped him. "For God's sake keep cool, everybody," he exclaimed piteously. "There was no one else to talk to—the wrecking boss was

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"Let Tracy take the key."