Ten Years' Trial

By Gen. CHARLES KING

It was but a few minutes after 2 when, through the Western Union, the stranger received the following dispatch:

Major Melville, U. S. A., Brentwood:
Nathan reports serious obstacles. Strikers opposing movement of train every mile. He has only 100 men. Four companies state militia go out by M. V. at once and may get first to Red Water gorge. The two commands should act in concert. Cacos.

The major replaced the dispatch in its envelope, stowed the packet in an inner pocket and walked slowly from the office into the slanting sunshine without. The street was filled with men sauntering up and down or gathered in knots at the corners. It was a still, wintry afternoon, though but little snow as yet had fallen east of the mountains. Melville noted that all eyes were on him, but not in open hostility. Whatever the hands might have in store for the officials of the road or for trainloads of troops, their rancor took no shape against a single man, apparently, even actually, unarmed. Melville carried neither flask nor pistol. He was reflecting on the miscarriage of the plans for the concentration of troops so far as Brentwood was concerned and wondering by what evil chance Nathan had been chosen to command the detachment ordered thither from the south. It was odd to think of light artillery men being so employed at any time, but these were the economical days. Companies, batteries and "troops" could rarely muster more than 30 men for duty. Pawnee's garrison had been split up and sent to three or four important points, and, being senior in date of commission to the two cavalry captains sent with it, Nathan had been given the lead, and Nathan looked anything but blissful when "Old Cat" ordered him off. "Leave enough men to care for your barracks, stables and gun sheds," said he, "draw 30 carbines from the cavalry, let your men leave their sabers and go with carbine and revolver, then you'll be uniform with the troopers." "Cat" thought that when a soldier was uniform with a trooper he couldn't be better off; Nathan thought he couldn't be worse. Next to an Indian Nathan hated a mob. Two hours from the time the orders reached him the command was ready to go, but not so Nathan. Two days from the time they started they were still two days' march from Brentwood, and their train met no detention whatever until it got well into northern Nebraska. Then it was found so easy to induce the commanding officer to believe that the track was all torn up just ahead or that strikers had blown up or burned down bridges that sympathizers with the wageworkers kept up the practice at every station, and Nathan was sending dispatch after dispatch to Omaha the tidings of which, when it all came to be investigated, proved utterly untrue, as the general held them to be at the time, and naturally he grew indignant and nervous. While most of the troops had been hurried to Chicago and the Mississippi crossings, the garrisons west of Omaha had been ordered to rendezvous there or go direct to other designated points in the northwest. Brentwood was making no great trouble, was the first report. Two or three companies of state militia were all that was needed, according to the original views of the authorities, and they were sent there, with the result that jeering telegrams came back to the magnates, the marshals and the military authorities called into action. All of a sudden people woke up to the realization that Brentwood was a railroad town and the whole community practically in sympathy with the operatives. All of a sudden the news came flashing over the wires that Captain Nathan, with 100 men from Fort Pawnee, had been stoned and compelled to retire when his command was detrained at Gunnison, and, though officers and men declared their readiness to push ahead afoot, their cautious captain forbade any man to push a foot ahead until he could again communicate by wire with department headquarters.

"What did I tell you?" growled the veteran Indian fighter, now taking his first turn of any consequence against the mob. "You've heard the old saying, 'An army of sheep led by a lion can whip an army of lions led by a sheep,' and that's what's side tracked now at Gunnison."

And at the very moment that Nathan was holding back there, alarmed and irresolute, with 100 fighting men ready for any duty and chafing at their commander's inaction, another troop train came steaming into the station. Two alert, clear eyed, sturdy men in civilian dress sprang from the engine cab, and at sight of the foremost the men who had so easily daunted the commanding officer of the first train seemed to slink away. He dived into the telegraph office, spent a few minutes in sending and receiving dispatches, and in that few minutes the platform swarmed with a laughing, shouting, shoving, altogether hilarious crowd of young fellows in loose, flapping blue blouses and greatcoats, eagerly seeking something—anything to eat or drink. Aboard the first train, far up ahead, was grim silence. Not a soldier showed himself outside the cars. Orders were orders. Around this second train it seemed as though, officers and men in a bunch, the battalion of militia had turned out for a frolic. It didn't last long. A grizzled, sharp featured little man in a major's uniform swung off the rearmost car and came up the track three ties to the stride, his eyes snapping. So were his words when he got to the platform. He wasted none till within hail. "Captain Clark, get your men aboard your car instantly. Captain Geisenheimer, this is the second time I've spoken to you. Go to the rear car in arrest! Lieutenant Meinecke, take command of the company and the company to the car. I told you supper would be ready for all hands at 5 o'clock. It's only 4. Back to the train, every mother's son of you! Back!" And, somewhat crestfallen, somewhat awed and abashed, yet realizing that the little major "meant business," back they went, still keeping up the semblance of jocularity by horseplay and racing. Then out came the first of the newly arrived civilians, followed by the younger, a silent man.

"All serene for ten miles, anyhow, major, but you might put four of your best men on the pilot and tender. We will be there too. All right, Mac!" he sang out to the engineer. "We push ahead as soon as we get this gang aboard. Look at the regulars' train up the track. They're not straggling all over creation!"

"No, and they ain't gittin ahead any too fast either," snickered the station agent. "It's taken 'em two hours to come 20 miles, and now the cap's waitin for orders."

"Then, by gad, that gives us the right of way and the lead," was the gleeful answer. "We go on at once. How's that for high, major? Better come forward to the baggage car."

Then pandemonium broke loose on the rear troop train. The words went from car to car like wildfire that the regulars were side tracked ahead, and "the boys," as they called themselves, would have the lead. From every door and window one head at least and sometimes two protruded as the engine gathered way and presently rolled past the heavier but shorter train at the water tank. A chorus of yells of rejoicing, chaff and fun arose from the throats of 300 lively young westerners on their first campaign. Silent, somber faces looked out at them from the other windows, though occasionally some light hearted Irishman would fling back a laughing answer. Three officers stood on the rear platform of the regular train intently eying the oncoming engine. The guardsmen on the pilot were hanging to their rifles with one hand and the rail with the other. The tender seemed bristling with bluecoats. The keen, bright eyed face of the railway official was peering forth from the fireman's side of the cab, and he waved his hand to the trio. None knew him, but all looked and saw, peering over his shoulder, another face. It was only an instant's glimpse, but a flash of recognition leaped into the eyes of the nearmost. He leaned forward from the step and gazed after them as they rushed by, regardless of the jocular hails of the crowd in the cars, then, as the engine was shut from view, drew back on the platform once more.

"Whom did I see?" he repeated in reply to a question asked by Mr. Torrance. "Eric Langdon or his ghost!"

CHAPTER VI.

Midway up the Red Water gorge and ten miles southeast of Brentwood there comes tumbling and foaming down from the north a stream that is little more than a big brook eight months of the year, but is advertised all the year round as one of the scenic attractions of the Seattle road, much to the disgust of the general passenger and ticket agent of the Big Horn, whose right of way is, in his opinion, twice invaded, first by the stream itself and then by the Seattle. Following the north bank of the Red Water, the Big Horn had to encounter all the engineering difficulty of laying out a stable roadway across the mouth of this little tributary that in the months of melting snows became a boiling torrent and the expense of constructing a massive bridge, while the spectacular effect was lost on its passengers because that right of way was scooped out at the base of steep, rocky cliffs that shut entirely the view of the cascade and rapids until the car was directly under them and was then too close to get the best effect, whereas from the opposite bank the passengers of the Seattle line, sweeping round a fine curve, concave to the north, were treated to a capital view not only of the foaming, spray tossing little cataract and the leaping rapids back of and above the Big Horn bridge, but of the fine bridge itself and the really magnificent gorge of the Red Water between the lines. Big Horn people thought it rough that the Seattle should so profit by what was practically their property. Some of the directors advocated boarding up the whole north side of their steel truss, thus hiding the sight from Seattle's eyes. But, said others, that would spoil it for our own patrons, besides making it dangerous for the bridge, for whenever a blizzard did sweep from the north—a rare occurrence near Brentwood—it came for all it was worth down that selfsame crossent gulch and beat in fury against the bridge at its foot. The massive stone piers were of double strength, and the stanch truss of tempered steel, that would stand any vertical strain the possibilities of railroading could heap upon it, had twice been perceptibly shifted by this lateral pressure. It was for this reason that a siding had been let into the bank for a quarter of a mile west of the bridge, and a train of flat cars, heavily laden with railway iron, was kept there until certain guys and anchors could be made and set and the bridge stiffened laterally—a long operation. The object was to run those cars out on the bridge, set the brakes and by this vast increase of weight so add to its stability as to bid defiance when the elements threatened. The repairs had been made and that auxiliary train removed before the management was called on to resist a storm of far greater magnitude and very different character. But the siding was still there. "It may come in handy some day," said the division superintendent, and the day appeared to have come. Old hands minded them of that old train, and some flat cars were "loaded up." The American is never satisfied with the powers of his own verbs—to add, to load, to open, to saddle and others of that ilk. He must, as he conceives, strengthen each by the superposition of "up," despite the fact that when correctly done there is no difference in the result of adding up or adding down. The schoolboy still talks of adding up a column, the section boss "loads up" his teams, the railway "opens up" the new region, the trooper "saddles up" his steed, and the newspaper sanctions and follows the example. Old hands knew it wouldn't do to hinder the mail trains, so the bridge was not destroyed or even blocked against them, but on the rumor that troops were coming conservative fellows among the strikers ran those iron laden cars down grade to the siding and there held them in readiness to be shoved out on the bridge the moment it was known the dreaded train had started from Gunnison, 20 miles to the east. One by one the heavy cars were then shoved across the bridge until the east approach and the span itself were covered. Then the more determined took things in their hands, also picks, crowbars and shovels, and so undermined the track at a point some 20 yards west of the bridge foundation that, should the troops succeed in reaching the bridge and then attempt to move the obstructing flats westward out of the way, their weight would break through the weakened roadbed and pile up a barricade of tangled rails and ruined flat cars that, without damage to either engine or troop train, would effectually block their passage, since men and tools and the wrecking train would be needed to clear the track, and as matters stood on this 28th of November these were not to be had.

And now at 4:30 in the wintry gloaming, silent save for occasional muttering, shivering a bit from mingled cold and excitement, a hundred or more of the hands, backed by twice their number of "toughs" and tramps, were gathered about the bluffs at Bridge siding, listening with all their ears for the first sound of the coming train. The rush of the Red Water over its rocky bed in the gorge below was the only sound that steadily bore upon the ear. Some few of the men, panting not a little, were laboring up the steep with hats or hands full of rocks. Over on the opposite—the southern—shore the concave curve of the Seattle was lined for a third of a mile with sympathizing operatives of the rival road, and for a time shouts of encouragement to each other and defiance to the management had echoed from bank to bank. Now, however, the gravity of the situation weighed upon the leaders, and in the mournful twilight the consciousness that they were "up ag'in the government," as several expressed it, caused some of the older men, who had gone through a harder tussle to utter defeat in 1877, to draw aside and confer together in cautious tones. From mere bravado an uncouth looking fellow began climbing the telegraph pole west of the bridge, and the applause of certain among the tramp element, at other times the natural enemy of the trainhands, attracted the attention of the leaders on the bluff. Instantly the query was bellowed from above:

"Hold on! What are you at?"

"Cuttin de wire, of course," was the shouted answer, and an unkempt face peered upward through the dim twilight.

"Let it alone, you fool! We're runnin the telegraph!" And a down spinning "dornick," sent by no reluctant hand, skimmed so close to the fuzzy head that, amid jeers of derision now, the would be wire clipper slid back to earth and skulked in among his cronies in the shadow of the bluff.

Barely 200 yards away eastward, across the deep rocky gulch, two men, muffled in overcoats and fur caps, had just alighted from a buggy. One, standing at the horse's head, nodded appreciatively.

"Hear that, major?" he asked. "They have not lost their senses, anyhow. I'll join you quick as I have blanketed and tethered the horse."

Silently the other bowed and, still standing at the edge of the little patch of firs that crowned the height, took from his pocket a small binocular, carefully studied the groups across the gulch to the west and then swept the line of the Seattle across the Red Water. Those on level with himself were in black silhouette against the pallid western sky; those down across the Red Water were but dimly visible, for the sun was now behind a bank of cloud at the horizon, and it was nearly 5 o'clock. Voices and jeers rising from the foot of the bluff where ran the line of the Big Horn told that many men were still there, but they could not be distinguished. Observant of his duty, Melville had notified the sheriff of the new complication, and together they had driven out of Brentwood by a northeastern road until well away from town and then, taking the first turn to the east, had swept round over the hard, smooth prairie highways and had finally come down along the east bank of the brook well out of sight of the strikers at the bridge, reaching their lookout in good time and without detection. Further tidings had come before their start to the effect that Mr. Channing, the energetic manager, was aboard the train bearing the militia boys. This could only mean that the situation to the east of the Missouri was now so far improved that the keenest officials were giving their main effort to the west. Even before the major had completed his calm, methodical survey of the situation he was rejoined by the sheriff. It was then so near darkness that the stars were peeping in the eastward sky, and over across the rushing Red Water the glow of a little fire started by some of the Seattle crowd lighted the rocky face of the railway cut and threw a gleam upon the waters.

And still no sign of the expected train. "Feelin her way," said the sheriff. "Dasn't take any chances." A spike or two withdrawn, a fishplate removed on any one of the half dozen sharp curves along the gorge, would shoot the engine over the bank and into the boiling waters, with car after car pitching atop of it. "Reckon 'twill be another hour before it gets here," concluded he.

Melville made no reply. He was watching a little light swinging like the lantern of a trainhand over on the southern shore and high up on a projecting point half a mile to the southeast. A moment earlier no light was there. Now it was swinging like a pendulum firefly swiftly to and fro. There was instant excitement among the strikers across the Red Water and over against them where the Big Horn leaders seemed to have gathered. "Comin sure as death!" whispered the sheriff, and together he and the major strode swiftly to the edge of the cliff overlooking the single track at its base.

Away down the Red Water a faint rumble and the pant of a laboring engine could just be heard above the rush of the stream, and presently the edge of a glowing disk came steadily into view; then the full glare of a headlight, which pointed an instant or two toward the opposite shore, swung across the seething rapids, dived into and under the bluff on the north side and disappeared from view. Behind it, snakelike, trailed the dim line of glowworm lights of the troop cars, and then they, too, were swallowed up in darkness.

"Runnin keerful," muttered the sheriff. "They know 'nuff not to come head on and full speed. She'll pull up somewhere down here and send forward to smell the bridge."

In silence and suspense they waited. All voices were hushed along the rocky banks. For a few minutes even the panting of the engine could not be heard as the train burrowed through a deep cutting. Then, louder, clearer, nearer than before, it sounded on the night, and a confused murmur of voices rose along the steeps. Angered and desperate as they were, few of the railway men could bear the thought of that train, freighted with human life, rushing on to destruction. A light as of a lantern shot suddenly into view on the opposite bank. Somebody at the same instant, lantern swinging, darted down the bluff on the Big Horn side. A howl of rebuke and menace rose from the gang of tramps, a volley of stones and coal chunks shattered the glass and stunned the bearer, and then, almost as though in relief and rejoicing, a shout went up across the stream from which side the train was now in plain view. Above the mingled roar of waters and voices, sharp and clear, could be heard the hiss of escaping steam. The engineer had shut off. The long train was slowing down, and presently, 400 yards away from the bridge, it settled to a crawl and soon came to a full stop. Bending over the brink, Melville and the sheriff could see some half a dozen lanterns dancing briskly up the curving track and presently clustered about a single spot. They had come upon the east end of the obstructing cars. Then the sheriff's voice was heard on the gathering night.

"Below there! Can you hear me distinctly?"

"Aye, aye!" was the answer after a moment's delay.

"Then don't attempt to send men across yet. There's a mob waiting there. Major Melville wants to see the gentleman in charge."

Silence one moment, and then uprose a voice from below, at sound of which Melville perceptibly started and bent more eagerly forward. It rang out on the night deep and resonant, in marked contrast to the "whang" of the westerner's official tone.

To be continued

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