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Continued from page 2

sheer force of habit, he was all enthralled. He had pleasant visions of the shops running overtime and everybody satisfied and happy. It made no difference to him that he would not be there to share in the general prosperity. With the start he had given it, the future of the Huckleberry would be assured. He decided he had better say nothing to Curtice about South America.

The upshot of this meeting was that he stuck to Curtice with a genial devotion that made him wax in his hands. They spent two days together inspecting paintless and tattered day coaches, and on the third day Dan strolled from his friend's office buttoning his coat on a contract that would mean many thousands of dollars for Antioch. It was altogether his most brilliant achievement. He felt that there only remained for him to turn the Huckleberry over to Holloway and leave the country. He had done well by it.

Dan had been in Chicago about three weeks, when at last Holloway returned, and he proved as limp as Cornish had said he would be in a crisis. He was inclined to be critical, too, and seemed astonished that Oakley had been waiting in Chicago to see him. He experienced a convenient lapse of memory when the latter mentioned his telegram.

"I can't accept your resignation," he said, frowning nervously among the papers on his desk. "I didn't put you at Antioch. That was General Cornish's own idea, and I don't know what he'll think."

"It has got past the point where I care what he thinks," retorted Dan curtly. "You must send some one else there to take hold."

"Why didn't you cable him instead of writing me?" fretfully. "I don't know what he will want, only it's pretty certain to be the very thing I shan't think of."

"I would have cabled him if I had considered it necessary, but it never occurred to me that my resignation would not be agreed to on the spot, as my presence in Antioch only widens the breach and increases the difficulty of a settlement with the men."

"Whom did you leave in charge?" inquired Holloway.

"Holt."

"Who's he?"

"He's Kerr's assistant," Dan explained.

"Why didn't you leave Kerr in charge?" demanded the vice president.

"I laid him off," said Dan in a tone of exasperation, and then he added, to forestall more questions: "He was in sympathy with the men, and he hadn't the sense to keep it to himself. I couldn't be bothered with him, so I got rid of him."

"Well, I must say you have made a frightful mess of the whole business, Oakley, but I told General Cornish from the first that you hadn't the training for the position."

Dan turned very red in the face at this, but he let it pass.

"It's too bad," murmured Holloway, still fingering the letters on the desk.

"Since you are in doubt, why don't you cable General Cornish for instructions, or, if there is a reason why you don't care to, it is not too late for me to cable," said Dan.

This proposal did not please Holloway at all, but he was unwilling to admit that he feared Cornish's displeasure, which, where he was concerned, usually took the form of present silence and a subsequent sarcasm that dealt with the faulty quality of his judgment. The sarcasm might come six months after it had been inspired, but it was certain to come sooner or later and to be followed by a bad half hour, which Cornish devoted to past mistakes. Indeed, Cornish's attitude toward him had become through long association one of chronic criticism, and he was certain to be unpleasantly affected both by what he did and by what he left undone.

"Why don't you wait until the general returns from England? That's not

disagreeable.

"If you are so sure of this, why don't you accept it?" retorted Dan.

"I have no one to appoint in your place."

"What's wrong with Holt? He'll do temporarily."

"I couldn't feel positive of his being satisfactory to General Cornish. He's a very young man, ain't he?"

"Yes, I suppose you'd call him a young man, but he has been with the road for a long time and has a pretty level head. I have found him very trustworthy."

"I would have much greater confidence in Kerr. He's quiet and conservative, and he's had an excellent training with us."

"Well, then, you can get him. He is doing nothing and will be glad to come."

"But you have probably succeeded in antagonizing him."

"I hope so," with sudden cheerfulness. "It was a hardship not to be able to give him a sound thrashing. That's what he deserved."

Holloway looked shocked. The young man was displaying a recklessness of temper which was most unseemly and entirely unexpected.

"I guess it will be well for you to think it over, Oakley, before you conclude to break with General Cornish. To go now will be rather shabby of you, and you owe him fair treatment. Just remember it was those reforms of yours that started the strike, in the first place. I know—I know. What you did you did with his approval. The men are peaceable enough, ain't they?" and he glared at Oakley with mingled disfavor and weariness.

"Anybody can handle them but me."

"It won't be long until they are begging you to open the shops. They will be mighty sick of the trouble they've shouldered when their money is all gone."

"They will never come to me for that, Mr. Holloway," said Dan. "I think they would, one and all, rather starve than recognize my position."

"They'll have to. We'll make them. We mustn't let them think we are weakening."

"You don't appreciate the feeling of intense hostility they have for me."

"Of course the murder of that man—what was his name?"

"Ryder, you mean?"

"Was unfortunate. I don't wonder you have some feeling about going back."

Dan smiled sadly.

The vice president was wonderfully moderate in his choice of words. He added: "But it is really best for the interest of those concerned that you should go and do what you can to bring about a settlement."

"It would be the sheerest idiocy for me to attempt it. The town may go hungry from now to the end of its days, but it won't have me at any price."

"I always told Cornish he should sell the road the first opportunity he got. He had the chance once and you talked him out of it. Now you don't want to stand by the situation."

"I do," said Oakley, rising. "I want to see an understanding reached with the men, and I am going to do what I can to help along. You will please to consider that I have resigned. I don't for the life of me see how you can expect me to show my face in Antioch." And with that he stalked from the place. He was thoroughly angry. He heard Holloway call after him:

"I won't accept your resignation. You'll have to wait until you see Cornish."

Dan strode out into the street, not knowing what he would do. He was disheartened and exasperated at the stand Holloway had taken.

Presently his anger moderated and his pace slackened. He had been quite oblivious to what was passing about him, and now for the first time, above the rattle of carts and trucks, he heard the newsboys shrilly calling an extra.

He caught the words, "All about the big forest fire!" repeated over and over again.

He bought a paper and opened it idly, but a double-headed headline arrested his attention. It was a brief special from Brookhorn Junction. He read it with feverish interest. Antioch was threatened with complete destruction by the forest fire, which for several weeks had been raging in the northern part of the state. All traffic was suspended, and the exact condition could only be guessed at, but there had been repeated calls for help. The neighboring towns had responded to these appeals by sending fire engines and hose, which were still waiting at Brookhorn Junction to go through. Oakley knew that the long drought had so diminished the available water supply that in an emergency of this kind Antioch must depend on the river.

The town derived its regular water supply from a standpoint fed from a small reservoir. In ordinary seasons and under ordinary circumstances the force was sufficient to meet all needs, but on an occasion such as the present the equipment of the local fire department, consisting of two hose carts and a single old-fashioned hand engine, would be quite useless.

Oakley's hands shook as they clutched the paper. He forgot his own troubles, all in an instant he was alive to the danger that threatened Antioch. She was a prisoner in the menaced town, in the very center of an impending tragedy. The thought of her possible peril sent the blood surging away from his heart.

Ten minutes later Dan again presented himself to Holloway. His face had lost its former look of dogged determination. It had become even and placid with a sudden anxiety.

"It's all right, Mr. Holloway," he

cried as he entered the office. "You needn't bother about my resignation. I'll take the first train for Antioch. Have you seen this?" and he held out the crumpled page he had just torn from his newspaper.

Holloway glanced up in astonishment at this unlooked for change of heart.

"I thought you'd conclude it was no way to treat General Cornish," he said.

"Hang Cornish! It's not on his account I'm going. The town is in a fair way to be wiped off the map. Here, read."

And he thrust the paper into Holloway's hands. "The woods to the north and west of Antioch have been blazing for two days. They have sent out call after call for help, and apparently nobody has responded yet. That's why I am going back, and for no other reason."

CHAPTER XXI.
AT Brookhorn Junction Joe Durks, who combined the duties of telegraph operator with those of baggage-master and ticket agent, was at his table receiving a message when Dan Oakley walked into the office. He had just stepped from the Chicago express.

"What's the latest word from Antioch, Joe?" he asked hurriedly.

"How are you, Mr. Oakley? I got Antioch now."

"What do they say?"

"They are asking help."

The metallic clicking of the instrument before him ceased abruptly.

"What's wrong, anyhow?" He pushed back his chair and came slowly to his feet. His finger was still on the key. He tried again to call up Antioch. "They are cut off. I guess the wire is down."

The two men stared at each other in silence.

Dan's face was white in the murky, smoky twilight that filled the room. Durks looked anxious, the limit of his emotional capacity. He was a lank, colorless youth, with pale yellow tobacco stains about the corners of his mouth and a large nose, which was superior to its surroundings.

Oakley broke silence with:

"What's gone through today, Joe?"

"Nothing's gone through on the B. and A. There's nothing to send from this end of the line," the operator answered nervously.

"What went through yesterday?"

"Nothing yesterday either."

"Where is No. 7?"

"It's down at Harrison, Mr. Oakley."

"And No. 9?"

"It's at Harrison too."

"Do you know what they are doing at Harrison?" demanded Oakley angrily.

It seemed criminal negligence that no apparent effort had as yet been made to reach Antioch.

"I don't," said Durks laconically, biting his nails. "I suppose they are waiting for the fire to burn out."

"Why don't you know?" persisted Dan tartly. His displeasure moved the operator to a fuller explanation.

"It was cut off yesterday morning. The last word I got was that No. 7 was on a siding there and that No. 9, which started at 8:15 for Antioch, had had to push back. The fire was in between Antioch and Harrison, on both sides of the track and blazing."

"Where's the freight?" questioned Oakley.

"The last I heard it was trying to make Parker's Run."

"When was that?"

"That was yesterday morning too. It had come up that far from Antioch the day before to haul out four carloads of ties. Holt gave the order. It is still there, for all I know—that is, if it ain't burned or ditched. I sent down the extra men from the yards here to help finish loading the cars. I had Holt's order for it, and supposed he knew what was wanted. They ain't come back, but they got there ahead of the freight all right."

Oakley felt this care for a few hundred dollars' worth of property to have been unnecessary in view of the grave peril that threatened Antioch. Still, it was not Durks' fault. It was Holt who was to blame. He had probably lost his head in the general alarm and excitement.

While Harrison might be menaced by the fire, it was in a measure protected by the very nature of its surroundings. But with Antioch, where there was nothing to stay the progress of the flames, the case was different. With a north wind blowing they could sweep over the town unhindered.

"Yesterday the wind shifted a bit to the west, and for awhile they thought Antioch was out of danger," said Durks, who saw what was in Oakley's mind.

"What have you heard from the other towns?"

"They're deserted. Everybody's gone to Antioch or Harrison. There was plenty of time for that, and when No. 7 made her last run I wired ahead that it was the only train we could send out."

"How did you get the extra men to Parker's Run?"

"Baker took 'em there on the switch engine. I sent him down again this morning to see what was the matter with the freight, but he only went to the ten mile bill and come back. He said he couldn't go any farther. I guess he wasn't so very keen to try. He said he hadn't the money put by for his funeral expenses."

"They told me up above that the M. and W. had hauled a relief train for Antioch. What has been done with it? Have you made an effort to get it through?"

Durks looked distressed. Within the last three days signs of inspiration and judgment had been manifested of him when he had been asked what he would do.

"I don't know," he said, "but I'll try to get it through."

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