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Moro, Sherman County, Oregon, Friday, March 6, 1908

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Sankey's Double Header
By FRANK H. SPEARMAN
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Napoleon boots, a sealskin cap draws snugly over his straight black hair, watching, ordering, signaling, while No. 1, with its frost bitten sleepers behind a rotary, struggled to back through the ten and twenty foot cuts which lay banked of snow west of McCloud.

of the western yard. It was good luck to see the sun again. Little Neets up on the hill must have seen them as they pulled out. Surely he heard the choppy, ice bitten screech of the 506. That was never forgotten, whether the service was special or regular.

Sanclair struggled with the throttle and the air. Sankey gave the alarm through the whistle to the poor fellows in the blind pockets behind. But the track was at the worst. Where there was no snow there were whisks. Oil itself couldn't have been worse to stop on. It was the old and deadly peril of fighting blockades from both ends on a single track.

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THE oldest man in the train service didn't pretend to say how long Sankey had worked for the company. Pat Francis was a very old conductor, but old man Sankey was a veteran when Pat Francis began braking. Sankey ran a passenger train when Jimmie Brady was running, and Jimmie afterward collected and was killed in the Custer fight.

Not until April did it begin to look as if we should win out. A dozen times the line was all but choked on us. And then, when snowflakes were dashed and train crews desperate, there came a storm that disintegrated the worst blizzard of the winter. As the reports rolled in on the morning of the 6th, growing worse as they grew thicker, Neighbor, dragged out, played out, mentally and physically, threw up his hands. The 6th it snowed all day, and on Saturday morning the section men reported thirty feet in the Blackwood canyon.

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He could have saved himself. He chose to save George. There wasn't time to do both. He had to choose.

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There was an old tradition about Sankey's name. He was a tall, swarthy fellow and carried the blood of a Sioux chief in his veins. It was in the time of the Black Hills excitement, when railroad men, struck by the gold fever, were abandoning their trains, even at way stations, and striking across the divide for Clark's Crossing. Men to run the trains were hard to get, and Tom Porter, trainmaster, was putting in every man he could pick up without reference to age or color.

Porter—he died at Julesburg afterward—was a great jollier, and he was not afraid of any of his men on earth. One day a war party of Sioux clattered into town. They tore around like a storm and threatened to scalp everything, even to the local tickets. The head braves dashed in on Tom Porter, sitting in the dispatcher's office upstairs. The dispatcher was hiding under a loose plank in the baggage room floor. Tom, being bald as a sand hill, considered himself exempt from scalping parties. He was working a game of solitaire when they broke down on him and interested them at once. That led to a parley, which ended in Porter's hiring the whole band to brake on freight trains. Old man Sankey is said to have been one of that outfit.

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When the railway trainmen held their division fair at McCloud, there was a lantern to be voted to the most popular conductor—a golden lined tin can with a green chain in the globe. Stewart and Ben Dotson, who were very well conductors and great rivals, were the favorites and had the town divided over their chances for winning it. But during the last moments George Sankey stepped up to the booth and cast a storm of votes for old man Sankey. Dotson's friends and Stewart's friends grew frightened. They pooled votes for a short, horse screen, a hat to Dotson, but it wouldn't do. George Sankey, with a crowd of engineers—Cameron, Moore, Foley, But Mullen and Burns—came back a third round such a swing that in the final round they fairly swamped Dotson. Sankey took the lantern by a thousand votes, but I understand it cost George and his friends a pot of money. Sankey said all the time he didn't want the lantern, but just the same, he always carried that particular lantern, with his full name, Sylvester Sankey, ground into the glass just below the green mantle. Pretty soon, Neets being then eighteen, it was rumored that Sankey was engaged to Miss Sankey was going to marry her. And marry her he did, though that was not until after the wreck in the Blackwood gorge, the time of the big snow.

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Sankey, to start with, had a peculiar name—an unpronounceable, unspellable, unmanageable name. I never heard it, so I can't give it. It was as hard to catch as an Indian cur, and that name made more trouble on the payrolls than all the other names put together. Nobody at headquarters could handle it. It was never turned in twice alike, and they were always writing Tom Porter about the thing. Tom explained several times that it was sitting Bull's ambassador who was drawing that money and that he usually signed the payrolls with a tomahawk. But nobody at Omaha ever knew how to take a joke. The first time Tom went down he was called in very solemnly to explain again about the name, and, being in a hurry and very tired of the whole business, he blurted out: "Hang it, don't bother me any more about that name. If you can't read it, make it Sankey and be done with it." They took Tom at his word. They actually did make it Sankey, and that's the name of the famous slinger, and more I may say—good name as it was and is, the Sioux never disgraced it. Probably every old traveler on the system knew Sankey. He was not only always ready to answer questions, but what is much more, always ready to answer the same question twice. It is that which makes conductors gray headed and spoils their chances for heaven—answering the same questions over and over again. Children were apt to be a bit startled at first sight of Sankey, he was so dark, but he had a very quiet smile that always made them friends after the second trip through the sleepers, and they sometimes ran about asking for him after he had left the train. Of late years—and it is this that hurts—there were some children, grown ever so much bigger and riding again to or from California or Japan or Australia, will ask when they reach the West End about the Indian conductor. But the conductors who now run the overland trains raise at the question, checking over the date limits on the margins of the coupon tickets, and, handing the envelopes back, will look at the children and say slowly, "He isn't running any more."

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Sankey hurried Sanclair through the gateway out into the gorge. He and he chose instinctively. Did he, maybe, think in that flash of Neets and of whom else needed most of a young and stalwart protector better than an old and a falling one? I do not know. I know only what he did. Every one who jumped got clear. Sanclair lit in twenty feet of snow, and they pulled him out with a rope. He wasn't scratched. Even the bridge was not badly strained. No, I pulled over it next day. Sankey was right—there was no more snow, not enough to hide the dead engines on the rocks. The line was open.