

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Number Thirty - Four

“We ain't seen you this long time, have we Jim, and we was a wondering what had become of yez, number 34, sir.”

Thus spoke a small, awkward man in the arcade, to me one day. He wore a mustard colored overcoat, pancake hat, and gaudy necktie, ornamented with an ovoid pin emblematic of a secret society. His general get up was a mixture of a fourth ward tough at a convention, and a country boy on Sunday. Still, there was that in his blue eyes which contradicted his vulgarly festive garb. There was that in them which instantly dismissed the first idea that 34 was a convict number, and therefore some vague souvenir of the times when amateur philanthropy in pursuit of prison reform had brought some contact with criminal classes.

“Number 34” gazed at me, [as] his sheepish companion looked up and down the arcade, said he must be going, evidently wanted to get away without knowing how to do the thing politely, and I, being constitutionally averse to riddles, lazy by nature, hungry for the moment, shook hands warmly with both, said “awful hurry, glad to see you looking so well, bye, bye, meet you again” and fled, with ideas reverting to proximate menu.

That night, before taking the train for my suburban home, I sauntered up and down the vast, gloomy station in one corner of which it stood waiting; a row of bright, warm-looking windows, beyond which chomped and snorted the great iron monster of iron and brass, which was to drag us through the outer darkness. It breathed quickly and heavily, like a mighty steed longing to break its bonds; and over it and under it crawled two active pigmies in blue checked overalls, poking long snouted oil-cans into its joints, caressing its massive limbs, peeping into its great cyclopean eye, and tickling it until it squeaked and sent forth spiteful jets of hissing steam. “No 34” was blazoned on its side in gleaming brass, and the wiry, self-reliant little engineer came up smiling, and invited me into his cab. “Didn't think you knowed up first today” he said “but Jim here says you've got an eye as takes in everything – an he says, – Jim says, – you must be a old traveler, because it's only them kind as walks forward to look at the engine. We's noticed you atakin' in the build of 34, and she's a hummer sure enough when she's given half a chance,

though this run, being local, you must come with us on train eight someday, if you want to see her dust things properly. Jump right in, sir, climb up there. So. We're ready to let her go. It wants but a half minute to our time to our time.

As I clambered upon the narrow leather cushion to the left, he leaned out of his little window waiting for the flip of the conductor's lantern, whilst Jim jerked a great iron chain attached to the door of the furnace, and a yawning, blinding gulf of flame roared at my feet, into which his brawny arms sent fresh fuel. Another moment there was a contraction of the gloved hand which grasped the lever, – Jim began to pull the bell with measured cadence; imperceptibly almost, the pillars of the station began to move by; then we wobbled and bobbed in an alarming manner amongst innumerable glittering rails, from which here and there red and green lights sprouted like mushrooms; threading her way through an apparently inextricable labyrinth of switches and side-tracks. Afar ahead of us lights would suddenly dance up and down, or change from red to green. Bridges rushed past overhead threatening to crush our smoke-stack as they came; out of the darkness long lines of freight cars would charge at us so that a collision appeared inevitable, but we would pass them by a hair's breadth it seemed. The great, moving mass of metal under us was instinct with magic life, its breath of flame and smoke came in quick, contented puffs, and its mighty, brazen voice roared to the crossings that we were coming with the quick, irresistible force of the avalanche or the thunderbolt. Out beyond the twinkling lights of the city, through the fresh-scented air of fields sparkling with swarms of fire flies which parted & flew past us like phosphorescent waters of the tropics past a ship's prow, we sped, the great engine settling down to its work contentedly with that regular, rocking motion which, once experienced is never forgotten.

White roads with belated teams sprang into view, rushing streams with black masses of foliage in silhouette over and through which our road lay, sometimes on frail-looking iron bridges, sometimes on long fills. Right and left sat those two immovable figures, engineer and fireman with tireless gazes, intent upon the two ever receding filaments of shining steel which converged in the darkness beyond the reach of our advancing light.

Many a night ride did I take with Billy and Jim in the cab of thirty four after that. I was curious to see the deference and attentive, silent obedience of the

big hulking fireman to his little chief, and the almost oppressive sense of responsibility on their set faces when on the road.

During the brief snatches of conversation which were possible at the frequent stops, I gained much information concerning the old Daisy, as Billy affectionately called No 34 in the intimacy of friendship, and in his illustrations of her various gaits, she responded to the touch of his gloved hand more quickly and unerringly than trained steed does to bridle or spur. Thirty four had killed her man and been through various thrilling vicissitudes, and I learned to know Billy's peculiar whistle afar off, for every locomotive engineer has his own signal, by which he makes his coming known, either to the craft or waiting sweetheart. The variation in tone is produced by a wooden plug in the whistle, much ingenuity and labor being often expended thereon. I learned much about locomotives in these rides, and progressed so far in the estimation of my two friends, that Jim even relinquished the bell rope to me.

One peculiarity struck me forcibly, after I had learned to ring for the crossings, without waiting for Billy's warning whistle. At the most solitary part of our ride, in a lonely corner of fields and scrubby trees, old 34 invariably sounded her defiant war-whoop, without apparent reason; and on questioning Billy, he told me to look to the left. Sure enough, whenever a whistle sounded in that spot, a gleam of light appeared faint and starlike, on the brow of the hill, wavered, and went out. For two years Billy said that light had greeted his whistle; he knew not why, nor cared he, but the ordinarily silent Jim chuckled, and hoarsely whispered in my ears "a mash!"

The only corroborative evidence of the envious Jim's surmise, was Billy's deep interest in the cost of cottages; and he finally confided to me that he thought he could buy one, and was "goin' to find out the lady as waived that light."

Events however necessitated my removal from the eligible Mabel Dale subdivision, the attractions and easy terms of which had been set forth so glibly by the real estate shark who lured me to buy a lot there. The seventeen trains a day turned out to be freight trains. The lamp-posts were there it is true, but there were no lamps in them nor provision for them; whilst the streets disappeared beneath the weeds, my wife was frightened by tramps and wailed over the possibility of retaining servant girls at that distance from trans rhenish concert-halls, and hill-top picnics. I was turned into a daily

package express with the misfortune of forgetting the most precious or necessary things entrusted me, in the cars, and the remarks and scorn of my better half in consequence. The sweet simplicity of rose bushes and leafy groves was dispelled by the erection of a slop-dairy and distillery in the neighborhood.

We held out many days; unwilling to confess to each other that our experiment of rural bliss at Mabel Dale was a failure; but one night there was an accident on the road; trains were blocked, and I arrived home at four o'clock in the morning, after a wearisome tramp of miles through darkness and slush, to find my young wife hysterical with fear and grief. That settled it. We moved to the city.

I never saw Billy again. Once at the Dog Show a great, hulking fellow sidled up and I recognized Jim the fireman. We shook hands warmly in memory of our ride on 34. "Billy was out West", he said "running on the U. P. and P.C. and A. He married his mash. But is divorced," Jim said. "You see, she was in the habit of signaling 53 and 48 same as she did us, as we found out afterwards, and then when 34 was sent in to the shops for repairs the last time, the plug o' his whistle kind o' shrunk and dropped out; so that when Bill came home on his first run again, his old lady didn't know his whistle as it didn't sound a bit like old 34. Well, nobody exactly knowed what happened at his house that night except that some of the winders was busted, and the last seen of Bill, he boarded No 3 coming west this side of the Coal switch. Anyhow his wife got a divorce sometime subsequent on desertion an' failure to support.

Henry F. Farney

Budget
Hinman Editor
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