The McWilliams Special

Frank H. Spearman

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IT belongs to the Stories That Never Were Told, this of the McWilliams Special. But it happened years ago, and for that matter McWilliams is dead. It wasn't grief that killed him, either; though at one time his grief came uncommonly near killing us.

It is an odd sort of a yarn, too; because one part of it never got to headquarters, and another part of it never got from headquarters.

How, for instance, the mysterious car was ever started from Chicago on such a delirious schedule, how many men in the service know that even yet? How, for another instance, Sinclair and Francis took the ratty old car reeling into Denver with the glass shrivelled, the paint blistered, the hose burned, and a tire sprung on one of the Five−Nine's drivers how many headquarters slaves know that?

Our end of the story never went in at all. Never went in because it was not deemed well, essential to the getting up of the annual report. We could have raised their hair; they could have raised our salaries; but they didn't; we didn't.

In telling this story I would not be misunderstood; ours is not the only line between Chicago and Denver: there are others, I admit it. But there is only one line (all the same) that could have taken the McWilliams Special, as we did, out of Chicago at four in the evening and put it in Denver long before noon the next day. A communication came from a great La Salle Street banker to the president of our road. Next, the second vice−president heard of it; but in this way:

"Why have you turned down Peter McWilliams's request for a special to Denver this afternoon?" asked the president.

"He wants too much," came back over the private wire. "We can't do it." After satisfying himself on this point the president called up La Salle Street.

"Our folks say, Mr. McWilliams, we simply can't do it."

"You must do it."

"When will the car be ready?"

"At three o'clock."

"When must it be in Denver?"

"Ten o'clock to−morrow morning."

The president nearly jumped the wire.

"McWilliams, you're crazy. What on earth do you mean?"

The talk came back so low that the wires hardly caught it. There were occasional outbursts such as, "situation is extremely critical," "grave danger," "acute distress," "must help me out."

But none of this would ever have moved the president had not Peter McWilliams been a bigger man than most corporations; and a personal request from Peter, if he stuck for it, could hardly be refused; and for this he most decidedly stuck.

"I tell you it will turn us upside−down," stormed the president.

"Do you recollect," asked Peter McWilliams, "when your infernal old pot of a road was busted eight years ago you were turned inside out then, weren't you? and hung up to dry, weren't you?"

The president did recollect; he could not decently help recollecting. And he recollected how, about that same time, Peter McWilliams had one week taken up for him a matter of two millions floating, with a personal check; and carried it eighteen months without security, when money could not be had in Wall Street on government bonds.

Do you that is, have you heretofore supposed that a railroad belongs to the stockholders? Not so; it belongs to men like Mr. McWilliams, who own it when they need it. At other times they let the stockholders carry it until they want it again.

"We'll do what we can, Peter," replied the president, desperately amiable. "Good−bye."

I am giving you only an inkling of how it started. Not a word as to how countless orders were issued, and countless schedules were cancelled. Not a paragraph about numberless trains abandoned in toto, and numberless others pulled and hauled and held and annulled. The McWilliams Special in a twinkle tore a great system into great splinters.

It set master−mechanics by the ears and made reckless falsifiers of previously conservative trainmen. It made undying enemies of rival superintendents, and incipient paretics of jolly train−dispatchers. It shivered us from end to end and stem to stern, but it covered 1026 miles of the best steel in the world in rather better than twenty hours and a blaze of glory. My word is out," said the president in his message to all superintendents, thirty minutes later. "You will get your division schedule in a few moments. Send no reasons for inability to make it; simply deliver the goods. With your time−report, which comes by Ry. M. S., I want the names and records of every member of every train−crew and every engine−crew that haul the McWilliams car." Then followed particular injunctions of secrecy; above all, the newspapers must not get it. But where newspapers are, secrecy can only be hoped for never attained. In spite of the most elaborate precautions to preserve Peter McWilliams's secret would you believe it? the evening papers had half a column practically the whole thing. Of course they had to guess at some of it, but for a newspaper−story it was pretty correct, just the same. They had, to a minute, the time of the start from Chicago, and hinted broadly that the schedule was a hair−raiser; something to make previous very fast records previous very slow records. And here in a scoop was the secret the train was to convey a prominent Chicago capitalist to the bedside of his dying son, Philip McWilliams, in Denver. Further, that hourly bulletins were being, wired to the distressed father, and that every effort of science would be put forth to keep the unhappy boy alive until his father could reach Denver on the Special. Lastly, it was hoped by all the evening papers (to fill out the half first column scare) that sunrise would see the anxious parent well on towards the gateway of the Rockies.

Of course the morning papers from the Atlantic to the Pacific had the story repeated scare−headed, in fact and the public were laughing at our people's dogged refusal to confirm the report or to be interviewed at all on the

subject. The papers had the story, anyway. What did they care for our efforts to screen a private distress which insisted on so paralyzing a time−card for 1026 miles?

When our own, the West End of the schedule, came over the wires there was a universal, a vociferous, kick. Dispatchers, superintendent of motive−power, train−master, everybody, protested. We were given about seven hours to cover 4oo miles−the fastest percentage, by−the−way, on the whole run.

"This may be grief for young McWilliams, and for his dad," grumbled the chief dispatcher that evening, as he cribbed the press dispatches going over the wires about the Special, "but the grief is not theirs alone."

Then he made a protest to Chicago. What the answer was none but himself ever knew. It came personal, and he took it personally; but the manner in which he went to work clearing track and making a card for the McWilliams Special showed better speed than the train itself ever attempted and he kicked no more.

After all the row, it seems incredible, but they never got ready to leave Chicago till four o'clock; and when the McWilliams Special lit into our train system, it was like dropping a mountain−lion into a bunch of steers.

Freights and extras, local passenger−trains even, were used to being sidetracked; but when it came to laying out the Flyers and (I whisper this) the White Mail, and the Manila express, the oil began to sizzle in the journal−boxes. The freight business, the passenger traffic the mail−schedules of a whole railway system were actually knocked by the McWilliams Special into a cocked hat.

From the minute it cleared Western Avenue it was the only thing talked of. Divisional headquarters and car tink shanties alike were bursting with excitement.

On the West End we had all night to prepare, and at five o'clock next morning every man in the operating department was on edge. At precisely 3.58 A.M. the McWilliams Special stuck its nose into our division, and Foley−pulled off No. 1 with the 466 was heading her dizzy for McCloud. Already the McWilliams had made up thirty−one minutes on the one hour delay in Chicago, and Lincoln threw her into our hands with a sort of "There, now! You fellows are you any good at all on the West End?" And we thought we were.

Sitting in the dispatcher's office, we tagged her down the line like a swallow. Harvard, Oxford, Zanesville, Ashton and a thousand people at the McCloud station waited for six o'clock and for Foley's muddy cap to pop through the Blackwood bluffs; watched him stain the valley maples with a stream of white and black, scream at the junction switches, tear and crash through the yards, and slide hissing and panting up under our nose, swing out of his cab, and look at nobody at all but his watch.

We made it 5.59 A.M. Central Time. The miles, 136; the minutes, 121. The schedule was beaten and that with the 136 miles the fastest on the whole 1026. Everybody in town yelled except Foley; he asked for a chew of tobacco, and not getting one handily, bit into his own piece.

While Foley melted his weed George Sinclair stepped out of the superintendent's office he was done in a black silk shirt, with a blue four−in−hand streaming over his front stepped out to shake hands with Foley, as one hostler got the 466 out of the way, and another backed down with a new Sky−Scraper, the 509.

But nobody paid much attention to all this. The mob had swarmed around the ratty, old, blind−eyed baggage−car which, with an ordinary way−car, constituted the McWilliams Special.

"Now what does a man with McWilliams's money want to travel special in an old photograph−gallery like that for?" asked Andy Cameron, who was the least bit huffed because he hadn't been marked up for the run himself. " You better take him in a cup of hot coffee, Sinkers," suggested Andy to the lunch−counter boy. "You might get a

ten−dollar bill if the old man isn't feeling too badly. What do you hear from Denver, Neighbor?" he asked, turning to the superintendent of motive power. "Is the boy holding out?"

"I'm not worrying about the boy holding out; it's whether the Five−Nine will hold out."

"Aren't you going to change engines and crews at Arickaree?"

"Not to−day," said Neighbor, grimly; "we haven't time."

Just then Sinkers rushed at the baggage−car with a cup of hot coffee for Mr. McWilliams. Everybody, hoping to get a peep at the capitalist, made way. Sinkers climbed over the train chests which were lashed to the platforms and pounded on the door. He pounded hard, for he hoped and believed that there was something in it. But he might have pounded till his coffee froze for all the impression it made on the sleepy McWilliams.

"Hasn't the man trouble enough without tackling your chiccory?" sang out Felix Kennedy, and the laugh so discouraged Sinkers that he gave over and sneaked away.

At that moment the editor of the local paper came around the depot corner on the run. He was out for an interview, and, as usual, just a trifle late. However, he insisted on boarding the baggage−car to tender his sympathy to McWilliams.

The barricades bothered him, but he mounted them all, and began an emergency pound on the forbidding blind door. Imagine his feeling when the door was gently opened by a sad−eyed man, who opened the ball by shoving a rifle as big as a pinch−bar under the editorial nose.

"My grief, Mr. McWilliams," protested the interviewer, in a trembling voice, "don't imagine I want to hold you up. Our citizens are all peaceable "

"Get out!"

"Why, man, I'm not even asking for a subscription; I simply want to ten "

"Get out!" snapped the man with the gun; and in a foam the newsman climbed down. A curious crowd gathered close to hear an editorial version of the ten commandments revised on the spur of the moment. Felix Kennedy said it was worth going miles to hear. "That's the coldest deal I ever struck on the plains, boys," declared the editor. "Talk about your bereaved parents. If the boy doesn't have a chill when that man reaches him, I miss my guess. He acts to me as if he was afraid his grief would get away before he got to Denver."

Meantime Georgie Sinclair was tying a silk handkerchief around his neck, while Neighbor gave him parting injunctions. As he put up his foot to swing into the cab the boy looked for all the world like a jockey toe in stirrup. Neighbor glanced at his watch.

"Can you make it by eleven o'clock?" he growled.

"Make what?"

"Denver."

"Denver or the ditch, Neighbor," laughed Georgie, testing the air. "Are you right back there, Pat?" be called, as Conductor Francis strode forward to compare the Mountain Time.

"Right and tight, and I call it five−two−thirty now. What have you, Georgie?"

"Five−two−thirty−two," answered Sinclair, leaning from the cab window. "And we're ready."

"Then go!" cried Pat Francis, raising two fingers.

"Go!" echoed Sinclair, and waved a backward smile to the crowd, as the pistons took the push and the escapes wheezed.

A roar went up. The little engineer shook his cap, and with a flirting, snaking slide, the McWilliams Special drew slipping away between the shining rails for the Rockies.

Just how McWilliams felt we had no means of knowing; but we knew our hearts would not beat freely until his infernal Special should slide safely over the last of the 266 miles which still lay between the distressed man and his unfortunate child.

From McCloud to Ogalalla there is a good bit of twisting and slewing; but looking east from Athens a marble dropped between the rails might roll clear into the Ogalalla yards. It is a sixty−mile grade, the ballast of slag, and the sweetest, springiest bed under steel.

To cover those sixty miles in better than fifty minutes was like picking them off the ponies; and the Five−Nine breasted the Morgan divide, fretting for more hills to climb.

The Five−Nine for that matter any of the Sky−Scrapers are built to balance ten or a dozen sleepers, and when you run them light they have a fashion of rooting their noses into the track. A modest upgrade just about counters this tendency; but on a slump and a stiff clip and no tail to speak of, you feel as if the drivers were going to buck up on the ponies every once in a while. However, they never do, and Georgie whistled for Scarboro' junction, and 180 miles and two waters, in 198 minutes out of McCloud; and, looking happy, cussed Mr. McWilliams a little, and gave her another hatful of steam.

It is getting down a hill, like the hills of the Mattaback Valley, at such a pace that pounds the track out of shape. The Five−Nine lurched at the curves like a mad woman, shook free with very fury, and if the baggage−car had not been fairly loaded down with the grief of McWilliams, it must have jumped the rails a dozen times in as many minutes.

Indeed, the fireman it was Jerry MacElroy twisting and shifting between the tender and the furnace, looked for the first time grave, and stole a questioning glance from the steam−gauge towards Georgie.

But yet he didn't expect to see the boy, his face set ahead and down the track, straighten so suddenly up, sink in the lever, and close at the instant on the air. Jerry felt her stumble under his feet caught up like a girl in a skipping−rope and grabbing a brace looked, like a wise stoker, for his answer out of his window. There far ahead it rose in hot curling clouds of smoke down among the alfalfa meadows and over the sweep of willows along the Mattaback River. The Mattaback bridge was on fire, with the McWilliams Special on one side and Denver on the other.

Jerry MacElroy yelled the engineer didn't even look around; only whistled an alarm back to Pat Francis, eased her down the grade a bit, like a man reflecting, and watched the smoke and flames that rose to bar the McWilliams Special out of Denver.

The Five−Nine skimmed across the meadows without a break, and pulled up a hundred feet from the burning bridge. It was an old Howe truss, and snapped like popcorn as the flames bit into the rotten shed. Pat Francis and

his brakeman ran forward. Across the river they could see half a dozen section−men chasing wildly about throwing impotent buckets of water on the burning truss.

"We're up against it Georgie," cried Francis.

"Not if we can get across before the bridge tumbles into the river," returned Sinclair.

"You don't mean you'd try it?"

"Would I? Wouldn't I? You know the orders. That bridge is good for an hour yet. Pat, if you're game, I'll run it."

"Holy smoke," mused Pat Francis, who would have run the river without any bridge at all if so ordered. "They told us to deliver the goods, didn't they?"

"We might as well be starting, Pat," suggested Jerry MacElroy, who deprecated losing good time." There'll be plenty of time to talk after we get into Denver, or the Mattaback."

"Think quick, Pat," urged Sinclair; his safety was popping murder.

"Back her up, then, and let her go," cried Francis; "I'd just as lief have that baggage−car at the bottom of the river as on my hands any longer."

There was some sharp tooting, then the McWilliams Special backed; backed away across the meadow, halted, and screamed bard enough to wake the dead. Georgie was trying to warn the section−men. At that instant the door of the baggage−car opened and a sharp−featured young man peered out.

"What's the row what's all this screeching about, conductor?" he asked, as Francis passed.

"Bridge burning ahead there."

"Bridge burning!" he cried, looking nervously forward. "Well, that's a deal. What you going to do about it?"

"Run it. Are you McWilliams?"

"McWilliams? I wish I was for just one minute. I'm one of his clerks."

"Where is he?"

"I left him on La Salle Street yesterday afternoon."

"What's your name?"

"Just plain Ferguson."

"Well, Ferguson, it's none of my business, but as long as we're going to put you into Denver or into the river in about a minute, I'm curious to know what the blazes you're hustling along this way for."

"Me? I've got twelve hundred thousand dollars in gold coin in this car for the Sierra Leone National Bank that's all. Didn't you know that five big banks there closed their doors yesterday? Worst panic in the United States. That's what I'm here for, and five huskies with me eating and sleeping in this car," continued Ferguson, looking ahead. "You're not going to tackle that bridge, are you?"

"We are, and right off. If there's any of your huskies want to drop out, now's their chance," said Pat Francis, as Sinclair slowed up for his run.

Ferguson called his men. The five with their rifles came cautiously forward.

"Boys," said Ferguson, briefly. "There's a bridge afire ahead. These guys are going to try to run it. It's not in your contract, that kind of a chance. Do you want to get off? I stay with the specie, myself. You can do exactly as you please. Murray, what do you say?" he asked, addressing the leader of the force, who appeared to weigh about two hundred and sixty.

"What do I say?" echoed Murray, with decision, as he looked for a soft place to alight alongside the track. "I say I'll drop out right here. I don't mind train robber, but I don't tackle a burning, bridge not if I know it," and he jumped off.

"Well, Peaters," asked Ferguson, of the second man, coolly, "do you want to stay?"

"Me?" echoed Peaters, looking ahead at the mass of flame leaping upward "me stay? Well, not in a thousand years. You can have my gun, Mr. Ferguson, and send my check to 439 Milwaukee Avenue, if you please. Gentlemen, good− day." And off went Peaters.

And off went every last man of the valorous detectives except one lame fellow, who said he would just as lief be dead as alive anyway, and declared he would stay with Ferguson and die rich!

Sinclair, thinking he might never get another chance, was whistling sharply for orders. Francis, breathless with the news, ran forward.

"Coin? How much? Twelve hundred thousand. Whew!" cried Sinclair. "Swing up, Pat. We're off."

The Five−Nine gathered herself with a spring. Even the engineer's heart quailed as they got headway. He knew his business, and he knew that if only the rails hadn't buckled they were perfectly safe, for the heavy truss would stand a lot of burning before giving way under a swiftly moving train. Only, as they flew nearer, the blaze rolling up in dense volume looked horribly threatening After all it was foolhardy, and be felt it; but he was past the stopping now, and he pulled the choker to the limit. It seemed as if she never covered steel so fast. Under the head she now had the crackling bridge was less than five hundred four hundred three hundred two hundred feet, and there was no longer time to think. With a stare, Sinclair shut off. He wanted no push or pull on the track. The McWilliams Special was just a tremendous arrow, shooting through a truss of fire, and half a dozen speechless men on either side of the river waiting for the catastrophe.

Jerry MacElroy crouched low under the gauges. Sinclair jumped from his box and stood with a band on the throttle and a hand on the air, the glass crashing around his head like hail. A blast of fiery air and flying cinders burned and choked him. The engine, alive with danger, flew like a great monkey along the writhing steel. So quick, so black, so hot the blast, and so terrific the leap, she stuck her nose into clean air before the men in the cab could rise to it.

There was a heave in the middle like the lurch of a sea−sick steamer, and with it the Five−Nine got her paws on cool iron and solid ground, and the Mattaback and the blaze all except a dozen tongues which licked the cab and the roof of the baggage−car a minute were behind. Georgie Sinclair, shaking the hot glass out of his hair, looked ahead through his frizzled eyelids and gave her a full head for the western bluffs of the valley; then looked at his watch.

It was the hundred and ninetieth mile−post just at her nose, and the dial read eight o'clock and fifty−five minutes to a second. There was an hour to the good and seventy−six miles and a water to cover; but they were seventy−six of the prettiest miles under ballast anywhere, and the Five−Nine reeled them off like a cylinder−press. Seventy−nine minutes later Sinclair whistled for the Denver yards.

There was a tremendous commotion among the waiting engines. If there was one there were fifty big locomotives waiting to charivari the McWilliams Special. The wires had told the story in Denver long before, and as the Five−Nine sailed ponderously up the gridiron every mogul, every consolidated, every ten−wheeler, every hog, every switch−bumper, every air−hose screamed an uproarious welcome to Georgie Sinclair and the Sky−Scraper.

They had broken every record from McCloud to Denver, and all knew it; but as the McWilliams Special drew swiftly past, every last man in the yards stared at her cracked, peeled, blistered, haggard looks.

"What the deuce have you bit into?" cried the depot−master, as the Five−Nine swept splendidly up and stopped with her battered eye hard on the depot clock.

"Mattaback bridge is burned; had to crawl over on the stringers," answered Sinclair, couching up a cinder.

"Where's McWilliams?"

"Back there sitting on his grief, I reckon."

While the crew went up to register, two big four−horse trucks backed up to the baggage−car, and in a minute a dozen men were rolling specie−keg's out of the door, which was smashed in, as being quicker than to tear open the barricades.

Sinclair, MacElroy, and Francis with his brakeman were surrounded by a crowd of railroad men. As they stood answering questions, a big prosperous−looking banker, with black rings under his eyes, pushed in towards them, accompanied by the lame fellow, who had missed the chance of a lifetime to die rich, and by Ferguson, who had told the story.

The banker shook hands with each one of the crews. "You've saved us, boys. We needed it. There's a mob of five thousand of the worst−scared people in America clamoring at the doors; and, by the eternal, now we're fixed for every one of them. Come up to the bank. I want you to ride right up with the coin, all of you."

It was an uncommonly queer occasion, but an uncommonly enthusiastic one. Fifty policemen made the escort and cleared the way for the trucks to pull up across the sidewalk, so the porters could lug the kegs of gold into the bank before the very eyes of the rattled depositors.

In an hour the run was broken. But when the four railroad men left the bank, after all sorts of hugging by excited directors, they carried not only the blessings of the officials, but each in his vest pocket a check, every one of which discounted the biggest voucher ever drawn on the West End for a month's pay; though I violate no confidence in stating, that Georgie Sinclair's was bigger than any two of the others. And this is how it happens that there hangs, in the directors' room of the Sierra Leone National a very creditable portrait of the kid engineer.

Besides paying tariff on the specie, the bank paid for a new coat of paint for the McWilliams Special from caboose to pilot. She was the last train across the Mattaback for two weeks.