

The Night Operator

Frank L. Packard

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TODDLES, in the beginning, wasn't exactly a railroad man — for several reasons. First, he wasn't a man at all; second, he wasn't, strictly speaking, on the company's pay roll; third, which is apparently irrelevant, everybody said he was a bad one; and fourth — because Hawkeye nicknamed him Toddles.

Toddles had another name — Christopher Hyslop Hoogan — but Big Cloud never lay awake at nights losing any sleep over that. On the first run that Christopher Hyslop Hoogan ever made, Hawkeye looked him over for a minute, said, "Toddles," short-like — and, short-like, that settled the matter so far as the Hill Division was concerned. His name was Toddles.

Piecemeal, Toddles wouldn't convey anything to you to speak of. You'd have to see Toddles coming down the aisle of a car to get him at all — and then the chances are you'd turn around after he'd gone by and stare at him, and it would be even money that you'd call him back and fish for a dime to buy something by way of excuse. Toddles got a good deal of business that way. Toddles had a uniform and a regular run all right, but he wasn't what he passionately longed to be — a legitimate, dyed-in-the-wool railroader. His paycheck, plus commissions, came from the News Company down East that had the railroad concession. Toddles was a newsboy. In his blue uniform and silver buttons, Toddles used to stack up about the height of the back of the car seats as he hawked his wares along the aisles; and the only thing that was big about him was his head, which looked as though it had got a whopping big lead on his body — and didn't intend to let the body cut the lead down any. This meant a big cap, and, as Toddles used to tilt the vizor forward, the tip of his nose, bar his mouth which was generous, was about all one got of his face. Cap, buttons, magazines and peanuts, that was Toddles — all except his voice. Toddles had a voice that would make you jump if you were nervous the minute he opened the car door, and if you weren't nervous you would be before he had reached the other end of the aisle — it began low down somewhere on high G and went through you shrill as an east wind, and ended like the shriek of a brake-shoe with everything the Westinghouse equipment had to offer cutting loose on a quick stop

Hawkeye? That was what Toddles called his beady-eyed conductor in retaliation. Hawkeye used to nag Toddles every chance he got, and, being Toddles' conductor, Hawkeye got a good many chances. In a word, Hawkeye, carrying the punch on the local passenger, that happened to be the run Toddles was given when the News Company sent him out from the East, used to think he got a good deal of fun out of Toddles — only his idea of fun and Toddles' idea of fun were as divergent as the poles, that was all.

Toddles, however, wasn't anybody's fool, not by several degrees — not even Hawkeye's. Toddles hated Hawkeye like poison; and his hate, apart from daily annoyances, was deep-seated. It was Hawkeye who had dubbed him "Toddles." And Toddles repudiated the name with his heart, his soul — and his fists.

Toddles wasn't anybody's fool, whatever the division thought, and he was right down to the basic root of things from the start. Coupled with the stunted growth that nature in a miserly mood had doled out to him, none knew better than himself that the name of "Toddles," keeping that nature stuff patently before everybody's eyes, damned him in his aspirations for a bona fide railroad career. Other boys got a job and got their feet on the ladder as call-boys, or in the roundhouse; Toddles got — a grin. Toddles pestered everybody for a job. He pestered Carleton, the super. He pestered Tommy Regan, the master mechanic. Every time that he saw anybody in authority Toddles spoke up for a job, he was in deadly earnest — and got a grin. Toddles with a basket of unripe fruit and stale chocolates and his "best-seller" voice was one thing; but Toddles as anything else was just — Toddles.

Toddles repudiated the name, and did it forcefully Not that he couldn't take his share of a bit of guying but because he felt that he was face to face with a vital factor in the career he longed for — so he fought. And if

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nature had been niggardly in one respect, she had been generous in others; Toddles, for all his size, possessed the heart of a lion and the strength of a young ox, and he used both, with black and bloody effect, on the eyes and noses of the call-boys and younger element who called him Toddles. He fought it all along the line — at the drop of the hat — at a whisper of "Toddles." There wasn't a day went by that Toddles wasn't in a row; and the women, the mothers of the defeated warriors whose eyes were puffed and whose noses trickled crimson, denounced him in virulent language over their washtubs and the back fences of Big Cloud. You see, they didn't understand him, so they called him a "bad one," and, being from the East and not one of themselves, "a New York gutter snipe."

But, for all that, the name stuck. Up and down through the Rockies it was — Toddles. Toddles, with the idea of getting a lay-over on a siding, even went to the extent of signing himself in full — Christopher Hyslop Hoogan — very time his signature was in order; but the official documents in which he was concerned, being of a private nature between himself and the News Company, did not, in the very nature of things, have much effect on the Hill Division. Certainly the big fellows never knew he had any name but Toddles — and cared less. But they knew him as Toddles, all right! All of them did, every last one of them! Toddles was everlastingly and eternally bothering them for a job. Any kind of a job, no matter what, just so it was real railroading, and so a fellow could line up with everybody else when the paycar came along, and look forward to being something some day.

Toddles, with time, of course, grew older, up to about seventeen or so, but he didn't grow any bigger — not enough to make it noticeable! Even Toddles' voice wouldn't break — it was his young heart that did all the breaking there was done. Not that he ever showed it. No one ever saw a tear in the boy's eyes. It was clenched fists for Toddles, clenched fists and passionate attack. And therein, while Toddles had grasped the basic truth that his nickname militated against his ambitions, he erred in another direction that was equally fundamental, if not more so.

And here, it was Bob Donkin, the night dispatcher, as white a man as his record after years of train-handling was white, a railroad man from the ground up if there ever was one, and one of the best, who set Toddles — But we'll come to that presently. We've got our "clearance" now, and we're off with "rights" through.

No. 83, Hawkeye's train — and Toddles' — scheduled Big Cloud on the eastbound run at 9.05; and, on the night the story opens, they were about an hour away from the little mountain town that was the divisional point, as Toddles, his basket of edibles in the crook of his arm, halted in the forward end of the second-class smoker to examine again the fistful of change that he dug out of his pants pocket with his free hand.

Toddles was in an unusually bad humor; and he scowled. With exceeding deftness he separated one of the coins from the others, using his fingers like the teeth of a rake, and dropped the rest back jingling into his pocket. The coin that remained he put into his mouth, and bit on it — hard. His scowl deepened. Somebody had presented Toddles with a lead quarter.

It wasn't so much the quarter, though Toddles' salary wasn't so big as some people's who would have felt worse over it, it was his amour propre that was touched — deeply. It wasn't often that any one could put so bald a thing as lead money across on Toddles. Toddles' mind harked back along the aisles of the cars behind him. He had only made two sales that round, and he had changed a quarter each time — for the pretty girl with the big picture hat, who had giggled at him when she bought a package of chewing gum; and the man with the three-carat diamond tie-pin in the parlor car, a little more than on the edge of inebriety, who had got on at the last stop, and who had bought a cigar from him.

Toddles thought it over for a bit; decided he wouldn't have a fuss with a girl anyway, balked at a parlor car fracas with a drunk, dropped the coin back into his pocket, and went on into the combination baggage and express car. Here, just inside the door, was Toddles', or, rather, the News Company's chest. Toddles lifted the lid; and then his eyes shifted slowly and travelled up the car. Things were certainly going badly with Toddles that night.

There were four men in the car: Bob Donkin, coming back from a holiday trip somewhere up the line; MacNicoll, the baggage-master; Nulty, the express messenger — and Hawkeye. Toddles' inventory of the contents of the chest had been hurried — but intimate. A small bunch of six bananas was gone, and Hawkeye was munching them unconcernedly. It wasn't the first time the big, hulking, six-foot conductor had pilfered the boy's chest, not by many — and never paid for the pilfering. That was Hawkeye's idea of a joke.

Hawkeye was talking to Nulty, elaborately simulating ignorance of Toddles' presence — and he was talking about Toddles.

"Sure," said Hawkeye, his mouth full of banana, "he'll be a great railroad man some day! He's the stuff they're

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made of! You can see it sticking out all over him! He's only selling peanuts now till he grows up and ——"

Toddles put down his basket and planted himself before the conductor.

"You pay for those bananas," said Toddles in a low voice — which was high.

"When'll he grow up?" continued Hawkeye, peeling more fruit. "I don't know — you've got me. The first time I saw him two years ago, I'm hanged if he wasn't bigger than he is now — guess he grows backwards. Have a banana?" He offered one to Nulty, who refused it.

"You pay for those bananas, you big stiff!" squealed Toddles belligerently.

Hawkeye turned his head slowly and turned his little beady, black eyes on Toddles, then he turned with a wink to the others, and for the first time in two years offered payment. He fished into his pocket and handed Toddles a twenty-dollar bill — there always was a mean streak in Hawkeye, more or less of a bully, none too well liked, and whose name on the payroll, by the way, was Reynolds.

"Take fifteen cents out of that," he said, with no idea that the boy could change the bill.

For a moment Toddles glared at the yellow-back, then a thrill of unholy glee came to Toddles. He could just about make it, business all around had been pretty good that day, particularly on the run west in the morning.

Hawkeye went on with the exposition of his idea of humor at Toddles' expense; and Toddles went back to his chest and his reserve funds. Toddles counted out eighteen dollars in bills, made a neat pile of four quarters — the lead one on the bottom — another neat pile of the odd change, and returned to Hawkeye. The lead quarter wouldn't go very far toward liquidating Hawkeye's long-standing indebtedness — but it would help some.

Hawkeye counted the bills carefully, and crammed them into his pocket. Toddles dropped the neat little pile of quarters into Hawkeye's hand — they counted themselves — and Hawkeye put those in his pocket. Toddles counted out the odd change piece by piece, and as Hawkeye put that in his pocket — Toddles put his fingers to his nose.

Queer, isn't it — the way things happen? Think of a man's whole life, aspirations, hopes, ambitions, everything, pivoting on — a lead quarter! But then they say that opportunity knocks once at the door of every man; and, if that be true, let it be remarked in passing that Toddles wasn't deaf!

Hawkeye, making Toddles a target for a parting gibe, took up his lantern and started through the train to pick up the fares from the last stop. In due course he halted before the inebriated one with the glittering tie-pin in the smoking compartment of the parlor car.

"Ticket, please," said Hawkeye.

"Too busy to buysh ticket," the man informed him, with heavy confidence. "Whash fare Loon Dam to Big Cloud?"

"One-fifty," said Hawkeye curtly.

The man produced a roll of bills, and from the roll extracted a two-dollar note.

Hawkeye handed him back two quarters, and started to punch a cash-fare slip. He looked up to find the man holding out one of the quarters insistently, if somewhat unsteadily.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hawkeye brusquely.

"Bad," said the man.

A drummer grinned; and an elderly gentleman, from his magazine, looked up inquiringly over his spectacles.

"Bad!" Hawkeye brought his elbow sharply around to focus his lamp on the coin; then he leaned over and rang it on the window sill — only it wouldn't ring. It was indubitably bad. Hawkeye, however, was dealing with a drunk — and Hawkeye always did have a mean streak in him.

"It's perfectly good," he asserted gruffly.

The man rolled an eye at the conductor that mingled a sudden shrewdness and anger, and appealed to his fellow travellers. The verdict was against Hawkeye, and Hawkeye ungraciously pocketed the lead piece and handed over another quarter.

"Shay," observed the inebriated one insolently, "shay, conductor, I don't like you. You thought I was — hic! — s'drunk I wouldn't know — eh? Thash where you fooled yerself!"

"What do you mean?" Hawkeye bridled virtuously for the benefit of the drummer and the old gentleman with the spectacles.

And then the other began to laugh immoderately.

"Same ol' quarter," said he. "Same — hic! — ol' quarter back again. Great system — peanut boy — conductor

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— hic! Pass it off on one — other passes it off on some one else. Just passed it off on — hic! — peanut boy for a joke. Goin' to give him a dollar when he comes back."

"Oh, you did, did you!" snapped Hawkeye ominously. "And you mean to insinuate that I deliberately tried to —"

"Sure!" declared the man heartily.

"You're a liar!" announced Hawkeye, spluttering mad. "And what's more, since it came from you, you'll take it back!" He dug into his pocket for the ubiquitous lead piece.

"Not — hic! — on your life!" said the man earnestly. "You hang onto it, old top. I didn't pass it off on you."

"Haw!" exploded the drummer suddenly. "Haw — haw, haw!"

And the elderly gentleman smiled.

Hawkeye's face went red, and then purple.

"Go 'way!" said the man petulantly. "I don't like you. Go 'way! Go an' tell peanuts I — hic! — got a dollar for him."

And Hawkeye went — but Toddles never got the dollar. Hawkeye went out of the smoking compartment of the parlor car with the lead quarter in his pocket — because he couldn't do anything else — which didn't soothe his feelings any — and he went out mad enough to bite himself. The drummer's guffaw followed him, and he thought he even caught a chuckle from the elderly party with the magazine and spectacles.

Hawkeye was mad; and he was quite well aware, painfully well aware that he had looked like a fool, which is about one of the meanest feelings there is to feel; and, as he made his way forward through the train, he grew madder still. That change was the change from his twenty-dollar bill. He had not needed to be told that the lead quarter had come from Toddles. The only question at all in doubt was whether or not Toddles had put the counterfeit coin over on him knowingly and with malice aforethought. Hawkeye, however, had an intuition deep down inside of him that there wasn't any doubt even about that, and as he opened the door of the baggage car his intuition was vindicated. There was a grin on the faces of Nulty, MacNicol and Bob Donkin that disappeared with suspicious celerity at sight of him as he came through the door.

There was no hesitation then on Hawkeye's part. Toddles, equipped for another excursion through the train with a stack of magazines and books that almost hid him, received a sudden and vicious clout on the side of the ear.

"You'd try your tricks on me, would you?" Hawkeye snarled. "Lead quarters — eh?" Another clout. "I'll teach you, you blasted little runt!"

And with the clouts, the stack of carefully balanced periodicals went flying over the floor; and with the clouts, the nagging, and the hectoring, and the bullying, that had rankled for close on two years in Toddles' turbulent soul, rose in a sudden all-possessing sweep of fury. Toddles was a fighter — with the heart of a fighter. And Toddles' cause was just. He couldn't reach the conductor's face — so he went for Hawkeye's legs. And the screams of rage from his high-pitched voice, as he shot himself forward, sounded like a cageful of Australian cockatoos on the rampage.

Toddles was small, pitifully small for his age; but he wasn't an infant in arms — not for a minute. And in action Toddles was as near to a wild cat as anything else that comes handy by way of illustration. Two legs and one arm he twined and twisted around Hawkeye's legs; and the other arm, with a hard and knotty fist on the end of it, caught the conductor a wicked jab in the region of the bottom button of the vest. The brass button peeled the skin off Toddles' knuckles, but the jab doubled the conductor forward, and coincident with Hawkeye's winded grunt, the lantern in his hand sailed ceilingwards, crashed into the center lamps in the roof of the car, and down in a shower of tinkling glass, dripping oil and burning wicks, came the wreckage to the floor.

There was a yell from Nulty; but Toddles hung on like grim death. Hawkeye was bawling fluent profanity and seeing red. Toddles heard one and sensed the other — and he clung grimly on. He was all doubled up around Hawkeye's knees, and in that position Hawkeye couldn't get at him very well; and, besides, Toddles had his own plan of battle. He was waiting for an extra heavy lurch of the car.

It came. Toddles' muscles strained legs and arms and back in concert, and for an instant across the car they tottered, Hawkeye staggering in a desperate attempt to maintain his equilibrium — and then down — speaking generally, on a heterogeneous pile of express parcels; concretely, with an eloquent squinch, on a crate of eggs, thirty dozen of them, at forty cents a dozen.

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Toddles, over his rage, experienced a sickening sense of disaster, but still he clung; he didn't dare let go. Hawkeye's fists, both in an effort to recover himself and in an endeavor to reach Toddles, were going like a windmill; and Hawkeye's threats were something terrifying to listen to. And now they rolled over, and Toddles was underneath; and then they rolled over again; and then a hand locked on Toddles' collar, and he was yanked, terrier-fashion, to his feet.

His face white and determined, his fists doubled, Toddles waited for Hawkeye to get up — the word "run" wasn't in Toddles' vocabulary. He hadn't long to wait.

Hawkeye lunged up, draped in the broken crate — a sight. The road always prided itself on the natty uniforms of its train crews, but Hawkeye wasn't dressed in uniform then — mostly egg yolks. He made a dash for Toddles, but he never reached the boy. Bob Donkin was between them.

"Cut it out!" said Donkin coldly, as he pushed Toddles behind him. "You asked for it, Reynolds, and you got it. Now cut it out!"

And Hawkeye "cut it out." It was pretty generally understood that Bob Donkin never talked much for show, and Bob Donkin was bigger than Toddles, a whole lot bigger, as big as Hawkeye himself. Hawkeye "cut it out."

Funny, the egg part of it? Well, perhaps. But the fire wasn't. True, they got it out with the help of the hand extinguishers before it did any serious damage, for Nulty had gone at it on the jump; but while it lasted the burning oil on the car floor looked dangerous. Anyway, it was bad enough so that they couldn't hide it when they got into Big Cloud — and Hawkeye and Toddles went on the carpet for it the next morning in the super's office.

Carleton, "Royal" Carleton, reached for a match, and, to keep his lips straight, clamped them firmly on the amber mouthpiece of his brier, and stumpy, big-paunched Tommy Regan, the master mechanic, who was sitting in a chair by the window, reached hurriedly into his back pocket for his chewing and looked out of the window to hide a grin, as the two came in and ranged themselves in front of the super's desk — Hawkeye, six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds, with Toddles trailing him, mostly cap and buttons and no weight at all.

Carleton didn't ask many questions — he'd asked them before — of Bob Donkin — and the despatcher hadn't gone out of his way to invest the conductor with any glorified halo. Carleton, always a strict disciplinarian, said what he had to say and said it quietly; but he meant to let the conductor have the worst of it, and he did — in a way that was all Carleton's own. Two years' picking on a youngster didn't appeal to Carleton, no matter who the youngster was. Before he was half through he had the big conductor squirming. Hawkeye was looking for something else — besides a galling and matter-of-fact impartiality that accepted himself and Toddles as being on exactly the same plane and level.

"There's a case of eggs," said Carleton at the end. "You can divide up the damage between you. And I'm going to change your runs, unless you've got some good reason to give me why I shouldn't?"

He waited for an answer.

Hawkeye, towering, sullen, his eyes resting bitterly on Regan, having caught the master mechanic's grin, said nothing; Toddles, whose head barely showed over the top of Carleton's desk, and the whole of him sizing up about big enough to go into the conductor's pocket, was equally silent — Toddles was thinking of something else.

"Very good," said Carleton suavely, as he surveyed the ridiculous incongruity before him. "I'll change your runs, then. I can't have you two men brawling and prize-fighting every trip."

There was a sudden sound from the window, as though Regan had got some of his blackstrap juice down the wrong way.

Hawkeye's face went black as thunder.

Carleton's face was like a sphinx

"That'll do, then," he said. "You can go, both of you."

Hawkeye stamped out of the room and down the stairs. But Toddles stayed.

"Please, Mr. Carleton, won't you give me a job on ——" Toddles stopped.

So had Regan's chuckle. Toddles, the irrepressible was at it again — and Toddles after a job, any kind of a job, was something that Regan's experience had taught him to fly from without standing on the order of his flight. Regan hurried from the room.

Toddles watched him go — kind of speculatively, kind of reproachfully. Then he turned to Carleton.

"Please give me a job, Mr. Carleton," he pleaded. "Give me a job, won't you?"

It was only yesterday on the platform that Toddles had waylaid the super with the same demand — and about

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every day before that as far back as Carleton could remember. It was hopelessly chronic. Anything convincing or appealing about it had gone long ago — Toddles said it parrot-fashion now. Carleton took refuge in severity.

"See here, young man," he said grimly, "you were brought into this office for a reprimand and not to apply for a job! You can thank your stars and Bob Donkin you haven't lost the one you've got. Now, get out!"

"I'd make good if you gave me one," said Toddles earnestly. "Honest, I would, Mr. Carleton."

"Get out!" said the super, not altogether unkindly. "I'm busy."

Toddles swallowed a lump in his throat — but not until after his head was turned and he'd started for the door so the super couldn't see it. Toddles swallowed the lump — and got out. He hadn't expected anything else, of course. The refusals were just as chronic as the demands. But that didn't make each new one any easier for Toddles. It made it worse.

Toddles' heart was heavy as he stepped out into the hall, and the iron was in his soul. He was seventeen now, and it looked as though he never would get a chance — except to be a newsboy all his life. Toddles swallowed another lump. He loved railroading; it was his one ambition, his one desire. If he could ever get a chance, he'd show them! He'd show them that he wasn't a joke, just because he was small!

Toddles turned at the head of the stairs to go down, when somebody called his name.

"Here — Toddles! Come here!"

Toddles looked over his shoulder, hesitated, then marched in through the open door of the dispatchers' room. Bob Donkin was alone there.

"What's your name — Toddles?" inquired Donkin, as Toddles halted before the dispatcher's table.

Toddles froze instantly — hard. His fists doubled; there was a smile on Donkin's face. Then his fists slowly uncurled; the smile on Donkin's face had broadened, but there wasn't any malice in the smile.

"Christopher Hyslop Hoogan," said Toddles, unbending.

Donkin put his hand quickly to his mouth — and coughed.

"Um—m!" said he pleasantly. "Super hard on you this morning — Hoogan?"

And with the words Toddles' heart went out to the big dispatcher: "Hoogan" — and a man-to-man tone.

"No," said Toddles cordially. "Say, I thought you were on the night trick."

"Double-shift — short-handed," replied Donkin. "Come from New York, don't you?"

"Yes," said Toddles.

"Mother and father down there still?"

It came quick and unexpected, and Toddles stared for a moment. Then he walked over to the window.

"I haven't got any," he said.

There wasn't any sound for an instant, save the clicking of the instruments; then Donkin spoke again — a little gruffly:

"When are you going to quit making an ass of yourself?"

Toddles swung from the window, hurt. Donkin, after all, was like all the rest of them.

"Well?" prompted the dispatcher.

"You go to blazes!" said Toddles bitterly, and started for the door.

Donkin halted him.

"You're only fooling yourself, Hoogan," he said coolly. "If you wanted what you call a real railroad job as much as you pretend you do, you'd get one."

"Eh?" demanded Toddles defiantly; and went back to the table.

"A fellow," said Donkin, putting a little sting into his words, "never got anywhere by going around with a chip on his shoulder fighting everybody because they called him Toddles, and making a nuisance of himself with the Big Fellows until they got sick of the sight of him."

It was a pretty stiff arraignment. Toddles choked over it, and the angry blood flushed to his cheeks.

"That's all right for you!" he spluttered out hotly. "You don't look too small for the train crews or the roundhouse, and they don't call you Toddles so's nobody 'll forget it. What'd you do?"

"I'll tell you what I'd do," said Donkin quietly. "I'd make everybody on the division wish their own name was Toddles before I was through with them, and I'd make a job for myself."

Toddles blinked helplessly.

"Getting right down to a cash fare," continued Donkin, after a moment, as Toddles did not speak, "they're not

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so far wrong, either, about you sizing up pretty small for the train crews or the roundhouse, are they?"

"No-o," admitted Toddles reluctantly; "but ——"

"Then why not something where there's no handicap hanging over you?" suggested the despatcher — and his hand reached out and touched the sender. "The key, for instance?"

"But I don't know anything about it," said Toddles, still helplessly.

"That's just it," returned Donkin smoothly. "You never tried to learn."

Toddles' eyes widened, and into Toddles' heart leaped a sudden joy. A new world seemed to open out before him in which aspirations, ambitions, longings all were a reality. A key! That was real railroading, the top-notch of railroading, too. First an operator, and then a despatcher, and — and — and then his face fell, and the vision faded.

"How'd I get a chance to learn?" he said miserably. "Who'd teach me?"

The smile was back on Donkin's face as he pushed his chair from the table, stood up, and held out his hand — man-to-man fashion.

"I will," he said. "I liked your grit last night, Hoogan. And if you want to be a railroad man, I'll make you one — before I'm through. I've some old instruments you can have to practise with, and I've nothing to do in my spare time. What do you say?"

Toddles didn't say anything. For the first time since Toddles' advent to the Hill Division, there were tears in Toddles' eyes for some one else to see.

Donkin laughed.

"All right, old man, you're on. See that you don't throw me down. And keep your mouth shut; you'll need all your wind. It's work that counts, and nothing else. Now chase yourself! I'll dig up the things you'll need, and you can drop in here and get them when you come off your run to-night."

Spare time! Bob Donkin didn't have any spare time those days! But that was Donkin's way. Spence sick, and two men handling the despatching where three had handled it before, didn't leave Bob Donkin much spare time — not much. But a boost for the kid was worth a sacrifice. Donkin went at it as earnestly as Toddles did — and Toddles was in deadly earnest.

When Toddles left the despatcher's office that morning with Donkin's promise to teach him the key, Toddles had a hazy idea that Donkin had wings concealed somewhere under his coat and was an angel in disguise; and at the end of two weeks he was sure of it. But at the end of a month Bob Donkin was a god! Throw Bob Donkin down! Toddles would have sold his soul for the despatcher.

It wasn't easy, though; and Bob Donkin wasn't an easy-going taskmaster, not by long odds. Donkin had a tongue, and on occasions could use it. Short and quick in his explanations, he expected his pupil to get it short and quick; either that, or Donkin's opinion of him. But Toddles stuck. He'd have crawled on his knees for Donkin anywhere, and he worked like a major — not only for his own advancement, but for what he came to prize quite as much, if not more, Donkin's approval.

Toddles, mindful of Donkin's words, didn't fight so much as the days went by, though he found it difficult to swear off all at once; and on his runs he studied his Morse code, and he had the "calls" of every station on the division off by heart right from the start. Toddles mastered the "sending" by leaps and bounds; but the "taking" came slower, as it does for everybody — but even at that, at the end of six weeks, if it wasn't thrown at him too fast and hard, Toddles could get it after a fashion.

Take it all around, Toddles felt like whistling most of the time; and, pleased with his own progress, looked forward to starting in presently as a full-fledged operator. He mentioned the matter to Bob Donkin — once. Donkin picked his words and spoke fervently. Toddles never brought the subject up again.

And so things went on. Late summer turned to early fall, and early fall to still sharper weather, until there came the night that the operator at Blind River muddled his orders and gave No. 73, the westbound fast freight, her clearance against the second section of the eastbound Limited that doomed them to meet somewhere head-on in the Glacier Cañon; the night that Toddles — but there's just a word or two that comes before.

When it was all over, it was up to Sam Beale, the Blind River operator, straight enough. Beale blundered. That's all there was to it; that covers it all — he blundered. It would have finished Beale's railroad career forever and a day — only Beale played the man, and the instant he realized what he had done, even while the tail lights of the freight were disappearing down the track and he couldn't stop her, he was stammering the tale of his mistake

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over the wire, the sweat beads dripping from his wrist, his face gray with horror, to Bob Donkin under the green-shaded lamp in the despatchers' room at Big Cloud, miles away.

Donkin got the miserable story over the chattering wire — got it before it was half told — cut Beale out and began to pound the Gap call. And as though it were before him in reality, that stretch of track, fifteen miles of it, from Blind River to the Gap, unfolded itself like a grisly panorama before his mind. There wasn't a half mile of tangent at a single stretch in the whole of it. It swung like the writhings of a snake, through cuts and tunnels, hugging the canon walls, twisting this way and that. Anywhere else there might be a chance, one in a thousand even, that they would see each other's headlights in time — here it was disaster quick and absolute.

Donkin's lips were set in a thin, straight line. The Gap answered him; and the answer was like the knell of doom. He had not expected anything else; he had only hoped against hope. The second section of the Limited had pulled out of the Gap, eastbound, two minutes before. The two trains were in the open against each other's orders.

In the next room, Carleton and Regan, over their pipes, were at their nightly game of pedro. Donkin called them — and his voice sounded strange to himself. Chairs scraped and crashed to the floor, and an instant later the super and the master mechanic were in the room.

"What's wrong, Bob?" Carleton flung the words from him in a single breath.

Donkin told them. But his fingers were on the key again as he talked. There was still one chance, worse than the thousand-to-one shot; but it was the only one Between the Gap and Blind River, eight miles from the Gap, seven miles from Blind River, was Cassil's Siding. But there was no night man at Cassil's, and the little town lay a mile from the station. It was ten o'clock — Donkin's watch lay face up on the table before him — the day man at Cassil's went off at seven — the chance was that the day man might have come back to the station for something or other!

Not much of a chance? No — not much! It was a possibility, that was all; and Donkin's fingers worked — the seventeen, the life and death — calling, calling on the night trick to the day man at Cassil's Siding.

Carleton came and stood at Donkin's elbow, and Regan stood at the other; and there was silence now, save only for the key that, under Donkin's fingers, seemed to echo its stammering appeal about the room like the sobbing of a human soul.

"CS — CS — CS," Donkin called; and then, "the seventeen," and then, "hold second Number Two." And then the same thing over and over again.

And there was no answer.

It had turned cold that night and there was a fire in the little heater. Donkin had opened the draft a little while before, and the sheet-iron sides now began to pur red-hot. Nobody noticed it. Regan's kindly, good-humored face had the stamp of horror in it, and he pulled at his scraggly brown mustache, his eyes seemingly fascinated by Donkin's fingers. Everybody's eyes, the three of them, were on Donkin's fingers and the key. Carleton was like a man of stone, motionless, his face set harder than face was ever carved in marble.

It grew hot in the room; but Donkin's fingers were like ice on the key, and, strong man though he was, he faltered.

"Oh, my God!" he whispered — and never a prayer rose more fervently from lips than those three broken words.

Again he called, and again, and again. The minutes slipped away. Still he called — with the life and death — the "seventeen" — called and called. And there was no answer save that echo in the room that brought the perspiration streaming now from Regan's face, a harder light into Carleton's eyes, and a chill like death into Donkin's heart.

Suddenly Donkin pushed back his chair; and his fingers, from the key, touched the crystal of his watch.

"The second section will have passed Cassil's now," he said in a curious, unnatural, matter-of-fact tone. "It'll bring them together about a mile east of there — in another minute."

And then Carleton spoke — master railroader, "Royal" Carleton, it was up to him then, all the pity of it, the ruin, the disaster, the lives out, all the bitterness to cope with as he could. And it was in his eyes, all of it. But his voice was quiet. It rang quick, peremptory, his voice — but quiet.

"Clear the line, Bob," he said. "Plug in the roundhouse for the wrecker — and tell them to send uptown for the crew."

Toddles? What did Toddles have to do with this?

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Well, a good deal, in one way and another. We're coming to Toddles now. You see, Toddles, since his fracas with Hawkeye, had been put on the Elk River local run that left Big Cloud at 9.45 in the morning for the run west, and scheduled Big Cloud again on the return trip at 10.10 in the evening.

It had turned cold that night, after a day of rain. Pretty cold — the thermometer can drop on occasions in the late fall in the mountains — and by eight o'clock, where there had been rain before, there was now a thin sheeting of ice over everything — very thin — you know the kind — rails and telegraph wires glistening like the decorations on a Christmas tree — very pretty — and also very nasty running on a mountain grade. Likewise, the rain, in a way rain has, had dripped from the car roofs to the platforms — the local did not boast any closed vestibules — and had also been blown upon the car steps with the sweep of the wind, and, having frozen, it stayed there. Not a very serious matter; annoying, perhaps, but not serious, demanding a little extra caution, that was all.

Toddles was in high fettle that night. He had been getting on famously of late; even Bob Donkin had admitted it. Toddles, with his stack of books and magazines, an unusually big one, for a number of the new periodicals were out that day, was dreaming rosy dreams to himself as he started from the door of the first-class smoker to the door of the first-class coach. In another hour now he'd be up in the despatcher's room at Big Cloud for his nightly sitting with Bob Donkin. He could see Bob Donkin there now; and he could hear the big despatcher growl at him in his bluff way: "Use your head — use your head — Hoogan!" It was always "Hoogan," never "Toddles." "Use your head" — Donkin was everlastingly drumming that into him; for the despatcher used to confront him suddenly with imaginary and hair-raising emergencies, and demand Toddles' instant solution. Toddles realized that Donkin was getting to the heart of things, and that some day he, Toddles, would be a great despatcher — like Donkin. "Use your head, Hoogan" — that's the way Donkin talked — "anybody can learn a key, but that doesn't make a railroad man out of him. It's the man when trouble comes who can think quick and think right. Use your _____"

Toddles stepped out on the platform — and walked on ice. But that wasn't Toddles' undoing. The trouble with Toddles was that he was walking on air at the same time. It was treacherous running, they were nosing a curve, and in the cab, Kinneard, at the throttle, checked with a little jerk at the "air." And with the jerk, Toddles slipped; and with the slip, the center of gravity of the stack of periodicals shifted, and they bulged ominously from the middle. Toddles grabbed at them — and his heels went out from under him. He ricocheted down the steps, snatched desperately at the handrail, missed it, shot out from the train, and, head, heels, arms and body going every which way at once, rolled over and over down the embankment. And, starting from the point of Toddles' departure from the train, the right of way for a hundred yards was strewn with "the latest magazines" and "new books just out to-day."

Toddles lay there, a little, curled, huddled heap, motionless in the darkness. The tail lights of the local disappeared. No one aboard would miss Toddles until they got into Big Cloud — and found him gone. Which is Irish for saying that no one would attempt to keep track of a newsboy's idiosyncrasies on a train; it would be asking too much of any train crew; and, besides, there was no mention of it in the rules.

It was a long while before Toddles stirred; a very long while before consciousness crept slowly back to him. Then he moved, tried to get up — and fell back with a quick, sharp cry of pain. He lay still, then, for a moment. His ankle hurt him frightfully, and his back, and his shoulder, too. He put his hand to his face where something seemed to be trickling warm — and brought it away wet. Toddles, grim little warrior, tried to think. They hadn't been going very fast when he fell off. If they had, he would have been killed. As it was, he was hurt, badly hurt, and his head swam, nauseating him.

Where was he? Was he near any help? He'd have to get help somewhere, or — or with the cold and — and everything he'd probably die out here before morning. Toddles shouted out — again and again. Perhaps his voice was too weak to carry very far; anyway, there was no reply.

He looked up at the top of the embankment, clamped his teeth, and started to crawl. If he got up there, perhaps he could tell where he was. It had taken Toddles a matter of seconds to roll down; it took him ten minutes of untold agony to get up. Then he dashed his hand across his eyes where the blood was, and cried a little with the surge of relief. East, down the track, only a few yards away, the green eye of a switch lamp winked at him.

Where there was a switch lamp there was a siding, and where there was a siding there was promise of a station. Toddles, with the sudden uplift upon him, got to his feet and started along the track — two steps — and went down again. He couldn't walk, the pain was more than he could bear — his right ankle, his left shoulder, and

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his back — hopping only made it worse — it was easier to crawl.

And so Toddles crawled.

It took him a long time even to pass the switch light. The pain made him weak, his senses seemed to trail off giddily every now and then, and he'd find himself lying flat and still beside the track. It was a white, drawn face that Toddles lifted up each time he started on again — miserably white, except where the blood kept trickling from his forehead.

And then Toddles' heart, stout as it was, seemed to snap. He had reached the station platform, wondering vaguely why the little building that loomed ahead was dark — and now it came to him in a flash, as he recognized the station. It was Cassil's Siding and there was no night man at Cassil's Siding! The switch lights were lit before the day man left, of course. Everything swam before Toddles' eyes. There — there was no help here. And yet — yet perhaps — desperate hope came again — perhaps there might be. The pain was terrible — all over him. And — and he'd got so weak now — but it wasn't far to the door.

Toddles squirmed along the platform, and reached the door finally — only to find it shut and fastened. And then Toddles fainted on the threshold.

When Toddles came to himself again, he thought at first that he was up in the despatcher's room at Big Cloud with Bob Donkin pounding away on the battered old key they used to practise with — only there seemed to be something the matter with the key, and it didn't sound as loud as it usually did — it seemed to come from a long way off somehow. And then, besides, Bob was working it faster than he had ever done before when they were practising. "Hold second" — second something — Toddles couldn't make it out. Then the "seventeen" — yes, he knew that — that was the life and death. Bob was going pretty quick, though. Then "CS — CS — CS" — Toddles' brain fumbled a bit over that — then it came to him. CS was the call for Cassil's Siding. Cassil's Siding! Toddles' head came up with a jerk.

A little cry burst from Toddles' lips — and his brain cleared. He wasn't at Big Cloud at all — he was at Cassil's Siding — and he was hurt — and that was the sounder inside calling, calling frantically for Cassil's Siding — where he was.

The life and death — the seventeen — it sent a thrill through Toddles' pain-twisted spine. He wriggled to the window. It, too, was closed, of course, but he could hear better there. The sounder was babbling madly.

"Hold second —"

He missed it again — and as, on top of it, the "seventeen" came pleading, frantic, urgent, he wrung his hands.

"Hold second" — he got it this time — "Number Two."

Toddles' first impulse was to smash in the window and reach the key. And then, like a dash of cold water over him, Donkin's words seemed to ring in his ears: "Use your head."

With the "seventeen" it meant a matter of minutes, perhaps even seconds. Why smash the window? Why waste the moment required to do it simply to answer the call? The order stood for itself — "Hold second Number Two." That was the second section of the Limited, eastbound. Hold her! How? There was nothing — not a thing to stop her with. "Use your head," said Donkin in a far-away voice to Toddles' wobbling brain.

Toddles looked up the track west — where he had come from — to where the switch light twinkled green at him and with a little sob, he started to drag himself back along the platform. If he could throw the switch, it would throw the light from green to red, and — and the Limited would take the siding. But the switch was a long way off.

Toddles half fell, half bumped from the end of the platform to the right of way. He cried to himself with low moans as he went along. He had the heart of a fighter, and grit to the last tissue; but he needed it all now — needed it all to stand the pain and fight the weakness that kept swirling over him in flashes.

On he went, on his hands and knees, slithering from tie to tie — and from one tie to the next was a great distance. The life and death, the despatcher's call — he seemed to hear it yet — throbbing, throbbing on the wire.

On he went, up the track; and the green eye of the lamp, winking at him, drew nearer. And then suddenly, clear and mellow through the mountains, caught up and echoed far and near, came the notes of a chime whistle ringing down the gorge.

Fear came upon Toddles then, and a great sob shook him. That was the Limited coming now! Toddles' fingers dug into the ballast, and he hurried — that is, in bitter pain, he tried to crawl a little faster. And as he crawled, he kept his eyes strained up the track — she wasn't in sight yet around the curve — not yet, anyway.

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Another foot, only another foot, and he would reach the siding switch — in time — in plenty of time. Again the sob — but now in a burst of relief that, for the moment, made him forget his hurts. He was in time!

He flung himself at the switch lever, tugged upon it — and then, trembling, every ounce of remaining strength seeming to ooze from him, he covered his face with his hands. It was locked — padlocked.

Came a rumble now — a distant roar. Growing louder and louder, reverberating down the canon walls — louder and louder — nearer and nearer. "Hold second Number Two. Hold second Number Two" — the "seventeen," the life and death, pleading with him to hold Number Two. And she was coming now, coming — and — and — the switch was locked. The deadly nausea racked Toddles again; there was nothing to do now — nothing. He couldn't stop her — couldn't stop her. He'd — he'd tried — very hard — and — and he couldn't stop her now. He took his hands from his face, and stole a glance up the track, afraid almost, with the horror that was upon him, to look. She hadn't swung the curve yet, but she would in a minute — and come pounding down the stretch at fifty miles an hour, shoot by him like a rocket to where, somewhere ahead, in some form, he did not know what, only knew that it was there, death and ruin and —

"Use your head!" snapped Donkin's voice to his consciousness.

Toddles' eyes were on the light above his head. It blinked red at him as he stood on the track facing it; the green rays were shooting up and down the line. He couldn't swing the switch — but the lamp was there — and there was the red side to show just by turning it. He remembered then that the lamp fitted into a socket at the top of the switch stand, and could be lifted off — if he could reach it!

It wasn't very high — for an ordinary-sized man — for an ordinary-sized man had to get at it to trim and fill it daily — only Toddles wasn't an ordinary-sized man. It was just nine or ten feet above the rails — just a standard siding switch.

Toddles gritted his teeth, and climbed upon the base of the switch — and nearly fainted as his ankle swung against the rod. A foot above the base was a footrest for a man to stand on and reach up for the lamp, and Toddles drew himself up and got his foot on it — and then at his full height the tips of his fingers only just touched the bottom of the lamp. Toddles cried aloud, and the tears streamed down his face now. Oh, if he weren't hurt — if he could only shin up another foot — but — but it was all he could do to hang there where he was.

What was that! He turned his head. Up the track, sweeping in a great circle as it swung the curve, a headlight's glare cut through the night — and Toddles "shinned" the foot. He tugged and tore at the lamp, tugged and tore at it, loosened it, lifted it from its socket, sprawled and wriggled with it to the ground — and turned the red side of the lamp against second Number Two.

The quick, short blasts of a whistle answered, then the crunch and grind and scream of biting brake-shoes — and the big mountain racer, the 1012, pulling the second section of the Limited that night, stopped with its pilot nosing a diminutive figure in a torn and silver-buttoned uniform, whose hair was clotted red, and whose face was covered with blood and dirt.

Masters, the engineer, and Pete Leroy, his fireman, swung from the gangways; Kelly, the conductor, came running up from the forward coach.

Kelly shoved his lamp into Toddles' face — and whistled low under his breath.

"Toddles!" he gasped; and then, quick as a steel trap: "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," said Toddles weakly. "There's — there's something wrong. Get into the clear — on the siding."

"Something wrong," repeated Kelly, "and you don't —"

But Masters cut the conductor short with a grab at the other's arm that was like the shutting of a vise — and then bolted for his engine like a gopher for its hole. From down the track came the heavy, grumbling roar of a freight. Everybody flew then, and there was quick work done in the next half minute — and none too quickly done the Limited was no more than on the siding when the fast freight rolled her long string of flats, boxes and gondolas thundering by.

And while she passed, Toddles, on the platform, stammered out his story to Kelly.

Kelly didn't say anything — then. With the express messenger and a brakeman carrying Toddles, Kelly kicked in the station door, and set his lamp down on the operator's table.

"Hold me up," whispered Toddles — and, while they held him, he made the despatcher's call.

Big Cloud answered him on the instant. Haltingly, Toddles reported the second section "in" and the freight

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"out" — only he did it very slowly, and he couldn't think very much more, for things were going black. He got an order for the Limited to run to Blind River and told Kelly, and got the "complete" — and then Big Cloud asked who was on the wire, and Toddles answered that in a mechanical sort of a way without quite knowing what he was doing — and went limp in Kelly's arms.

And as Toddles answered, back in Big Cloud, Regan, the sweat still standing out in great beads on his forehead, fierce now in the revulsion of relief, glared over Donkin's left shoulder, as Donkin's left hand scribbled on a pad what was coming over the wire.

Regan glared fiercely — then he spluttered:

"Who in hell's Christopher Hyslop Hoogan — h'm?"

Donkin's lips had a queer smile on them.

"Toddles," he said.

Regan sat down heavily in his chair.

"What?" demanded the super.

"Toddles," said Donkin. "I've been trying to drum a little railroading into him — on the key."

Regan wiped his face. He looked helplessly from Donkin to the super, and then back again at Donkin.

"But — but what's he doing at Cassil's Siding? How'd he get there — h'm? H'm? How'd he get there?"

"I don't know," said Donkin, his fingers rattling the Cassil's Siding call again. "He doesn't answer any more. We'll have to wait for the story till they make Blind River, I guess."

And so they waited. And presently at Blind River, Kelly, dictating to the operator — not Beale, Beale's day man — told the story. It lost nothing in the telling — Kelly wasn't that kind of a man — he told them what Toddles had done, and he left nothing out; and he added that they had Toddles on a mattress in the baggage car, with a doctor they had discovered amongst the passengers looking after him.

At the end, Carleton tamped down the dottle in the bowl of his pipe thoughtfully with his forefinger — and glanced at Donkin.

"Got along far enough to take a station key somewhere?" he inquired casually. "He's made a pretty good job of it as the night operator at Cassil's."

Donkin was smiling.

"Not yet," he said.

"No?" Carleton's eyebrows went up. "Well, let him come in here with you, then, till he has; and when you say he's ready, we'll see what we can do. I guess it's coming to him; and I guess" — he shifted his glance to the master mechanic — "I guess we'll go down and meet Number Two when she comes in, Tommy."

Regan grinned.

"With our hats in our hands," said the big-hearted master mechanic.

Donkin shook his head.

"Don't you do it," he said. "I don't want him to get a swelled head."

Carleton stared; and Regan's hand, reaching into his back pocket for his chewing, stopped midway.

Donkin was still smiling.

"I'm going to make a railroad-man out of Toddles," he said.