

When Big Swede calls the boys for sit down I figure on bullets but damned if he hasn't whipped up some big fours and black strap; I mind my manners and don't wonder where he got them. The duck's eggs and coffee look fine, fine enough warm the insides and muffle the snap of winter in the air.

"Gonna be a pitch blacker," says the genial old roundhead, "and the bulls are prowling, so let's damp this fire and hear some tales, you road apes. Come on, pay for dinner. Who's first?"

Ace and Sailor Jack: On the Overland

by Al B Dickerson

for Shirley M Dickerson
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He looks right at a brash cat, a stranger from the Land of Milk and Honey, who sprawls next to Blinky Bob. The cat stares at where I'm sittin', lamps all slitted like a bull spotting an axle rider. He takes a long swig, smacks his lips and says, "I want to hear about Ace and Sailor Jack on the Overland. I want to hear it from that road hog," he's pointing a finger at Finny Richard and I ponder how nine would suit him, "fore he up and ambles off again. How about it?" he says, still looking at Richard but a mite bit more respectful like he'd heard me thinking, "You were there, weren't you? You knew 'em, you seen it happen..."

Big Swede interrupts. The cat don't take mind to object. "I saw some of it," he says, "I seen him. The Overland Brakeman. I seen his eyes!" and Big Swede shudders like a pretty she-bo in a corner. Whistles of awe come from us assembled. I shiver like the wind was blowing through my blanket, cold as those glittery eyes.

Then comes a tappin'. It's fancy Lord Hardaker. "I am happy to say, my good chaps, that I did not witness this 'brakeman' with whom you are all so impressed, but I was eyewitness to the

very first meeting of London Ace and Sailor Jack. If Finny Richard is to regale us with the tale of Ace, Jack, Big Swede, Pumkinseed," he's talking about me, I'm Pumpkinseed, "and himself on the Overland, I could perhaps preface the tale?"

The assembled offer no objections. Hardaker stares into the empty tin cup he was tapping for attention, like he's reading something in the bottom, a Gypsy seer in a battered top hat. We wait amiably, listening to distant moos from the fields and whos from the branches and the far off, lonesome whistle of a black engine calling out to the night. I'm wondering who she is and where she's going when I hear Lord Hardaker telling the story's beginning. Here's his words as I remember.

Not being British (*says Lord Hardaker*), I suppose you fellows aren't as aware of accents as I and my countrymen. To you, an accent gives at best a vague approximation of one's birthplace. But to my countrymen and I, an accent reveals all. Upon hearing one single sentence we are able to divulge one's place of origin, economic class, social class and sometimes occupation. After disembarking in San Diego I felt surrounded by unreadable strangers, like a hound with a dull nose. It was a disconcerting and, frankly, lonely business.

I was keenly interested, then, to hear a clear London accent one winter's morning while visiting the old camp between Sacramento and Frisco. Chinaman's Stake. No, 'visiting' is incorrect, an evasive euphemism. My apologies. One must be honest in honest company. I was avoiding a certain creditor, then, and most keen to postpone a certain transaction he wished to conduct upon my kneecaps. Therefore, I had adopted the guise of a road man in order to avoid the unwanted surgery.

Remarkably, it was while ruminating upon the premature appearance of a certain ace at a most inopportune time that I stumbled, quite by chance, upon another. Amidst the babble of Chinese, Irish, Eastern, Mexican and Southern voices I was transfixed to hear, in a fine deep baritone, the clear tones of an upper-working-class denizen of North London!

"Oh no you don't!" I heard, "Stop right there!"

Driven by nostalgia for the home I shall never again see, my quickened pace brought me to a sturdy shack set back in the pines up on the north bank. I stopped, for an incident was

occurring.

His legs planted in a wide stance, a smooth-faced youth in a long baggy coat stood in the muddy clearing before the domicile's entrance. His expression was fiery and he brandished a stout club at a blubbering man splayed at his feet. The wretched thing had stolen a key from the lad, it soon transpired, though I never learned why he wanted it or, honestly, why London Ace (for it was he) valued it so highly as to commit such violence upon the pickpocket.

I saw the poor man unclench a trembling fist and pass something small and glittery to his vanquisher. Yes, I said 'poor man'. I felt pity for him. Really, he was the lowest of the low, a hopeless and probably brain-fevered shell of a man, the thing we assembled all fear to become. For London Ace I felt a measure of distaste. He was dirty and dressed in a shapeless assemblage of cast-off and undoubtedly stolen apparel but he radiated health. One, like myself, new to the road. And far too strong, in my estimation, to honorably deliver such a savage beating to such a lost wretch.

As Ace accepted the key and carefully secreted it deep within his layers I decided my distaste for violence out-trumped my homesickness and prepared to exit the scene. Had I done so, I would not have met Sailor Jack nor had the wherewithal to share this tale.

But I stayed, because that's when Ace surprised me.

He dropped the club and knelt in the mire. Then I heard him say, 'You poor daft bugger. Why'd you have to go and do a stupid thing like that? Let's get you out of the cold and put some food inside you.' With nearly matronly care he supported the thief and with a grunt of effort had him sitting up. But it was clearly difficult to gain purchase upon the slippery earth and I saw Ace look around. His eyes fell on me.

I would like to report I was already coming to his aid but alas, I am not commonly given to charitable notions. Not even the mention of food gave me the stomach, if you will, to offer assistance. But as I rifled my mind for honorable excuses a strong hand grasped my arm and a fourth character took the stage.

"Come on, stovepipes," said a low voice, and I turned to see a young man, little more than a boy, peering at me with wide-set eyes. "Let's help."

I did not resist. Though many years my junior, there was something in his manner that

brook no defiance. I allowed myself to be led to the scene and between us we soon had the thief on shaky feet. London Ace said his thanks and we helped the man inside.

Blinky Bob interrupts here. "Say, your lordship? If it helps, that crummy old Airdale's handle is Handy Vance. He got burnt skydiving in Frisco and he's cooling his heels upstate. He's put a shine on, ya know. Told me all about London Ace and the Sailor Kid." He gives the Lord a skeptical look. "Don't recollect him mentioning any toby there, though."

This sets me pondering, 'cause Blinky Bob just told us a lie. Or maybe a lie was told to him. Anyway, Lord Hardaker just shrugs and returns to his tale.

'Handy Vance', is it? Very well. Be that as it may, I was *most assuredly* there and my account is the unvarnished truth. I'll admit I played audience member for the events that followed, so I assume Handy Vance has merely forgotten my presence. It is not surprising; the man was insensate. He may never have noticed my presence.

Now, as I was saying, we assisted the derelict into the shack occupied by London Ace. Incidentally, I've no idea how he came to occupy it. I was in fact musing about this very subject and making conjectures about the size of club involved when the Sailor Kid softly whistled and outright asked about it.

"Say, kid, how did a punk like you rate these digs?" he asked.

London Ace balled his small fists and said, "Who are you calling a punk?"

"Peace, road brother. I'm just askin'. Don't be hooty."

"I am not a punk. I know what that means."

"Alright, alright. Sorry, then."

Ace dropped his mitts and said to help him with Handy Vance. The Kid nodded, remembering why we were there, and we arranged the old bum in the straw. Ace noticed the Kid stealing looks at him and looked right back, level but nervous. "*Here's one with secrets,*" I think.

I get the feeling faces are like accents to the Sailor Kid. He read London Ace like a professor reads a book. I watched, interested, and in my head I scripted their unspoken dialogue.

"Who are you?"

"Just another road man,"

I can see Jack is skeptical.

"You're just a new kid."

"So? What if I am?"

Out loud, Ace said, "Hand me that rag. And stop staring at me."

Jack's as tenacious as a terrier after a badger.

"No, not even that. You're no road kid at all."

Ace turned and wrapped Vance's head, tying a knot and looking satisfied. Then he looked back at Jack.

"No, not like you."

"What's in it for you, helping this bum? He ain't nothing." said the Kid.

"I knew it. You're a bozo."

"I've travelled farther than you."

"Prove it."

And London Ace stops swabbing the blood and locks eyes with Sailor Jack. I can see it from where I'm standing by the door.

Here's what the look on London Ace's face told me. He was far from home but not in the way that I was. Somehow it wasn't about rails and roads and oceans. It was about who he was, too, and that was tangled up in all the miles. I could see it, in that second, and it kicked me in my gut. Ace was farther away from where he belonged than anyone I've ever seen or hope to see. But there was something else, something maybe Ace didn't even know. A danger there, waiting down the road, something dark and powerful and sinister, and I wanted to be far away from Ace when he met it.

Jack saw it too, the distance and the Thing at the end, and it shut him up. He looked sad for a beat, feeling some connection with young Ace, like he was far from where he belonged, too. But the danger didn't faze him. Some bravado, some swashbuckling thirst for adventure, made him smile. Ace smiled back and I noticed his teeth were clean and white.

That's about it, gents. Jack gave me a jug to fill from the river but I never returned with it on account of an urgent errand I had just remembered. But I was there when the heroes of the Overland first met, no matter what Bob there says. And that look, that stare; well, they became brothers in front of my eyes.

I don't know what became of London Ace but I expect he's caught the Westbound or drank the black bottle. The Sailor Kid, though... that's another story. I enjoyed many an exhibition meal because I could spin a yarn about him. "Tell me about the Sailor Kid," the maiden Janes would say, or 'Sailor Jack' or 'Frisco Jack'. Or, as we all know him now, Mister Jack London.

The Nevada Cat snorts in derision. "Ol' Sailor Jack. Big fancy writer now, telling everybody he was King of the Road. You ask me, he never held a candle to A Number One."

Finny Richard, who's been awful quiet, says the cat needs to learn some respect. "Jack never claimed to be a better bo than A No-1, friend," he says in that book-learned speech of his.

Big Swede says, "Everybody knows the Kid learned it all from A No-1, and learned it good." He says it like 'Goot'. "That makes him Prince, at least."

"All I'm sayin' is you can't trust a story from a storyteller."

Well, that is a stumper for sure and got us all a-thinkin' to ourselves. Maybehaps we almost call it a night when the Swede holds up his beefy paw and says, "Harken!"

He's hearing something.

"Come on," he says, "Fire's going out."

Without another word he packs his bindle and everyone else does, too. In less than a turn the clearing's empty but for smoke and spirits.

So they file on up the bank and I follow, through the tree shadows to where the bright rails come out of the murk of Wright's Tunnel. We keep it quiet 'cause there's a lamp on in the general store. Big Swede makes a 'stay here' at us and creeps up to the line like the haint of an injun brave I once met. He puts a hand on the steel and bows his head. Big Swede can read the rails, I remember, 'cause I saw him do it on that night he saw the Brakeman. That time, he felt really scared of what was coming but the rest of us didn't take heed. I take mind of this and hope

everyone's listening now.

"Easy ride," he whispers, "pack of rattlers for Oakland. Lazy bulls. I'm flippin'. Come with me and we'll keep on with the tellin'. Sorry, your Lordship, but I guess you can hear the tale some other time."

Lord Hardaker doesn't say nothin', just turns back into the trees and hobbles off stiff-legged with his two walking sticks. Then the rest of us hear it, what Big Swede heard back at camp.

It starts as a whisper, a chiff-chiff-chiff-chiff you feel before you hear. Then another sound merges in, a clack-clack-clack that tries but never quite matches the rhythm it's reaching for. Chiff-chiff-clack-clack-chiff-clack-chiff on and on and on but never the same. Chiff-clack-chiff-chiff-clack. It's steam-driven pistons pushing steel wheels, that's the chiff, and the clack is when it hits the uneven joins between rails. Sometimes the rails meet up fine and the wheels whisper across but usually sunlight and weather and time have bent the ties they're anchored on and when the metal tonnage bears down they go clack-clack-clack like a telegraph. And that's when the other sounds get inside you, the rattles of chains and banging couplings and the urgent howl of the steam whistle.

There's a light picking out the brick tunnel walls now and the chiff-chiff-chiff-chiff turns to a chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff and then a chug-chug-chug and an echoed blast from the whistle as our iron mistress slows for the bend ahead. We pick our ground and wait. For just a blink time holds its breath and then the empty tunnel mouth is filled with smoke and light and noise being pushed ahead by something huge squeezing out and like a one-eyed dragon leaving its lair the train is there.

The huge motion and the vibration and the wind of her passage grab us and lift us up to a level of joy we could never sustain lest we burn to ashes. Here was life, brothers, here was the road, and here was our ride.

But we must be swift. Laughing, we begin our run as the line of cars moves past.

There goes the engine, her driver leaning out and looking ahead. There's a bull on the tender but he's lighting a roll-up and off the job. Then the rattlers, the unladen boxcars, hove into view and rumble past. Most are unlatched and open, airing out for future cargo. Dirty faces peer

out at us from some and we relax. This will be a complimentary ticket.

Our lady slows more, almost trundling now, and we accept her kind invitation. Big Swede effortlessly hoists himself aboard through an open side, takes Richard's hand and pulls him up and in. Easy for the Big Swede, near suicide for anyone smaller.

The Cat and Blinky Bob choose a safer route, swinging aboard onto a blind and up the deck ladder and down through the hatch. Then we're all there and in the dark I see glittering eyes and yellow grins celebrating our success as the chugs become chuffs and chuffs become chiffs as we speed down the steel road to the sea.

Big Swede starts talking.

I ain't got much to say (*says Big Swede*) but nobody but maybe Pumpkinseed got a better look at the Brakeman than me. And seeing how Pumpkinseed ain't talking I wager it's up to me. This you got to know, to understand, before Finny Richard has his turn. It's this, and it's God's own truth, cross my heart like a Papist – that Brakeman on the Overland that night? Him that we all speak of in whispers, though no one has laid eyes on him since that night? I think he was that danger ol' Hardaker told us he seed. I don't think he was a bull on the job, no siree. He was there, on that blasted snowy night, for one reason and one reason only. He was there to do evil. I think that lightning brought him down and took him back up after he was beat.

He was not a human man.

And Big Swede says this with such solemn conviction that we all sit there and the only sound for a true minute is chiff-chiff-chiff-clack-chiff. Then Blinky Bob chuckles. "Hell, Swede, if I'd knew this was gonna be a ghost story I'd have stayed by the fire and asked Lord G about his damned haunted theatre." The Cat says, "Shut up, Bob," and squints at where I'm sat and adds, "I reckon every story's a ghost story after it's happened. What about it, Swede? Was the Overland Brakeman a ghost?"

A ghost? No, I never had that idea. When I say he weren't human I mean he was alive, flesh and blood and knit like a mother's son but not altogether natural. Think of them freaks in Mr.

Barnum's roadshow. You got little midgets and dwarveses, you got the gator man and the wolf man, you got the lady with the beard. They look different but they be people. Folks like us inside where it counts. I could have a proper sit-down with them freaks and feel at home. But the Brakeman... oh, I saw his eyes. I thought they were blue, but that was just the lightnin' inside him shinin' out. And I was standin' too close to the lightnin'.

I be done. I ditched my buddies but I admit it and I live with it.

Now we're in the big valley and the hills are pulling away on each side. Lights like steady stars shine from farmhouses and villages and I'm thinking I like the warm glow of oil lamps better than the harsh glare of Edisons and I like an old steam cow like this one over those ugly new streamliners. Time's going to keep moving on if we can keep up or not and I wonder again what the world of man will look like when this ol' Pumpkinseed finally fades away.

The Nevada Cat might be watching the hills recede but he's really lookin' at a pocket watch. He gives Big Swede a sneaky nod and makes a one with his finger and then both of them glance over at Blinky Bob and Finny Richard.

I'd like to ruminate on this a bit but Finny Richard looks ready to talk.

Time for the main event.

I've never fathomed why (*says Finny Richard*), on that cold Spring morning in 1891, I handed my notice to Scratch and the gang, walked over to the Oakland yard and hopped an Eastbound freight, but that's I did. The notion came into my head, I followed the notion. That Mister Jung I saw down East last year would say it was my subconscious talking to me. That's the part of your brain that runs things, you know, but it does it when you aren't paying attention. So, while I was preoccupied with the good life – that is, stealing oysters and avoiding the Fish Patrol, well, my subconscious was telling me to drop anchor and go find Jack London, my old captain from our *Razzle Dazzle* days.

There's like a day and night of knowing things, do you follow? Either you know something or you don't, usually, but once that train got rolling I learned there was a third way of knowing, where it sort of slowly forms in your head like a developing photograph or, let's say, a day

coming on. At first, when there was just a dim glow making flat silhouettes of the Eastern hills, I found myself certain I knew where where Jack was. Then little glowing edges came on the morning clouds and I suddenly had an insight. My lucky run at the tables was a sign. All those Aces I'd been dealt meant something. Maybe, I thought, I was going to win a few hands. That was a pleasing prospect.

So the sun was shining and I was feeling happy, secure in my knowing, right when I entered that muddy clearing in Chinaman's Stake and that Lord Hardaker pushed by with an empty vase and a white face.

He turned and said, "Here, my good man. Take this and fill it." Then he pointed to a shanty in the trees. "There's an injured man."

And you know? Somehow the wind came right of my sails. I was far from home, among people I didn't at the time want to associate with and I didn't appreciate being passed a task. Even from a man who, like my grandpap, had a Northumberland accent.

Blinky Bob, I don't know that Handy Vance you spoke about and I hate to cast aspersions but I can tell you now that the fellow's a liar. The man who was snoring away in London Ace's shack there on Chinaman's Claim wasn't some skydiver caught in the act. Hell, no. That was somebody else entirely, and I expect you might not believe me but it's true.

Ol' Hardaker, you see, he missed all the action. He's been walking around, best as he can at least, all these years with the wrong damned story in his head. What London Ace told me was this – he'd found himself a patch of that thin sun and took a Mexican *siesta* to warm his bones when he felt fingers fishing around his pockets. Well, London Ace was a man of action and he was on his feet swinging but it was too late. The miscreant was already lighting for the trees when suddenly that ol' derelict was there in his path. Not by happenstance, you mind. Ace had fed him the day before, so when he woke up that morning sick as a dog it was Ace he went to for helping. When he saw that thief creep up and start rummaging ol' Pumpkinseed grew himself a backbone.

That got you, Bob, didn't it? Yep, that old rummy wasn't old or a rummy at all. And he sure wasn't no Paul Bunyan named Handy Vance. Our man Pumpkinseed's famous now and

rightly so, but back then he was just a sick lamb who, sad to say, was just a few weeks out from the nuttery.

The Nevada Cat's squinting at me again and I see the Big Swede frownin' 'mind yer manners' at him. I do surely hate being noticed and I doubly hate being talked about like I'm not there, but I ignore the both of 'em and listen to the story, even though I don't like being in it.

Well, backbone he might have had, but Pumpkinseed's opponent had a stout old club. I know which one I'd wager on. Pumpkinseed's charity won him a mighty whack on the thinker. Give him credit, he didn't go down, not right away. First he managed to grab that key. Then Ace ran up yelling murder and the snake wriggled away, dropping the club.

Ace hollered, "No you don't!" and "Stop, Thief," or some such, and brandished the club at the woods, and that's when Lord Hardaker walked up. He jest seen the tail end of it, you see, and drew conclusions therefrom. Let that be lesson to you.

Like I said before, I was coming into it as Hardaker was getting out. I went down to that creek and filled the vase he'd handed me. Then went back to the clearing. I gave a knock on the shack door and moseyed right in.

"That was fast. Give me the water," said Jack, not looking up until London Ace said, "Hang on! Who're you?" Then Jack was all smiles. "Is that Swimming Dick I see? Come here, you old pirate!" and there was a minute of backslaps and handshakes. London Ace just shook his head in a kind of wonderment. He kind of reminded me of ladies at a base-ball meet, watching their menfolk hooting and not quite understanding why but happy for them just the same.

Well, Jack and I rounded out the reunion with a promise to visit his Road brother Big Swede later so I could sample something Jack called 'white mule'. Well, he said 'sample' but knowing Jack it meant drink a quart or two. Or maybe he meant sample. The liquor almost killed Jack a couple of times that I recollected and there was talk he'd joined the league.

Then London Ace said, "We still need water, he's burning up," and Jack volunteered to go fetch some. So he took a cup and some rags and said, "Be right back," and I was there, more or less alone, with Ace. He looked at me and stuck out a hand and we did the shaking thing. I'd

been pulling ropes since the Sisters kicked me out and my hands were big and calloused. London Ace had soft little hands like a girl but there was some fiber there, too.

My eyes had gotten used to the dim light in there and I got a good look at Ace's mug while we were shaking and I got another weird brain kick. I think Ace felt it too, because he said, "Have I met you?" and the words came out of my mouth - "I was just thinking that. You been to Frisco?"

"No," he said, "I've only been here." and I don't remember thinking how odd that sounded.

"Where are my manners?" he said then, and we shook again. "I'm Ace, but they call me London Ace 'cause of my accent."

I said my pleased to meet you and started to tell him I was Swimming Dick, because I've been Swimming Dick ever since I beat Jack across the bay but something deep in my memories says another name and I'm a little scared of it and between my brain and my mouth I added a little to it. "I'm Finny Richard," I said, and it sounded true enough.

Then a weak voice said, "Punkinseeds" and "Shuttemup" and Ace and I laughed a little but not to be mean. It was our sick friend, of course, and we reckoned he was saying his introductions.

"Let's say, 'Pumpkinseed'," said Ace and I said, "I don't know... 'Shut Up' is a pretty good hobo name, don't you think?" He snorted at that but we all know what stuck.

Jack returned with Big Swede in tow. Our man Swede had a head of hair back then and wasn't so big below decks as he is now. But he was just as sharp. He fussed around Pumpkinseed for a minute or two and told us his head was okay, just a knot, but he was deadly feverish and to get him out in the sun, wrap him up so he sweats and make him drink. "And start a fire," he said. We did those things and the wood was crackling when he came back with a little kettle. Inside was water and tree bark. "Willow bark," he said, "We're making willow tea."

And you know, with the five of us there – the sick boy Pumpkinseed, the mystery kid Ace, the two hobos Big Swede and Sailor Jack and then me, nothing at the time but an oyster pirate far from the bay – well, it was like some kind of puzzle just missing one piece to make a picture. I

think we were all feeling the same way. We were all being quiet, thinking and sizing each other up, waiting for the tea to boil. It felt like meeting a bunch of distant relatives for the first time. Awkward, but pleasing at the same time.

I have to say something about Pumpkinseed. We finally got him out in the sun, like Swede said, and I got my first real good look at him. He was one odd looking fellow. Not tall but real thin, with long skinny arms sticking out of his coat-sleeves. His face was sharp as a hatchet, and big-pored, and his hair was grey. Maybe that's why Hardaker thought he was old.

Pumpkinseed had his eyes half-open and he was looking at each of us in turn, not moving his head but shifting his eyes around. Man, those eyes. You know, I couldn't tell you what color they were. Every time I looked they were a different shade. Blue, green, brown and, I swear, yellow. When he looked at me they were pure black and I felt like a goose had walked over my grave. I realized right then that for some reason Pumpkinseed didn't much care for me so I decided I didn't much care for him either.

I was trying to figure that out when I saw everybody looking at the edge of the clearing. A wizened old Celestial was standing there, trying to get our attention by being unobtrusive like they do. He looked us over and pointed a long fingernail at Ace, who jumped up like he was stung on the rear. His face lit up under all the dirt.

"Did the Doctor send you? Is it time?"

"You will answer a riddle," said the Chinaman. Ace gave an excited nod.

"Sun Emperor's bane. His name is?"

"Cain," said Ace, right away.

"You will answer another riddle." Ace nods again. I'm thinking that last puzzle piece is coming.

"Has a map but half his wits. His name is?"

"Glitts!"

"Also acceptable, 'bilge bag'. You will answer one more riddle."

Ace nodded and waited. The Chinaman took his time, then pulled a piece of paper out of his sleeve.

"Who are you waiting for?" he said, and Ace snatched the paper and started reading.

The old man sniffed the air and wandered over to the fire. He nodded at Big Swede, winked at Pumpkinseed and then pulled a little lacquered case out of a pocket. He extracted a little bottle and unstopped it, raising an eyebrow at Big Swede, who nodded his permission. A couple drops in the willow tea and the old man sniffed, smiled and put his gear away.

That's when the real last puzzle piece dropped into place, because that's when London Ace said, "The Overland? What the hump is the Overland?"

Did you fellows know that the first great intercontinental railroad was laid over the old wagon trails? Yep. All them years ago folk would hitch up their wagons back in Saint Louis, pile on everything they owned and turn their backs on everything they knew. In front of them was endless prairies and rivers that needed fording and high mountain passes and for a good number of 'em death was waiting there, too. Death from burning heat and biting cold and hunger and injun axes. And they knew it, or at least the sensible ones did. But they followed the Sun anyway, mile by mile, day by day. And brothers, it took forever. Months of Sundays. Suckling babes from Saint Louis would be taking their first little steps when the wagons finally pulled into Frisco.

That's all over now. Since Mister Dodge and Mister Montague shook hands after that golden spike was driven, well, a man with some money in his pocket can ride in comfort in a velvet-lined Pullman, sipping wine from a clean glass and watch the world go by like it's one of them moving pictures. Right on the same trails as his grandbears struggled on, but easy and quick.

That's a train, ain't it? You're in one place, you step inside a box and cool your heels, and before long you're stepping out in another place. After a while, it doesn't seem like real travelling. Even worse, after a longer while it makes all those places you're going to and coming from seem less real, too, doesn't it? And that's when a man forgets what's important and gets caught up in that rat race, all those timetables and fripperies.

You're thinking, "Not us," and I'm agreeing with you. We ride the trains too, but we ride them *real*. Just like those old folks in their wagons, we aren't supposed to be here. We have conductors and brakemen instead of injuns but we still bake and freeze and starve. We ride in

the air, up on deck, or under on the rods. We ride with a door open to let the smell of the world in and brothers, we feel the miles. Yes sir, I reckon we're the true sons of the pioneers, not them tea-sipping society dandies reading their stock market reports and fretting about their shares and investments and if the trains going to be five minutes late. Dead inside, every mother's son.

Now you're thinking, "Shut your gob and get on with the story," right? Fair enough. I do rattle on.

Later that night, after tossing his biscuits from the tea, a cold dunk in the river, some of Big Swede's stew and some cleanish new rags, Pumpkinseed was a new man. Though it might just have been what the Celestial put in the tea, I don't know. Up and talking, he was. And what he was saying was, well, sort of putting me off his company. Not what he was saying, really, just the way he was saying it.

The story was this. He never knew who his folks were. He'd been abandoned at an orphanage down in Los Angeles. When he was ten or so the sisters had him committed to a nuttery outside of Frisco and he'd been there ever since. But a few days ago a new man came to work there and he was careless about locking up, so Pumpkinseed found himself at liberty. All his life he'd heard those distant whistles blow but he'd never seen a train up close. And he wanted to. He reckoned he'd be happy riding trains for the rest of his life. But he didn't have money, just the stolen clothes he wore, so he couldn't buy a ticket. He knew about hobos, though, so he came searching and ended up here with a new name that he reckoned fit right well.

But, good Lord, the way he talked! You heard him, Big Swede. It was like listening to a dozen people all taking turns. "I didn't mind being in the asylum," he'd say in a normal boy's voice, but then, "I got on well with the doctor," would come out in this girly falsetto followed right away by some deep old codger saying, "and the staff were kind to me because I made no trouble." He never seemed to notice the changes, just kept on talking. We all looked at him funny but London Ace, at least, seemed real interested.

“At least you're feeling better,” he said, “so you should come with me tomorrow. I'm meeting the Doctor,” he says it like a name, “in San Francisco to catch a ship and I bet he'd like to meet you.”

Sailor Jack perked up at that. That boy had salt water in his veins. “What ship?” he asked, “Where are you bound?”

London Ace shrugged. “The letter doesn't say.”

“What does it say?” Jack wanted to know.

“Just to take the Westbound Overland Express from Sacramento to the San Francisco station and meet him there. And to be careful.”

Sailor Jack whistled. “That's good advice on the Overland. Those bulls are mean.”

He waved away this thought and asked, “Who is this 'Doctor', anyway? What is he to you?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Only way to find out something.”

Now, while London Ace was telling us about this Doctor of his, I was coming to two realizations. The first came into my head as Ace was telling us he was shanghaied to Iceland and put to work in an ice plant. The boss there, that fellow Cain from the Chinaman's riddle, was mustering an army to overthrow the government or something and was fixing to recruit him. Then that Doctor showed up and rescued him. “*You're not telling everything,*” I thought, and found out I was right, because of what he told us next.

Ace then told us he'd been travelling with this Doctor ever since, and that they got separated from their luggage in Frisco, it being left on a train. “It's a big blue box,” he said, “have you seen it?” His Doctor left him here and said wait for a message and that's what he did. But earlier, I remembered, Ace told me he'd not been to Frisco. At the time this made me suspicious. I know why he said it now, and I'll tell you gents soon, but at the time it was troublesome.

But you know what's funny? Ace's story was somehow seeming more and more like something we belonged in. Something we'd always belonged in. Him, Big Swede, Sailor Jack and I, that is. Pumpkinseed was something else, something really important but not one of us. Do you understand? He was there but he wasn't part of the pack? I don't want to exaggerate – it

was cobwebby, slippery to the grip, but it was like hearing that story made us characters in it. And that, near as I could figure, made us as nutty as Pumpkinseed. I didn't care much for that notion.

Anyways...

Now the Doctor's message had been delivered, and I decided there was nothing for it but for me to be on the Overland tomorrow, too. So, when Sailor Jack said, "What an adventure! I'm coming with you!" and Pumpkinseed and Big Swede said they were coming too, well, nobody thought nothing of it when I counted myself in.

The old freight's rattling' along and from a car up ahead we hear off-key singin' but in here not a soul of us makes a peep. Listenin' to Finny Richard tellin' his side of things, well, it was throwing light into all sorts of corners that had been dark for near twenty years. And danged if it didn't just make that long-ago night stranger than before.

Finny Richard takes a pull from his canteen. Big Swede and the Nevada Cat share that knowin' look again and Blinky Bob catches it and looks a mite worried.

As for me, Pumpkinseed, I just sit and recollect how, ever since I come outta that fever, somethin' was scaring me deep, 'cause my four new friends had somethin' in common that not a one suspected. Good Lord. I surely do know about takin' on passengers I don't want, but this one? This one was bigger than the sky and meaner than Scratch and all his devils. And it was sneaky. It wasn't telling 'em what to do, no sir, though I suspected it stage-whispered a thing or two to Richard. No, what this thing did was cause happenstance to line folk up, knowin' how they'd act so they'd do what it wanted without them even knowin' it. And then, when everybody was sayin' they'd go on the Overland, I said I was goin' too. Then I thought about new men and unlocked doors and I wished I hadn't.

I see Finny Richard's getting ready to talk again and before I start listenin' I thank the Good Lord that that Thing, that Whatever, that Who, is gone out of the man. 'Cause something's going on here 'tween the Cat and the Swede and Blinky Bob and it's got to do wit' the tale we're tellin' and it's got to do with Richard. And I would surely hate to see that Thing riled up and throwin' curses.

I don't know what they got planned, but I reckon it's almost time. Or time for reckoning.

If you illiterates (*said Finny Richard*) had your letters you could read Mister Jack London tell the next part of this story himself. You know how he was always scribbling on those papers of his? Well, he collected all that writing and made a book that's called, 'The Road'.

He thought dodging the bulls on the Overland was a great game, a claim to fame. The notion of stopping that great train, loaded with passengers and government mail and a ten-man crack crew, just filled him with glee. He told all about it in his book, except he never sent a publisher the story we're telling tonight. Told me he never would. "People will believe most any tall tale, Dick," he said to me a couple years back. "I've written stories about plague scouring the world and war in the Pacific and ghosts and living mammoths and all manner of fantastic things. But if I was to claim for more'n a minute that such things be true, well, I'd be a laughing stock."

"But it happened, Jack!" I said, "The Brakeman was real and there's folk who were there who saw him!"

He picked his words. "Who's gonna believe a bunch of aging bums? Even if we could find 'em? Any respectable folk on the train that night slept right through it. It's true, Dick, I did some asking. Not a soul remembers a thing except that big bang of lightning and then waking up in their seats. The crew know a bit more but it's their jobs if they talk 'bout it. 'sides, I told Ace I'd never tell the tale and I'm a man of my word."

Then he got quiet, turned into that brooding Jack we all seen now and then.

"It's too terrible, anyways, and I don't want that Brakeman given any regard, and I want the dead to rest in peace."

The Overland Express, a day and a half out of Reno, Nevada, rolled out of Sacramento at Three-Fifty in the afternoon. Between there and Frisco were dozens of little station towns like Davis and Dixon and San Pablo, where her early morning sister would stop. But this was the Express. When those folks stepped aboard in Sacramento they did so with the assurance of the Union Pacific company that the train wasn't stopping until it reached Frisco and the bay.

That was the plan, leastways. Those millionaire rail barons and their time table planners

and their switch men and engineers, well, they hadn't reckoned on Sailor Jack, had they?

They sure as hell hadn't reckoned on the Brakeman and what he did.

I hope the finding out made them choke on their cigars.

We knew we had to wait for the sun to be down before we could make our move, and we knew we had to be miles away before we could make our move, so there was no rest for us that night. We cut out across marshes and over hills, near as we could as the crow flies. We were already tuckered out, young Pumpkinseed especially, when we got lucky and appropriated a little skiff upriver from Suisun Bay and the rest, to coin a phrase, was smooth sailing. Jack, his hair blowing in the wind, filled us in on his plan as we bounced over the waves.

“Out of Sacramento,” he said, “the Overland keeps a full head of steam as the tracks there are straight as shots down the big valley. But then there's Benecia and the Overland's got to throttle down to follow the older, twisty rails along the bay and the river, right?”

None of us knew except Big Swede and he said, “Sure, true enough.”

“Well,” said Jack, “I've watched the Overland cross the narrows on that trestle and as soon as she hits that big curve west she slows down to a crawl. I reckon I can flip on there, no problem.”

“Won't they see you?” asked Ace.

“Exactly!” said Sailor Jack, “You don't get it? 'No transient rides the Overland Express. Your safety and comfort are guaranteed'. I read that in a pamphlet. It just ain't done. Point of pride, I guess, but right unsocial to us downtrodden folk.”

“But what happens when they see you?” Ace wanted to know.

“That's the beauty of it. If I'm in that first blind behind the baggage car they have to stop the train to pitch me off.”

“Wicked!”

“And then they got to send the brakemen fore and aft a mile with warnin' lamps...”

“I begin to see...” says Ace, laughing, and Jack tells us the rest.

“Just a minute,” said Big Swede, after Jack was done. “We have this fine little boat. If

London Ace needs to get to Frisco, well, why don't we just say to hell with the Overland and travel in style?"

Man, if you could've seen Jack and Ace's faces. Swede took one look and buttoned himself up. Jack and Ace were having their adventure and no amount of common sense was stopping them.

It's all built up now but back in the '90's the coastline opposite Benecia was still pretty wild. Lots of scraggly trees and fishing shacks and grassy dunes, all fine cover for a band of enterprising hoboes and fellow travellers. We all took the time to rummage around and Swede came up with some fine stout boards he set about whittling grooves in, riding the rods being part of Jack's plan, you see.

Darkness settled in the East and a cold wind blew gusty from the sea like it was trying to push the night away. That's when the others, I think, started feeling something unnatural was gathering. Big Swede read the rails and his face got white. He tried to warn them but Ace and Sailor Jack still weren't having it. It was about then, the setting Sun sneaking behind towering black clouds, that the first few flakes of snow started blowing in.

Well, right after sunset we saw a bright light in the distance, blinking and twinkling as it moved behind things betwixt us, and we knew it was the Overland's lamp. Her steam trumpet played Wooh, wooh, woo, wooh as she crossed the road on the other shore. We all scurried away to our appointed places.

The Union Pacific Overland Express! One big ol' locomotive with a built-in coal tender, two baggage cars, club car, dining car and about a dozen Pullmans and then the Caboose. The crew would number a dozen or so. Up front in the cab, the driver, or engineer, and the fireman. Staggered along up top were three brakemen, expertly synchronizing individual brakes so all the cars slow down at the same rate. And not too much our concern, the conductor and his crew of porters and barkeeps and cooks. Oh, and maybe a guard on the U.S. Mail. I guess I didn't really need to tell you all that.

Anyway, the Overland hove into view and just like Jack said, she slowed down as soon as she cleared the trestle and entered the big curve.

Jack went running alongside, brazen as you please, and swung up between the two baggage cars. There aren't any end doors on this kind of car, so they they couldn't come through the train at him. Right away I heard a whistle from the caboose. He'd been spotted, right away. The brakemen leaped to their posts as the engineer sounded a series of short toots.

Now, if he'd been an evil man all that engineer needed to do was tap the throttle down just so and every car in the line would have squeezed together like an accordion for just long enough to break every rib in Jack's body. But he was not. He alerted the brakemen up on deck to start braking slow. It took some precious, valuable time, but the train stopped. It sat there on the track, the escaping steam huffing like breathing, like a big monster angry that it had to stop running. A brakeman ran aft with a lantern and another ran ahead. The third and last went for Jack's hidey-hole but when he shone the light it was empty.

Meanwhile, Swede was on the other side of the train, under the last Pullman, sliding boards over the struts. He'd carved the grooves perfectly and they fit right on. He lashed them tight with rawhide. Then he rolled back out and started running up the track through the dark. The rest of us were already up there, trying not to laugh when the brakeman with his lantern walks by and trips on a tie.

Four long whistles, then five. The brakemen were called back, the train snorted and she was moving again. Jack had already sprinted far ahead.

Now, one of the brakemen was riding Jack's blind spot. But there was no way off the blind once the train got up to speed so the man had to jump off and catch the caboose as it rolled past. The second he dropped off, Jack and Ace jumped on from the other side. Now, that might have been that for the rest of us catching a ride, but Jack had figured on the crew peeking at his cards. Sure enough, a brakeman was hiding on top of the baggage car. He couldn't get down to them without risking his life so he blew his whistle and the Overland ground to a halt again. Laughing like hyenas, Ace and Jack sprinted ahead into the night. Ace even waved at the driver.

But now two brakemen were in pursuit and that left only one who, by strict regulations, had no choice but to go in the other direction with his warning lantern until the driver called him back. We watched him go, his light catching the falling snow and making it shine like stars in the

darkness, till he faded from view.

There were faces peering out of the Pullman cars, folks wondering why they'd stopped, so we angled in from behind the caboose. That was Swede, Pumpkinseed and me. We rolled under to where Swede had put the boards and climbed on. Me and Pumpkinseed were nervous – hell, who wouldn't be? Riding the rods is the worst ticket there is – but Swede whispered encouragement and we settled in and grabbed hold.

“Grip with one hand,” Swede told us amateurs, “and put the other in your armpit to keep it warm. When you start feelin' numb in the other, just switch. And get ready. It's going to be bumpy, windy and noisy and that ground is gonna seem real damned close. Just concentrate and for God's sake don't fall asleep!”

The driver called the brakemen back.

Then I heard chuckling and whispering and like a couple naughty school-boys Jack and Ace came sliding under the car. Jack climbed up but Ace kind of stared. I don't think he'd really realized what riding the rods meant until then.

Then I heard Big Swede saying, “Just climb on the boards and grip with one hand. Put the other in your armpit to keep it warm. When you start feelin' numb in the other, just switch. And get ready. It's going to be bumpy, windy and noisy and that ground is gonna seem real damned close. Just concentrate and for God's sake don't fall asleep!”

Except halfway through the speech I looked and it wasn't Big Swede at all. It was Pumpkinseed, saying every word and exactly in Swede's voice. I shuddered a little. Of all the people to be stuck under a train with!

“Pumpkinseed, I hope you ain't planning to go talking in my voice any time soon,” I said.

“No sir, Mister Finny,” he said in his regular voice, “I don't do it on purpose, nohow, but I'll try my best to avoid it.”

I felt a little mean sayin' that to him and was thinking of a pleasantry when the engine brakes hissed and we shuddered a bit and started moving. Ace grabbed hold then and Jack pulled him up. We started picking up speed and I began to hear the ground hissing by less than a foot below me. I shut my eyes and grabbed on with both hands, Swede and the parrot be damned.

I'm watching ol' Swede and maybe we just hit a rough rail join but maybe he nods to agree. I understand; yessir, I do. It's a mite discombobulating to have something new and strange thrown up in your path all unexpected. For Richard and Swede and the rest, the thing was me. For me, it was the thing that started happening soon as that ground started moving by under us.

I hear tell that Mother Nature don't make straight lines, that geometry's something mankind fashioned to bind her, and I reckon I can see that even if it ain't always true. Man put straight rails on the earth but he don't tell the wild geese how to fly, does he? Anyway, folk's minds don't have much in the way of lines and squares, either. A few lunatics I know come close but they had nothing on the mind I detected just then, just as the Overland's wheels started turnin'.

It was above me and near the front of the train. One second it wasn't there and the next, it was. A mind it was, with thoughts and errands and memories but cold and hard and full of straight lines. I remember thinking right off that if a man built a machine brain it would be like this. All Greek logic and no proper feelings.

And it was lookin' at me.

We were off. Plan was, we'd ride the rods all the way to Frisco. When the Overland made the station we'd drop off and run like the wind. Then we'd look up Ace's Doctor. That was the plan, it was. And for just a minute, before the train had built her full head of steam, it seemed certain to be a good one.

Then, just as somebody said, "Yoo-Hoo!", like they were having a good time, we heard a big deep rumble that wasn't coming from the train.

"Thunder-snow!" Jack yelled, and then there came an almighty *Crack!* and a lurch, like the hammer of Thor had smacked the Overland broadsides. My ears rang and I felt slow and squeezed like I was deep underwater. But somehow I still heard Ace yelling and I craned my head to see and I wished I hadn't.

Richard stops and says his mouth is dry, does anyone have a drink. Maybe it is but I know he's

really just stalling, tryin' to put what happened next into words.

I know the feeling. That was me that said "Yoo-Hoo" and I was having a good time. You see, right after that machine head looked at me it was like a dam burst and I was downriver. All my control went away and suddenly every living person on that train, 'cept a few I'll tell you 'bout in a sec, just started flooding into my head. I had dozens and dozens of new friends and that "Yoo-Hoo" was me sayin' "How do". But something was wrong. Those folk up in the train weren't just vistin', no. They was comin' to stay. And that was wrong, even though I somehow knew that whoever made this happen didn't mean no harm.

For some reason, somethin' to do with that machine brain, I reckon, my friends here beneath the Overland were unaffected. But it wasn't just them. Right above us in the car there was a person I could only glimpse out of the corner of my mind's eye. And he or she had something to do with plannin' what was happenin' and he or she wasn't affected, either.

So there I was puzzling over mysteries and enjoying my new friends when the thing Richard don't know how to talk 'bout happened.

I heard an almighty Crack! Like lightnin' and that logical mind atop the train screamed and I heard Ace yell something about metal and my hands, which felt far away, let loose of the rods. But it didn't do no good. Something new had arrived, some terror that made me and all within me scream, and then one by one but impossibly fast they was yanked out of me and cast away. Oh, I felt so hollow for a second, then I knowed I wasn't because I, Pumpkinseed, was still there.

I was myself, just myself, for the first time ever.

My voices, my stories. They were gone, but where did they go?

It was coming from the front of the train and racing back at us.

A web of sparks and lightning, blue and white, running and dancing over every piece of metal and getting closer by the second. I froze, just useless, at the sight of it. Then Ace yells, "Let go! Let go the metal!" and I gripped my board, teetering on top of it as the snowy ground zipped by under me. I saw the others doing the same just as the lightning broke over us like a harbor wave. But holding on the wood instead of the metal, we were safe.

All but one of us, that is. Even though he'd listened and let go of the rods, that lightning jumped the gap and went crawling all over Pumpkinseed. And he started to scream. Scream in dozens of voices at once.

My God, my God. It wasn't just Pumpkinseed screaming. That lightning was screaming, too, and somehow I knew that those screams were the crew and the people up in the Overland having their brains, minds, souls, whatever – having *themselves* pulled out of their bodies and tossed out into the cold dark to swirl like snowflakes in the wake of the speeding train.

And then it was just gone, or maybe we left it behind. There was a minute where everything was quiet, where nothing made a sound. Then I heard Pumpkinseed say, in his own small boy's voice, "I'm alone." Then he laughed. "I'm alone! It's just me in here! They's gone!" and he whooped like an injun. And everybody looked at him with their own expressions, happy, curious, you know. But he sounded so relieved and carefree I was glad for him.

But then he hushed up and one by one we all stopped looking at him and up at the undercarriage of the Pullman.

And the whole world axis tilted.

We'd ridden adventure into fear and then wonder but now, well, now we all felt something new, some awful horror, knitting itself together in the car above us, like a lamp genie making a body out of smoke. It was something that rode that lightning down, some thing from outside of what we can see with our eyes.

There's no way we should have been able but we heard footsteps in the carriage above. They started tentatively and then got more confident, like something learning to walk. They stomped to the door connecting to the next Pullman. He heard it swing open and shut and the thing, the Brakeman, went out on the little deck. We were all listening, hard as we could, just hoping it would go away.

We hung on as the world flew by under us.

Then, one little sound.

I'd never been a hobo but I'd heard the stories and I guessed what that *chink!* sound signified. Then I heard that mad chuckle and I knew.

"Dear sweet Jesus," I heard Swede say.

The Brakeman had tied a coupling pin to a rope and lowered it down the gap between cars. That noise was it hitting the ties racing by between the cars. It wasn't just a single noise now. No. That pin, all ten or twelve steel pounds of it, was banging and rattling and clinking now, as it bounced along the ground. Then the Brakeman fed it more rope and it bounced higher and harder. Then it was striking the ground and the undercarriage in a wild ricochet that got faster and faster as the train increased in speed.

"We're dead men," said Big Swede, "Fare well, good brothers."

That bolt would split our boards or break our bones if it hit us true. You've all seen it, seen those broken bodies on the line, those skulls staved in. It's murder, it is, and sadistic and evil. But not as evil as the voice we heard next.

"No free rides!"

It was like the voice of a storm, like a Texas twister born of thunder and wrapped in lightning. And the Brakeman, having spoke his decree, fell silent and played out more rope. The pin came closer.

"What are we gonna do?" yelled Ace and Jack said, "Die!"

"What!?"

"No! Wait a minute! Ace! There!"

I didn't see what Jack was fussing about on account of my eyes being closed again but I did hear a sort of muffled, hollow pounding.

"Grab my knife outta my belt!" yelled Jack, "Pry it with that!"

"I'm tryin', I'm tryin'!"

"Try faster!"

That's when I hear a sharp *crack!* and Jack yelled and I dared a look. The pin had busted Jack's board into splinters and he was hanging directly on the strut. His heels were bouncing off the icy ground itself.

"*That's that for Jack,*" I thought, when Ace yelled, "Hang on! Almost got it! There!" and suddenly there was light glowing down. I saw Ace haul himself up into the carriage through a little square maintenance hatch.

Jack was already losing his grip when that pin hit him in the meaty part of his leg. *Smack!*

He howled and lost his grip with one hand. Now he was bouncing on the ties with his hips and I knew he was seconds from being knocked out and that would be the end of him. But old Jack, even being just a boy then, well nobody's got more zest. Even with what I figured was a broken leg, he grunted and got ahold with his other hand and then got his good leg up, safe unless that pin smacked him again.

Seeing his fight for life unloosed my vocal cords.

"Ace!" I yelled, "Where the hell are you? Get Jack, damn it!"

He heard me. He reached down for Jack to take his hand but Jack couldn't let go without slipping off and that was certain death. The pin was bouncing all around him. I started to crawl forward, cursing my luck, when Pumpkinseed beat me to it. He made his way across those boards agile as an ape, grabbed Jack's wrists and pulled him up. Ace reached down and dragged him inside. Pumpkinseed was about to follow when the heavy coupling pin banged on a tie and shot straight up, too fast to evade. It grazed Pumpkinseed's head and shot right up through that hatch. Pumpkinseed sagged on the board, knocked out and not balanced.

I found my courage and started moving toward him. Then I saw something that made me laugh at the sheer cussedness of it. The rope was taut. Either Ace or Jack, or both of them I guessed, had taken hold of it and pulled, playing tug of war with the Brakeman.

I'd just reached Pumpkinseed when the rope went slack and the loose coils raced beneath us. The Brakeman had let go. I heard thumps above as my friends fell back on the carriage floor.

Everything stopped.

Oh, the rail bed was still flying under us at a mile a minute. But it seemed like all the wind and the noise and even the cold seemed to retreat, like God got distracted and skipped a second.

Then the wind and the noise and the cold came roaring back and the Brakeman moved away. I felt his malice retreat as he climbed atop the train and moved toward the locomotive.

"Richard," I thought, "*It's time for a change of scenery.*"

"Ace! Jack!" I yelled, "Help me with the lad! He got hit!"

I saw, angled up through the hatch, that they'd got up and were looking about with no small measure of fear. That's when I realized that there was no noise from the passengers.

Indeed, from down here there was no evidence of their presence. But you know, even when Ace climbed up there I didn't think they'd give him any trouble. I'd heard the screams in the lightning and figured the car above was a great rolling coffin, and we were on the Westbound Express.

It was with a strange mixture of relief and fear that, as we heaved Pumpkinseed up to safety, we felt the train begin to slow. The relief came from the cessation of immediate danger. The fear came from our shared dread that the stage was merely being set for a new horror. One that Jack, for his part, was not eager to experience.

His leg wasn't broke, of course, but he had a bruise and a limp for months.

"If it slows down enough we can ditch," he said, hopping in a limpy way, but I barely heard him. I'd looked around. My God, the passengers!

Have you ever seen one of those waxworks? You know, the statues of kings and such made of wax and dressed up and painted so they look almost alive? Well, imagine climbing up out of the noise and wind of the undercarriage into a fancy Pullman, all warm and lit up, to find yourself surrounded by a gallery of waxworks. But these were not statues. They were slowly moving, playing out what they were doing right before the lightning sucked out their souls. There was a lady suckling a babe, a fat man slowly turning the page of a Salt Lake City newspaper, a Negro porter handing a pillow to a cute little gal. All of them whispering quietly, and not a soul taking any notice that four ripe hobos were trespassing in their midst.

"They're alive," said Ace, "Just stuck like this." He waved his hand before the staring eyes of a child. "They don't see us."

"I wonder what they're saying?" I said.

Ace leaned close and listened. One, then another. "Gordon Bennett!" he said, like he was cursing. He looked at us, fear on his face.

"No free rides."

Jack muttered, "Medusa" under his breath, then said, "Forget about them! Feel that? We're almost stopped! Let's go!"

Right on cue, the Overland shuddered to a standstill.

"Capital suggestion! I'll get Swede moving," I said, and eased myself through the hatch to

the blessedly stationary rail bed. "Swede!" I said, "We're going!"

I saw relief wash over Swede's face and he eased himself down. I started crawling over to join him when I heard a crunch and saw booted feet approaching alongside. The Brakeman! Why didn't I sense him? I hissed a warning but Big Swede, in his eagerness, had already clambered from under the car.

From my position, all I could see was feet. The Brakeman waited as Big Swede stood. Then Swede felt him there and spun. He froze! A faint blue light shone on the new snow and suddenly Swede's feet left the ground. I heard a choking gurgle. Then I saw a dark mass tumble down the bank. The Brakeman had lifted and flung him, all six and a half feet and three hundred pounds of him, like you and me would toss an empty bottle. Good old Swede didn't break but he was broken, if you follow, and his legs picked him up and took him away into the trees, away from the Overland and the Brakeman. I wouldn't have looked back, either.

Swede, I surely wish I'd gone with you.

He smiles at Big Swede now, twenty years on, riding that old rattler. There's a sad understandin' there. Big Swede meets his gaze and tells us again, "I seen his eyes," and damned if that don't explain everything.

And that's all he needs to say. Not a man of us could claim to have acted any different.

Finny Richard starts talking again. I wish I didn't have to listen. I surely hate this part.

I did not linger, no sir. "It's the Brakeman!" I yelled to the hatch, naming our tormentor for the first time, "Run for your life!"

Quick as a flash I rolled out from under the other side of the train and got running. I was near fifty yards gone when I found myself circling back. Now, I was fighting that urge, I can tell you, but something, maybe God but I suspect the Devil, turned me around.

So I snuck back, cursing as I went, but quiet and to myself. Then I got my first good look at the Brakeman as he rounded the caboose, peered into the trees where I was hiding, then strode to the front of the train. Dressed like the standard issue, he was. Big long coat, floppy-eared hat tied around his head with a big scarf that left nothing but his shiny blue eyes showing.

Big hard boots and thick gloves. I watched him climb into the locomotive, where the waxwork driver and waxwork fireman were still on duty. He pried the fireman's shovel out of his hands and start scooping coal into the burner.

Then he tilted his head at the two men, reached out his two arms and put a finger in the middle of their foreheads. Both of them dropped like sacks of potatoes. He regarded them for a minute.

Then he kicked the throttle and the Overland stopped sulking and lurched to life.

Now, while I was watching this, Ace and Sailor Jack were still in that haunted Pullman with Pumpkinseed. The car was packed but there was one empty seat and they sat him in it. Ace tore some cloth off a lady's dress and wrapped it around the boy's head while Jack (he told me about this later) was hopping around fit to be tied. He was all for getting away and letting the kid take his chances, but Ace wouldn't budge until Pumpkinseed was on his feet.

So Jack, being the enterprising sort, decided that all these slow folk wouldn't be missing their wallets. He was catching his third fish when Ace noticed.

"Oi!" he says, "What are you doin'?"

Grabbing everything that ain't nailed down is a natural act for a Road Man, so for a second Jack didn't even realize Ace was talking to him. "Just pickin' up some petty cash. You might want to help yourself, too."

"I can't believe you're doing that with everything that's going on! You're a real toe rag, Jack London! Look close at these people, look how they're dressed. This is a third class carriage. These guys aren't travelling like tourists, they're families moving to California to find work. That's probably their life savings you're stealing."

Well, that hadn't occurred to Jack, who'd already, you might know, started thinking about what he called the 'laborer's plight'. He recollected once taking a job in a jute mill shovelling coal. He was so energetic and young the foreman asked him if he wanted a double shift and Jack agreed. Later on he found out that he'd taken two men's jobs and one, with a wife and children to feed, had killed himself in his despair. That was one of the things that put Jack on the Road, in fact.

So Jack replaced the money but made a mental note to stop up in first class if the opportunity arose. That's when something occurred to him. He'd been, how you say, all over the map. Oyster pirate, Fish Patrolman, hand on the *Sophie Sutherland* and laborer. He'd been Jack London then, but here on the road the Code said you never use your real name. None of the road men knew his real name.

"Ace! How did you know I'm called Jack London? Did Dick tell you?"

"No." said Ace, looking uncomfortable.

"I don't remember telling my name to anybody."

Ace was quiet for a minute, thinking about something, Jack reckoned.

"I'm not supposed to say. Honest. I'd love to tell you but I can't."

"Who says? That Doctor?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he ain't here."

"I wish he was. He'd know what to do."

"How so?"

"Well..." Ace hesitated. Jack waited, and that's when they heard somebody hollering from underfoot. It was me yelling, "It's the Brakeman! Run for your life!"

"Oh, cruel and unusual!" said Ace in his funny way of cursing. "Doctor! What am I supposed to do?"

"Do? What do we do? We ditch!" yelled Jack, reaching for Pumpkinseed, "before she gets moving!"

"What? No! Jack, we have to stop that thing and whatever it's got planned!"

Now, this was a novel notion. What on Earth was Ace going on about? If there was danger, you ran from it. You didn't stay and confront it. Any fool, even God's own fool Jack London, knew that.

"Are you mad?" he said.

"No... shut up. This is what we do, the Doctor and me. That letter said to be on this train. He knew something was going to happen and that's why I'm here." He was quiet for a second. "I bet he's testing me. That would be just like him."

"Is everybody a lunatic except me?" said Jack. He slapped Pumpkinseed's face, not too hard. "Come on, you! Get a move on! We're ditching!"

Pumpkinseed groaned a little, a good beginning but he didn't stir.

"I think he might have a concussion," said Ace. "Be careful."

"We can be careful after we're off the train," said Jack, "so step lively and help me haul him up!"

"I can't. I'm sorry but I can't! Jack, you have to believe me. This is what I *do*."

I assume Jack was hoping he'd sidelined that avenue of thinking.

"It most assuredly ain't what I do!" said Jack, "What I do is git while the gittin's good!"

"What if that Brakeman starts killing? Do you want all these people's blood on your hands?"

"I reckon the blood will be on the Brakeman's hands, not mine." Seemed reasonable to Jack.

"Not if you could have stopped him but ran away instead."

Well, that there was a point, Jack supposed.

"Even so," he said, "what do we know about stopping something like this Brakemen? He simply ain't natural!"

"I'm an expert in unnatural," said London Ace.

"How so? No offense. I admit you're a steady hand but what's so special about you?"

Ace looked Jack square in the eyes.

"You have to swear. Don't ever repeat what I'm about to tell you."

He looked so serious that Jack swore right away. He made me swear when he told me about later. So that's both of us oath-breakers. Don't fret, I'll not hold you gents to it. You all can tell whoever you want. Nobody will believe you, anyways.

Here's what Ace told Jack. Call me a liar, I don't care.

Ace was actually from a hundred years in the future. And he hadn't really been shanghaied to Iceland but caught in a thing called a 'time storm' and ended up in outer space on Jupiter or somewhere like that. Jack said he wished he'd paid better attention but while Ace was telling him that the Doctor was some kind of space wizard with a magic box that he sailed to

other planets that all had strange folk living on them, he was too distracted by the idea of that Brakeman lurking outside. He got the gist, anyway, and when nothing happened right away he relaxed and paid better attention.

“So, you and that Doctor are star rovers? From the future?”

“Yeah, and I can prove it. Um, you really, really can't tell anyone about this.”

Ace reached up to his neck and tapped his Adam's apple twice. To Jack's amazement, it popped right off into Ace's hand, leaving a pink, round spot of smooth neck. He showed Jack the underside of the patch-like thing. In the center was a little piece of metal and what appeared to be hard honey, shining same as a tiny jewel. It was like something from his imagination. He forgot everything happening, mesmerized by this magic thing, when he heard a girl say something.

He looked up and then Ace said, “I said, 'Hi, Jack!,” and it was a rich, girly voice and suddenly he, no, *she* kind of snapped into focus. His little hands, his smooth face, his way of mothering young Pumpkinseed. Not 'his'. *Her*. Suddenly everything that was strange about London Ace made sense.

Yep. The big secret was out. Jack plumb forgot about all the space future business. This was way more interesting.

London Ace was a girl!

Now, I already knowed Ace was a Jill. Knowed it since the day before. But to everybody else it was a revelation. They got to jabbering and Finny Richard just waited for 'em to settle down.

By the way, by this time on the train that long-ago night, I had one eye slitted open and was enjoying watching Jack's consternation. Ace put that man-voice gadget back on and asked him if it were on straight and Jack said, “Yes” and then he looked at her again and shook his head, all wonderin'. Ace tells him it's a party trick from the future and it's set on 'Johnny Cash', though it was a shame she couldn't work out the accent setting. Johnny Cash? Accent setting? Whoever, whatever.

Interestin' but not really important, I figured, since the cat's out of the bag. Now, not only will Jack do whatever Ace tells 'im, well, he's gonna turn into a White Knight

As for me, I just think it's about damned time this story had a lady in it. Even if she did sound like this Cash fella.

“So what you're saying, then,” said Jack, thinking he'd recovering nicely, “is that this Brakeman is some kind of Moon monster?”

“Close enough,” said Ace. “I figure he's here for the other alien.”

“Huh? Other what? There's two of 'em? How do you figure that?”

Ace shook her head. “The Doctor's right. People see what they want to see.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don't look like a boy but you believed it because you wanted to.”

Jack had to admit that that was true. But from her tone he knew she meant more, and said so.

“What I mean, Jack London, is that you've known a real live alien since you met him yesterday.”

Jack turned and took a real hard look at Pumpkinseed.

“Oh.”

Oh.

“Okay,” said Jack, “I can accept that, I suppose. Makes more sense than him just being a funny looking kid who imitates people. Hell, it makes more sense than you being a she-bo.”

“Careful!”

“Just kidding. Well! A girl from the future and a real live Moon man! And I really can't tell anybody?”

“Sorry.”

“Nobody would believe me, anyway. So when did you know Pumpkinseed was a space critter?”

“I knew it right away when he asked me for food the day before yesterday. Once you've met a few, like me, your brain stops trying to fool you. Of course, I was on the lookout for an

extraterrestrial, anyway.”

“How's that?”

“Extraterrestrial. Alien. The Doctor said he'd detected an alien presence in this time zone. That's why we landed here in the first place.”

“Landed in that magic cabinet? Which you then lost?” That seemed awful careless of them.

“Um, yeah... We landed on one of those flat rail cars. The ones for lumber? Then the men at the rail yard, the 'bulls', dragged us off for questioning and when we convinced them we weren't tramps – not the kind they meant, anyway – the train had already left.”

“Where'd it go?”

“Omaha? I think? The Doctor paid some men to find it but then we didn't have any money left so we ended up in Chinaman's Claim.”

That's when the Brakeman kicked the throttle. Jack peered out the window and spied me sneaking, then running, back.

“Hey, there's Swimming Dick!”

He shook his head in wonder.

“I can't believe he's coming back. He ain't got any more horse sense than you,” he said.

“Well, let's go and fetch him. Come on, girl.”

“Jack, you promised. None of that 'girl' business.”

“Sorry, sir.”

They moved down the aisle, past all the passengers who were whispering, “No free rides, no free rides.”

Ace looked back at Jack and made a face. “That's creepy,” she said, “That alien must have some kind of mind control device hidden on the train somewhere. All these people are tuned into what the Brakeman's thinking.”

I don't remember it word for word – to be honest, I've been making up most of their talking – but this was when Ace and Jack started trying to figure out what was going on. They agreed that the Brakemen was stealing something, souls or energy, from all these folks, leaving

them like empty houses. But Pumpkinseed, being a Moon man, was actually helped by the Brakeman when all of his extra voices and such were pulled out. Though Ace wasn't sure about that last bit.

“Pumpkinseed might have been acting naturally. Maybe that's how his species remembers things, all those voices he had? You heard him mimic Big Swede – it's like he collects people, collects their words.”

“He's like my notebook, then,” said Jack, patting his pocket, “except he's walking around. Imagine that!”

“But he's not now, is he? Walking around, I mean. And neither is anybody else, not really.”

“Except the Brakeman.”

They reached the connecting door. Ace changed the subject.

“Jack, how often do you think there are empty seats on the Overland?”

Jack looked back down the length of the car at Pumpkinseed slumped in his seat. And Jack remembered that the Brakeman had come to life right over their heads. Ace waited while he worked it out.

“Never an empty seat. Oh, I see what you're thinking. The Brakeman was a passenger...” Jack said and Ace nodded. “Go on.”

“And all those thoughts and fears and dreams and stories...”

“Went into his head. All those minds, all at once.”

“Why, though? What's the point?”

“I don't know. I guess maybe it feeds on them? Or uses them for power?” said Ace. “Something alien. The Doctor would know.”

Jack opened the door just as I was grabbing the rails and they stepped out on the little deck.

“There is one thing,” I heard Ace say, raising her voice over the wind.

“What's that?” said Jack. He and Ace reached for my arm and hauled me up. Ace was saying something about the Brakeman, wondering why he was trying to kill us if he'd already got what he wanted. We entered the car and shut the noise outside.

“Well,” said Jack in the relative quiet, “I have an idea about that.”

“What are you talking about?” I wanted to know. I hated coming into a talk halfway over.

“We're talking about Moon men. The Brakeman's one, maybe, but Pumpkinseed is the definite article.”

All I could say was, “Oh. Well, how about that?”

We decided the caboose would be a good place to hole up and went to collect Pumpkinseed. Jack explained his idea on the way. He reckoned the Brakeman ran on folk's souls like a locomotive ran on coal. We mused on that as we retrieved Pumpkinseed, being real careful, and squeezed past that standing porter. It wasn't too hard. Pumpkinseed was awake, after a fashion, and walked mostly on his own. Besides, he was light as a feather.

Then Jack continued. That Brakeman had all that coal in his head. Energy, like Ace said. We agreed and Jack went on. He figured that Brakeman's boiler was just the right size for an Overland Express full of regular folks.

We all got what he was suggesting and looked at Pumpkinseed, who murmured, “Didn't count on me, right? Too much coal in the burner.”

“That's right, my Moon man friend. The ol' Brakeman's over fueled and fit to blow a gasket. All them voices yammering at once.”

“That sort of makes sense...” Ace said to Jack.

“So, if there was anything all them voices agreed on it would be right front and center in his head, right? Mind the gap, there.”

“They're controlling him!”

“That's what I'm thinking. And what's the one thing the crew and the passengers on this train have in common? What's the one thing they'd agree on when they see people like us?”

I hardly followed what they were talking about but even I knew the answer to that.

“No free rides.”

We opened the rear door and stepped over the gap to the caboose. It was unlocked. I remember thinking we could save ourselves a lot of grief if we just jimmed the coupling pin and let the Overland go on without us but something told me not to waste my breath by suggesting it.

It felt safe in the caboose. Warm and kind of cozy, like a little house. There was a pot of

coffee on the stove and I poured cups while Ace and Jack got Pumpkinseed settled in on the bunk. I latched the doors as they told me about their ideas. They didn't mention Ace being a girl. I didn't find that out for years. But they did explain about men from space and the future and what they figured was driving the Brakeman.

“But is he just a passenger or is he another space man?” I asked, but they weren't sure.

“How about we just give 'im some money? Would that work?” They didn't know that, either, though Ace made a face like it was worth tryin'.

“I do wonder one more thing.”

“Yeah,” said Ace, “What's that?”

“Did either of you notice that gun cabinet?”

It happens I know a bit about rifles, what with sea lions and sharks and all, and the one in the locked cabinet was beaut, not five years old. I looked it over. “Marlin model 1881. Forty-five caliber. Lever action.”

“I hate guns,” said Ace, putting away the little wire she'd picked the lock with.

“You don't have to carry it, then,” I said. “You ask me, our odds of getting' through the night just got a damn sight better.”

I sighted down the barrel, said, “Howdy, Brakeman,” and made a *pow* sound.

Jack chuckled but Ace got irate. I figured she was just one of those folks who got nervous around things that go *boom* so I didn't have any problem promising her that I'd only use the weapon as a last resort.

“We don't even know if the Brakeman means to be doing this,” was her argument and to my surprise Jack, who'd been quiet since he realized I was dead serious, added, “Ace is right. All we need to do is stop the train and get him off, not kill him.”

“*You didn't see him throw Big Swede,*” I thought, “*I reckon it's going to take a bullet,*” but what I said was, “Agreed. It's a deal.”

That little spell of coffee and conversation helped us control our jitters, and I enjoyed my new forty-five caliber confidence, and Pumpkinseed was sitting up and talking in a low voice to Ace.

It couldn't last and it didn't. That damned Brakeman had us going way, way too fast for the bendy track 'tween here and Frisco.

Me and Jack felt the car tilt a little as the Overland went round the bend near to Valona and I could see in his face that he was getting awful anxious. He gave a curt nod, saying it was time to move.

"Ace, if we don't get that engine throttled down we're going to derail. Let Pumpkinseed rest, now. We got to get to the locomotive."

She nodded, not saying anything, just held the space man's skinny hands for a minute. Don't forget, I thought she was a man, so I thought it was a bit queer. I didn't care, mind you, being a well travelled man of the seas, but I remember thinking he'd best be real careful in Frisco. They don't stand for that there. She whispered something that I swear was, "Get you home". Then she stood up and said, "I'm ready."

Jack gave Pumpkinseed a little pat on the shoulder and I essayed a friendly nod, though I ain't sure my acting was up to snuff. Once you knew he wasn't natural you couldn't see him as a person anymore, you know? I tried, though. I tried, and I'm still damned sick at heart about what happened, cause it seems like he'd decided I was okay, after all, and gave me the nicest smile I ever got.

Damn it all.

Richard sits and broods for a minute and I'm wondering if the fire's out when he looks around at us. He heaves a big ol' heavy sigh and looks at his hands, turning 'em over like he's looking for something.

"You know," he says, "I've sailed every sea and seen a lot of things. I seen men eat fire in Bali, I seen an Indian fakir climb a rope and disappear in a puff of smoke. I've seen ports and palaces, mountains of ice and rivers of fire. But that up there," he says, lookin' at the ceiling, "That there is the real ocean, ain't it? Makes mine a rain puddle. Endless, Jack says, going on forever. More ports and more wonders than a man could count in a million lifetimes. And after that, God in his heaven."

He looks at the Cat, Swede and Blinky Bob. "Speaking of Heaven, I know who you are," he

says.

"Just keep talking," says Blinky Bob, who never blinks and whose hands never tremble.

"Why not?" says Richard. "I look at all those stars up there and sometimes I wonder how many that Ace has been to, but it's kind of funny... usually I wonder which one ol' Pumpkinseed hailed from, and how he got here, and whether he has kin looking for him."

I've wondered that myself, of course, ever since Ace told me who I was. But I've never learnt the answer, 'cause no kin came lookin'. I don't really mind, though. Plenty left to see here. The stars can wait. Besides, even if they did come looking for me, why, it wouldn't do 'em any good.

You know, what with me being dead and all.

At the door Jack said, "After you," to Ace, kind of gallant. That made me wonder a bit about Jack, too, but then Ace shot him a look and Jack said, "An ace trumps a jack, don't it?" and we started our journey.

In the first Pullman the Porter was still holding that pillow and that empty seat gave us the shudders. I wondered who was sitting in it. Was it that Moon man of Ace's, just laying low until the lightning came, or was it just a regular passenger possessed, like in the Bible story of Legion and the swine? I remembered what happened to those pigs and stopped cogitating.

Jack retrieved that coupling pin and hefted it like a weapon.

The second Pullman was like the first but real cold. Those shadow people were shivering and their whispers had a chattery quality. The connecting door was open, we saw, and we closed it as we passed through so the folk wouldn't freeze.

The next door was open, too, and the car had a surprise for us. There was a crewman, a brakeman from the hardy look of him, just standing there in his trousers and undershirt. The demon Brakeman had taken his heavy outside clothes.

We kept on going, car by car, watching the decorations and appointments getting' fancier and fancier along with the passengers. It smelled better up here at the front, like fine cigars and perfume. But all the husks, all those haints, were still whispering along to the Brakeman's drum. Just, you know, pronouncin' it better. And eventually we stopped really paying attention to them.

We were in the last passenger car, about halfway through, and it was a first class beauty packed with gentry and ladies. Up ahead, we guessed, would be the dining car, the saloon car, the two baggage cars where Jack had jumped on what seemed a lifetime ago (but was barely twenty minutes) and then the locomotive with its built-on coal tender.

I think Jack noticed it first. He was doing some fishing in this fat, bewhiskered man's coat, trying not to be noticed, when I saw him start a little and rub his hands. They sparked, like when you touch a doorknob on a cold day, and I realized my skin was tingling. We looked around and saw the little sparks were jumping from person to person.

"I don't like this," said Ace, and I happened to agree.

Then... Wooh! Hang on, gents. Give me a minute here.

I know what happened next and I don't blame Richard for having a spell of trouble sayin' it out loud. We all give him his time.

You fellows ever see them statues they put up in parks and such? You know how at first you kind of look at 'em, thinking the artist did a good job and speculating about what a man has to do to get a statue of his own? Well, turns out (when you read the plaque) it's kill a bunch of other men and then be dead yourself, but anyway...

The thing about a statue is the more you walk by it the less you notice it. It blends into the scenery, like the trees and the flowers. Now imagine that one day you walk by that statue for the hundredth time and you hear a creaking and when you look that statue has turned its damned head at you.

That would be bad enough, some stone thing looking at you. But you don't think of that statue as anything special anymore, just part of the landscape, remember? So it's like something a whole lot bigger, something colossal and indifferent, has got you in the cross-hairs. And it's so far from your way of understanding that there's nothing you can do but stand and await the judgment.

Well, then. All those folks in that car? We never saw a one of them actually turn their heads but when we looked away and then back they was staring at us, and that damned 'No free

rides' was getting louder than a whisper. They were saying it, now, and here and there some were rising up and moving out of their seats.

You know how narrow those aisles are. If we wasted any time we'd be surrounded for sure. But we was frozen in real terror. Then that fat gent got a hand around Jack's arm and it was like the ice was broke. He hollered, "Ace! Richard! We got to get outta here now!"

Well, I saw Ace shake her head and look around all resourceful. She punched a woman reaching for her and kneed a man who was already standing in the aisle. She yelled, "No shooting!" to me and I'm happy to say I hadn't considered it; I was using the stock like a club, the same way Jack was using that coupling pin. We made it to the front of the car, punching and clubbing our way along and hopefully not really hurting anybody in our zeal.

Ace and Jack got the door open and Ace stepped out on the deck. Somebody grabbed my collar and I heard, "No free rides" right in my ear. Somebody else grabbed my trouser leg and I stumbled. As I went down I heard Jack cry out, "Ace!"

The weight of the passengers was crushing me and I felt a tingling emptiness from their clutch. Only once did I manage to gain my feet before oblivion took me, and in that instant I saw Jack, framed by the door, gazing upward. He was alone, and Ace was gone.

Back in the Caboose that crackling light roused me up like I'd been sleeping a year. My head hurt something fierce. I'd been clobbered twice in that many days, you know. But it didn't stop me from reading those people in the cars ahead. The Brakeman had leaked just enough juice to get 'em dancing. Just enough to scare my friends outta the cars and up on deck for the showdown.

But that was enough for me. I was starting to feel like my old self. My recent old self, I mean, who could just sample folk without hurtin' them. Not that boy long ago in the orphanage who, at what I'm guessing for my folk would be puberty, started causin' folk to fall asleep and never wake up and then exacerbate matters by talkin' in their voices. So they took me away to the State Hospital in Napa and put me in a cottage far on the edge of the grounds, an outlier.

Here I set about trainin' myself so I wouldn't hurt no-one again. And at night on my lonely cot I'd lie awake and listen to the mournin' of faraway trains. That's funny, train and trains.

The only person I saw regular was a trustee, and that came about because I told that

nervous doctor that I didn't do my mind trick on crazy people. I wished I could take away the crazy part of 'em, you know, like brain surgery, but it was too fine work for me. They sure didn't make sense, like a story with no point of view, no plot and no grammar.

But the years give me time and I learned stuff, all on my own. Over time I figured out how to trawl further away, and I learned that what I could take, I could return. And I truly wanted to give them sleeping folk their lives back.

So when that new man left those doors unlocked I figured it was safe to get going. I found them folks, no problem, seein' how they was all sharing a ward in the same hospital. I just stood outside and sent 'em back, enjoying the thought of the happy ruckus that was gonna ensue.

And then I went lookin' for trains. I found that Ace, she was nice and interestin', and then I got sick and then I got hit by that robber, and now I was on a train, getting the measure of those folk in the cars ahead and thinkin' I was the only one who could beat that Brakeman.

Which I admit sounds awful coincidental, but it ain't really. Not when you know that the new man at the nuttery who left those doors unlocked was the exact same old Chinaman that gave Ace those riddles yesterday. And who'd given me a note, sayin' exactly where to go and when to be there. Kind of funny how it was written in the same handwritin' as the one he gave Ace, don't you think?

It couldn't have been more than a minute or two but I was nearly suffocated when I felt the hands grabbing me start to loosen. Along with that, the whispering died down and turned into regular breathing and soft snores. It was a struggle, moving those limp bodies, but I climbed out, gasping for air and begging the pardon of the young miss whose position forced me to take certain undue familiarities. She was on the Marlin, you see.

Well, I picked my way down the aisle, trying to not tread on anyone and not succeeding, and made it to the doorway. The wind was whipping and the train was going so fast every nearby object we passed was just a second's blur and gone. I hung the rifle on my back and climbed the service ladder to the top deck.

The smoke and snow blew in my face but I could squint and see what was happening. The Overland's lamp illuminated the blurred, tangled branches meeting dangerously close

overhead as she raced through the snow. It looked like we were falling down an endless tunnel full of swirling stars. It was something I could watch all day but I remembered my mission and turned my concentration to matters closer to hand.

On the top of the third car ahead somebody was bent over something I couldn't see but which seemed to be throwing off an awful lot of that blue lightning.

It was hard to see past that blue glare but I could just make out a big hunchbacked figure moving toward the locomotive. I began to move carefully but as quick as I could. Just like Jack said, my sea legs carried me down the rattling, swaying car. It wasn't much different than crossing the deck during a blow, really, except a schooner isn't likely to jump track and explode.

I was getting on so well I jumped the first gap without much thought. The jump was easy, only four or five feet, but they must have damped the stove in the car below because the deck was pure ice. My feet slid out from under the moment I landed and it was sheer luck that my hand found the car brake wheel before I pitched over the side.

I climbed back up and crab walked on hands and knees. Then I reached the second gap. This time I was careful and I suffered no mishap. The scene ahead became clearer.

That hunchbacked thing was the Brakeman carrying Ace on his shoulder. She wasn't moving. The sparking thing was some sort of lightning rod, topped with a big glass globe all burning with blue fire, affixed to the baggage car. I could see it now because the person – it was Jack – had fallen over beside it. I sped up, fearing that Jack might slip off, and tried not to think about the Brakeman. One hellish thing at a time, right?

Well, I made the last jump and kept my footing. It was bright as day here and I knew if that Brakeman turned he'd see me for sure, so I tried to keep that lightning rod between us. I was close enough to touch Jack now, but I was wary. It looked like he'd tried to smash that gadget with his coupling pin. Guess he forgot about how electricity can travel through metal.

Anyway, Jack was laying there, sparks dancing all over him, a crazy look of wonderment on his face, and he saying something I couldn't make out. It wasn't 'No free rides'. When I leaned in I realized he was saying names. I won't belabor you with a recitation of 'em, though I remember quite a few for my own reasons which will become clear in a sec. But through the

years I read everything of Jack's I could lay my hands on, and you know? Many of those names – they were the passenger's names, of course, but not just the passengers, as I'll tell you – ended up in his stories. Ain't that mad?

In that old rattler twenty-odd years after, I watch Richard face the Black Tribunal. "All right, now. My story is almost done. You'll hopefully pardon my prolixity in regards to what happened so far and forgive my brevity regarding what's to come."

"Just state your confession," says Blinky Bob, "and we'll tell you how your story ends."

Richard just says, "Fair enough."

But it ain't fair, really. Not a bit.

It wasn't his fault Richard murdered me.

Well, when I was listening to Jack speak those names the train hit a loose rail or something 'cause the whole car shook and I lost my footing. Damned if I didn't fall right beside Jack, close enough to what we'd call, 'complete a circuit'. Those sparks started digging in and I couldn't move. But a little bit of me was still sort of in charge, maybe because I was right by that lightning rod, I reckon, so when I started getting my head crowded by the names and dreams and fears of all those passengers, well, it was like I was harking to them but not really joining them. But it wasn't just the passengers. It was the crew too, of course, but it was also all the people Pumpkinseed had met during his life, all those Sisters and doctors and orphans. Jack was there, too, and we said "Hello" after a fashion and for some reason found it awfully funny.

We both wondered where Ace was, though. She wasn't here, and that was worrisome but only for a spell.

That was because there on the top of that freezing train car, barreling like a twenty ton bullet toward certain death, well... I was having the time of my life. I don't know how long it lasted in real time but it felt like I spent hours meeting and knowing those people, there in my head, and them getting to know me. None of them remember, like Jack said, which is a pity, because I'd have much liked to be friends with some of them.

The thing, fellows, that I really took away with me was this insight – we like to put titles

on people, don't we, and then judge 'em by the cover we put on 'em? The has and has-nots, the male and the female, the socialist and the capitalist, the white and the Negro and the Chinaman... well, I'm here to tell you that up in our heads we are all pretty much written the same. We all got the same concerns and aspirations. We just hark at 'em different, that's all. And I resolved to never judge a person by what they looked like or by their station in life, but instead by how they treat their fellow travellers. That's the only thing that's important in the end, isn't it? And, I think, Jack came away from this with the same insight and became a great writer. I became what you men call a Road Hog, just somebody who visits the road now and then. Because I've gone on and sailed every sea, walked every continent and collected every man's story I could. Sold a few to Jack, too, and I planned to use that money to buy passage back to my forefather's village by the sea.

But I digress. You want to hear about the thing I don't want to talk about. My confession.

While I was getting' acquainted with all those folks my eyes were still looking over at that lightning rod. It was sideways because that's how I was lying but I could see real clear. And I saw something that drove everything else away.

I don't recollect them arriving at all, but suddenly there were two figures standing there.

The Brakeman was crouched like a villain on one side of that light and Pumpkinseed was standing tall and heroic on the other. Those sparks were being pulled back and forth between them and I realized they were having a tug of war. Or maybe a duel. Not with weapons. No, that's wrong. Not with man made weapons. They were using the greatest weapons God gave us. They were using their *minds*.

I felt myself slowly floating to the surface of my own head and a squeeze on my arm told me Jack was, too. He slipped away but I didn't watch. I was too mesmerized by the duel and feeling sorry that my new friends were leaving me to become weapons in the battle above.

Now, let me explain this so it's clear to you. I don't know how I came to know this, I just did. It's tricky to put into words but I'll try.

There was two kinds of energy at work here. Think of all those folk's stories like voices on

a telephone line. And think of that blue lightning as the electricity that pushes those voices through the line. You got that? Well, the big globe on the lightning rod was holding the electricity that was making us hear the voices. And the voices of the people were on invisible lines running from that globe and connecting, like a big web, every soul on the train. And every soul that got returned to it's rightful place made that globe a little weaker. And it was that raw energy in the globe, shaped by the voices, that was driving the Brakeman.

Pumpkinseed was pulling all those folks out of the Brakeman and the Brakeman was pulling 'em back. Ol' Pumpkinseed didn't waver, not for a second. He almost looked like he was filling out, becoming a man right before my eyes. And the Brakeman was dwindling. He'd been a giant before but he wasn't now. Pumpkinseed had his measure.

And just like that (*Richard snaps his fingers*), Pumpkinseed won. All that lightning, all those people and their stories, they flowed into Pumpkinseed and the empty Brakeman fell to his knees, every inch of his body radiating defeat and confusion and bottomless humiliation.

Pumpkinseed paused. I heard him whisper, "Go back home, y'all," and realized he was fixing to send all the people back to their rightful bodies.

Then there came an explosion, just like one that started it all. It was the Hammer of Thor again, and that lightning rod shattered into a million pieces and the spot where it had sat suddenly flared like a blue sun. And that raw energy that had driven the Brakeman to his terrible deeds flowed into Pumpkinseed. And he screamed at the influx and grabbed his head and looked up and his eyes had lightning in them and he looked down at me and said, "**No free rides!**"

And my brain shut down and my reflexes took over and the rifle was in my hands and my finger pulled the trigger.

The slug hit Pumpkinseed under his jaw and he was knocked back like he'd been poleaxed. That energy he'd bottled just went *whoosh* and blew away into the night.

I stood there, dumfounded at what I'd done and left full of emptiness, like my usefulness was done and I stood at the end of my destiny.

Poor Pumpkinseed was alive but I could see a big chunk of his neck was gone and his blood coated the deck like it was a pagan altar. Then... Sweet Jesus. Then he looked at me and

his eyes were golden and warm and forgiving. The gun dropped from my hands.

Then I heard, "You murderer!" and Jack's fist filled my vision and I went over the side and wrapped around a tree. When I finally came to a whole month later they told me I'd suffered a fractured skull, seven busted ribs and a cracked arm. And they wanted to know who 'Pumpkinseed' was. And I told them he was my great friend who died.

Gentlemen of the jury, that's my story. I did kill Pumpkinseed, sure enough. But from what Jack told me I was the only one that saw he was turned into a new Brakeman. So it looked like cold-blooded murder.

Jack had snuck off to find Ace and found her in the locomotive easing back the throttle. She told him she'd just woke up in the coal; she had no idea what had been happening. The first thing she'd thought of was saving the folk on the train, and she did just that. Worked out the controls and rescued 'em all.

Jack left her at her work and was coming back when that second bang blinded him. All he saw was me shooting Pumpkinseed. You can imagine, he lost his head and punched me. When we met again a few years later he was happy I was alive and, even though he wouldn't say why, told me he didn't blame me anymore.

I'm thinking he did tell a few folk, though, and they told others, 'cause when I visited the Road after that I didn't feel real welcome. It got better over the years as old folk drifted out and new folk drifted in but the story never really died. I catch an occasional evil eye even now, if a tramp has been through California and heard the story of Pumpkinseed and Finny Richard on the Overland.

Then Richard says something else. The Nevada Cat, Big Swede and Blinky Bob listen to what he says and then agree with his request and then they climb outta the car and leave him sittin' alone. But he don't see them go. He don't even recollect saying that thing that saved him. He just opens his eyes to an empty car and and says something foul but sort of funny.

But that's that, thinks I. Richard is safe from the Tribunal's secret justice. I couldn't let them kill him on my behalf, not when I had the means to stop them, could I? I like ol' Richard and

I hope he likes living in England, in that village with the big stone church.

I have a feeling he will, though I worry about his children. You see, the longer I'm around, well, the more I can glimpse the road ahead. But it's got many diverging pathways and it's pretty hazy at best so I don't much worry my head about it. But there was something lurking up there in the future, in all of 'em, and I know its name. I don't like to say it, though.

Anyway, besides seein' the future I discovered I could do something else. Now, it's a bad thing, a violation for sure, and I try not to do it. Nobody should edit someone else's story, you know? But this was a special case, so right after Richard named his story I made him sleep and borrowed his voice box.

What I told the tribunal was this: Mister Jack London had never breathed a word about his adventure on the Overland except that bit at the beginning when it was just a game. No, it was me. I liked ridin' the trains, you see, and there were people like Big Swede and the Nevada Cat who could sense me sometimes and before too long they started to tell the story. It just rubbed off on 'em. Unfortunately, it took me quite a spell before I could really pick and choose what they sensed and what they carried away was the story that he'd killed me, not the part where it wasn't murder. "So I'm settin' the record straight," I told them, "and you let this man alone. Just like he ain't in control now, well, he wasn't then, either. He didn't pull that trigger, that Brakeman did, reaching into his mind for a last bit of revenge."

They believe my lie. And now nobody but you knows the truth of the tale.

Blinky Bob is a pragmatic man without any imagination except for makin' a killin' look like an accident, but the Nevada Cat and Big Swede know it's me talkin', ol' dead Pumpkinseed. I tell 'em to spread the word that Richard is innocent and they promise they will. I watch them go and then I take my leave of Richard.

I rise up and watch the train follow those gleaming rails into the distance and think about the souls it bears away. It feels to me like the last page of a book is starting to turn and there's something satisfying to think I gave it a happy ending. Not every story needs a ghost or a woman or a murder but a story without justice don't bear tellin'.

Almost done. Time for that surprise on the last page.

I got two for you, how's that?

Back on the Overland, twenty years before, I was dying. Jack had his hand to my throat, trying to stop the tide, but he couldn't. It didn't hurt much, so I didn't mind, though I sure appreciated his effort. Then Ace was looking down at me too, and tears started coming.

Jack asked her about the train and she said the driver had woken up and took over. That made me visit the driver real quick and I make him mind that she'd saved the train and to not chuck her and Jack off. I was struggling, trying to send all those souls home before I died there, but I figured it was the least I could do. Well, I did the job and got a kiss from Ace for it when I told her. I started to tell them about Richard, how he was a true hero, but I plumb ran out of juice and suddenly I couldn't talk no more. I felt all light and airy, though, and sat right up and stretched. Then I saw Jack was layin' his coat over my body and I realized I was dead just as that train stopped rolling. All up and down the line of cars folks started waking up from a nightmare they didn't even know they'd had.

Ace thought to look but there was no sign of the Brakeman. I could still hear, somehow, and I heard Jack tell Ace he was already vanished when Richard shot me.

What I couldn't tell them was that I knew right where that Brakeman had got to. I could make myself move, too, so I went down to that last Pullman and there he was, back in his seat. He'd shed the brakeman's clothes. I studied him a while but for the very first time in my life I'd found a closed book. I couldn't read a word of him. So I drifted back up front where Jack and Ace, wrapped in blankets, were being fed hot soup in the dining car and, for the first time in their lives, being treated like respectable folk. Like heroes.

So we pulled into Frisco. The little man who'd been the Brakeman ran off into the crowd on the platform, brushed off his clothes, then walked to the front like he was there all along, just waiting for an arrival. When Ace got off she ran to him and he hugged her and ruffled her hair like a proud pappy. Then he was introduced to Jack and shook his hand. Ol' sneaky Jack. Ol' sneaky Doctor.

Ace told that Doctor there was so much to talk about but they had to get going because the Conductor wanted to ask them questions So they melted away into the crowd leaving the platform. Ace told the Doctor her story, crying when it got to be about me, as they passed through the big station. The Doctor put his arm around her and said it wasn't her fault.

The three were met on the street by a cart driven by that old Chinaman. They got on and rode to a nice hotel. The Doctor and the Chinaman bowed and the cart moved away.

In a room upstairs there was a blue box with 'Police' written atop the door. Ace pulled out that key I'd wrestled away from the thief and used it. "Good-bye, Jack," she says, "take care of yourself and keep writing," and gives him a kiss. "And buy a toothbrush."

Then she entered the box and not too long after I heard her voice echoing from far away, yelling something about a shower. Maybe it rains inside magic cabinets, I don't know.

The Doctor chuckled and said Jack did a good job keeping an eye on her, just like he was hired to do, and then he gave Jack a little pouch of silver and told him it was triple because of the unforeseen complications. Then he said thank you and told Jack to leave. I was about to follow him when I got a surprise.

"I can see you, you know"

The Doctor was looking right at me.

"She did well, didn't she?" he said, "My Ace."

He sighed and for a moment he was just a proud little man in a rumped Sunday suit.

Somewhere inside the blue box I heard the girl Ace holler something about clean clothes. She sounded far away now, way past my ken. The Doctor smiled in her direction and I saw he loved her.

Then he turned back to me and steel came into his eyes. "I'll do anything to teach her to survive. The Overland was a perfect test. Bring the alien safely to me. Keep away from the brakeman. Learn about travelling, learn there's no free rides."

Sayin' those words take the moxie out of him and he sits on the fancy bed. He looks down, studies his hands just like Richard will in twenty-some years.

"I'm sorry you got killed, Pumpkinseed. I was going to use you to put the train asleep,

that's all. No one would have been hurt, not even you. Then I planned to play brakeman, give her a few challenges and a mystery to solve. No harm done, not to anyone, and Jack was there as insurance."

Then he was on his feet and that steel was back.

"Something went wrong," he snarled, "that lightning... someone interfered. Overloaded my psychic sink, directed it back at me and reduced my good intentions into the murderous impulses of that Brakeman. I don't know who was responsible but I promise you I will find out, if it takes me years."

I could have told him right then and there but I didn't. I don't much like the sort of folk who peek ahead and spoil an ending. Besides that, he got me killed. It wasn't his intention, I know. He couldn't help himself, no more than I could have when the Brakeman got into me at the end. So I ain't exactly mad but there's a principle, ain't there?

So I don't put a name to that lightning, to that evil force that directs men's paths. But thinking of it makes me wonder if there isn't an opposite, a force that does the same and that maybe put me where I would be needed. I guess folk would say that was God, but that can't be right because that evil thing on the Overland wasn't Satan. It was something called Fenric.

The Doctor stood there for another minute, then moved to the doorway of the blue box and looked inside.

"She can never know," he said. Then he looks up at me

"Well, it's time for us to go. I can still take you home."

He stepped inside but kept talking, just a voice to me now. "I'm going to leave the door open for a minute."

Then he asked if I understood and I did. I'd have to avoid Ace, of course, but the Doctor was saying I could sail the stars with them if I wanted.

No. I wanted to be a road man, not a passenger. I wanted to see the world race by, to listen to that steel music, to feel the wind blow through me. That's me, Pumpkinseed. That's my story.

A short time later I watched the box vanish forever. Even after it was gone, it made a

lonely sound that made me think of a train whistle, heard from far, far away, going who knows where.

And then I heard another, closer by but just as lonely, and I went to see where she was bound.

Author's Note:

Finny Richard, nearly seventy but strong and healthy, appears in Episode One of The Curse of Fenric. He may be seen leaving the big stone church. It is not known if he survived the events of the day.

Sailor Jack drank the black bottle and caught the Westbound Express on a November evening in 1916, the next night after Richard told his tale to the Black Tribunal. His final word was, 'Hello', as if he was greeting an old friend.

