

The Girl and the Game

A STORY OF MOUNTAIN RAILROAD LIFE

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

AUTHOR OF "WHISPERING SMITH," "THE MOUNTAIN DIVIDE," "STRATEGY OF GREAT RAILROADS," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

In the mid-morning quiet, the bathing beach and the ocean reflected only the brightness of the inviting sun. But a little way back from the glistening sand and converging through a small park toward a suburban station the streets of the seaside resort were alive with men and women, hurrying to the city for the grind of the day. Motor cars, too, rattling noiselessly along the boulevards drew up in turn before the station and discharged their passengers. From one of these a middle-aged, military looking man, General Holmes, an ex-army officer and a railroad man, alighted on the platform. A governess and a pretty girl, Helen—General Holmes' only child—had accompanied him to the open tonneau to say goodbye. Helen sprang impulsively half way into his arms. His train pulled in as he quite simply but affectionately kissed his child and boarded the nearest car.

Helen, promised a morning in the park, left the motor car and governess at the moment they crossed a small scenic railroad running back of the beach. She already had her eye on what she wanted to play with. A contented dog, at peace with the world and sunning himself on a grassy slope, had riveted her alert eye. Helen advanced joyously to get acquainted. The dog seemed not averse to a friendly acquaintance with the little maid, sitting down, sought something more, and by pulling hard and with confidence at his neck, soon had his unpromising head—after a fashion, at least—in her diminutive lap.

The strain on his sensibilities appeared more than her amiable and care-free friend could stand. After submitting for a time he rolled over, jumped up and trotted briskly away for a new seclusion and a new peace. Helen, undaunted, followed. Her governess, engaged with the chauffeur, saw nothing of this part of the incident. But a moment later the few spectators in the scenic railroad square, waiting to board one of the miniature trains, saw a protesting dog trotting rapidly away from a curly-haired girl, who briskly and relentlessly followed.

A newsboy, relaxing against a convenient lamp post after the morning rush, watched the pursuit for a moment with languid interest, then turned to look at an approaching train on the scenic road. He seemed no more than half awake. His wits in truth were wool-gathering. Every morning found him absorbed greatly in the mysteries of the miniature engine that pulled the scenic railroad train. He had long since become fast friends with the engineer and at night he had dreams of greater engines—indeed, of greater things.

A shout, then a chorus of cries aroused him from his reverie. The puffing train was pulling swiftly toward the open square. The unhappy dog, casting reproachful glances over his shoulder at his pitiless friend, was rattling uncertainly, but directly down the narrow track toward the oncoming train. Helen, seeing her head in the train and fixed only on her chase, ran after at top speed. A dozen people saw her dander as the train rounded the curve just in front of her—only one of them made a move. Dropping his unloads, the day-dreaming newsboy, waking sharply, ran headlong after the head of the train.

It was none too soon. The dog, dismayed alike by the cries and a second pursuit, sprang, almost in the teeth of the engine pilot, right across the track. Helen fast on his heels was ready to jump after, but it would have been pretty certainly a jump to her death. The newsboy caught her arm and whirled her from the engine just as it shot past with the brakes squeaking on the drivers.

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"What is your name, little boy?" she faltered in a wailing, commanding tone. "I'm no little boy," returned her rescuer gruffly. "What are you, then?" she demanded bravely.

"I'm a big boy. My name is George Storm. I'm named after my father. He was a railroad engineer. My father got killed on a train. Who's your father?" "Where did that dog go?" quivered Helen, not answering.

"I don't care," declared Helen, gulping solemnly while the governess tried to hurry her away. "I won't ever forget you—no matter what you are."



1—They Struggled with the Balking Brake. 2—"You Are Hurt," She Said, Smiling, "to See a President's Daughter So Very Clever." 3—"Very Gratifying," He

Amos Rhinelander, a New York man of large means, and General Holmes, returning on Helen's eighteenth birthday with Rhinelander and Rhinelander's nephew—Robert Seagrave, himself a young and ambitious railroad promoter—from a trip of inspection of the Tidewater terminals of Holmes' road, was eagerly awaited by his daughter at their country home among the San Pablo foothills. A message sent up to her from Signal, the suburban station of the country seat, had asked her to meet her father that day on No. 20, the through eastern passenger train.

The motor car had gone ahead and Helen, taking Rocket, one of her favorite hunting horses, rode down at her leisure to the station.

While far from being a spoiled child, Helen felt very much at home anywhere on the Copper Range & Tidewater railroad.

On the day that Helen cattered lastly down through the foothills toward Signal, a long westbound freight train, after climbing the grade east of a big hill known on the division as Blackbird pass, reached the summit only to find itself in trouble. The air pump, after balking all morning, had quit, and the conductor, going forward found the engineer, after repeated efforts with the big machines, helpless—the airbrakes out of service.

Without losing much time, the conductor rapped up his emergency telephone and asked for instructions from the dispatcher. The answer to his request was curt: "Bring in No. 15 by hand brakes."

The crew sprang to their posts on the decks, the lumbering string of heavily laden cars were carefully started down the hill, and the long string began rapidly to pick up speed.

The two, who liked him, pulled the boy toward the tender. He shook loose. "Stay and be—hanged," shouted the conductor, with a fiery expletive. "Let him alone," he cried, angrily. "He's dippy. Come!" And with his companions hustling close after, he started over the coal on the tender.

The train had attained a frightful pace. Already glimpses of its long, curving roll on the distant hill might be seen from the window of Signal station, where the disturbed operator had taken the message of the runaway from Cedar Grove and was reading it to Helen Holmes, breathless besides his table.

"Air brakes broken down. Running away. Sidetrack No. 20—No. 16." It was the import of the last sentence which for an instant froze her senses. Her father! The passenger train facing that runaway on the single track below Signal! More than once she had heard her father declare that the stretch between Signal and the next station, Beaman, must be double-tracked—only money was so hard to get. If the lack of it should now cost him his life, the lives of perhaps half a hundred others!

While she was thinking, the operator was working furiously at his key with a message for Beaman station. His one hope of avoiding the head-on collision was to catch the passenger train at Beaman.

"Stop No. 20. Runaway on main line." He told Helen, closely watching his nervous fingers, what he had sent. "I should have an answer in a minute."

It came at once. The signal station operator first tried to write it, then threw down his pen and repeated its words unsteadily to the frightened girl.

It was a difficult, but Rocket, who could thread a lava bed without brushing a felloe or cross a prairie-dog town at full speed and hold his mistress as steady as if she were sitting on a rocking horse, was not likely to balk at galloping over mere ties—besides, she would give him his time. At the worst, any bridge, she said to herself, must be reached before it can be crossed, and her eyes were already fixed hard on the one she must cross, when she thought she saw the great jackknife man moving mysteriously on the cinders under his flying feet, and in what seemed another moment—so fast had she flown—checking the horse cruelly, she threw her lines and slid from his back beside the sidetrack switch.

Running to it, she grasped the lever only to find the switch locked.

She could see smoke streaming from the stack of the engine. Behind, she had no need to look, the rumble of the head-end of the runaway was thundering on the bridge. Desperation cleared her head. She caught up a heavy stone from the right-of-way and pounded fiercely at the switch lock. She struck at the stout bow and hammered in a fury at the resisting cover.

No mechanism could stand such an assault for long. The ground under her feet was vibrating with the fearful pound of the great freight engine as it dashed with its heavy drag over the creaky rail joints. She knew the reeling machine must be almost on her and the thought spurred her to unparalytic strength. The jumpy gave way. The excited girl, jacked the lever clear and threw the switch, half fainting beside it as the monster engine struck madly at the points. Then, with a shock that tore the heavy road-bed and the roar almost of an earthquake, engine, tender and train lurched heavily into the siding. Car after car jumped and pounced at the stubborn rails. On and on they came, shaking the solid earth under Helen as she gasped. But the thundering, jumping wheels continued to pass the switch in safety and the points held. The long train made the siding to the very end and Helen, almost stunned, saw, in something like a vision, the passenger train, its brakes throwing streams of fire from the grinding wheels, race past her down the main track toward the bridge.

The runaway freight was less fortunate. At the farther end of the sidetrack three box cars stood patiently waiting for orders. They had been standing there unmolested for days; they had tarried one moment too long. The runaway train with its still obstinate fireman, at times on the running board and at times in the cab, was heading viciously for them. Its speed was much reduced after reaching level grade. But the fireman saw the game was clearly up. He chose his moment and jumped, landing violently in the cinder ballast. Bruised and cut, he lay breathless, almost insensible. He heard confusedly the terrific crash into the idle box cars. The first realization that came to the stunned boy was of someone struggling to help him away from the wreck—some puny strength exerted to drag his heavy body to greater safety. With a breath, the first he had been able to draw, he opened his eyes. A young woman was bending over him.

He was a forbidding sight. Blood, dust and gravel hung in half a dozen dots on his forehead—hardly a feature of his face, except his eyes, had escaped the smash of the cinders. Someone with a very little and very wet handkerchief wiped his eyes and he could see more clearly when he opened them again. He could see the face bent over him and two eyes fixed anxiously on his—a girl's face, strange and yet—what could it be of recollection that struggled through his whirling senses.

Not had Helen, as she knelt and worked over the injured man, dreamed of seeing any face she had ever looked into before. Even had it been unfigured she would hardly have recalled it under ordinary conditions. But two people, a young man, now, and a young woman, were meeting under extraordinary circumstances and their eyes were very close together. The man caught at her hand as it passed with the poor little stained handkerchief across his forehead, stopped it, and looked keenly into Helen's eyes.

"I surely know you," he said, not taking his eyes from hers. "Unequal to releasing her gaze, she stared at him without speaking. 'I'm sure I know you,' he exclaimed, perplexed.

He rose of a sudden to his feet—so easily it surprised her. "It was the

plains ahead. The bridegroom was hastily lowering the knife for the freight. Determined, while in the river, to leave the bridge open and wreck the freight, Helen believed she could avoid even that, and had given the tender his orders accordingly. The tug, which had been whistling wildly, now heeled violently toward the wharf, where the captain, a game sport, had resolved to make fast and see the excitement out. With the boat crew afloat and dashing across the wharf to watch Helen, she crouched like a jockey over Rocket as he crushed and scattered the cinders under his flying feet, and in what seemed another moment—so fast had she flown—checking the horse cruelly, she threw her lines and slid from his back beside the sidetrack switch.

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beach," he went on, slowly. "You were hurt—the miniature railroad!" She regarded him a moment in silence. Then she spoke: "Is it possible?" she murmured. "You are—"

"I'm the little boy," he smiled grimly. "Till now, I've never seen the little girl since."

A sense of confusion assailed her; she wanted to escape his look. "You are hurt," she said, dismissing with an effort all consciousness of their strange meeting.

A cry of recognition and amazement cut off her words. The passenger train had backed down on the scene. Her father, his friend Rhinelander, young Seagrave, the Signal station operator, the tug captain and the train passengers crowded the observation platform looking at her and the shaken-up fireman.

The fireman could hardly raise the step-cover quick enough to release Holmes as that he might get down to his daughter. He knew all the operator had told the story. He caught his daughter in his arms with a shower of misty reproaches. "What!" he cried. "Have you lost your mind? Are you mad?" Helen's eyes fell before her father's anger. She was a dutiful girl. "Who's this boy?" he demanded, pointing to the grimed and disfigured fireman. "What's your name?"

"Storm, General Holmes—George Storm, fireman," responded the boy, unmoved. "What were you sticking like a leech to a runaway engine for—why didn't you go back with the rest of the crew?" demanded the head of the road severely.

Storm met the assault calmly. "I thought I might be able to get the air pump going," he countered.

"Did you do it?" asked Holmes, with sarcasm.

"I'd have done it if I'd had time," persisted the somewhat dismantled fireman. "I guess," he added calmly, looking back at the mess of cars, "I needed a couple

of days more."

"How many cylinder heads did you blow out?" sputtered the general.

"I didn't have but two, and as they really didn't belong to me, I blew out only one. The other side is running fine yet, I reckon."

Amos Rhinelander took the scene in with an abundance of satisfied humor. He was a big, wholesome fellow. Beside him stood Seagrave, silent and observant. Both before and after her father introduced him, he ventured something of a compliment—tried, as it were, for a moment, to take the stage and seemed to await confidently an appreciation of his remark.

But Helen, whether confused by her much-witted plight, or engrossed by the recollection of her adventure, could hardly notice his effort to be agreeable. Storm had gone to his engine. Her father was helping her to the observation platform. From it Helen looked steadily back to Storm, now standing down the track in the midst of the wreckage. The passenger engine sounded two sharp blasts of the whistle. Storm looked around; the passenger train was moving ahead. He saw in the group on the rear platform one figure—that of a slender girl in a wet jockey costume, a smile lighting her face as she looked toward him. She was lifting her hand to his bruised forehead and waved back her greeting. Beside Helen stood Seagrave. He did not seem pleased with her attitude and dropped an ironical remark in her ear. This one she quite plainly heard and understood: "Very gratifying," he smiled, "to find a president's daughter so very clever. And," he added softly, "she seems to take a real interest in engineering."

Helen looked deliberately around at him—but whether she may have been her thoughts, she made no reply.

(To Be Continued.)

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