

Here's a story to warm the heart of any true railfan, about the GC&W Limited, which made the trip each day from Green Corners to Woodsville and back...

The Day The Limited Was Late

by **ROBERT F. YOUNG**

Steam hissing, bell clanging, the GC&W Limited, with Luke at the throttle of the 4-6-4 locomotive, pulled into the Green Corners station. As usual, she was right on time.

Ben the brakeman ran the length of the train and threw the switch that reconnected the station siding to the main line. Then he stood by the track, waiting for the Limited to move out.

Luke leaned through the cab's right-hand window and watched the passengers for Green Corners step down to the platform. Buck the fireman joined him. Fred the mailclerk opened the door of the mail car and tossed the Green Corners mail bag down to Jim the baggageman, and Jim the baggage-man handed up the Woodsville mail bag to Fred. In addition to the tender, the mail car and the passenger car, the Limited consisted of a reefer, a gondola (both empty at the moment) and a caboose.

John the conductor supervised the alighting of the passengers. Beyond the station's red roof, the cubelike houses of the little town were a dazzling white against the grassy-green slope of the valley. After all the passengers for Green Corners had alighted, John helped those for Woodsville get on. Ruth the ticket agent came to the door of the station and waved to Luke and Buck, and they waved back. She gave Luke a warm smile, and Luke felt himself blushing.

"Aren't you going to report that bad stretch of roadbed we went over back at Marshy Meadows, Luke?" Buck asked.

"It wouldn't do any good," Luke said. "You know as well as I do the section gang won't budge out of their beds till they get that new work car they ordered."

Buck was a batch, same as Luke. So were John the conductor, Ben the brakeman and Fred the mail clerk. Like Luke and Buck, they were married to the railroad. The GC&W.

As the last of the passengers for Woodsville climbed on board, Luke pulled out his solid gold railroad watch and looked at it. Then he replaced it in his overalls pocket and turned off the bell. "Blow the whistle, Buck," he said.

Buck pulled down hard on the cord. Actually, blowing the whistle was Luke's job, but he had long ago relegated the task to Buck to justify to some extent at least the fireman's presence on a coalless coal-burner.

"All a-booooooaaarrd!" John the conductor cried. "All aboooooaaarrd!"

Luke released the brakes and moved the throttle forward a notch. The Limited began creeping out of the station. Ben the brakeman (sometimes he was more appropriately referred to as Ben the switchman) waited till the caboose went by, then returned the siding switch to its former position, ran after the caboose and swung himself on board. He disappeared inside.

Luke gave her some more throttle. The engine picked up speed, the cars rattling faintly as they rolled along behind. Luke revved her up some more, listening appreciatively to the pounding of the six driving-wheels. The train went by Arrowhead Hill, and high up on the grassy-green slope he saw the little house where he lived all alone. The rest of the train-crew stayed at Mother O'Malley's Green Corners boarding house, but Luke prized his privacy. Also, he'd had his eye on Ruth the ticket agent for a long time, and having a house of his own was sort of an investment in the future.

Presently the powerful 4-6-4 locomotive began climbing the steep incline that led up to Spiny Ridge. When she reached the ridge back, Luke let her pick up speed. To his right — east, you'd call it — fuzzy fir trees stood close together, blocking the view, or rather, hiding the fact that there was none; on Buck's side of the engine, the ridge overlooked an expanse of grassy-green pastures with cows standing in them, and houses and barns showing in the background.

After John the conductor finished punching the passengers' tickets, he came forward to the engine to chat. Considering his age and considering the fact that he had to hop from car to car and climb over the back of the tender to boot, this was no mean accomplishment. But he disliked remaining with the passengers. He simply couldn't stomach them, not because he didn't hold with what he called their "indolence." "All they ever do," he said peevishly, standing in the cab between Luke and Buck, "is ride back and forth between Green Corners and Woodsville and between Woodsville and Green Corners. Don't they have any other way of occupying their time? Don't they ever *work*?"

"Why should we care?" Luke said sensibly. "They keep the GC&W in business, don't they?"

"Well, I don't suppose we should care, as far as that goes," John admitted. "But being in contact with them every day like I am, you can't help but notice their indolence. All they do is sit and gawp out the windows, and gasp every time they see a hill or a tree."

"What's wrong with that?" Buck asked.

"People should have more to do than gawp and gasp at trees and hills they've seen hundreds of times before. It doesn't make any sense."

"The trouble with you, John," Buck said, "you think too much. Instead of sitting up in your room every night, worrying about how old you're getting and about maybe having to retire pretty soon, you should join the rest of the boardinghouse bunch in Mother O'Malley's living room and enjoy yourself. Last night we played pinochle till twelve o'clock — had a grand time."

"I don't like pinochle," John said.

Seated by the cab window, his right hand resting on the throttle, Luke found himself thinking of Ruth. Of what a nice girl she was and how strange it was she'd never married. Certainly she must have had plenty of proposals, what with that wavy brown hair of hers and those blue eyes and those willowy legs. Was it possible she was waiting for *him* to ask her? His heart pounded at the thought. Gosh! if only he dared!

By the time he came out of his reverie, John had gone back to talk with Fred the mail clerk and the Limited had left Spiny Ridge behind and was moving briskly across Buffalo Prairie. To right and left — north and south now, the track having changed direction — the terrain was grassy-green and almost perfectly flat. However, despite the place-name, there were no buffaloes to be seen — only the usual milch cows and once in a while a wild horse.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke ordered. "We're approaching Hell's Bend."

Buck blew six short blasts. He enjoyed blowing the whistle.

Luke slowed the engine as they neared the Bend. He slowed her even more as they started around the curve. It was a dangerous one, because the big green hill on the left made seeing where you were going impossible. Not only that, the roadbed wasn't banked; and on the right, as you went around, there was a deep gulch that would spell doom to both passengers and crew were the Limited to jump the rails.

"Luke! Luke!" Buck shouted. "There's a cow on the track!"

Luke's sharp eyes had already spotted it. It was a big Holstein and it was straddling the center rail, facing the oncoming locomotive. Luke sighed. It was too late to brake, but he was able to slow the engine considerably by pulling the throttle back a couple of notches. However, the cow didn't stand a chance. The cowcatcher knocked it down and pushed it along the track, sparks flying to beat the band. Finally the cowcatcher edged it off the rails, and it came to rest on the lip of the gulch, one of its legs broken off and the other three jutting stiffly into the air.

"If we'd hit it a little harder, it'd gone into the gulch," Buck said disappointedly.

"I know," Luke said, half wishing he hadn't slowed quite so much.

After coming out of the curve, the Limited began rolling north across Dead Man's Desert. On either side of the roadbed, cacti stood. There were numerous arroyos, several empty water holes and lots of rock formations, one of which looked like the steeple of the Green Corners Methodist Church.

Up ahead lay the Evergreen Forest, which bounded Woodsville on the north, west and south. The town itself was hidden by the wispy dark-green trees.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke said.

After the shriek of the whistle died away, Luke got out his gold railroad watch again. They were right

on time, as usual. The citizens of Green Corners and Woodsville could set their clocks by the Limited — that's how punctual she was. As a matter of fact, they *did* set their clocks by her. They had to. In the O-gauge universe they lived in, with its variable nights and days, she was the only constant.

Soon the train entered the Evergreen Forest, and presently white, cubelike houses showed beyond the trees. Luke slowed her long enough for Ben the brakeman to jump down from the caboose and run up the roadbed and throw the siding switch, then he began bringing her into the station. Finally he turned on the bell and brought her to a smooth stop, spotting the mail car and the passenger car alongside the platform.

The Woodsville station was a dead ringer for the Green Corners station, except that it was white instead of red. The passengers for Woodsville alighted and those for

Green Corners climbed on board. It was difficult to tell one batch from the other because their faces were little more than vague blurs. Moreover, all of them wore the same sort of apparel: the men, dark-gray suits and white sombreros; the women, gay print dresses of exactly the same cut and color; while the children, boys and girls alike, wore one-piece brown playsuits and red stocking caps.

Fred the mail clerk tossed the Woodsville mail bag down to George the Woodsville baggage-man, and George handed up the Green Corners mail bag to Fred. Jane the Woodsville ticket agent came to the door of the station and waved to Luke and Buck. She was nowhere near as pretty as Ruth, in Luke's opinion, but Buck seemed to think she was the cat's meow, and it was clear from the warm look she gave the handsome young fireman that she thought he was the cat's meow too.

Luke consulted his railroad watch. It was time to move out. "Blow the whistle, Buck."

"All a-booooooaaarrd!" John the conductor cried. "All aboooooaaarrd!"

Ben the brakeman had already run down to the other switch and "bent the rails." Now, as the "hearse" went by, he bent them back and hopped on board. Recently Luke had had to caution Ben about his carelessness. The brakeman was too confident for his own good, and one of these fine days he was going to make a misstep and wind up lying across the track, and even Ben knew what would happen then.

Gradually the Evergreen Forest thinned out, gave way to more open country. After he finished punching the tickets, John the conductor came forward again, carrying his lunch pail. Buck got his and Luke's out of the tender, and the three men had lunch together, Luke keeping one hand on the throttle and one eye on the track. John had peanut butter sandwiches and orange pop, Buck had banana cream pie and chocolate milk, and Luke had pizza pie and hot cocoa.

When they finished eating, John went back to the mail car to chat with Fred, and Buck leaned back in the fireman's seat for a brief nap. Luke wasn't sure, but it didn't seem to him that the engine was pulling the way she should. This became more apparent as the Limited began moving up the slope that led to Stony Ridge. Soon, though, they were rolling along the crest of the high hogback; and if there was any diminution of power, it was no longer noticeable.

Luke slowed her a little as they neared the trestle that spanned the Spoon Handle River. As always, he was concerned for the safety of his passengers. The Spoon Handle flowed into Sparkly Lake, which was visible through the cab window on Buck's side. Presently, as the Limited began moving out onto the trestle, the stream itself could be seen far below, winding its way through the gorge. To the west, the gorge narrowed rapidly, its precipitous slopes finally coming together to form a natural cul-de-sac. At the base of the juncture the water of the river could be seen emerging from a dark cave about which innumerable tales had been told, but into which no one had ever dared venture. The most popular tale, and the one that Luke subscribed to, had it that in the old days a tribe of wild Indians had lived in the cave and attacked the trains and that finally the U.S. Cavalry had come and wiped them all out.

Soon the gorge lay behind, and the Limited began roaring down the long curved embankment that led to the base of the Mountain. No one had ever thought to name the Mountain, probably because it didn't need a name. Whenever you said "Mountain," people knew immediately that you meant *the* Mountain, for the simple reason that there were no others.

It was a singularly bleak formation, and it rose abruptly out of the landscape without so much as a single hill to herald it. Oh, there were a few trees high on its slopes and a scattering of wiry bushes, but that was all. The railroad tunnel went through it exactly in the middle and was as black as midnight.

According to John the conductor, the passengers always became apprehensive when the Limited was approaching the tunnel and, once they were inside, always said the same things. Like, "Gosh, it's dark in here!" and, "Brrrr! — I'm scared, aren't you?" This kind of behavior annoyed John to no end. "You'd think," he would say, "that after all the times they've made this run they'd be able to take the tunnel in their stride, or at least think of something different to say. But no — every time it's the same old malarkey!"

Sometimes it seemed to Luke that too many things annoyed John. The old conductor seemed to forget that every time the Limited came to the tunnel *he* probably said the same thing too. Probably "We're about to enter a tunnel, ladies and gentlemen. Don't be alarmed when it starts to get dark." And he seemed to forget also that all he had to do to alleviate the passengers' apprehension was to turn on the lights.

"Blow the whistle, Buck," Luke said. "There may be a cow in the tunnel."

Even if there was a cow in the tunnel, blowing the whistle wasn't going to make it move off the track. But what good was a whistle if you didn't use it now and then?

Buck blew a series of short blasts.

A moment later the Limited plunged into the black bowels of the Mountain.

Luke switched on the engine's powerful headlight, and the beam burned a white swath through the darkness, gleamed on the pressed sheet-metal rails. The walls of the tunnel amplified the pounding of the driving wheels, turned it into a steady roar that drowned out the rattling of the cars. The track up ahead appeared to be empty, but Luke had Buck blow the whistle again anyway. The subsequent series of shrieks almost lifted the Mountain off its foundation, and Luke knew he was in for another lecture from, John. John always lectured him whenever he had Buck blow the whistle in the tunnel, saying that it was both unnecessary and downright nerve-shattering, that as conductor he couldn't condone such conduct and that he had half a notion Luke did it just to annoy him. Luke always kept a straight face and never said anything back.

At length Luke discerned daylight up ahead and turned off the headlight. But he didn't increase the engine's speed because Marshy Meadows lay just beyond the tunnel's mouth, and that was where the bad stretch of roadbed was. Instead, he pulled the throttle back a notch. Not that he needed to, for the engine was slowing of its own accord.

Even then, he didn't immediately draw a connection between the loss of power and the bad roadbed. It wasn't until the engine emerged from the tunnel and he saw the break in the track that the truth hit him. He braked her then, braked her for all she was worth. Slowly she ground to a halt, hardly more than a section of track distant from the separation.

"How come we stopped, Luke?" Buck asked.

Luke pulled out the big red GC&W RR bandanna handkerchief he carried in the back pocket of his overalls and wiped his face. Then he leaned out his side of the cab and pointed up the track.

"*That's* why."

Buck leaned out his side and looked. "Holy mackerel!" he said.

After setting the brakes, Luke climbed down from the engine and began walking up the roadbed. Buck joined him. The roadbed was bounded on the south by the low-lying fields known as Marshy Meadows and on the north by a big pasture enclosed by a split-rail fence. Up ahead, the water tower could be seen. Beyond it, the track began the long curve that led into Green Corners valley.

For some reason the Marshy Meadows stretch of the GC&W had always been more susceptible to vibration than the rest of the Pike, and, as a result, the ballast forming its roadbed had settled to a degree where the rails actually sprang up and down whenever the Limited passed over them. Inevitably this had resulted in the pulling apart of two of the track sections. Obviously they'd nearly pulled apart the last time the Limited had gone through, and, just as obviously its recent approach through the tunnel had created the minute amount of vibration necessary to finish the job.

When Luke and Buck reached the break, Luke studied it with experienced eyes. It was a bad one, all right: the pins had pulled completely free.

He knelt by the track for a closer look. "What're we going to do, Luke?" Buck asked plaintively. "We can't make the passengers walk all the way to Green Corners, and the section gang won't do a darn thing till they get their new work car. What're we going to do?"

Luke straightened. "We're going to fix it ourselves. You go back into the tunnel and get Fred and Ben and tell John everything's under control and to turn on the car lights and keep the passengers calm. I'll wait here."

Buck took off like a shot, and a moment later he disappeared into the tunnel. Luke utilized the delay to make a comprehensive survey of the situation, and by the time Buck returned with Fred and Ben, the resourceful young engineer knew just what had to be done and exactly how to do it.

Under his direction, the three men got a split-rail apiece from the nearby fence to use as levers, while he got one himself to use as a brace. "Now," he said, "I want all of you to stand facing the break, one on each side of the track and one in the middle. Whoever stands in the middle will have to straddle the center rail and keep his feet between the wooden ties, and, believe me, he'd better be careful! Okay, take your places."

The three men obeyed, Buck and Fred positioning themselves on either side of the track and Ben straddling the insulated center rail, his feet between the wooden ties.

"Now," Luke said, "I want each one of you to insert the end of your lever under the metal tie near the end of the pulled-out section, and when I give the word I want you to pry up and push forward—but not too far, or she'll pull out on the other end." Luke knelt and positioned his brace at right angles to the break. "All set? ...GO!"

Buck, Ben and Fred pried, then pushed. Simultaneously, Luke shoved. The three pulled-out pins slipped into the tubular rails of the next section as smooth as pistons, and when the track tried to sag back down, it was thwarted by Luke's brace.

The four trainmen pulled their red GC&W RR bandanna handkerchiefs out of their overalls pockets and wiped their foreheads. "That was pretty slick, Luke," Buck said admiringly.

"It'll hold her till the gandy dancers get their new work car," Luke said, getting to his feet. "Then they can repair her permanently."

Ben yawned. "Guess I'll get back to the caboose," he said. He tossed his lever to one side and started to step off the track.

"Ben, watch out!" Luke cried.

The brakeman, careless as always, had stepped on the hot rail and now, his mind somewhere else, was about to step on the ground rail with his other foot and thence onto the side of the roadbed. At Luke's cry, he tried to freeze his foot in midair. He couldn't.

Horrified, his three companions saw him go as stiff as a board as the 16-volt current coursed through his body. Sparks shot from the top of his head, right up through his GC&W RR cap. His face turned blue, then black. Finally he toppled over backward and landed flat on his back, his shoulders wedged between the two short-circuited rails.

"Don't touch him!" Luke shouted.

Fred, who'd been about to do so, jumped back. "Poor Ben," he said. "Poor good-old Ben. Never harmed nobody in his whole life!"

"That goldarned third rail!" Buck swore. "Why does it have to be there!"

Again, Luke took command. Under his direction Buck and Fred pried poor Ben loose with their makeshift levers and pushed him off the track; then they carried his body back to the train and placed it gently in the caboose. Afterward, Fred returned to the mail car and Luke and Buck walked sadly back to the engine and climbed into the cab. Luke released the brakes and shoved the throttle forward. "Blow the whistle, Buck."

Savagely, Buck yanked down on the cord.

The Limited pulled into the Green Corners station 35 0-gauge seconds* (*28 minutes (computed in

1/4-inch scale, 1 1/4 seconds equal one minute)) late. The passengers for Green Corners got off, but none for Woodsville got on. Somehow, word always got around when the pike was about to be shut down.

Soon, now, darkness would fall.

Luke said good night to Buck and Fred, listened patiently while John lectured him about blowing the whistle in the tunnel, said good night to the old conductor, and stopped into the station's little lunchroom for supper. After studying the menu, he decided on apple pie a la mode and a glass of root beer. Ruth, who ran the lunchroom in her spare time and did all the cooking, served him. She smiled at him warmly and asked him how the pie was. Ruth was a swell cook: the crust was so tender it melted in your mouth. Gosh! but she'd make someone a wonderful wife! He considered popping the question to her then and there, but he didn't quite have enough nerve. Besides, a lunchroom was no place to propose to the woman you loved. So, after finishing his pie and his root beer, he said good night to her and started for home.

He didn't remember poor Ben till he was halfway up the hill. But he didn't slow his footsteps. He knew that there'd be a Ben the brakeman on the Limited tomorrow, the same as there'd been today, and that no one, including Luke himself, would think anything about it. And as for the body in the caboose, that would vanish during the night the way all such unpleasantnesses did.

The daylight went out. Luke groped the rest of the way up the hill to his little house and went inside. The light was already on. He pulled the coffee table over to his big easy chair, sat down and dealt out a hand of solitaire. If he was aware of the Brobdingnagian eye peering in at him through the little living-room window, he gave no sign. Maybe he knew that there was another Luke — a big little one who liked to spy on the little big one and who owned the GC&W and enjoyed putting cows on the track and doing sundry other things to make life interesting for the train crew. And maybe the little big Luke also knew — although this is doubtful — that reality is a multistoried structure whose perception on any given level depends as much on the camera's angle as it does on the camera.

His thoughts returned to Ruth. Gosh! what a peach of a girl she was! Someday he'd have done with just thinking about asking her to marry him and find nerve enough to come right out and ask her. But he knew he never would.