

CAUGHT BY A WHEEL: A CYCLING STORY.

BY W. G. CALDERWOOD.



DURING the earlier period of Western settlement, when railroads were few and towns much less frequent, and men of bad character were no novelty, it was my lot to be sent out to the frontier as local

agent and telegraph operator on a railroad. This was considered no misfortune, either by my friends or by myself; in fact, in those days we all tried to get work at the front. Better salaries were paid Western men and a certain local notoriety attached to men from the frontier.

I was to report for duty August 24 and it was the 10th when I received notice of appointment. Accordingly I at once began to prepare my wardrobe and armory. I had no clear conception where Xalo was except that it was on the front in the mining districts, where of course I should need guns. The air castles which I built were made from hairy hides, ornamented with antlers and mounted buffalo heads, and the meals served in them abounded with venison, elk ham and bear quarters. Consequently, first, after a suit of business or office clothes, came a strong duck shooting suit, to accompany which were a shotgun, a Winchester rifle and a revolver which I thought I might need in case I should be asked by unauthorized parties for the company's funds, together with what change I might have.

All preparations being duly made and final leave taken from my friends I started for a three days' ride.

I was tired and worn when the brakeman called "Xalo!" The train wheezed a moment, as was its custom, and crept up to the tank to get a drink before resuming the tiring sport of climbing and coasting the hills.

The agent—I knew him by his express haversack and bundle of letters, though I should hardly have guessed him from his loosely-laced shirt and his large hat—ad-

vanced and, extending his hand cordially, said, "Mr. Greenleaf, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," I returned; "but I have not the pleasure of knowing your name."

"Blackford—Ed Blackford. Step in the office—your future cell," he said, smilingly.

"I dare say you find it lonely?" I ventured. A weary, significant smile was my answer, and the train being reported we went with the mail to the post office. The exterior of this building was quite superior to many that I had seen since leaving home; in fact, showed superiority to some in Xalo. It was a rough, tar-papered edifice, perhaps 16 by 24 feet, with two small windows in the front end of the lower story, and a very small one in the gable of the half story above. The inside eclipsed the out in oddity and frontier style.

The indication of postal delivery was a scrawling inscription on the detached bottom of a pasteboard box tacked on the side of a boot box divided into two compartments—one for papers and one for letters. When delivering the mail the entire lot was overhauled and sorted.

In company with Mr. Blackford, the mail being distributed and the people scattered, I went out to do the town. We found the following: Tank, no better nor worse than ordinary railroad tanks; depot, no better, but considerably worse than ordinary depots, having small office unpainted and gloomy small waiting room ditto, with a freight ware room to match, all set up on stilts and surrounded by a platform, and the battened sides of the structure indicated no special warmth; two houses for section foremen, see tank; two hand-car houses, same; store, before mentioned: large log building two stories high, marked in rude characters on an unpainted board, "HeAD QUArterS"—"Hotel," said Mr. Blackford with another weary smile; a low log building farther down the grassy, shrubby lane, marked similarly to the hotel, "SaLooN."

It was but a few weeks before I was used to my place and the half day and half night work. I say work only in reference to the time I was on duty. There was no society, good, bad or indifferent,

I could only read and hunt, hunt and read.

Pressed by these circumstances I decided to get me a pony or a bicycle to beguile my unoccupied time—to use as a sort of sauce to mix with the wholesome read and hunt diet that I had lived on. Ponies though inexpensive, were tricky at the slightest provocation and commonplace, whereas bicycles were expensive, with no provocation and novel. I would have a bicycle.

A dozen postal cards in the same mail astonished the postmaster, and a speedy return of as many bicycle catalogues delighted my heart, and a sluggish freight finally brought the long-expected wheel. As soon as I was assured of privacy I repaired to a gentle slope, pursuant to the directions given in my catalogues, and none but a practical wheelman, who has tried it once himself, can have any idea of how quickly that innocent-looking machine, on which I had banked the cream of two months' salary, took the conceit out of me and the starch out of my shirt. I had, in keeping with the directions given in my book, taken the wheel into my confidence and tried to make a friendly impression on it, and it had used me in the rudest manner. Nevertheless in time I conquered. In the cool evenings I would bowl over the roads—for they were perfect—and I grew to take pleasure in climbing and coasting the hills that were almost mountains.

One night, as I was in my office and had grown weary of my books and was almost dozing in my chair, I was startled by a heavy tread on the platform. This was very unusual. I opened the drawer that contained my revolver, and reached and turned my Winchester so that I might the more easily secure it in case of need. I lay no claim to bravery and am quite free to admit that I was frightened. Visitors were indeed a novelty, even at train time, much more so at this hour. The door opened and in strode an ungainly, dirty, ill-clad boy of perhaps twelve years. I laughed at my foolishness. He was small for his seeming age, but his clothes were evidently cut in the hope that he might grow. His fingers hardly reached to the end of his turned-up sleeves and his coat might easily have made two for him. Yet his elbows were sufficiently long to protrude from the ragged holes they had worn. His boots, whose number would tally well with his age, smote

heavily, first heel and then toe, with a dismal chu-clunk, chu-clunk as he advanced toward the ticket window.

"What time will the cars goin' east be here?" he asked, peering from beneath his antiquated hat timidly.

"At 1:22 if she is on time. Are you going east?" I asked, anxious to have someone to talk to, even if he was hardly as charming a companion as one might wish.

"Yes. Do you expect her to be on time?"

I went to the instrument and found that the train was forty minutes late, and so informed him. I tried to engage him in conversation, but he did not wait to answer my questions but chu-clunked off the platform.

The wires were quiet and I called up the operator at Warren, the next station east, and began to chat with him. Suddenly the instrument ceased to work. I closed my key and waited, thinking that Warren had broken by opening his key. No sound came. Rattling and waiting alternately did no good.

I grounded east and I grounded west, and no sound could I get. I tried every means, known and unknown, to get my instruments to working, but all to no avail.

Anything unusual on a dark and lonely night is sufficient to arouse the suspicion of a timid person, and my imagination heard sounds of feet and murmuring voices, and fancy painted eyes on the window panes. Trembling with excitement I stood for some seconds—they seemed like many minutes—listening with ears strained; then summoning all the courage I had, and little enough it was, I looked from the office window which faced to the east. It was a moonlit night, such as are seen in the lucid Western atmosphere, and everything stood out clear and silvery. Excluding the light from the room with my hands I could clearly outline some object or objects moving on the track. I imagined they were train robbers, for, to a frightened boy, nothing seemed more natural than that they should be waiting for the eastern bound train, which usually had quite an amount of gold and silver bullion, sometimes indeed had a very large amount, in transit.

There is a point in fear which, if reached, gives daring. I cannot say that I reached that point, but I did reach a

point where my thoughts were not hampered by fear, and I planned coolly.

The entire town lay up the track from the depot, and it would be impossible for me to get to it without the supposed robbers seeing me, and this meant, if they were robbers, that I would be invited to stop, and I knew that if they asked so small a favor my gentlemanly training would not permit me to refuse. I had just time to save that train, but no wires to work.

The men were yet thirty or forty rods from the depot. If I could only get down the track I might be able to give warning to the train five miles or, as she was late, even more from the station. My bicycle!—the thought came tardily over my mind. The incline from my platform to the ground was on the west side, and the wheel in the freight wareroom, which had a west door. It could not be more favorable if it had been planned purposely. I pocketed my revolver, swung the red lantern, unlit, on my arm, and opening the wareroom door, mounted, as was my custom, in the room, and slid off down the incline. I worked with a will and energy hitherto very unusual, for I fully expected that I should be followed, and it seemed that it might be desirable to have even a bullet handicapped in the race by a good start. I had no fear of accident, for I knew every inch of the road to Shawnee, the next station west, and the night was one of the clearest and most beautiful I have ever seen.

Five miles beyond was Brown's Gulch, and the bluff going down into it was so steep that I had never dared to take it except with set brake, and very carefully. The precipitousness of the hill was not now enough to stop me. My speed was good when I tipped over the hill's brow. Throwing my feet over the handle bars I leaned well back to avoid danger of heading. Ah, how the speed increased! The wind blowing from behind seemed to change and blow a stiff front gale. Never do I want another such ride. I could see no stones, though there were several in the track. Whizzing through the air till I was dizzy and the spokes of the wheel fairly hummed as they cut through the air, I saw and realized little, except that I could do nothing but ride it out. The hill was long, but I soon seemed to be thrown into the air; I heard a hollow

rumble scarcely an instant in duration, and I knew that the bridge at the bottom was crossed. At the top of the incline at the other side of the gulch I lit the lantern and for the first time thought of the foolishness of my wild chase, if the whole conspiracy to rob the train were only in my imagination. Pondering these things I remounted and toiled on, still at my best speed, till Shawnee was reached, and no train yet. She had evidently "stolen time"—that is, reported as leaving before she really did, hoping to make up the time thus stolen.

Exhausted and breathless I related my story to the agent, who had grounded east and got to working with the dispatcher, by having his work repeated over other lines. The dispatcher, suspicious of the strange action of the wire, had ordered the train to be held. My arrival being announced and my suspicions related, he ordered that the coaches be left, the mail and express unloaded and put under guard at Shawnee, and that officers and posse in the baggage cars only run cautiously to Xalo. Excitement ran high as the passengers began to learn the cause of the delay, and several volunteered their services as deputies to the officers and-others didn't. A posse was made up and we advanced slowly, lest the track should be broken or obstructed, if the robbers had divined or discovered my flight. A council of war in progress as we were going resulted in a plan to draw up to the depot in usual style, only that we did not dare to run at usual speed, and to cover with guns any and all who might be at the station as soon as anyone was seen, giving the alternative of raising submissive hands or being fired upon.

When the whistle blew we were prepared, with guns leveled and the conductor ready to pull open the door as soon as we should be at the depot. I cannot vouch for the feelings of anyone except myself. My heart beat fast and perspiration started from every pore. The door opened and there stood two masked men and the boy who was "goin East." Timid as he had seemed in my office he now held his gun, poised and ready.

The astonishment of the robbers on hearing our men shout the terms, and on seeing themselves so much outnumbered and outwitted may be imagined, and with sullen grace they submitted.