

THE ADOLESCENCE  
OF NUMBER  
EIGHTY-SEVEN



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The Adolescence of Number Eighty-Seven

By Arthur Stringer

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The prairie drift-snow shrilled and whined under the slowly moving wheels, as the engine and tender for Number Three backed down the ice-hung water-tank. To Web Ross, up in the cab, it sounded loud and ludicrous, like the squealing of a train-load of hungry pigs.

In the thermometer against the wall of the squat little Canadian Pacific stationhouse the mercury was frozen in the bulb. It was at least forty degrees below zero. Just how much colder than that it might be, neither Web nor the thermometer could tell.

But as the high-shouldered young engineer swung down from the cab steps, with his oil-can and his waste in his hand, he noticed that the snow crunched sharp and crisp under his boots, like dry charcoal, and he could feel the sting of the keen air in his nostrils.

"Cold work, eh?" said a voice, almost at his shoulder.

Web looked round, unconcernedly, as any man of solemn responsibilities should. Three months before he had been a wiper in the Moosehead roundhouse. To reach the throttle after only a quarter of a year of firing was unusual, tending, naturally enough, to give a man an undue sense of his own importance. But three months before, the engineer of the Transcontinental Express been blown from the cab of his huge camelback by the bursting of a steam pipe. A trackman had found him with a broken hip, and sent the alarm east and west, to keep the road clear for the wildcat train. It was Web who volunteered to pull out of Moosehead on a special engine and take the rail ahead of the runaway, slowing down gradually, until he was able to jump from his tender's rear-board to the pilot-bar of the wildcat, and then scramble perilously up to the cab and close the throttle. So Web had accepted his subscription gold watch with a grin and taken a little pride in his promotion.

"Uncommon cold!" repeated the stranger, stepping a little nearer. His face was muffled in the upturned corner of his heavy overcoat, and he clattered his heels, boyishly, on the trodden snow.

Web was busy watching the black oil drip into the polished brass cup.

"Cold as hell!" he answered, offhanded.

"New engine, eh?" asked the black-coated stranger, not to be shaken off.

"Yep," said Web, with his handful of waste, as he petted the great shimmering piston-rod, very much as a winning jockey might rub down the withers of a race-horse. "Yep; she's new enough!"

He looked up at her approvingly. She stood a good fourteen feet from the crest of the rail to the top of the boiler-shell.

"He is a big fellow, isn't he?" remarked the amiably disposed stranger.

The driver of the twelve-wheeled monster snorted aloud.

"Fellow? She's no fellow! She's woman, through and through!" He pointed at her lifting-pipe with his long-nosed oiling-can. "There's her petticoat, to prove it!"

"What's her speed, when you force her?"

"Her speed?" echoed the man with the oil-can, as his arm went recklessly in among the great shining shafts. "Well, she's such a gawk of a girl yet, I hate to push her. There's no use bein' too hard on her, for a while yet, anyway! So we've got to kind o' coax the speed out of her still. She's touchy, too, touchy as a four-year-old girl!"

But he was proud of her; the stranger knew that by the way in which Web rubbed down the polished cylinders.

"I've seen her wobble along, in her sore-legged kind o' way, doin' her mile in forty-seven seconds!"

"Then what would she do that run from Police Creek to Deerhead in, if she was pushed?" the stranger asked.

"You'll see her do it in thirty-five minutes to-night, if you're on board!" answered the young engineer. He turned to wipe a stain off her boiler jacket--it was almost the same touch that a mother gives to wipe away a child's tear. "Just wait until she finds herself! She's still kind of ashamed o' showing her ankles now, which ain't good for a girl who's got to do the most loose-jointed work that steam and cylinder was ever set at." Web chuckled at his own personifying jocularly. "She's too skittish yet, and needs another month or two of pettin' down and coaxin' out, and *then* you'll see that eighteen by twenty-six cylinder of her's getting in its fine work!"

The stranger was on the cab steps, peering about the tender and boiler head and cab windows.

"She's got to learn her table manners yet, too," said Web. He was young, and he liked to talk. "She eats coal like a hog--has the dirtiest habits of any Brooks I ever saw! But me and Tom's been teachin' her things, and she's willin', mighty willin', to learn!"

"I see you haven't got those white train-markers on, instead of green!" laughed the stranger, waving his gloved hand toward the waiting express cars.

"No, by Gawd, but we've got two Winchesters and two picked men on board, and I guess they'll answer about as well!"

"I hear that Collins, who ought to be going out on this run, kind of flunked!"

"It's a lie," cried Web, like one of the Brotherhood, "he's sick! He's damned near dead; that's what *he* is--wife sittin' up two nights, puttin'

plasters on him!"

The reference was twofold. Some amiable lunatic had written to the Division Superintendent saying he needed a few thousand dollars, and desired the road, if they cared to treat with him before certain things might happen, to place white markers instead of green on their East-bound express. This in itself was nothing. But three times in two weeks switchlocks had been tampered with, and a local and a lumber-train had come to grief, and not without loss of life.

"Well, I guess there's nothing much doing, *this* kind of weather, anyway," remarked the stranger, with his muffled but companionable laugh.

Web swung himself up on the cab steps, for out of the clear, windless air of the late afternoon they could hear the incoming West-bound scream, and scream, and scream again. Then across the open prairie glare they could hear the reverberant rumble and roar. A moment later she wheeled into sight, belching a pennant of pearl-colored steam, with rose-tinted edges, in the late afternoon sun. She staggered to a standstill, her great shoulders hunched arrogantly up, panting and blowing with what seemed a sense of her own importance.

A man ran crunchingly down the platform with a sheet of yellow flimsy in his hand. The black-coated stranger boarded the train.

As Web disappeared behind his oil-stained canvas curtain the burnished bell swung noisily once or twice, a cloud of pearl and old-rose steam surrounded the twelve great wheels, Number Eighty-Seven grunted a response to the throttle-move and seemed to shake herself from her sleep. The drift snow shrilled and whined, and the great steel belly, in which a family might house, hissed forth her power, and the East-bound was on her way again.

Many eyes watched her curiously from the squat little station, for already the news that she carried two armed guards on board, and that her express-car safes held forty thousand dollars in Ashcroft gold-dust, had spread about the little frost-bound town. But as Web's friend had hinted, it was not felt to be exactly the right sort of weather for road-agent romancing.

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Web was happy. He found nothing depressing in the silences and the snowy desolation of the northern twilight. The snow glare, with the on-coming of night, had died down, and the endless, undulating plain of white had taken on a tint that seemed the softest of pinks. Now it was blue, lifeless, steel blue; and Number Eighty-Seven and her train, to Web, seemed a feverish needle of life flashing across some limitless fabric of blue-tinted silence. It seemed warm and homelike in the cab, for Tom Wasley, who was firing for Web, had closed the overhead ventilator, to keep out the penetrating night air. He and Tom were facing what two older runners had shied at, yet each of them appeared unruffled, undisturbed, altogether at home. To them it was prosaic; all in the day's work. And old Tom did not even resent the younger man's presence on "the throttle-side." With one it was the recklessness of youth; with the other, the resignation of age.

As Eighty-Seven took the sharp curve at Tithurn Bridge, and the heavy coaches twisted and creaked in her wake, Web put a hand on the sand-lever, squinted at his gauge, and let her take the up-grade wide open. Web knew that the working-pressure of his eighty-seven-inch boiler was well over two hundred and ten pounds; he knew the length of her main rod was within an inch or two of nine feet, and that her great piston-stroke of thirty-four inches could make her lick up distance like a thirsty hound. She seemed so responsive, "so all-fired ready to learn," as Tom had put it, so eager to show her new-found speed and strength, that Web, keeping a strained eye out for the

switch-lamps as they pounded down into Police Creek, felt a wordless resentment for the wreckers who had the heart to endanger so fine and finished a goddess of steel. He felt that she was almost human.

"I'd say she was *slobberin'* less than usual," he called to Tom Wasley. He turned from his window, and saw that the fireman was not in the cab.

Instead of Tom Wasley he beheld the black-coated stranger who had spoken with him at the beginning of the run. It filled him with a quiet and sullen wonder that this stranger should be menacing him with a glimmering pistol-barrel.

"I want you to slow down," he said quietly, but firmly. Web noticed that through each swing and lurch of the cab the menacing revolver pointed undeviatingly at one point just between his eyes.

"I want you to slow down, and do it pretty quick, too," said the stranger once more.

"What's all this joshin', anyway?" demanded the amazed engineer.

"I'm not joshin'! Stop this train, and stop it quick!"

"What for?" demanded Web.

"To save your head getting a hole in it. Pull that lever, you damned numskull, or I'll plug you!" And he sealed his determination with a sharp oath.

Eighty-Seven slowed down, shudderingly.

"Now you climb back and cut off this engine and tender--quick!"



Web has hesitated to weigh his chances in a hand-to-hand tussle, but the ever-menacing gun-barrel gave him no chance. He felt that perhaps his moment would come later. At any rate, he decided, as he swung sulkily down before his oppressor, he would have to wait for that moment. Already the train men were marveling at the stop. Sixty seconds would give him his chance.

But the man in the black overcoat was wary, and Web knew that the hand that was reckless enough to hold up the Imperial Limited would not be apt to hesitate very long before a life or two, when he found his chances for escape cut off. But still it was worth the fight, if he could only get a chance.

He climbed back into the cab with nimble sulkiness, yet with that ever-present barrel of steel bristling somewhere about the back of his neck.

"Now send her ahead, full speed. And I want you to remember, young man, that I know this road a little better than you imagine. When we're a mile this side of Deerhead, with the bridge and the little mission church on the left, I don't want any slowing up. I want you to go through that Deerhead station yard at a mile a minute. You understand?"

"I've got an inkling," answered Web, giving the lever another notch or two. He looked at the other man grimly, and grinned.

"Ain't this expensive work?" he asked.

"Maybe it is, but it's the kind I like," answered the stranger. He groped backward to the tender, and with his free hand flung down two heavy satchels and a canvas mail-bag cut in half.

From the mail-bag fell a little shower of letters. Web noticed that each one of these letters, for all the careless way in which the stranger

kicked them together on the grimy cab floor, bore a registered stamp. Web assumed, from this, that the operations in the express and mail car had been carefully and thoroughly carried on. He wondered, vaguely, if the two satchels held the Ashcroft gold, and he also wondered if old Tom Wasley had been hauled back over the tender and locked in with the messengers and mail clerks. He questioned, too, if the one man had done his work alone. Then a still more appalling thought came to Web; he himself would be called up on the carpet for the part he had been forced to play in the whole business.

Web decided that nothing could at least be lost by talking. Sulking did no good. He must simply grin and bear it, and wait his chance.

He turned to the highwayman, who had guardedly flung the scattered mail into the open sack, and knotted it at the top.

"How far are we goin', anyway?" asked Web. He had been wondering how long it would be before the abandoned train crew had the news of the hold-up on the wire, and where the first interference from the outside world would come from. Eighty-Seven wasn't flinging herself; Web knew she hated to leave her train behind.

"You're going just as far as I say," was the curt reply. "And from the look of that lower gauge you'd better fire up a little."

Web had hoped for a chance, with the heavy steel shovel once in his hand; but at every move he saw the lynx-like eye of his enemy following him. So he shoveled in sullen silence. After all, it was all in the day's work. It might have been another open switch, and another eight cars overturned. He had hoped, at first, that Number Eighty-Seven would "lay down on him"; now, as he glanced out into the blue-white desolation of the frost-bound prairie, he knew that nothing good could come of being stranded in emptiness, with the mercury on the lower side of the forty mark.

He watched the pointer on his steam gauge go higher and higher, shut off the injector for a minute or two, and threw the lever back to the last notch. He began to worry a little about the driving-wheels--caststeel did strange things, sometimes, in sixty degrees of frost--but the man had asked for speed, and he was giving it to him.

"Keep this up until we're twelve miles past Deerhead, right through. When we get to the stretch of timber there, I want you to slow down. When I drop off I want you to go right ahead--no running back to Deerhead--and I don't think you'll gain anything by being in too much of a hurry, either!"

Web grinned, and put on the pump again, for the steam was hissing and singing through the gauge-cocks, blue and dry and hard.

"You'd better fire up again," suggested the highwayman.

"We're hammerin' her pretty hard," demurred the young engineer.

"It'll do her good."

"But she's my engine, and I've got to watch her!"

"She's got to travel faster, I say."

Web glared across the swaying cab at his enemy. This was all he got for it; this was all his thanks for pounding the spirit out of her, and threatening those beautiful big six-foot driving-wheels on that pounding track.

"I tell you I've *got* to save; her crown sheet," declared Web.

"Crown sheet be damned! I've got to get past Deerhead before Sanderson gets his wire in, and, by God, it won't go easy with you if I

don't, either."

"I tell you the water's giving out," yelled Web. This was a lie, though the young guardian of Eighty-Seven almost wished it was true.

"Then push her through to the last foot and as fast as she can make it, too!"

Web was about to retort, angrily, but as his glance instinctively fell along the glistening line of steel under his pilot an idea came to him. He had suddenly remembered that only one thing could happen if she took the switch at the Deerhead station-yard at that rate of speed. Seventy miles an hour over a loose-jointed point-switch--there could be only one outcome! But it would put a stop to this high-handed traveling, and to the career of his black-coated friend, and she would go over on the left, he felt sure, so he could jump for it from his cab step.

Web's second idea was not such a happy one. It would mean the death of Number Eighty-Seven. It would be killing her, to gain his point. It would seem like murder. It meant crippling and breaking her spirit--just when she was beginning to know what life was, just when she was beginning to answer to every touch, and obey every move and order. *She* would never treat him in that way!

But he must decide quickly, he told himself, for already he could catch the glimmer of the Deerhead yard lamps. Even at the best there was risk in it; even at the best, he told himself, it was cruelty to the old girl.

"Pound her through," ordered the highwayman, as he called her a foul name, and clung to the swaying window rail at the other side of the cab, "and let her blow up when she damn please."

Web clamped his jaw, and again shut off the injector to allow her to

pick up. Then his hand shot out to the whistle lever, and her sudden shriek tore a hole in the silence of the prairie night.

"What in hell d'you mean by that?" cried the other man, leaping forward, white with rage.

"But that's orders."

"You take your orders from me, this time! I don't want that whole town swarming down to the track, you fool!"

Web watched the switch light dance and swim up to them. He stood ready, waiting.

It was the unexpected that happened. He could feel the pound of the switch point, the quick lurch and swing. In another moment he expected to feel the shuddering thud of his wheels on the sleepers. Instead of that a mass of steel tore whistling through the left-hand side of the cab, carrying away iron and woodwork as it went. Then came another; and another.

Web understood what it meant. The huge rim of one of the great driving-wheels had broken, and fragments of it kept cannonading up through the frail shell of the cab as the great mass flew madly round.

Instinctively Web's arm shot out to the lever, and he shut her off. He turned to explain why. He had, for a moment, even forgotten the presence of the other man. And that menacing gun-barrel might have barked out at him by mistake, and it would have been all over, forever.

Web gasped, and the sound was like air rushing into an opened breaks-tube. The highwayman lay against the tender-sheet, unconscious, with his cheek torn open.

Eighty-Seven had got even with him. She had held him up! She had

cannonaded him with her bolts of wrath! She had given him as good as she had taken!

The jolting engine shuddered to a standstill, and over the dry, hard snow sounded the whirl of feet and the cry of excited voices. Web swung himself down from the cab steps. For all the cold, oily drops of sweat clung to his gray-white forehead, and the muscles in his jaw were working like leather-covered injector-valves.

"What's happened there? What's happened?" cried the Deerhead night operator, running up with a lantern.

Web leaned against the driving-rod, for under his oil-stained overalls his legs were shaking and quaking. Then he wiped his forehead, and cursed hysterically.

"I bust you up, old girl! I bust you up," he moaned.

He picked up a piece of broken steel, bright like silver on the raw edge, and gazed at it stupidly. Then he dropped it, and laughed a little. The first effects of his shock were passing away.

"What happened down here, anyway?" the operator was demanding.

Web looked at him, and then gazed at his disabled engine, regretfully. Then he pointed toward the cab.

"By God, O'Higgins, *she's human*," he declared, inconsequentially, but with great conviction.

"Who's human? What's human?"

"This old girl of mine! She's human, I tell you--and I've gone and broken her spirit!"

He groped about the injured wheel sorrowingly, shaking a melancholy head. Then he looked up and called out to O'Higgins, the operator.

"There's a road-agent up in that cab you'd better look after. Yes, I say a road-agent. You may think I'm a fool, O'Higgins, but I'll blister in hell *if Eighty-Seven didn't turn and hold the cuss up, herself!*"

The operator swung back the oil-stained canvas curtain, and peered into the cab.

"Poor old girl!" said Web, fingering the raw edge of the broken steel. Then he wiped his forehead, and shook his head again.

"I'll get hell for this," he said, dejectedly, taking still another spiritless look at his broken engine.

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