
The Last Ride

by Eugene V. Debs

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The man who earns his bread upon a locomotive risks his life and limb every moment he occupies in the discharge of his hazardous duties. Almost every hour brings the report of a wreck on the rail — of a train loaded with humanity gone down — of an engineer and fireman who “took their last ride.”

Every precaution is taken against these dreadful calamities; but without avail. They seem to be inevitable as fate itself. The dangers give no warning of their approach. Silently they lie in ambush until their prey is certain; when they spring upon the unsuspecting victims, with an insatiate fury. Their havoc is sad indeed to contemplate and the scenes that ensue are frightful to behold. Here and there, midst the shattered wreck of iron and timber and hissing steam are strewn the dead and dying. The king of terrors made no discrimination for we see the most sacred relations torn asunder with a merciless hand. Father, dead and mangled beyond recognition; mother, cruelly maimed, and little children imploring their aid. The coldness of death, the intense agonies of suffering, and the wailings of grief combine to make this scene heartrending in the extreme. Words can never express the depth of its horrors.

But thank fortune such calamities do not always follow a wreck. Between the train of living, throbbing, freight and approaching danger there stands the man in front — “the man of sand — the moral hero.” No matter what element of destruction may reveal itself, he is there to avert it if he can; and if he cannot, to offer the first victim to appease its wrath. He may stop the train in time to save the precious lives committed to his

keeping; but his own, he has to sacrifice as the price of his heroism. In almost every instance he is first to encounter the shock — first to hear the death-knell sounded. How often we hear it said: “The train was saved without the loss of a single life, but the engineer and fireman were killed.”

The passengers may, and often do, escape unharmed; the men in front, scarcely ever. They are found under their engines, shapeless, ghastly, frightful. No thought of home and loved ones light their last solemn moments on earth. A crash; a stifled cry of agony and despair; night without a star, and all is over.

’Tis the wink of an eye, the draught of a breath,
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death.¹

Then begins the work of raising the ponderous mass of machinery to recover the remains. He who was first to breast the elements of destruction is last to be rescued from its terrible grasp. In the mass of debris is found his fallen form. The nameless hero has taken his last ride. He was faithful to the end.

Now comes the deepest and blackest shadows of this gloomy picture. We see two households in mourning — two wives brokenhearted and their fatherless children in abject despair. Again we look and see their cottages surrounded by mourning relatives and friends. The slow tolling of the bells indicate that the funeral day has arrived. Next comes the sad and pathetic sermon, the funeral cortege and the grave. All is over now. The men who were in front a few days ago have glided into the vast unknown.

Thus the engineman lives and thus he dies. In the midst of life and health and plenty he is cut down never to rise again. To contemplate their situation, it seems to us, should impress them with the necessity of being at all times prepared to “take their last ride.”

They should never mount their engines without being in readiness to answer the call. If they have loving ones who depend upon them for support, they should make every provision for them in time. They should have a moral standing in the

¹ Couplet from the poem “Mortality” [1824] by William Knox (1779-1825).

community in which they live so that the public sympathy will not be withheld from them in the hour of their emergency. They should have a clear and consistent record as men. They should be prepared to leave this world with a spotless character — one they need not fear to answer for in the world to come. To impress these principles upon the minds of men is the object of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and upon the merits of its aims and purposes it will rise to the high sphere of usefulness it is destined to occupy. The grateful widows and orphans it has relieve, the maimed sufferers it has comforted, and the erring and infirm it has reclaimed from the world of vice, are willing witnesses to its eternal progress.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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