

The Black Cat

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Flicker Brown's Fourth.

BY SEWELL FORD.



DO say that Victoria Siding, one of the minor marks of punctuation on the long line of the Canadian Pacific road, was a lonesome place would be to wofully understate the exceptional advantages it offered to hermits in search of a congenial place of residence. People came and went every day, it is true, and in considerable numbers; but the serious practical difficulties in the way of maintaining satisfactory social relations with the occupants of a flying express train, left its solitary resident, the station master, substantially without society of any kind, and in an isolation so complete as to materially assist his natural politeness in overlooking the dubious motives and personal undesirability of his infrequent Indian visitors, and to give the monthly call of the paymaster's car the incidental importance of a social function.

Into such an environment Fate, with its customary strong sense of humor, had pitchforked Flicker Brown, a native of New England, with an ample inheritance of all the characteristics of his birthplace, including an intense patriotism and an unquenchable loquacity. Flicker had, in a happier past, been justly described as a man who would rather talk than eat, and the irony of circumstances which had, during the three months of his official residence

at Victoria Siding, strictly confined the effective use of his mouth to the latter employment was, indeed, bitter.

To explain just how it happened that so loyal an American should be holding a position of some trust, if of small emolument, on the greatest railroad line in Her Majesty's American provinces would require too profound a dip into the variegated past of Flicker Brown. It is enough to say that at twenty-six the responsibilities of life still sat lightly upon him, so lightly, indeed, that, lacking other ballast, he came and went to any port at will, sometimes with clearance papers and sometimes without. And his latest voyage upon the troubled sea of life had left him in this incongruous haven. But the most iron circumstances were powerless to confine Flicker Brown's natural tendencies. Nothing could curb his desire to talk, not even the lack of hearers. Because he chanced to be a dozen miles from the nearest human being, it did not occur to Flicker that conversation was vain. He loved the sound of the human voice, and even under more favorable circumstances had been suspected of preferring the sound of his own vocal organ to that of conversational competitors. So it was merely characteristic that, standing upon his official platform one hot July morning, his legs wide apart, and his hands in his trousers' pockets, he should have smitten the unheeding air of British Columbia with the following entirely superfluous utterance: —

“Now, what in tillieludlum do you suppose is in that box?”
“Tillieludlum” being an ingenious compromise between the profane traditions of his profession and the samples of a strict bringing up.

The subject of his inquiry was a long, rectangular, shallow box of new quarter-inch pine. It might have held scythe blades, or clothes pins, or pressed corned beef in cans. Certainly there was nothing strikingly mysterious about it. It was an ordinary, commonplace, every-day sort of a box, yet for Flicker it had a certain mysterious fascination which easily prevailed over the not particularly distracting cares of his office. It was not very heavy, for he had easily perched it on top of the barrel of salt that had come for Pierre Miquelle. Both had been dumped on the platform before he had left his bunk in the corner that very morning,

contributions of the way-freight which always came wheezing along just in time to wake him up to the enjoyment of a second nap. Weighted by a ballast rock on top of the box had been the way-bill. But the way-bill showed only one package of freight for Victoria Siding, and that one was the salmon canner's barrel of salt. Yet here were two.

At first this had not puzzled Flicker, for the sleepy freight conductor had made mistakes before; but on looking over the box he found neither name nor address upon it. After closer search, however, he had discovered a single tack holding a bit of paper and showing where had been the tag which rough handling had rubbed off.

"Some shippers haven't the brains of a jack rabbit," said Flicker, again indulging his ruling passion for conversation.

He carried the box into the station where he could look at it while getting breakfast, leaving the task of rolling in the heavy barrel until later.

"Now what *do* you suppose is in that box?"

This was not the third or the fourth time he had allowed himself the luxury of putting this question. Not that it was any part of his business to find out what *was* in the box. On the contrary, as freight agent, his plain duty was to mark it "S. S." for "strayed shipment," and send it back to the general office. But Flicker reflected that if, as freight agent, he ought not to pry into strayed parcels, as station master he had a right to know the kind of merchandise he was storing. Besides, as switch tender and telegraph operator, he might be pardoned a little interest. And above and beyond this concerted call of duty, he was conscious of a very human curiosity to lift the lid of the estray.

He did not immediately yield to this weakness, however. During the three months in which he had served the Canadian Pacific at Victoria Siding he had learned to do things leisurely, there was always so little to do and such a wealth of time in which to do it. And he was, besides, reluctant to reduce at once to a possible commonplace the very first stimulating mystery that had arisen during his incumbency. Above all there was duty.

So the conscientious freight agent sternly drove back home the few nails which mere irresponsible curiosity and official casuistry

had idly withdrawn, and sternly applied himself to the task of housing his other piece of freight.

But the box continued to exert over him an irresistible attraction. He became aware that his customarily simple pilgrimages about his diminutive premises were complicated by superfluous detours, all leading him by and near the box. And at each perigee, so to speak, resulting from this mysterious force of gravitation, he felt his sense of official honor to grow weaker and the promptings of his weak humanity to wax more and more irresistible. It is due to him to say that it was high noon before he finally yielded, but it must be owned that at twelve precisely he nervously seized his hatchet and guiltily began to loosen the lid.

Once at the business he quite forgot his scruples. Up came one corner, then the other. Next he pried up the sides and carefully yanked out the wire nails. Under the cover was a layer of excelsior,— a momentary but irritating delay. Lifting this, he paused and gave utterance to a long whistle.

“Wh-e-e-ew! Flags, by ginger! The good old Stars and Stripes, too. Great switches! It seems like years since I've seen one. ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! The flag that made us free!’” and the impetuous Flicker, waving one in each hand, marched about the room. They were cheap, printed flags, about ten and a half by fifteen inches in size, but there were three bundles of them, a dozen in a bunch, and each flag mounted on a five-foot stick. In a moment he was excitedly pawing out more excelsior.

“Jumpin' beeswax! Fireworks, or I'm a Piute! Rockets, pinwheels, Roman candles, cannon crackers, punk, and the whole outfit.”

It would be neither edifying nor moral to trace the process by which Flicker Brown convinced himself that in appropriating this strayed package he was doing a patriotic and commendable deed. The process was brief. Mainly, it was the bracing up of the wobbly sophistry that the man who paid for these fireworks intended them to be burned on that very Fourth of July; that the loss of the tag would prevent him from ever attending to the business himself; and that the ultimate fate of the said fireworks, subsequent to their sale at auction with other unclaimed parcels, would be to go up, not in honor of our own glorious declaration

of independence, but to commemorate the birthday of a successor to the throne of the hated George Third.

"No sir-ree. No Canucker'll ever set these off on no Queen's birthday, not if I can help it," declared Flicker indignantly. And he continued, "Will Victoria Siding celebrate to-night? Well, I guess."

For an hour he was busy and happy. He tacked a row of flags to the eaves of the square, one-story stone station, crossed a pair in each window and nailed two more over the door. He set up rocket troughs and fastened to a telegraph pole a crossbar for Catherine wheels.

Then on his kindled enthusiasm came a dampening thought. What satisfaction would there be in having a display of fireworks and no one there to see it but himself? Way back on the creek bank there were some Siwash huts, but the Indians were probably off down river fishing. Save for them he knew of not another living soul nearer than the next station, a dozen miles west, where there were not more than half a hundred, counting half breeds. Never before had the human barrenness of British Columbia made itself felt so strongly.

In his glance there was sadness — or as near sadness as the patriotic and conversational Flicker ever got — as he looked at his preparations. There would be no spectators at Victoria Siding's Fourth of July celebration.

"Won't, eh? By Christopher, we'll see about that!"

It was then that Flicker had his inspiration.

When darkness began to shut in around the lonely little station, when the great spruce forest seemed to advance until it hemmed him in closer than ever, he stood in the doorway and whistled "Yankee Doodle," beating out a bass accompaniment on the door panels with his heels.

Far off in the blackness where the darkening sky met the dark woods in an irregular line began to glow a single bright eye. As it grew in size the low rumble took on a heavier volume; then the eye became a great blazing headlight and the rumble swelled to the crashing thunder of flying wheels heavy laden. The Dominion Limited was coming west.

There came two frightened snorts from the engine whistle, a series of screeches as the brake shoes bit the steel, and a con-

fused whirring that told of reversed drivers and an open sand-box. Then the long train, with a bumping of draw-heads, came to a stop at Victoria Siding.

Every one aboard seemed to be interested in this sudden change from the noisy, swinging rush coastwards to the calm, dense stillness of this desolate spot. Through the windows of the long, vestibuled cars the passengers peered out. Late diners left their coffee, tired travelers pushed back their berth curtains, and the men in the smoking compartment dropped cards and stories.

They saw Flicker Brown calmly swinging a red lantern. The brass-buttoned conductor saw him, too, and lost no time in seeking him out.

"What in thunder do you mean by stopping the Limited at this forsaker hole, and that with us twenty minutes behind schedule?" he demanded, red of face and puffing from his dash up the track.

"Orders," replied Flicker with unusual brevity, and handed out a message damp from the copy press.

The conductor grabbed the sheet and held it close to his nickeled lantern.

"'Hold Victoria Siding until 8:32,'" he read. "Now what idiot sends me such an order as this? Why, there's no train due either way for four hours."

"Them's the orders," said Flicker. "Mebbe it's a special."

"They wouldn't sidetrack the Limited for a special. Joe, what do you think of this?" said the conductor as the engineer came up.

Joe's expressed thoughts on the subject were rather profane. He joined the conductor in pointed criticism of train despatchers as a genus and of this one as an individual. Having done this and somewhat relieved his mental strain, the conductor said to Joe: "Well, I suppose we shall have to take the siding."

And take the siding they did.

While something like three hundred passengers were simultaneously investigating this delay, Flicker got some matches and created a diversion. Touching off a red light at either end of the platform, he revealed the novel spectacle of a Canadian Pacific railroad station decked out in American colors. He was sending up his second rocket when the conductor rushed back.

"You — you impudent scoundrel! What do you mean by — by that?" and, words failing, he waved his hand toward the station.

"Me?" said Flicker. "Oh, I don't mean nothing by that; I'm just havin' a little celebration."

"Celebration! For what?"

"Why, for the Fourth of July. I always do."

"You do, do you? Well, young man, you're cheeky. Don't you know that as an employee of this road you have no right to do such a thing? Stop it at once! Why, I've got Lord Windover-Breers and two Privy Councillors aboard. They'll be red hot. Stop it, I say."

"Guess not, old man; this is my private blow-out, and she's goin' through, lords or no lords. You can tell His Royal Thingumbobness that for me. Look out, I'm going to touch off another!" and as Flicker applied the slow-match there was a swish and a roar as the rocket raced up into the sky to burst into balls of red, white, and blue.

The conductor retreated into the station, and the little knot of passengers which had surrounded them was quickly augmented by enthusiastic recruits from the train, who practically testified to their appreciation of the humor of the situation by hilariously assisting Flicker in the task of setting off his fireworks. They were deep in the fun when the angry conductor burst forth from the station and rushed toward the victim of misplaced patriotism.

"Hi, you agent! What d'ye mean? Headquarters say they didn't send out any such order."

"Who said they did?" and Flicker touched the burning punk to the fuse of a big Roman candle. "Them's my orders. Yes, *my* orders; that's what I said. Hey, keep off there, you beef-eating Britisher, or I'll plug you full of hot balls."

"I'll have you discharged to-morrow," roared the irate official, displaying, however, a physical discretion in the face of Flicker's awkward weapon that ludicrously contrasted with his fire-eating mood.

"You can't," said Flicker, as he triumphantly blazed away. "I'm going to resign to-night."

And as the train ignominiously retreated from an unmistakable

American victory, a ringing cheer went up from a knot of Yankee passengers on its rear platform, in commemoration of the first and last Fourth of July celebration at Victoria Siding.

Flicker's resignation was wired that evening to the superintendent in the following laconic terms: —

“I'm through here and gone West. Send on another man.”

All of which came duly to pass. The new man, it is needless to say, is a lonely but loyal Briton.

