

THE DENTIST'S PROFFERED TESTIMONY

locked against public discovery for 87 years

To the Venerable Owners,
Wiscasset, Waterville & Farmington Railroad
Wiscasset, Maine
June 22, 1912

Honorable Gentlemen:

By now you have closed your case on the train that disappeared. You have done the only prudent thing. You conducted an investigation. I am pleased to know that the records of the Wiscasset, Waterville & Farmington Railroad will always show that the Two-ten of April 27 left China Lake on time, also that the Five-fifteen, the same train, never arrived in Wiscasset. Those are the facts.

Your investigation concluded that, since no train can simply disappear, since you also did not find it in a ravine or in a river or run aground in the woods somewhere, it clearly was stolen. You could not prove as much in court, so you fired the train's engineer, fireman, and conductor, and the dispatcher in China Lake, the last men officially in charge of the train. As surely it befit the circumstances, you accused agents of the Maine Central Railroad of conspiring somehow to obtain the narrow-gauge equipment by diverting it to their standard-gauge flat cars and whisking it away, a feat whose execution you have not explained, and whose purpose could only be obscure.

Curiously, you left unbesmirched the name of the dispatcher in Wiscasset, whose innocence I can avow anyway even though I have never met him. You also failed to convince anyone in Wiscasset or elsewhere that a train could silently sneak across a town at evening, past ticket-holders at the station, past workers waiting to

load ice, past the distraught Wiscasset dispatcher as well, in order to reach the tracks of the adjoining railroad company, where it would have taken many men and substantial conspicuous equipment to accomplish the deed.

Your representatives who came to China Lake those several weeks ago to investigate the mystery promised to interview the passengers who had been set off from the last car just before the train vanished. There were five of us, besides the train's three-man crew. I am one of those five.

Yet, you have not returned to interview us, and we can see by the newspapers that you consider the case closed. Therefore I propose to reach you by personal correspondence.

Now learn what truly happened to the Five-fifteen. I shall begin by introducing myself.

I am a dentist – Bates - 1904, Tufts - 1907. I have resided in Waterville and Winslow most of the ensuing years since embarking upon my calling. However, the villages of China Lake, North Vassalboro, East Vassalboro, and others proposed that one of my profession serve their communities as an itinerant dental surgeon until one or two of their own young citizens could complete the rigorous training in dentistry. That is how I came to be in China Lake off and on recently, particularly in the days preceding the April 27 disappearance.

I had come there most recently from a few day's work in North Vassalboro, therefore I listened with particular interest one evening at dinner when my host, Mister Chet Flewes, commented that that poor village was being visited by a peculiar stranger. This conversation took place a couple of weeks or more before you lost your train.

The stranger had personal business in the area, Mister Flewes had heard: he was seeking information concerning a lost ancestor. Apparently he was succeeding poorly or not at all in his quest, but was lingering until he had exhausted all sources.

Mister Flewes, a headmaster, learned a little bit more each day, and so Mistress Flewes, as well as another

boarder, and I listened eagerly for more news each evening at dinner.

The stranger in North Vassalboro was a Mister Efferfelz. He was residing in a room at the home of the elder Mistress Prouty, the same Lisbeth Prouty who had only recently provided my lodging there, and a person known to many in China Lake.

What we learned next had the character of a tale blown out of proportion in the telling. Mistress Prouty, a reputable and honest woman of modest means in her widowhood, was watching Mister Efferfelz as he approached her house one evening at dusk. He was described as a lean man of shadowy ways and foul disposition, whose age showed only in his hair, once red and curly but now like meringue: white throughout except for wavy tips that still showed burnt orange.

As the man came nearer, Mistress Prouty assessed that he had been drinking – perhaps not excessively, but enough that he would weave slightly. In so weaving, Mister Efferfelz strayed from the sidewalk and struck his foot against a low iron figurine decorating Mistress Prouty’s crocus patch. As he reeled from the blow, barely remaining erect, the man cursed, and, before her eyes, he pointed at the statue and caused it to glow instantaneously, then disappear.

The night this story was told at dinner I promised that one day I would return from another visit to Mistress Prouty’s house and would tell the people back in China Lake what really happened.

Then another story came home with Mister Flewes. Mister Efferfelz had gone to the home of the town clerk of North Vassalboro, there to peruse some old town records. Due to his morose manner and reputation for raising people’s anxiety, he was asked to stand at the back door as the clerk, an aging Mister Aberly, brought things to him. Mister Aberly had a wind chime in a tree near his door, which instrument evidently annoyed Mister Efferfelz.

Presently, (annoyed also that he was made to stand outside), Mister Efferfelz whirled on the noisemaker, snarled, and waved his hand at it, causing it to disintegrate where it hung. The tree branch was unaffected.

These were the facts as told us by Mister Flewes. Other stories less credible also circulated in China Lake, and were especially exaggerated by the children. All feared, of course, that this stranger eventually would make his way to China Lake. And of course he did.

Now, in China Lake there was one person who, we all knew, would best avoid a confrontation with this stranger. "Chuck-the-Talking-Ox" Wilbert, as he's called behind his back, runs an all-purpose business on the shore of the lake. He rents boats and canoes, he sets a table and runs a restaurant when someone wants to buy a meal, he has a cot in the boathouse so he can claim to be an innkeeper. He repairs automobiles, builds privies, and does anything that might bring in a nickel.

Chuck Wilbert is also outspoken without inhibition, and one can tell as much just by looking at him. He peers through magnifying eyeglasses, which match his unusual height and broad girth. He wears overalls that are too short, and sneezes into countless rags that drip from his many pockets. The sole listener to his incessant opinionating is usually his cat, but any human being who passes within earshot usually finds himself snared in conversation – or shall I say, in "uni-versation" – as I learned one day when I recklessly passed his open-fronted establishment.

On or about April 21, as it happens, (it was that Sunday), I myself had skirted Wilbert's storefront in order to sink a worm into a stream I had found a little distance from town. I was horseback this day, for once I was a mile or more from town I expected to cover about another mile off-road. I was not much disturbed by the gathering clouds, but if I had been more sensible that day I would have stayed indoors for what they forebode.

I was well out of town, on the road to the Vassalboros, I must add, when I realized that I must surely turn back. The horse was nervous due to the imminent storm, and hardly knew me. But then, in the distance, I saw a man approaching on foot. He carried a light bag and made no effort to hail or detain me. Nonetheless, I paused until he drew near enough that I could offer him a lift.

He would have trudged past me as if I were a two-headed, four-legged bush at the road's edge, but I spoke

to interrupt his pace and know his desire. His up-turned gaze said leave-me-alone, and when he faced me squarely I knew whom I had intercepted. Beneath the straw hat grew the aptly-described hair. The face wore a look of disgust at my interruption of his journey.

"Sorry to stop you, Sir," I explained, sliding from my mount but holding her reins fast, "but I thought I could offer to share my horse for a faster ride into town." I wanted to study his face from the advantage of being a stranger, but somehow he turned his head this way and that to prevent my scrutiny of him.

After a mild sigh the traveler said, (unpleasantly, but less threateningly than I had expected): "You go your way, I'll go mine."

I indicated the storm with one arm after I rose back to the saddle, and as if joining me in contemplation of the sky he squinted into the first few heavy drops of rain. So, I good-naturedly patted the horse's rump and said: "Last chance!" or something like that. But the words were barely off my tongue when the man shouted: "I don't want your horse!" As soon as he had yelled this he swung his free arm at the sky as if batting cobwebs from a ceiling. I saw his face clearly in that moment: His jaw was set in a fierce frown, his eyes aglare, his nostrils flared, and his hair seeming to squirm out from under the edges of his hat.

Ignoring his gesture I spurred away toward town, for the poor mare had become edgy almost beyond control. But then, after – how long was it? – a half a minute? – the horse seemed to ease her gallop, and I drew her to a stop to assimilate what she had already discovered. The clouds, you see, had given way directly overhead. The rain, that had already begun to sting the back of my neck, was no more. Sunbeams shot across the road the fields and the forest at a crazy angle, setting the budding deciduous trees aglow against the moistened conifers. Still, the sunlight itself was an enigma under the blackened sky all around. The wind had barely had a chance to blow in with the first raindrops, and now it, too, was restrained. In the shadows beyond the horse's flank a dozen evening grosbeaks stood, nearly offering to be trampled, but casting about as if to understand what was become of their expected weather.

I wanted to glance backward, to see whether the traveler had come into view, but I didn't care. He had already refused my hospitality, and I understood too well what had become of our storm. I probably could have enjoyed my afternoon of fishing after all, but in truth I couldn't have enjoyed anything at all at this point. I spurred the horse once again, scattering the dumbfounded birds, and didn't ease up until I neared my hosts' house.

As I was stabling the horse I thanked God that I was not, of my own innate goodwill, the one who personally brought Mister Efferfelz into China Lake, for, had I done so, the citizens of the town would never forget such a faux pas. I said nothing to Mistress Flewes, who was merrily entertaining guests. Within hours, I guessed, they would hear of the strange man's arrival, and I could then be as "surprised" as everyone else.

And hear about it we did. For Mister Efferfelz, regardless what his other powers might have been, evidently was not gifted at discerning flawed character, so to avoid undesirable consequences. He walked into the village a half hour or so after I had returned, and immediately spied Chuck Wilbert's signs. As Chuck later regaled everyone repeatedly, they haggled over the price of cot privileges and meals, and Wilbert himself admits to being subdued by the gaunt man, to the point of accepting the stranger at his opening offer.

But later, after Mister Efferfelz had settled his things and was politely eating the supper Wilbert had set before him in the open doorway of the boathouse, the innkeeper warmed to his usual talkativeness. Presently, a couple of Wilbert's cronies sidled into the boathouse to have a look at the guest. Wilbert acknowledged them but continued to inform the visitor of all the political and social problems of China Lake. The three locals recall clearly that, without any extraordinary provocation, Efferfelz looked up from his plate and asked: "Why is it that as people grow older they lose the use of their eyes, their ears, their limbs, their bladders, their teeth – almost everything – but the voice doesn't even falter?"

Wilbert turned red and stammered, quick to take the insult, and gripped his stool as if to rise in wrath, while the others scowled at the scene uncomprehending. The stranger calmly swept his arm at the talking ox's seat as

if whisking away a fly, and the stool disappeared – disintegrated completely. Gravity being what it is, therefore, Wilbert simply tumbled backwards, out the doorway and into the water lilies that clogged the shallows around his establishment.

Chuck Wilbert was unhurt, of course. And when he was back on his feet making puddles on his dock, his rage unabated, he was able to see Mister Efferfelz, bag in hand, sauntering purposefully toward the center of town. For the next several days Wilbert remained aloof from everyone, but it was said that he had hired a spy to inform him should Efferfelz ever again approach his business.

It's a fact that China Lake, like any other town, boasts a half a dozen houses each with a discreet sign in a window saying "ROOMS". By such a sign at the Flewes house I was able to find lodging. However, when word of the mysteries happening in North Vassalboro had spread far enough, the signs simply disappeared, one by one. Thus, on a Sunday evening at dusk, a traveler in town became a vagrant.

No one knows where he slept for the next couple of nights. By day, no more dusty or unkempt than any other traveler might of necessity be, Efferfelz made his way about town inquiring after his lost ancestor. We now knew the name of the person he sought, the Reverend Mister Percival D. Welch. But it meant nothing to those whom he asked, nor to anyone else who heard about the stranger's business.

Efferfelz took all his meals at the sandwich counter in Stuart's Store, a tedious diet after a couple of days, I can attest. He eyed everyone who entered the place hour after hour, as if watching for the unknown ancestor to happen along. I had a different theory, though. I think he was looking for someone who resembled the person he sought. Mister Philip Stuart, a quiet and devout Christian, treated his dour customer with courtesy, and the Stuarts might have suffered a loss of business were it not for the fact that they were such respected citizens that the town simply would not abandon them. Sometime during the week Philip Stuart even made up an apartment for Efferfelz upstairs over a storage building behind the store.

Mister Stuart was ultimately able to determine that Percival D. Welch was an uncle to the stranger, and

Efferfelz did not know whether the uncle was living or dead. What business he had with this uncle he would not say.

All through his first five whole days in China Lake I was able to avoid a reunion with the man I had met on the road. And on Saturday afternoon I was scheduled to leave on the Two-ten, so I might have escaped altogether, as it were. I had my ticket and would be making connections southward to Falmouth to visit an aunt for a while, before resuming my own dentistry practice in Winslow. But late Saturday morning I had need to visit Stuart's Store myself, for the store was also the Post Office, and I had dental records and a bank draft to send home.

Efferfelz rounded the corner to the entrance to the store just as I also reached the door. I nodded politely and held the door open for him, which gesture he did not acknowledge. In that moment, perhaps from the surprise of finding myself side-by-side with the man in public, I felt like a stranger to town myself. Indeed, I sensed some pairs of eyes on the two of us together, thinking: "There are those two outsiders."

It happens that there are street urchins in China Lake, as you might call them, children not yet in puberty who are free to roam the streets and yards, the water's edge and the forest's edge, from the school's last bell until dusk. I saw about six such children almost every day, such that within a week or ten days I could put names or nicknames to every one. I had been in the home of at least one such to treat a mother's putrid gums.

A group of these ragamuffins flew into the store like a flock of snow buntings, shortly after Efferfelz and I arrived.

"Be about your business and then be gone!" Mister Stuart warned the children, expecting that one of them had been sent to buy the two-cent day-old bread or some salt pork for beans.

They set about their business, all right. Two or three went to the back of the store and began stinging Efferfelz with projectiles from home-made pea shooters. Efferfelz spun and glared at them in disbelief, while I, certain of his power but unsure how he might use it, stood nearby, numb and mute.

One of the hooligans near the door began urging another to "Tell him what he is! Tell him! Tell him what he is!" The ones with pea shooters hurried front, for Efferfelz had risen to his feet and was moving to intercept them.

But the little roaches were too quick, and the last one to reach the open door, a child I had previously learned was called "Petey" or something like that, stopped and shouted: "You're the devil, you are!"

Petey reached the street still spouting: "You're the devil himself!"

Efferfelz nearly caught the kid but missed. He stood in the store's open doorway and listened to the same group of kids taunt him from the middle of the rutted street: "Devil in disguise!" and other shouts. I roused myself and would have gone after the man had he taken another step. But as I watched, his chin quivered and his eyes reddened and filled with liquid. And then, from my front corner of the store, I glimpsed the fleeting motion of his arm as he raised it to sweep a dreadful curse into the street. I'm told that, as I watched the child called Petey through the store's front window, I shouted: "No!" in that moment when the little boy rose ever so slightly from the ground and then disappeared in a weak orange flash that seemed to magnify whatever was beyond it.

The remaining kids wasted no time analyzing what had happened. They all dispersed instantly. I half turned to glance at Philip Stuart, who had also seen. He had the large eyes and open mouth of a man whose deep religious foundation had just been shaken by an earthquake that could not happen. Others outside the store, for there were two or three passers-by, stopped in their tracks and raised their eyebrows. But then, one by one they saw the man standing in the doorway, and their oblivion turned to comprehension and panic.

Efferfelz stalked out the door and lurched around the corner of the building in the direction of his apartment. Who was going to accost him, after all?

Stuart and I, as well as the others present, slowly approached the spot where Petey had last existed. A constable, whom I recognized as a local stonemason in an ill-fitting uniform, hurried from a nearby house,

wiping his chin with a doily. Here, perhaps, was Wilbert's spy. He too had witnessed the unbelievable.

Minutes passed, I suppose, as more and more citizens gathered around the suspicious spot, and the story had to be told and retold. It was a telling that could not be exaggerated. Shortly a diminutive young woman could be seen running and shouting hysterically from the direction of the apartment houses up the hill from the lake. She was surrounded by other young mothers and by kids, many more children than made up the normal group of street kids, but most of them younger.

Then things happened which are a blur, but the next thing I recall is that I was among a crowd that stood all about inside Stuart's Store. It was clear that the boy, Petey, and his mother were somewhat new to China Lake. It was also whispered that she was divorced, and therefore living in near poverty with this one child, without significant social involvement in the town. In a sense, the mood of the crowd was not so much that Petey's annihilation was a tragedy, but that it were now possible for such an unspeakable thing to happen to any "decent" citizen of the town.

Shortly the crowd was of one mind that someone needed to talk with this evil man. Once this decision was agreed upon, the entire group sort of poured thickly into the street, I along with the rest, agreeing.

Agreeing! For whom had all minds fixed upon to talk to him? Why the other outsider in town: me! I had added my assent, realizing too late that I was the lone designee.

To ponder this prospect I lowered myself to the steps of the store and sat with my face in my hands. Voices reassured me from all sides that I was perfect for the task. Perfect, of course, because I was expendable to these people. Nevertheless, they may have been right.

Without a word I rose and walked slowly around the store. Without a pause I climbed the outside wooden steps to the man's door. The door was slightly ajar, so when I knocked, it swung in a little. "Mister Efferfelz," I said to accompany my knock.

"Go away."

I repeated: "Mister Efferfelz..."

"Go away!" he insisted, and I shuddered to think what a turning point this was in my life. In a little over an hour I could be on a train and out of this town forever. Or, in a couple of minutes, I could be vaporized, molecule-by-molecule, my displaced soul at the mercy of a power I didn't comprehend.

I pushed the door and waited until it ceased its swing. Efferfelz sat in a dusty green colored, stuffed, wing-back chair under a dormer, his back to the entrance. I stepped into the dark storage room and saw for the first time the minute, Spartan space within the attic that this man occupied. The sleeping quarters seemed to be in order, and his bag was packed for departure, resting on a cot.

He turned slowly, but with obvious intolerance. "Oh, the dentist," he remarked, and then turned back toward the window. "My teeth are fine. Go away."

"I'm not here to antagonize you, Sir..." I began as I nudged the door with my elbow to close it part way.

"Then don't," he interrupted.

I pressed on: "But the town has asked me to insist that you restore the child...to life and body..." I was out of words.

During the ensuing pause, my mind tried to divert its attention from the danger at hand to any other subject at all, so long as it were more pleasant. Inscrutably, I found myself trying to repeat silently the steps required for a simple tooth extraction – to prepare the instruments needed and the procedure itself. My memory was as blank as if I had never heard of teeth.

"It was only a street urchin." The voice, slightly edgy, broke my confusion.

I tried to muster words that would answer his condemnation of a child – a pest of a child, yes – whose value to this other human being stood alongside that of an urchin. A cooked urchin on your dinner plate? I wondered, or a live urchin in its littoral habitat?

"I can't do it," Efferfelz continued meekly.

I didn't know what to say to this, so I waited behind him in silence. Petey wasn't my child, nor did he have any relationship to me, but I felt my anger slowly rise. I was angry not so much at this man, but at the mere fact that a power could be placed at the disposal of an ordinary man, which power was able to pluck a human being out of time and space without having to account for itself.

Then Efferfelz turned. "I've been trying to think of a way," he explained.

"Sir," I ventured, disarmed by his quieter manner, "I do not come to judge you. Others have judged, and I cannot count myself among them, for I don't know what experiences may torment a man's past."

"That's good, Doctor Williamson," Efferfelz said, sustaining the conversation. "I presume that you have never known another with my special – ah – gift."

"You're right. I have not known another. Nor can I comprehend such a talent."

"Sit there, Doctor Williamson. I shall explain something to you. For I leave here in an hour, and in my wake I leave a chain of destruction in every town, although not by design." He looked away and mumbled: "Mostly minor destruction."

I took a step backwards and lowered myself to a trunk next to the door. I saw at this point that the door was closed completely. Should this meeting deteriorate, I was prevented a quick escape. Then it also hit me: leaving in an hour!

Hiding my scrambled thoughts, I faced him squarely from the trunk.

Efferfelz proceeded. "You've been deferential to me since our first meeting, Doctor. Perhaps you sense that I am not an evil man. Or perhaps your manners are so well-honed that you tip your hat to cockroaches before you squash them. I will assume the former, though."

"I have not presumed you evil," I answered honestly.

Efferfelz alternately turned toward the window, then away from it toward me as he spoke. And this is what he told me: "I once met an angel of Satan. I didn't realize his position at the time, and indeed, any one of us

could aspire to that distinction, angel of Satan, if we wanted it. In the same way, any one of us could become a saint in the service of God, and occasion the happening of miracles by summoning profound faith.

"I was vexed by a property boundary dispute, not so very long ago, a truly petty thing, now that I can reflect on it clearly. The details don't matter, but I was a wealthy man of property, and, of all the stupid things, a rock along a property line created a disagreement over the dimensions of the property, and thus its value. For the lot description referred to a 'huge boulder', and there was this one which troubled me, and there was another several dozen yards away.

"As I stood on the troublesome property line one day, a year and a half ago, a strange-looking man dressed all in furs wandered past – a trapper I imagined. And, in a way, I was right. For although he only nodded to me in the field, he showed up at my office the next day.

"'I can be of some help to you,' the trapper told me at this encounter, 'and you to me.' I told him I was a busy man, so to make the offer and be on his way.

"'You can will that stone gone,' the trapper said. Now it's possible that anybody could have known of my plight over the stone, so that didn't surprise me.

"'I'm not a church-going man,' I said.

"'Forget church,' he said. 'Meet me at your rock tomorrow at dusk. And bring with you the one possession you hold most dear in this world.'

"'I wouldn't give you my dearest possession just to remove a rock,' I argued with him.

"'I won't ask you for it,' he assured me. 'Just bring it as a symbol of your desire to have the thing gone, and of your faith that it can be done.'

"I knew instantly what possession that would be, of course, but it wasn't until he left that I pondered how he could guess it was something small enough to carry single-handedly. I don't remember his departure from my office. I must have been deeply preoccupied. And all the next day I chided myself for my gullibility. Still, who

would know, if I experimented with this odd plan?

"That evening I drove late to the field whose back boundary held the stone. I reasoned that the old trapper would tire of waiting and would find someone else on whom to practice his con games.

"This stone – this rock, whose total annihilation would be required to satisfy my greed – this solid piece of earth was perhaps a third the size of this building. I half-expected the furry old man to show up with a few sticks of dynamite, and yet he would realize as well as I that no one could shatter that boulder without drawing a crowd from town to investigate the explosions. Nor could the large remaining fragments be dragged across the muddy field without leaving traces. What's more, a team and driver would be needed, and a place to dump the debris.

"So I knew he had to have another trick to demonstrate, or else he would stand there in the edge of the woods with a crowd of my business colleagues and they would laugh at my stupidity in showing up.

"But the old man was alone, beside the rock. He had a peculiar gleam in one eye, and he asked whether I'd brought my treasure. Well, I had, but I also had brought a substitute in case – well, just in case. So I patted the pocket which held the substitute, and he made a most sinister grin. He seemed to spring from foot to foot in a little dance, almost as if he desperately needed to urinate.

"Then he pointed at the pocket where my true treasure lay, and he screamed – screamed!: 'I want what's in that pocket!'

"'And I want that gone!' I shouted, swinging my arm at the rock looming beside me. I was angry, of course, and more determined than I must have realized. For the rock made a sort of loud 'Pop!' and disappeared. There remained a brief orange glow in the air, and through the aura I could see the old trapper running away into the woods, clutching something in his hands with which he was obviously well-pleased.

"My hands automatically went to my pockets. The pocket which had held a man's jeweled ring, a gift from my father, still contained the gaudy ring. But the pocket which had held a silver locket with a photograph had

been ripped open, and the locket was gone.

"I never saw the fur-bearing man again, and no one else I asked had ever seen him. And in the days that followed I found myself annihilating things around me with angry sweeps of either arm. You see, it's a gesture which I must have used all my life, but now, when I desire something gone at the same time, it truly becomes 'gone'.

Efferfelz suddenly addressed me directly, as if remembering for the first time that I was in the room. "Did you ever have the opportunity to do something you knew was wrong – steal an ashtray, for instance – and follow through impulsively, before you could stop yourself? And then did you discover that it was too late to reverse the act?"

I nodded slowly. "Something like that."

"Well, I've always been quick to anger, so to Satan I suppose I was a good candidate upon whom to confer such a destructive power. No one can understand with what determination I restrain myself."

"If it's your faith in your ability to do this thing which makes it all possible," I ventured, "then surely you would understand how to invoke a faith in God for the purpose of relieving yourself of the curse."

"Do you think I'm stupid? Of course I realize that! And so it has become an obsession with me to seek the one man I have known who could, with enough forbearance, lead me to give it up to God."

I supplied the name: "The Reverend Mister Percival D. Welch."

"In the silver locket stolen by the trapper is a photograph of my mother and Percival Welch, her brother. My mother is long dead, but I don't know what became of my uncle. I have been led to believe that he and his child, now a grown woman, is living in the central part of the state. He was married late in life, and had a child perhaps thirty years ago. I lost touch with him not long thereafter."

"I don't know what might have become of him," I offered lamely.

"Of course not."

"But perhaps I could put off my plans for a time and join your search."

The whispery echo of a locomotive's whistle gave us both pause.

For a fleeting instant Efferfelz seemed to soften, but then he set his jaw and rose from his chair, saying: "Save your energy. I have a train to catch. Do you suppose any officer of the law will try to interdict me for causing a child to disappear?"

I became alarmed that he would leave so casually. "Is that it, then? You annihilate a child, a human being, and now you walk away?"

Efferfelz gave me a condescending smile. "I am going to try to bring him back, if you can believe that of me. But I can only guess how to go about it. And I think I will have only one chance. So tell the town that they will have my answer after I have departed. Now, please. I must catch a train."

He moved to retrieve his bag, and I gave him a smile I might put on were I a card-player about to show a good hand, for I was able to pull a ticket from my own shirt pocket and hold it before him. "I'll see you on the train," I said, intending to be friendly. I don't know how he took it, though, for he brushed past me, pulled the door aside, and hastened down the stairway to the packed earth below.

I sat inside where I could watch his leave-taking for a few seconds. No human form interrupted his progress, although many eyes were upon him from within windows and around corners.

I too left the apartment. My bags were already checked that morning at the station, so I was able to pause at the front of Stuart's Store and survey the small crowd still loitering there. Mister and Mistress Flewes were in the group, and the Stuarts, but mostly these were the faces of a distraught populace faced with fear and helplessness.

I sighed, swallowed hard, and shook my head. Someone asked: "How'd you spend so much time up there and come out in one piece?"

"I let him talk."

"And let him walk!" someone else charged.

"Doctor Williamson can't stop him," Mister Flewes defended quickly.

"What did he tell you?" came another voice.

I didn't know who asked. It didn't matter. "He has a power he didn't ask for. And he doesn't know how to bring the boy back, but he'll try."

"Then let him come and try!" another hooted.

"Go get him yourself," I invited, and the crowd laugh dryly.

Looking about, I mumbled: "He's leaving on the Two-ten. I'm scheduled on the same train."

Mister Flewes heard me, although the crowd was becoming unruly, and offered to give me a lift in his automobile the short distance to the station just as the whistle pierced the air announcing the train's imminent arrival.

Ten minutes later the whistle blew again and we were off. The train was a mixed consist – a single small engine, a mail car, a couple of freight cars, and a single passenger car. It wasted no time getting up to thirty or forty miles per hour, and jolted and creaked as only those miniature trains can do.

Efferfelz sat at the forward end of the coach. Four other passengers, a conductor, and I were distributed around the rest of the interior. When we had gone about a mile or a little more across fields and alongside woods and a stream, Efferfelz rose and exited the car toward the front of the train, where through the open door we could see the back of a wooden boxcar. No one gave it a thought, I suppose. But then, presently, the train slowed, and shortly, the engineer and fireman were ushered into the car.

"Run! Run!" the thin, wild-eyed engineer was shouting as he stumbled into the car.

Efferfelz appeared behind them, puffing from the exertion of climbing up and over the freight cars between us and the engine. I recognized the expression he wore, one of fading tolerance.

The train continued to decelerate, its throttle pulled back in the empty engine cab. One by one the

passengers sized up the situation and moved to huddle in the rear of the car.

I didn't fear the man, but I didn't challenge him. In fact, I somewhat anticipated him, so that when he ordered us to jump from the back of the creeping train, I led the way. I hoped it would give the others courage, and it did.

While we all variously sat or stood on the ballast and rails, rubbing our bruises, we watched Efferfelz crawl back across the tops of the receding freight cars to the engine. The little train then picked up speed as it approached a curve ahead. And then, when only Engine Number 5 was half gone behind trees that lined the curve, but the rest of the train was still fully in sight, there was a dull clap in the air and a weak orange flash that reflected from the smooth crowns of the rails. A profound silence instantly replaced the hissing and clatter of the accelerating train. And, except for a sideways-drifting plume of thinning smoke, the Two-ten out of China Lake had vanished.

Eight pairs of eyes saw it all. The fireman and engineer, still and silent to this point, began running toward their train's trail of smoke, but both stopped after a few strides. There was simply nothing toward which to run.

I led the way back to China Lake along the tracks, out-pacing the others in order to avoid the useless debate over what had happened. It was clear now what his idea had been for restoring the child. Efferfelz needed a vessel – the train – into which he could place himself, and then he needed to annihilate the vessel itself, and thus him with it.

As I strode over the cross ties, strewn on both berms with flattened, yellow-gray stalks of last summer's mustard and wild carrots, there was something more I saw all too clearly – too late to posit to Efferfelz that he surely had another recourse. For he had been playing Satan's game and losing. But isn't the presence of a devil sure proof of God as well? Couldn't you see, Efferfelz, (I wanted to say to him as I plucked a sprig of mustard), that you didn't need to fight such a force with only your own weak power?

Near town we all scrambled onto the auto road where it swung alongside the tracks, and from here I drew

back and let the others run ahead.

When I was halfway along the street toward Stuart's Store I was joined by three of the same street urchins who had taunted Efferfelz that afternoon. "He's back!" they shouted – an announcement I didn't grasp but fully understood at the same time.

"Who's back?"

"Petey's back!"

I ran ahead.

In front of the store, the crowd was milling still, and then it parted. I slowed to let whatever-it-was pass. Dr. Nadeau, the town physician, appeared, and then Petey emerged, clutched so tightly by his mother that his feet mostly dragged limply on the ground. His mother wiped at his eyes with her apron as she tried to speak to the doctor through her sobs. The boy was sooty and unkempt, but not perceptibly different than usual.

Dr. Nadeau hailed me as he led the pair across the street toward his office: "Doctor Williamson! Perhaps you could assist me here! This lad has had an unusual experience, and I will be examining him."

I joined the trio, then, as they reached the doctor's front steps, followed by the advancing crowd. Inside, Dr. Nadeau asked, making conversation I assumed: "Now, do I know you, Ma'am? Did I deliver this child?" The doctor's gnarled hands cupped the boy's face and gently turned his head from side to side, beginning the examination.

"No," Petey's mother answered. "We've lived here only a year and a half."

"Ah..." the doctor said, and sat Petey onto his examining table. Then he waited for the young mother to continue.

"We, uh, moved here from Rockland when my father died there. My husband left us, and – and I had a friend here, and so we came here where things were quieter." The woman blushed at the admission of divorce.

"Ah..." Dr. Nadeau said again.

"Doctor, I can't pay for any examination," the woman protested.

"I'll not worry about that," he answered. After he had obtained a sheet of paper and a pen the doctor proceeded to address the shuddering child. "What's your name, Son?"

"Petey Baker."

"Peter, is it, Ma'am?"

"Aw, Ma!" the boy protested before his mother could answer.

"He's called P.D. His name is Percival Darius Baker," she told us against his protest.

The doctor was writing this on the sheet while I stared blankly at the mother.

"And your name, Ma'am? For the record."

"Theresa Welch Baker."

So there you have it, gentlemen of the railroad. As it turned out, the boy recalls nothing but a sensation such as that of having fallen off a horse, which he described as having knocked him silly.

What more is there for me to tell you?

Well, the Reverend Mister Percival D. Welch, for one thing. His death in Rockland seems to have coincided with Efferfelz's encounter with the trapper who made off with his locket. The Reverend Welch was a much respected pastor there, if his daughter can be believed.

It is not my line to speculate upon theological subjects, but the whole situation is so neat, don't you see? Satan needed the good pastor removed from this earthly realm. Who knows why he had to contrive this method? And then, he needed to prevent Efferfelz's discovering his own cousin and her son right there in China Lake. So Efferfelz was set up to destroy the boy, forcing the unfortunate gentleman, for he may have been a naturally gruff man but not naturally evil, to flee. I expect that Satan has claimed the tormented man's soul in the bargain, while losing the good pastor's to heaven. As for the boy, well, there's still another chance to grab him.

I doubt that this letter will find its way into the official account of the disappearance of the Five-fifteen. I hope, though, that you will be kind enough to assign it a place in a lower file drawer, where it may enlighten future investigators of the incident.

Very truly yours,

Raymond L. Williamson, DMD

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