Old Peppersass

BY NATHANIEL L. GOODRICH

“OLD PEPPERSASS” was the first engine of the Mt. Washington railroad. After outliving its usefulness it was exhibited as a relic in various places, and finally returned to the Boston & Maine, which made it the central feature of a celebration in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the opening of the mountain railroad. The story of what happened on that occasion may be found in the papers of July 21, 1929. The following is merely an experiment in recollection, an attempt to record, a year later, something of what one who was present saw and felt—and nothing else.

The guests assembled for the celebration at the “Base Station,” where the cog road begins. There were speeches. Then Peppersass appeared, clanking and hissing, and was greeted with cheers. She was brave in paint of red and green and black, in the best old style of the carriage painter. Engineer and fireman were got up in black trousers, red shirts and tall black hats, and looked somewhat sheepish. It was a clever effect in the manner of an old print. Movie men were busy. A camera man protruded a plump and cheerful face from a lofty window. The crowd milled about Peppersass for a while, then broke for the trains waiting to take them up the mountain. There were six trains, each of an engine and one car, and every car was crowded, even to standing in the aisles. The slow, grinding, rattling climb began. The familiar scene jerked by the window; dwindling fires, outcropping rock, opening ravines, widening sweep of blue distance. Not even the noisy crowded car or the rain of cinders could deaden altogether the thrill of height, of far views, of brilliant weather above the world.

At the top the crowd poured out into a strong cold wind, for which it was ill prepared. Hats blew about. Some stayed outdoors to see the view, but not many, nor for long. It was warm in the Summit House. There was a rush for the lunch counter, which seemed odd, considering the time of day. But everyone was a bit excited, and there was nothing else to do—except to try to pick out the four or five Governors who had
come, by special invitation, from their Connecticut conference; or to view with covert amusement the hairy faces and repellent clothes of two college boys from the Madison Hut gang, whose stunt for the summer seemed to be an imitation of cave men.

After a while I saw the crowd inside was thinning, and went out. The trains were filling fast. The first up, out on the trestle, was empty because it could not be reached. The last up, and first to go down, still had room, which seemed surprising. I even found a seat, and was congratulating myself, when a uniformed aide of the Governor of New Hampshire opened the door and said he would have to ask us to get out, as this train was reserved for the official party. No one complied. He repeated his request. We looked at each other; there was a suggestion of uneasy movement. Then the train started down the mountain and the aide jumped off.

Someone said Peppersass had come part way up, behind the last train. No one knew how far up, or if it were anything but a rumor. The general opinion seemed to be that such a trip had not been part of the original program. Anyway she was not in sight on the track below. We jolted slowly down, the sky line rose, cinders blew in. The usual tedious afternoon, excitement all over. The train stopped rather suddenly, not at a water tank. A man appeared beside the track and passed a note to the engineer. We started, ground on for a while, then stopped again. Another man appeared, and talked earnestly to the engine crew. This certainly was not regular, even on a slow mountain railroad. But nothing was visibly wrong. And the train went on. But it stopped very soon, and I saw beside the track a man looking generally battered, and holding his jaw with both hands. He was helped aboard, and we went on. The car was crowded—many were standing in the aisle—and I was disinclined to force my way back to inquire. Word drifted along that he was a hiker who had fallen off the trestle. I recall thinking vaguely that this accident was unlikely but perhaps possible. Then we stopped again. Another man was led on, half-conscious, his face hideous with blood. He wore a red shirt and black trousers. Evidently something had happened to Peppersass. It seems to me now that I felt a stiffening of tension in the car. Across the aisle a woman was becoming slightly hysterical. I realized that we had started down again. Above
the rattle I caught fragments of reassurances passing from one to another—"no danger really;" "brakes never fail"—that sort of thing. I saw no cause for worry. An accident to that ancient relic had nothing to do with our safety. Then the train slipped, briefly but definitely. I saw that two trainmen were working the emergency brakes. A cold, formless apprehension began to arise in the back of my mind. Possibly we were somehow involved in this accident. But railroad propaganda had done its work with me, and I had a blind confidence in those brakes. I looked out. We were on the steepest part of the line. It looked much steeper than I remembered—and we were running onto a trestle. I looked down, a long way, it seemed, and directly below there was a body on the rocks, in the unnatural huddle of death. One or two stood about, looking. A voice in my ear said tensely, "Why don't they cover him up?" It didn't seem to matter. The train went on. Suddenly it slipped again, and was held at once. There seemed nothing to do but sit still. There was probably no danger. I could not easily get to the car door through the crowded aisle; to try would be evidence of alarm; and I was not alarmed, not really; anyway, sit still and take a chance. Something of this sort went through my mind, I think, and apparently the others felt the same way. The crowd was rather quiet, but very tense. Across this tenseness the mounting hysterics across the aisle rasped unbearably. What was going to happen, anyway?

The train stopped. One or two got off. Hesitantly several moved out. Quietly, in a sort of daze of relief, we all stepped down on to the rocks. Such information as was available spread through the group. Peppersass had gone part way up, carrying two camera men. On the return she broke loose, somehow. All jumped; one too late. He was the photographer who had found the loft window. The flying engine damaged the cog rail, making our train slip. It was not safe to go on. I looked back. The other trains had stopped, apparently far apart. The last could be but a short way below the summit. Looking down, the Base Station did not seem too far. I think we were near the Waumbek tank. What next? There seemed to be officials about to attend to things. One could easily walk down, either on the track or by a fair trail beside it. I suddenly desired intensely to get off the mountain, and remembered that a
friend was waiting at Bretton Woods for her husband, who was on one of the trains, perhaps the last one. She might become alarmed—I started down, alone, and going fast. Vigorous action was a tremendous relief. I saw serious damage to the track, and in the scrub, fragments of Peppersass, and wisps of smoke or steam.

At the Base Station a small crowd was waiting, and I enjoyed the momentary importance attaching to the bearer of news. At Bretton Woods my friend was very anxious, for the rumor was about that a train had been wrecked and many injured. The hotel desk had for her nothing but official ignorance. I reassured her. We went out and looked at the mountain. Dusk was growing. The trains were still there, strung out nearly to the top. The railroad would get everyone off the mountain somehow. Probably they would be run back to the top and motored down the road on the other side. It would be a slow job, and chilly, but nothing worse.

We could only wait, and watch the purple light of evening fade from the massive slopes of Mt. Washington. There, in the gathering dark, Old Peppersass lay in fragments; many people waited in discomfort and uncertainty; and one lay dead.