

THE PERILS OF PUSHER

A Melodrama in Two Scenes

by James Witherell

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

RALPH: ROUNDHOUSE: Smart enough to have a railroad pension, but little else.

BOXCAR BETSY: A middle-aged spinster with a sharp tongue. Inspects railroad ties and everything else.

REBECCA ROUNDHOUSE: Ralph's beautiful, bright, and kind daughter, a vision of loveliness.

GAN DEE: Dances to a mysterious tune.

STANLEY STUDMILL: Best logger in these here parts.

DUKE DEADHEADER: Most rotten rascal on the railroad.

FLORA FLAGSTOP: The Flower of Philadelphia is really a weed.

BULLHORN BEULAH: Like Betsy, but with pistols.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Duke Deadheader, the most rotten rascal on the railroad, plots to relieve the simple but honest stationmaster, Ralph Roundhouse, of the company's construction funds. Aided by his beautiful but equally nasty accomplice, Flora Flagstop, Duke burns down the lumber mill of our hero, Stanley Studmill, cons Ralph into signing a worthless contract for ties (Ralph thought they were railroad ties), and kidnaps our heroine, Rebecca Roundhouse. All appears lost, but Duke has not reckoned with the mysterious Chinese foreman, Gan Dee, nor the ever-reliable Boxcar Betsy and her cousin, Bullhorn Beulah. Just when Duke and Flora think they have everyone tied up, they find themselves caught in one of the most hilarious chases ever staged.

PRODUCTION NOTES

THE SETTING may be kept quite simple. All that is really needed is a row of flats painted to represent the side of a boxcar. If possible, there should be a sliding panel for the doorway; however, entrances and exits can be made around either side of the "boxcar" if desired.

THE HANDCAR need not be realistic. The actors "pump" it with their arms but actually make it move by pushing with the upstage foot. Like everything else in the play, it is intended to make the audience laugh - so the sillier the better.

SETTING

An abandoned railroad boxcar, set up without its wheels alongside newly-completed tracks in the Sacramento River canyon of Northern California. On its side, painted crudely, is a sign proclaiming: "City of Pusher Main Station - City Hall - Telegraph Office - General Store." Another sign says "Offices Closed" while another reads "Offices Open." NOTE: The directions north and south are to the sides of the stage. They may be either direction, depending upon the orientation of the particular production.

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SCENE 1

(AT RISE: It is a sunny morning in August of the year 1886. The boxcar door slides open, obscuring the "Offices Closed" sign. The stationmaster, RALPH ROUNDHOUSE, steps down to the ground (since there are no wheels) carrying a railroad lantern. He comes down to the edge of the tracks, looks up and down them, pulls out his pocket watch to check the time, and looks again. Ralph is a retired railroad man and dresses like one. BOXCAR BETSY appears in the doorway, lugging a heavy desk. She is a middle-aged spinster with a sharp tongue. She is also dressed like a railroader. She shakes her head at Ralph.)

BETSY: Same thing every morning! Ralph Roundhouse, you know there's no trains on this line yet!

RALPH: Got to stay in practice for the day when they start running. Want some help with that desk, Betsy?

BETSY: I can manage. Wouldn't want to tear you away from your duties as stationmaster. *(Sets the desk down.)*

RALPH: Well, it's an important job. The company needs someone here to handle the business while the line is being completed.

BETSY: Even if all you have to do is buy railroad ties from Stanley Studmill and watch him court your daughter. That's the extent of both the business and the pleasure we get around here. I'll sure be glad when this job is done. Then my cousin Beulah can come down from Oregon to visit. Haven't seen her since we started this job.

RALPH: That's right. She's doing the same job on the northern line coming down as you are here, so each day the two of you get a little closer.

BETSY: You know, Beulah and I have been working for the railroads for years, and this is the closest we've ever been to working on the same job.

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RALPH: By this time next summer, you should be in spittin' distance. If all goes well, the two lines are supposed to meet somewhere in Southern Oregon in the summer of '87.

BETSY: I wonder if they'll have a big ceremony.

RALPH: Most likely. The big brass like that sort of thing.

BETSY: Beulah was in on the big one - where they drove that golden spike at that place in Utah back in '69.

RALPH: You didn't work the big transcontinental job?

BETSY: Nope. I was on the southern route at that time. Beulah said it was quite a sight, though, when they finally met.

(REBECCA ROUNDHOUSE appears in the boxcar doorway. She steps down and hangs a sign proclaiming "Offices Open" on the open door. Rebecca is Ralph's beautiful, bright, and kind daughter, a vision of loveliness. She comes to them.)

REBECCA: Good morning, Daddy ... Betsy! Isn't it a beautiful day?

RALPH: *(Embracing her.)* Sure is, honey.

BETSY: Yup. That's why I'm setting my office up out here again. I can soak up some sunshine and then I don't have to walk so far when I've got a load of ties to inspect. Not that there's anything wrong with the ties from Stanley's mill, but the rules say I got to inspect each and every one before they're set in place.

REBECCA: *(Excited.)* Should be about time for Stanley to bring the first load.

RALPH: *(Regarding her with amusement.)* He'll be along soon enough. That crazy Chinaman isn't here yet, and he always beats Stanley by a few minutes. Anyway, you got things to do inside, gal. Someone might want to send a telegram or buy something at the store.

REBECCA: It's doubtful, but I'll be ready, Daddy. First, I'll help you bring out the waiting room bench, just in case anyone passes by and wants to rest.

RALPH: We may not have any trains though here yet, but at least we've got a station and a waiting room bench. Let's go, my dear.

(RALPH and REBECCA start toward boxcar.)

BETSY: *(Looking off to north.)* Here comes the Chinaman. That means Stanley won't be far behind.

REBECCA: We'd better hurry, Daddy.

(A races into boxcar. RALPH follows, shaking his head. GAN DEE enters from north side. He is a young Chinese man, dressed in traditional coolie outfit.)

BETSY: Good morning, Gan Dee!

GAN DEE: *(Speaks in pidgin English for the moment.)* Good morning, Missy Betsy, counter of railroad ties. Gan Dee is humble servant for honorable missy. Gan Dee can dance for you; Gan Dee dancer! *(He laughs hilariously.)*

BETSY: *(Also laughing.)* You and your comedy routines! You're quite a con man, Gan Dee.

GAN DEE: *(Now speaking cultured English.)* It's part of the job, Betsy. The company executives have finally discovered that a Chinese foreman can get much more work out of the Chinese laborers than a white man could, but they also have preconceived notions of how any Chinese, even a foreman, should speak. So I accommodate them and keep my job; with my friends, I can converse in my normal manner.

BETSY: Your normal manner sure seems fancy, with all them big words you use. You been to college?

GAN DEE: As a matter of fact, I am a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines.

BETSY: Now, how did a Chinaman like you get to the Colorado School of Mines?

GAN DEE: *(Back to pidgin English.)* I was exchange student, honorable missy! *(He laughs hilariously again.)*

BETSY: Always kidding around. I never can get a straight answer out of you.

End of Freeview

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