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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FORTY MINUTES LATE ***

FORTY MINUTES LATE

By **F. Hopkinson Smith**
1909

It began to snow half an hour after the train started—a fine-grained, slanting, determined snow that forced its way between the bellows of the vestibules, and deposited itself in mounds of powdered salt all over the platforms and steps. Even the porter had caught some puffs on his depot coat with the red cape, and so had the conductor, from the way he thrashed his cap on the back of the seat in front of mine. “Yes, gettin' worse,” he said in answer to an inquiring lift of my eyebrows. “Everything will be balled up if this keeps on.”

“Shall we make the connection at Bondville?” I was to lecture fifty miles from Bondville Junction, and had but half an hour lee-way.

If the man with the punch heard, he made no answer. The least said the soonest mended in crises like this. If we arrived on time every passenger would grab his bag and bolt out without thanking him or the road, or the engineer who took the full blast of the storm on his chest and cheeks. If we missed the connection, any former hopeful word would only add another hot coal to everybody's anger.

I fell back on the porter.

“Yes' sir, she'll be layin' jes' 'cross de platform. She knows we're comin'. Sometimes she waits ten minutes—sometimes she don't; more times I seen her pullin' out while we was pullin' in.”

Not very reassuring this. Only one statement was of value—the position of the connecting train when we rolled into Bondville.

I formulated a plan: The porter would take one bag, I the other—we would both stand on the lower step of the Pullman, then make a dash. If she was pulling out as we pulled in, a goatlike spring on my part might succeed; the bags being hurled after me to speed the animal's motion.

One hour later we took up our position.

“Dat's good!—Dar she is jes' movin' out: thank ye, sar. I got de bag—dis way!”

There came a jolt, a Saturday-afternoon slide across the ice-covered platform, an outstretched greasy hand held down from the step of the moving train, followed by the chug of a bag that missed my knees by a hand's breadth—and I was hauled on board.

The contrast between a warm, velvet-lined Pullman and a cane-seated car with both doors opened every ten minutes was anything but agreeable; but no discomfort should count when a lecturer is trying to make his connection. That is what he is paid for and that he must do at all hazards and at any cost, even to chartering a special train, the price devouring his fee.

Once in my seat an account of stock was taken—two bags, an umbrella, overcoat, two gum shoes (one off,

one on), manuscript of lecture in bag, eye-glasses in outside pocket of waistcoat. This over, I spread myself upon the cane seat and took in the situation. It was four o'clock (the lecture was at eight); Sheffield was two hours away; this would give time to change my dress and get something to eat. The committee, moreover, were to meet me at the depot with a carriage and drive me to where I was "to spend the night and dine"—so the chairman's letter read. The suppressed smile on the second conductor's face when he punched my ticket and read the name of "Sheffield" sent my hand into my pocket in search of this same letter. Yes—there was no mistake about it,—“Our carriage,” it read, “will meet you,” etc., etc.

The confirmation brought with it a certain thrill; not a carriage picked up out of the street, or a lumbering omnibus—a mere go-between from station to hotels—but “our carriage!” Nothing like these lecture associations, I thought,—nothing like these committees, for making strangers comfortable. That was why it was often a real pleasure to appear before them. This one would, no doubt, receive me in a big yellow and white Colonial club-house built by the women of the town (I know of a dozen just such structures), with dressing and lunch rooms, spacious lecture hall, and janitor in gray edged with black.

This thought called up my own responsibility in the matter; I was glad I had caught the train; it was a bad night to bring people out and then disappoint them, even if most of them did come in their own carriages. Then again, I had kept my word; none of my fault, of course, if I hadn't—but I had!—that was a source of satisfaction. Now that I thought of it, I had, in all my twenty years of lecturing, failed only twice to reach the platform. In one instance a bridge was washed away, and in the other my special train (the price I paid for that train still keeps me hot against the Trusts) ran into a snowdrift and stayed there until after midnight, instead of delivering me on time, as agreed. I had arrived late, of course, many times, gone without my supper often, and more than once had appeared without the proper habiliments—and I am particular about my dress coat and white waistcoat—but only twice had the gas been turned off and the people turned out. Another time I had—

“Sheffield! Shef-fie-l-d! All out for Shef-f-i-e-l-d!” yelled the conductor.

The two bags once more, the conductor helping me on with my overcoat, down the snow-blocked steps and out into the night.

“Step lively!—more'n an hour late now.”

I looked about me. I was the only passenger. Not a light of any kind—not a building of any kind, sort, or description, except a box-car of a station set up on end, pitch dark inside and out, and shut tight. No carriage. No omnibus; nothing on runners; nothing on wheels. Only a dreary waste of white, roofed by a vast expanse of black.

“Is this Sheffield?” I gasped.

“Yes,—all there is here; the balance is two miles over the hills.”

“The town?”

“Town?—no, the settlement;—ain't more's two dozen houses in it.”

“They were to send a carriage and—”

“Yes—that's an old yarn—better foot it for short.” Here he swung his lantern to the engineer craning his head from the cab of the locomotive, and sprang aboard. Then this fragment came whirling through the steam and smoke:—“There's a farmhouse somewhere's over the hill,—follow the fence and turn to—” the rest was lost in the roar of the on-speeding train.

I am no longer young. Furthermore, I hate to carry things—bags especially. One bag might be possible—a very small one; two bags, both big, are an insult.

I deposited the two outside the box-car, tried the doors, inserted my fingers under the sash of one window, looked at the chimney with a half-formed Santa Claus idea of scaling the roof and sliding down to some possible fireplace below; examined the wind-swept snow for carriage tracks, peered into the gloom, and, as a last resort, leaned up against the sheltered side of the box to think.

There was no question that if a vehicle of any kind had been sent to meet me it had long since departed; the trackless roadway showed that. It was equally evident that if one was coming, I had better meet it on the way than stay where I was and freeze to death. The fence was still visible—the near end—and there was a farmhouse somewhere—so the conductor had said, and he seemed to be an honest, truthful man. Whether to right or left of the invisible road, the noise of the train and the howl of the wind had prevented my knowing—but *somewhere's*—That was a consolation.

The bags were the most serious obstacles. If I carried one in each hand the umbrella would have to be cached, for some future relief expedition to find in the spring.

There *was* a way, of course, to carry bags—any number of bags. All that was needed was a leather strap with a buckle at each end; I had helped to hang half a dozen bags across the shoulders of as many porters meeting trains all over Europe. Of course, I didn't wear leather straps. Suspenders were my stronghold. They might!—No, it was too cold to get at them in that wind. And if I did they were of the springy, wabbly kind that would seesaw the load from my hips to my calves.

The only thing was to press on. Some one had blundered, of course.

“Half a league, half a league—into the jaws,” etc.

“Theirs not to reason why—” But my duty was plain; the audience were already assembling; the early ones in their seats by this time.

Then an inspiration surged through me. Why not slip the umbrella through the handle of one bag, as Pat carries his shillalah and bundle of duds, and grab the other in my free hand! Our carriage couldn't be far off. The exercise would keep my blood active and my feet from freezing, and as to the road, was there not the fence, its top rail making rabbit jumps above the drifts?

So I trudged on, stumbling into holes, flopping into treacherous ruts, halting in the steeper places to catch my breath, till I reached the top of the hill. There I halted—stopped short, in fact: the fence had given out! In its place was a treacherous line of bushes that faded into a delusive clump of trees. Beyond, and on both

sides, stretched a great white silence—still as death.

Another council of war. I could retrace my steps, smash in the windows of the station, and camp for the night, taking my chances of stopping some east-bound train as it whizzed past, with a match and my necktie—or I could stumble on, perhaps in a circle, and be found in the morning by the early milk.

On! On once more—maybe the clump of trees hid something—maybe—

Here a light flashed—a mere speck of a light—not to the right, where lay the clump of trees—but to my left; then a faint wave of warm color rose from a chimney and curled over a low roof buried in snow. Again the light flashed—this time through a window with four panes of glass—each one a beacon to a storm-tossed mariner!

On once more—into a low hollow—up a steep slope—slipping, falling, shoving the hand-gripped bag ahead of me to help my footing, until I reached a snow-choked porch and a closed door.

Here I knocked.

For some seconds there was no sound; then came a heavy tread, and a man in overalls threw wide the door.

“Well, what do you want at this time of night?” (Time of night, and it but seven-thirty!)

“I’m the lecturer,” I panted.

“Oh, come! Ain’t they sent for ye? Here, I’ll take ‘em. Walk in and welcome. You look beat out. Well—well—wife and I was won-derin’ why nothin’ driv past for the six-ten. We knowed you was comin’. Then agin, the station master’s sick, and I ‘spose ye couldn’t warm up none. And they ain’t sent for ye? And they let ye tramp all—Well—well!”

I did not answer. I hadn’t breath enough left for sustained conversation; moreover, there was a red-hot stove ahead of me, and a rocking-chair,—comforts I had never expected to see again—and there was a pine table—oh, a lovely pine table, with a most exquisite white oil-cloth cover, holding the most beautiful kerosene lamp with a piece of glorious red flannel floating in its amber fluid; and in the corner—a wife—a sweet-faced, angelic-looking young wife, with a baby in her arms too beautiful for words—must have been!

I dropped into the chair, spread my fingers to the stove and looked around—warmth—rest-peace—comfort—companionship—all in a minute!

“No, they didn’t send anything,” I wheezed when my breath came. “The conductor told me I should find the farmhouse over the hill—and—”

“Yes, that’s so; it’s back a piece, you must have missed it.”

“Yes—I must have missed it,” I continued in a dazed way.

“The folks at the farmhouse is goin’ to hear ye speak, so they told me. Must be startin’ now.”

“Would you please let them know I am here, and—”

“Sure! Wait till I get on my boots! Hello!—that’s him now.”

Again the door swung wide. This time it let in a fur overcoat, coon-skin cap, two gray yarn mittens, a pair of raw-beefsteak cheeks and a voice like a fog-horn.

“Didn’t send for ye? Wall, I’ll be gol-durned! And yer had to fut it? Well, don’ that beat all. And yer ain’t the fust one they’ve left down here to get up the best way they could. Last winter—Jan’ry, warn’t it, Bill?” Bill nodded—“there come a woman from New York and they dumped her out jes’ same as you. I happened to come along in time, as luck would have it—I was haulin’ a load of timber on my bob-sled—and there warn’t nothin’ else, so I took her up to the village. She got in late, of course, but they was a-waitin’ for her. I really wasn’t goin’ to hear you speak to-night—we git so much of that sort of thing since the old man who left the money to pay you fellers for talkin’ died—been goin’ on ten years now—but I’ll take yer ‘long with me, and glad to. But yer oughter have somethin’ warmer’n what yer got on. Wind’s kinder nippy down here, but it ain’t nothin’ to the way it bites up on the ridge.”

This same thought had passed through my own mind. The unusual exertion had started every pore in my body; the red-hot stove had put on the finishing touches and I was in a Russian bath. To face that wind meant all sorts of calamities.

The Madonna-like wife with the cherub in her arms rose to her feet.

“Would you mind wearing my fur tippet?” she said in her soft voice; “‘tain’t much, but it ‘ud keep out the cold from yer neck and maybe this shawl’d help some, if I tied it round your shoulders. Father got his death ridin’ to the village when he was overhet.”

She put them on with her own hands, bless her kind heart! her husband holding the baby; then she followed me out into the cold and helped draw the horse-blanket over my knees; the man in the coon-skin cap lugging the bags and the umbrella.

I looked at my watch. After eight o’clock, and two miles to drive!

“Oh, I’ll git yer there,” came a voice from inside the fur overcoat. “Darter wanted to go, but I said ‘twarn’t no night to go nowhars. Got to see a man who owes me some money, or I’d stay home myself. Git up, Joe.”

It was marvellous, the intelligence of this man. More than marvellous when my again blinded eyes—the red flannel in the lamp helped—began to take in the landscape. Fences were evidently of no use to him; clumps of trees didn’t count. If he had a compass anywhere about his clothes, he never once consulted it. Drove right on—across trackless Siberian steppes; by the side of endless glaciers, and through primeval forests, his voice keeping up its volume of sound, as he laid bare for me the scandals of the village—particularly the fight going on between the two churches—one hard and one soft—this lecture course being one of the bones of contention.

I saved my voice and kept quiet. If a runner did not give out or “Joe” break a leg, we would reach the hall in time; half an hour late, perhaps—but in time; the man beside me had said so—and the man beside me knew.

With a turn of the fence—a new one had thrust its hands out of a drift—a big building—big in the white waste—loomed up. My companion flapped the reins the whole length of Joe’s back.

"Git up! No, by gosh!—they ain't tired yet;—they're still a-waitin'. See them lights—that's the hall."

I gave a sigh of relief. The ambitious young man with one ear open for stellar voices, and the overburdened John Bunyan, and any number of other short-winded pedestrians, could no longer monopolize the upward and onward literature of our own or former times. I too had arrived.

Another jerk to the right—a trot up an incline, and we stopped at a steep flight of steps—a regular Jacob's-ladder flight—leading to a corridor dimly lighted by the flare of a single gas jet. Up this I stumbled, lugging the bags once more, my whole mind bent on reaching the platform at the earliest possible moment—a curious mental attitude, I am aware, for a man who had eaten nothing since noon, was still wet and shivering inside, and half frozen outside—nose, cheeks, and fingers—from a wind that cut like a circular saw.

As I landed the last bag on the top step—the fog-horn couldn't leave his horse—I became conscious of the movements of a short, rotund, shad-shaped gentleman in immaculate white waistcoat, stiff choker and wide expanse of shirt front. He was approaching me from the door of the lecture hall in which sat the audience; then a clammy hand was thrust out—and a thin voice trickled this sentence:

"You're considerable late sir—our people have been in their—"

"I am *what!*" I cried, straightening up.

"I said you were forty minutes late, sir. We expect our lecturers to be on—"

That was the fulminate that exploded the bomb. Up to now I had held myself in hand. I was carrying, I knew, 194 pounds of steam, and I also knew that one shovel more of coal would send the entire boiler into space, but through it all I had kept my hand on the safety-valve. It might have been the white waistcoat or the way the curved white collar cupped his billiard-ball of a chin, or it might have been the slight frown about his eyebrows, or the patronizing smile that drifted over his freshly laundered face; or it might have been the deprecating gesture with which he consulted his watch: whatever it was, out went the boiler.

"Late! Are you the man that's running this lecture course?"

"Well, sir, I have the management of it."

"You have, have you? Then permit me to tell you right here, my friend, that you ought to sublet the contract to a five-year-old boy. You let me get out in the cold—send no conveyance as you agreed—"

"We sent our wagon, sir, to the station. You could have gone in and warmed yourself, and if it had not arrived you could have telephoned—the station is always warm."

"You have the impudence to tell me that I don't know whether a station is closed or not, and that I can't see a wagon when it is hauled up alongside a depot?"

The clammy hands went up in protest: "If you will listen, sir, I will—"

"No, sir, I will listen to nothing." and I forged ahead into a small room where five or six belated people were hanging up their coats and hats.

But the Immaculate still persisted:

"This is not where—Will you come into the dressing-room, sir? We have a nice warm room for the lecturers on the other side of the—"

"No—sir; I won't go another step, except on to that platform, and I'm not very anxious now to get there—not until I put something inside of me—" (here I unstrapped my bag) "to save me from an attack of pneumonia." (I had my flask out now and the cup filled to the brim.) "When I think of how hard I worked to get here and how little you—" (and down it went at one gulp).

The expression of disgust that wrinkled the placid face of the Immaculate as the half-empty flask went back to its place, was pathetic—but I wouldn't have given him a drop to have saved his life.

I turned on him again.

"Do you think it would be possible to get a vehicle of any kind to take me where I am to sleep?"

"I think so, sir." His self-control was admirable.

"Well, will you please do it?"

"A sleigh has already been ordered, sir." This came through tightly closed lips.

"All right. Now down which aisle is the entrance to the platform?"

"This way, sir." The highest glacier on Mont Blanc couldn't have been colder or more impassive.

Just here a calming thought wedged itself into my brain-storm. These patient, long-suffering people were not to blame; many of them had come several miles through the storm to hear me speak and were entitled to the best that was in me. To vent upon them my spent steam because—No, that was impossible.

"Hold on, my friend," I said, "stop where you are, let me pull myself together. This isn't their fault—" We were passing behind the screen hiding the little stage.

But he didn't hold on; he marched straight ahead; so did I, past the pitcher of ice water and the two last winter's palms, where he motioned me to a chair.

His introduction was not long, nor was it discursive. There was nothing eulogistic of my various acquirements, occupations, talents; no remark about the optimistic trend of my literature, the affection in which my characters were held; nothing of this at all. Nor did I expect it. What interested me more was the man himself.

The steam of my wrath had blurred his outline and make-up before; now I got a closer, although a side, view of his person. He was a short man, much thicker at the middle than he was at either end—a defect all the more apparent by reason of a long-tailed, high-waisted, unbuttonable black coat which, while it covered his back and sides, would have left his front exposed, but for his snowy white waistcoat, which burst like a ball of cotton from its pod.

His only gesture was the putting together of his ten fingers, opening and touching them again to accentuate his sentences. What passed through my mind as I sat and watched him, was not the audience, nor what I was going to say to them, but the Christianlike self-control of this gentleman—a control which seemed to carry

with it a studied reproof. Under its influence I unconsciously closed both furnace doors and opened my forced draft. Even then I should have reached for the safety-valve, but for an oily, martyr-like smile which flickered across his face, accompanied by a deprecating movement of his elbows, both indicating his patience under prolonged suffering, and his instant readiness to turn the other cheek if further smiting on my part was in store for him. I strode to the edge of the platform: "I know, good people," I exploded, "that you are not responsible for what has happened, but I want to tell you before I begin, that I have been boiling mad for ten minutes and am still at white heat, and that it is going to take me some time to get cool enough to be of the slightest service to you. You notice that I appear before you without a proper suit of clothes—a mark of respect which every lecturer should pay his audience. You are also aware that I am nearly an hour late. What I regret is, first, the cause of my frame of mind, second, that you should have been kept waiting. Now, let me tell you exactly what I have gone through, and I do it simply because this is not the first time that this has happened to your lecturers, and it ought to be your last. It certainly will be the last for me." Then followed the whole incident, including the Immaculate's protest about my being late, my explosion, etc., etc., even to the incident of my flask.

There was a dead silence—so dead and lifeless that I could not tell whether they were offended or not; but I made my bow as usual, and began my discourse.

The lecture over, the Immaculate paid me my fee with punctilious courtesy, waiving the customary receipt; followed me to the cloak-room, helped me on with my coat, picked up one of the bags,—an auditor the other, and the two followed me down Jacob's ladder into the night. Outside stood a sleigh shaped like the shell of Dr. Holmes's *Nautilus*, its body hardly large enough to hold a four-months-old baby. This was surrounded by half the audience, anxious, I afterward learned, for a closer view of the man who had "sassed" the Manager. Some of them expected it to continue.

I squeezed in beside the bags and was about to draw up the horse blanket, when a voice rang out:

"Mis' Plimsole's goin' in that sleigh, too." It was at Mrs. Plimsole's that I was to spend the night.

Then a faint voice answered back:

"No, I can just as well walk." She evidently knew the danger of sitting next to an overcharged boiler.

Mrs. Plimsole!—a woman—walk—on a night like this—I was out of the sleigh before she had ceased to speak.

"No, madam, you are going to do nothing of the kind; if anybody is to walk it will be I; I'm getting used to it."

She allowed me to tuck her in. It was too dark for me to see what she was like—she was so swathed and tied up. Being still mad—fires drawn but still dangerous, I concluded that my companion was sour, and skinny, with a parrot nose and one tooth gone. That I was to pass the night at her house did not improve the estimate; there would be mottoes on the walls—"What is home without a mother," and the like; tidies on the chairs, and a red-hot stove smelling of drying socks. There would also be a basin and pitcher the size of a cup and saucer, and a bed that sagged in the middle and was covered with a cotton quilt.

The *Nautilus* stopped at a gate, beyond which was a smaller Jacob's ladder leading to a white cottage. Was there nothing built on a level in Sheffield? I asked myself. The bags which had been hung on the shafts came first, then I, then the muffled head and cloak. Upward and onward again, through a door, past a pretty girl who stood with her hand on the knob in welcome, and into a hall. Here the girl helped unmummy her mother, and then turned up the hall-lamp.

Oh, such a dear, sweet gray-haired old lady! The kind of an old lady you would have wanted to stay—not a night with—but a year. An old lady with plump fresh cheeks and soft brown eyes and a smile that warmed you through and through. And such an all-embracing restful room with its open wood fire, andirons and polished fender—and the plants and books and easy-chairs! And the cheer of it all!

"Now you just sit there and get comfortable," she said, patting my shoulder—(the second time in one night that a woman's hand had been that of an angel). "Maggie'll get you some supper. We had it all ready, expecting you on the six-ten. Hungry, aren't you?"

Hungry! I could have gnawed a hole in a sofa to get at the straw stuffing.

She drew up a chair, waited till her daughter had left the room, and said with a twinkle in her eyes:

"Oh, I was glad you gave it to 'em the way you did, and when you sailed into that snivelling old Hard-shell deacon, I just put my hands down under my petticoats and clapped them for joy. There isn't anybody running anything up here. They don't have to pay for this lecture course. It was given to them by a man who is dead. All they think they've got to do is to dress themselves up. They're all officers; there's a recording secretary and a corresponding secretary and an executive committee and a president and two vice-presidents, and a lot more that I can't remember. Everyone of them is leaving everything to somebody else to attend to. I know, because I take care of all the lecturers that come. Only last winter a lady lecturer arrived here on a load of wood; she didn't lose her temper and get mad like you did. Maybe you know her; she told us all about the Indians and her husband, the great general, who was surrounded and massacred by them."

"Know her, Madam, not only do I know and love her, but the whole country loves her. She is a saint, Madam, that the good Lord only allows to live in this world because if she was transferred there would be no standard left."

"Yes, but then you had considerable cause. The hired girl next door—she sat next to my daughter—said she didn't blame you a mite." (Somebody was on my side, anyhow.) "Now come in to supper."

The next morning I was up at dawn: I had to get up at dawn because the omnibus made only one trip to the station, to catch the seven-o'clock train. I went by the eight-ten, but a little thing like that never makes any difference in Sheffield.

When the omnibus arrived it came on runners. Closer examination from the window of the cosey room—the bedroom was even more delightful—revealed a square furniture van covered on the outside with white canvas, the door being in the middle, like a box-car. I bade the dear old lady and her daughter good-by, opened the hall door and stood on the top step. The driver, a stout, fat-faced fellow, looked up with an

inquiring glance.

"Nice morning," I cried in my customary cheerful tone—the dear woman had wrought the change.

"You bet! Got over your mad?"

The explosion had evidently been heard all over the village.

"Yes," I laughed, as I crawled in beside two other passengers.

"You was considerable het up last night, so Si was tellin' me," remarked the passenger, helping me with one bag.

I nodded. Who Si might be was not of special interest, and then again the subject had now lost its inflammatory feature.

The woman made no remark; she was evidently one of the secretaries.

"Well, by gum, if they had left me where they left you last night, and you a plumb stranger, I'd rared and pitched a little myself," continued the man. "When you come again—"

"Come again! Not by a—"

"Oh, yes, you will. You did them Hard-shells a lot of good! You just bet your bottom dollar they'll look out for the next one of you fellows that comes up here!"

The woman continued silent. She would have something to say about any return visit of mine, and she intended to say it out loud if the time ever came!

The station now loomed into sight. I sprang out and tried the knob. I knew all about that knob—every twist and turn of it.

"Locked again!" I shouted, "and I've got to wait here an hour in this—"

"Hold on—*hold on*—" shouted back the driver. "Don't break loose again. I got the key."

My mail a week later brought me a county paper containing this statement: "The last lecturer, owing to some error on the part of the committee, was not met at the train and was considerably vexed. He said so to the audience and to the committee. Everybody was satisfied with his talk until they heard what they had to pay for it. He also said that he had left his dress suit in his trunk. If what we hear is true, he left his manners with it." On reflection, the editor was right—*I had*.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FORTY MINUTES LATE ***

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