



# Never Again-

By Frank L. Packard

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

## CHAPTER I.

### ON THE SPOT.

**T**HIS happened at a period in the history of the Hill Division when trade was very bad, and the directors, scowling over the company's annual report, threw up their hands in holy horror; while from the sacred precincts of the boardroom there emanated the agonized cry: "Economy!"

The general manager took up the slogan and dinned it into the ears of the division superintendents. "Operating expenses are too high," he wrote. "They must be cut down." And the superintendents of divisions, painfully alive to the fact that the G. M. was not dictating for the mere pleasure of it, intimated in unmistakable language to the heads of departments under them that the next quarterly reports were expected to show a marked improvement.

John Healy had charge of the roundhouse at Big Cloud in those days, and the morning after the

lightning struck the system he came fuming back across the yards from his interview with the superintendent, stuttering angrily to himself. As he stamped into the running shed, his humor a shade worse than usual, the first object that caught his eye was Speckles, squatted on the lee side of No. 483, dangling his legs in the pit. That is, it would have been the lee side if Healy had come in the other door.

"Cut down operatin' expinses, is ut?" Healy muttered. "Begorra, I'll begin right now!"

And he "fired" Speckles on the spot.

Now Speckles—whose name, by the way, was Dolivar Washington Babson—had been fired on several occasions before, and if he trembled a little more than was good for his physical comfort it was rather as a result of startled surprise at Healy's appearance than because of any poignant regret at the misfortune that had overtaken him. Nevertheless, he felt it incumbent on himself to expostulate.

"Git out an' stay out!" said Healy, refusing to argue.

And Speckles got out.

For a day he kept away from the roundhouse, the length of time past experience had taught him was required to cool the turner's anger; then he sauntered down again and came face to face with Healy on the turntable.

"I came down to ask you to put me on again, Mr. Healy," he began, broaching the subject timidly.

"Phwat?" demanded Healy.

"I came down to ask you to put me on again, Mr. Healy," Speckles repeated monotonously.

"Oh, I heard you—I heard you," said Healy, a little inconsistently. "On ag'in, is ut? Ut'll be a long toime, me son, mark that!"

This being quite different from Healy's accustomed "Well git back to yer job," it began to filter vaguely through Speckles' brain that his name was no longer to adorn the company's pay sheets.

"Am I fired for good, Mr. Healy?" he faltered.

"You are!" said Healy. "Just that!" Then, relenting a little as Speckles' face fell, he went on: "If 'twere not fer the big bugs down yonder"—he jerked his thumb in the general direction of the East—"I might—moind, I don't say I would, but I might—put you on ag'in. As ut is, we've instructions to cut down the operatin' expinses, an' there's an ind on ut!"

Speckles stood for a moment in dismay as Healy went back into the roundhouse; then he turned disconsolately away, crossed the tracks to the platform of the station, and, seeking out a secluded corner of the freight house, sat down upon a packing case to think it out.

To Speckles it was no mere matter of cutting down expenses. It was a blasted career!

Whatever Speckles' faults, and he was only a lad, he had one redeeming quality, before which, in the eyes of the business he had elected to follow, his strayings from the straight and narrow path dwindled into insignificance—rail-roading was born in him.

At ten he had started in as caller for the night crews, and, during the five years the company had the benefit of his valuable services in that capacity, there was not a man on the division but sooner or later came to know long-armed, bony, freckle-faced, red-haired Speckles—came to

know the little rascal, and like him, too.

Then Speckles had been promoted to the post of sweeper in the roundhouse, and occasionally, under Healy's critical inspection, to washing out boiler tubes. Fresh fuel thereby added to the fire of his ambition, he began to figure how long it would be before he got to wiping, then to firing, and after that—even Speckles' boundless optimism did not have the temerity to specify any particular date—the time when he would attain his goal and get his engine.

Now, instead, at the age of sixteen, he found himself seated on a cracker box, his dreams for the future rudely shattered—thanks to Healy, old Sour Face Healy!

So Speckles sighed, and as he sighed the shop whistle blew. It was noon, and the men began to pour out of the big gates. Then Speckles, remembering that the schools were also "letting out," hurried down the platform and up the main street. He would confide in Madge. She would understand.

Madge Bolton was the daughter of the ticket agent at the station, and between Mr. Bolton and Speckles there existed a standing feud, the casus belli being fifteen-year-old, blue-eyed Madge. Speckles kicked his heels on the corner until she appeared; then he turned and fell into step beside her, reaching a little awkwardly for her strap of books.

"Hello, Dol!" was Madge's greeting. She was the only person in Big Cloud who did not call him Speckles.

"Hello, Madge!" he returned.

Madge glanced at his face and hands. "Haven't you been to work?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Why, Dol?"

"Fired," said Speckles laconically.

"Oh, Dol, again!" she cried reproachfully. "What for?"

"'Tain't only the third time, and 'twasn't for nothin'," said Speckles, a bit sullenly. "I was only restin'."

"Dolivar Babson," she accused, "you were loafing. Oh, Dol, you'll never get to firing, and—and——" She hesitated and stopped, her cheeks a little red with the hint of boy-and-girl castle building that would have increased her father's ire against the luckless Speckles had he seen it.

Speckles, somewhat shamefaced, and having no excuse to offer, trudged on in silence.

"Did you ask Mr. Healy to take you back?" she inquired, after a moment.

"He won't," said Speckles.

"What are you going to do, Dol?"

"I dunno."

"Well," said Madge hopefully, "perhaps you could get a job in one of the stores. I'll ask Mr. Timmons, the grocer, if you like. I know him pretty well."

Speckles came to an abrupt and sudden halt, cast in Madge's face one look that carried with it a world of unutterable reproach, handed over her books in silence—and fled.

He, a railroad man, go into a *store*! And this from Madge! Madge, who, of all others—it was too much! Speckles ate his dinner, dispirited and crushed. Everything and everybody was against him.

His mother's curt inquiry as to when he was going back to work did not in any way tend to mitigate his troubles—rather to accentuate them.

"Old Sour Face won't put me back," he muttered angrily, in response to his mother's repeated question.

"No wonder he won't," said his mother sharply, "if you're as disrespectful as that. I'm ashamed of you, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Speckles was too much depressed to offer any defense. He finished his meal in silence, gulped down his cup of tea in two swallows, took his hat, and started out.

## CHAPTER II.

"LOOK HERE, SPECKLES."

UNCONSCIOUSLY he directed his steps toward the yards, and some five minutes later arrived at the station. Here, about halfway down the platform, he spotted Mat Bolton in the open doorway of the ticket office.

As he approached the nonchalant air with which the other leaned with folded arms against the jamb of the door aroused Speckles' suspicions. To reach the seat of his meditations—the cracker box in the freight shed which had now become his

objective point—he would be obliged to pass Mr. Bolton. He therefore began to incline his course toward the edge of the platform nearest the rails, so that, when he came opposite the office door, some fifteen feet were between him and his arch enemy.

Mr. Bolton awoke from his lethargy with surprising suddenness. "You young rascal," he shouted, "what you been doing to my girl? I'll teach you to make girls cry, you little speckled-face runt, you!"

He made a dash for Speckles, but by the time he had recovered his balance and saved himself from toppling over the edge of the platform to the tracks, Speckles had reached the safe retreat of the freight-shed door. And as the irate parent, after shaking his fist impotently, walked back and disappeared within his domain, Speckles indulged in a series of pantomimes in which his fingers and his nose played an intimate and comprehensive part.

Perched once more on the cracker box, Speckles again resolved himself into a committee on ways and means. His little skirmish with Madge's father had exhilarated him to such an extent that his heavy and oppressing sense of despondency had vanished, and in its place came a renewed determination to resume, somehow or other, the railroad career that Healy had so emphatically interrupted.

He turned over in his mind the feasibility of applying to Regan, the master mechanic, for a job in the shops, but dismissed the idea almost immediately on the ground that shopmen were not, strictly speaking, railroaders.

He might start in switching and braking, and work up to conductor. That, at least, was railroading—not to be compared with engine driving, not by long odds, but still it was railroading. His face brightened. He would interview Farley, the train master.

Farley was in his office. Speckles had not very far to go, only a few steps down the platform. All the offices—and Big Cloud was division headquarters—were under the same roof.

At Speckles' request, Farley swung around in his swivel-chair with a quizzical expression on his face. Then he grinned.

"Want to go on with the train crews, eh? What do you think, kid, that I'm running a

kindergarten outfit, even if some of 'em do act like it? How old are you?"

"Sixteen," said Speckles with a sinking heart.

"Sixteen, eh? Well, come back in a couple of years, and—"

But, for the second time that day, Speckles fled. He was in no mood to stand much chaffing, and Farley, as he well knew, had a leaning that way. Speckles halted outside the door, undecided what move to make next, when the clicking of the instruments in the dispatcher's room overhead came to his ears like an inspiration.

Why hadn't he thought of that before? Spence, who had been on the night trick most of the years that Speckles was caller, was now chief dispatcher. If he had any friend anywhere, it was Spence, the man at whose elbow he had sat through those long, dark hours of the night that beget confidences, and into whose ears he had so often poured the tales of his cherished aims and ambitions.

Speckles covered the stairs three steps at a time, in his new-found exuberance. Spence looked up from his key and listened as Speckles told his story.

"So you're Healy's contribution to economy, eh?" he said when Speckles had finished. "And he won't take you back?"

"No," said Speckles.

"Well, that's pretty rough. But I don't see how I can help you any, Speckles. I haven't any rights over Healy, you know."

Speckles hesitated a moment and fidgeted nervously from one foot to the other. "I know you ain't," he began, "but I thought you'd put me on here."

"W-what!" ejaculated Spence. Then, smothering a laugh at the sight of Speckles' woebegone countenance, he demanded gravely: "You mean dispatching?"

Speckles nodded.

"No, no, Speckles, that would never do. You go back and see Healy. I'll do what I can for you with him."

"'Twon't do no good," said Speckles hopelessly. "I've asked him twice already."

"Well, ask him again. Look here, Speckles, it's up to you to square yourself with Healy, somehow or other. If you want your job very badly, you ought to be sharp enough to find a way

of getting it. Go on, now."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THAT HANDY BROOM.

SO Speckles descended the stairs to the platform and irresolutely began to cross the tracks in the direction of the running shed. He reached the roundhouse and skirmished cautiously along its front. No Healy was in sight, so he dived in between two engines and made his way to the rear of the shed. Here, by peering around the end of a tender, he could see Healy's cubby-hole—Healy called it an office—a bit of space about four by six partitioned off from the back wall in the corner, with a greasy book the engine crews signed, and two or three others, equally greasy, in which Healy kept tabs on things in general.

In spite of his trepidation, Speckles grinned. Healy was there, bending over a very flimsy, spindle-legged table that he had wheedled out of the claim agent some months before. His brows were puckered into a ferocious scowl, and he growled and muttered to himself, now laboring furiously with a stubby pencil on the sheets of paper in front of him, now pausing to bite that unoffending article almost in two in his desperation.

Healy was working on his invention. All the division knew about Healy's ideas on Westinghouse and "air," and that these ideas, when perfected, were to be patented. As to what the consensus of opinion of their value was is neither here nor there, except that in Healy's presence, when referred to at all, the subject was treated with dignity and respect, for Healy's physical powers were beyond the ordinary, and dearest to Healy's heart and most sacred in his eyes was this creation of his brain, or, to be more accurate, fancy.

Speckles sidled up to the cubby-hole, and, without any peroration, took the plunge. "I came to ask you to put me on again, Mr. Healy,"—he spoke rapidly, as though he feared his courage might ooze out before he could finish.

Healy wheeled round with a grunt. "Oh, ut's you, is ut?" he asked grimly.

Speckles, ready to run at the first sign of

violence, acknowledged the impeachment by nodding his head affirmatively, and smiled sheepishly while Healy scrutinized him with a long stare from head to foot.

"Well," said Healy, "you wait a minute an' I'll give you me answer."

Speckles' heart bounded in joyous hope. Healy very deliberately gathered up his papers, folded them carefully, and opening the cupboard where his coat hung—it was a hot day, and Healy was in his shirt sleeves—tucked them into the inside pocket. Then, like a flash, he turned and reached for the first thing in sight. It was a broom.

But, quick as he was, Speckles was quicker, and he led Healy by the length of the pit as he dodged around the tail end of a tender and darted out of the running shed across the tracks to the freight house.

Healy followed no farther than the turntable. There he halted, and Speckles, from his retreat, saw him shake his fist and listened to the threat that thundered across the yards: "Show yer face around here ag'in, you young rascal, an' I'll bate the loife out av you, so I will!"

Speckles betook himself to the cracker box, and from his lips there flowed a fluent and unrestrained expression of his opinion on things in general, but more particularly of Healy, and more particularly still of Healy's invention. Then, his indignation subsiding, it was followed by a fit of the blues; so that when, at the expiration of half an hour, Healy, still in his shirt sleeves, came out of the roundhouse and walked up the tracks in the direction of the shops, Speckles, through the freight-house door, remarked the incident in complete apathy and as one in which he had no interest.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE YAWNING DOORS.

TEN minutes later, however, Speckles apathy vanished and he sprang to his feet at the sound of the excited shouts of the men in the running shed. Some were hastily swinging the big engine doors wide open, others were setting the table in position, while one started on a run in the direction Healy had taken.

Another minute and the shop whistle had boomed out its warning, and as Healy, with the man who had gone after him, came tearing down the track like mad, Speckles saw the smoke beginning to curl up over the roof at the back. The running shed was afire.

With a whoop, Speckles traversed the platform, leaped to the rails, and was hard on Healy's heels by the time the turntable was crossed. The thing to do was to get the engines out, and Healy was the man to do it.

"Get tackle rigged on 463," he ordered. "She's cold, an' we'll have to haul her out. Set the table fer 518; I'll take her."

Then he started on the jump for the cubby-hole and his precious papers.

Now, the tackle that Healy had referred to was stored in the rear of the roundhouse in the same general direction as the cubby-hole, and as the order had been given to no one in particular, Speckles, shouting "I'll get it," started after Healy.

Some grease and waste had caught and was rolling up a nasty smoke. Through it, even while he tugged manfully at the heavy tackle, Speckles saw Healy run into his office, snatch his coat, rush out again, and dash for the cab of 518, throwing the coat up on the tender. As he did so, something fell from the pocket.

Speckles dropped the tackle and pounced upon it. It was the bundle of papers he had seen Healy put in his coat pocket a little while before. It was Healy's invention!

Speckles' first impulse was to shout to Healy, but just then No. 518 glided out of the shed, and the men in front of 463 were yelling in chorus for the tackle, so Speckles put his tongue in his cheek and the papers in his pocket.

It wasn't much of a blaze, but it looked bad while it lasted. Even after the shop hands had got their hose lengths connected and a stream playing on the fire, and the engines were all in safety in the yard, the smoke continued to roll out in clouds, with here and there a vicious tongue of flame.

Then Healy, his duty done, bethought him of his coat on the tender of No. 518. And Speckles, as he heard Healy's gasp of dismay on discovering that his papers were gone, had an inspiration.

"Me papers! Me papers!" wailed Healy. "Fer

the love av Mike, I must av dropped them on the flure!”

“I’ll get them for you, Mr. Healy,” said Speckles, quick as a shot.

“You’ll not!” said Healy. “I’ll have no wan risk his life fer thim, bad as I want thim. Hey, come back, you runt!”

But Speckles was gone. Headed straight for the big, yawning doors that vomited their smoke and flames? Oh, no, not Speckles! Hardly! Speckles would make his attempt from the rear! And around the end of the shed and in behind he raced.

Some of the men were fighting the fire from that side, but they were too busy to pay any attention to Speckles. A dab of soot and dirt on his face which he obtained by rubbing his fingers along the blackened wall, an artistic smudge of generous proportions on the outside of the papers, which he took from his pocket, and Speckles’ make-up was complete and convincing.

Now, Speckles had an eye for the dramatic and an appreciation of its value. He peered in through one of the windows. It was not nearly as bad inside as it had been, and he decided there

would be no risk and very little discomfort in carrying out the plan that had popped into his head.

So he climbed in through a window and dropped down to the floor on the other side. The next minute he had dashed through the running shed, and emerged from a whirl of black smoke into the open in front of the turntable, the papers waved aloft in his fist.

It was effective—decidedly effective! A cheer went up, and the men crowded around, while Healy rushed forward and began to pump Speckles’ arm up and down like an engine piston.

“Ut’s a hero you are, me bright jool av a lad!” he cried in his delight. “‘Tis mesilf, John Healy, that ses ut, an’ the bhoys are me witness. Come back to yer job in the mornin’ an’, by my soul, Speckles, I’ll niver fire you ag’in, niver! An’ ut’s more I’ll do—I’ll promote you. Ut’s a wiper you are from now on, me son, an’ to blazes wid cuttin’ down operatin’ expinses! Where did you foind the papers?”

“On the floor,” said Speckles—and he told the truth.