

McQUEEN'S HOBBY

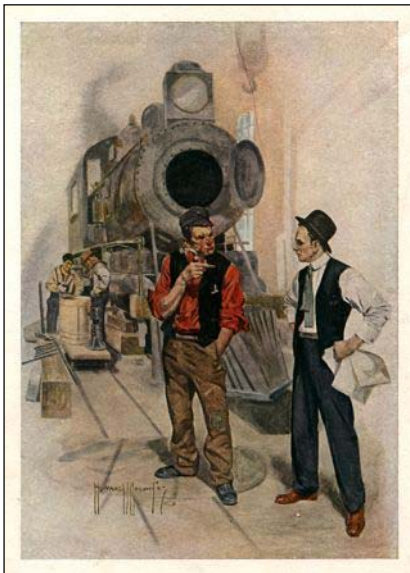
By Frank L. Packard

"McQUEEN'S HOBBY" is from Frank L. Packard's 1911 book *On the High Iron at Big Cloud*. It's really a book of short fictional stories, all centered on the Hill division of a western railroad. Like so much of the American railroad fiction genre, this story is filled with the action and rough-and-ready characters that symbolized the railroads of its time.

AI

There isn't much use in talking about the logical or the illogical when you come to couple up with a man's hobby, because a hobby is a hobby and that's all there is to it -- with nothing left to be said on the subject. Most men have a hobby. McQueen's was coal -- just coal.

McQueen talked coal with a persistence that was amazing. On all occasions and under any pretext it was coal. Was he off schedule with a regularity that entailed his presence on the carpet before the division superintendent, it was coal. Did he break down between meeting-points with the attendant result that the dispatchers fretted and fumed and swore as they readjusted their schedules and rearranged their train sheets, it was coal. Everlastingly and eternally coal.



"What's coal?" McQueen would demand oracularly. "It's carbon and oxygen and hydrogen with a dash of nitrogen, ain't it? Well, then, what are you talking about? Coal *ain't* just coal, some of it's mostly slate. Two hundred and ten pounds all the way, all the time, with the grate bars cluttered with that, huh! What?"

No purchasing agent that had ever hit the division had been quite able to satisfy McQueen with the brand of the commodity that was supplied in accordance with the requisition orders that he drew. And so, day in and day out, big 802 puffed her way through the mountains, and McQueen, in the cab, absorbed coal statistics, coal data, coal everything, with an avidity, a thoroughness, and a masterliness of detail, that would have put some noted geologists to shame and given the rest a run to hold their rights on the marked-up schedule.

Up at headquarters -- when things were running smoothly and McQueen was behaving himself with no scores chalked up against him on the time-card -- they treated his hobby as a joke. So that when his whistle boomed out of the gorge to the westward, or shrilled across the cut to the eastward, followed a moment afterward by the sight of the big, flying mogul with her string of slewing dark-green coaches, the staff on duty at Big Cloud would lean from the upper windows and watch the Limited as she shattered the yard switches with a

roar -- watch as, with a hiss of the air and the grinding of the brake shoes as they sparked the tires, she would draw up, panting, at the platform, and the big engineer would swing himself from the cab for an oil around. Then the badinage flew thick and fast while McQueen swabbed his hands on a hunk of waste and punctuated the remarks with squirts from his long-spouted can as he filled the thirsty oil cups.

So the big fellows laughed and joked, and the Brotherhood chaffed him unmercifully.

If anyone had asked McQueen what had started, let alone caused him to exhaust the subject of coal with such painstaking and conscientious insistence, he couldn't for the life of him have answered. It had started -- just started, that's all -- and, fascinating him, had pursued its insidious advance unchecked and unquestioned -- that is, unquestioned until one morning when Clarihue, the turner at the Big Cloud roundhouse, kind of jerked him up a little on the proposition.

"You're against the red, you and your coal, Mac, all right, all right," Clarihue chuckled, as the engineer came in to sign on for the day's run.

McQueen was patting 802's slide bars affectionately. "How's that?" he asked.

"Oil!"

"Oil?" repeated McQueen, puzzled.

"Sure thing! No more coal -- no more slate -- no more cinders -- you touch her off, and there you are! You'll have to cut out the coal and plug up on oil, Mac."

"Oh!" said McQueen, enlightened. "Oil-burners, eh? I saw one of 'em down East. They're evil-smelling, inhuman, stinking brutes, that's what they are! Don't you let 'em side track you like that, son. They may do down there, but not in the hills. Not while you and me are pulling throttles, and don't you think so."

Clarihue grinned.

"Well, mabbe," said he. "But say, honest, Mac, what's the sense of gassing about coal the way you do? What's to come out of it? What's the good of it? You just get the laugh from the boys, what?"

McQueen's answer was to scratch his head. To put the matter into the concrete class of practicability was a phase of the subject that he had not considered. He scratched his head when the turner had gone; and, also, he scratched his head for several days thereafter. Then he caught at a happy inspiration whereby to solve the riddle, and therein he fell -- but of that in a moment.

Things were booming on the Hill Division. Traffic was doubled, trebled. Everything on the train sheets was in sections. Promotions flew thick and fast. Wipers were set to firing, and the firemen moved over to the right-hand side of the cabs. Every wheel the division could beg, borrow or steal was doing fancy time stunts smashing records. Everyone from car-tink to superintendent, was on the jump. Even the directors, not to be outdone in the general order of things, worked overtime rubbing fat hands in gleeful anticipation of juicy, luscious dividends to be; only *they* neglected to figure in Noonan as an item on the balance sheets.

Noonan? Where is the Brotherhood that does not number among its members men with grievances, fancied or real? Noonan had a grievance, -- no particular grievance, just a

grievance -- and Noonan was a power in that branch of the Brotherhood that held sway over the Hill Division. Noonan always had a grievance; due, primarily, to the fact that he had a deep and long-seated grudge against himself. It dated way back -- he'd been born that way.

"Grievances!" he spluttered to a group of his admirers. "Grievances? Why, we're against the worst of it all the time. We're not track-walkers, are we? Well then, who runs the road? It's us on the throttles, what? Who's to blame for our measly schedule of hours and pay? We are, 'cause we haven't the sand to stand up for our rights. That's what, and don't you forget it!"

There was a chorus of assent. "Noonan's right," said one Devins, "only it don't look to me like now was what you might rightly call the time to growl. Times are good, everything's double-headed, and the paycar's running carload lots."

Noonan glared. "You've got the brains of a piston head, that's what you have," he exploded. "It's times like these we'd win hands down. Perhaps you'd like to wait till there's nothing doing, and they're laying the boys off and everybody, mostly, is running spare! What chance d'ye think any demands would stand then?"

Of a truth it was the accepted time and a most glorious opportunity. In that, Noonan was right. Only one obstacle lay between him and the accomplishment of his cherished ambition to make something of his trouble-hunting proclivities and become a leader of men -- in a strike. That obstacle was McQueen.

McQueen was a company man. Out and out a company man; though nothing would have surprised McQueen more than to learn that he was looked up to as a leader by the conservative element of the Brotherhood. True, he and his coal was the joke of the division; but that was only a joke, and in no wise to be held up against him. His influence, of whose existence he was oblivious, was based on things apart from that. Big, kindly, honest, incapable of deceit, simple, straight-forward, staunch in his friendships, somewhat inclined to stubbornness in his beliefs perhaps, easily ruffled but as easily pacified, such was McQueen. Such was the McQueen the officials honored, and such was the McQueen with whom the boys would gladly and loyally have shared their pay checks to the last cent.

All this Noonan knew. Knew, too, that to gain his end he must first win over McQueen. And to that object he began to devote himself. He and McQueen shared the honors of the fast mail, and under ordinary conditions communication between the two men was limited to a flirt of the hand from the cab as one or other of them tore by the siding designated as their meeting-point by the lords of the road, the dispatchers. But now things were a bit different, everything was more or less off schedule. And while the Limited, East and West, was nursed along as near her running time as possible, and generally got the best of it over everything else, there were, nevertheless, occasions when both men were stalled together on time orders at the same point.

Noonan tackled McQueen at the first opportunity. He picked his way cautiously as though not quite sure of his rights and ready for a quick reverse.

"Say, Mac," he began, "what do you think of all this talk that's going 'round?"

"Talk?" said McQueen. "What talk?"

"You don't mean to say," gasped Noonan, in well-simulated surprise, "that you haven't heard it? And the boys are slinging it pretty hot, at that!"

"I haven't heard anything," McQueen answered, slightly suspicious that Noonan was about to spring one at his expense. "What you giving us?"

"Straight," confided Noonan earnestly. "It's strike, Mac, that's what."

"Strike!" ejaculated McQueen, bewildered. "What for?"

"What for!" cried Noonan. "What for? That's a sweet question to ask. Well, pretty dashed near everything," -- he waved his hand expansively -- "hours, scale, and -- and -- "

McQueen shook his head. "I'm not kicking," he said. "I don't see anything to strike about. Looks to me as though you fellows were hunting trouble. You'll probably get it, what?"

"You never see anything," Noonan blurted out, irritation getting the better of diplomacy. "Nothing but the blamed coal you're forever yapping about."

"What I know about coal," returned McQueen with dignity, "you'll never know. It's a subject that requires brains."

"Is that so!" Noonan jeered. "You tell it!"

"It requires brains," McQueen repeated stolidly.

"It's a shame that the only man on the division that has 'em, don't know how to use 'em, then," Noonan prodded. "Who cares about your blazing old coal and what it's made of? Talk's cheap. There's no sense to it, anyhow."

"Maybe there isn't, and then again maybe there is. At any rate, there's a dollar a day for every man pulling a throttle," McQueen announced triumphantly. "I don't know yet just how much for the firemen, I haven't figured it on their schedule."

Noonan pricked up his ears. "What's that you say, Mac," he demanded.

Here was McQueen's vindication. They'd laugh at his absurd, pointless theories on coal, would they? Well then, he'd show them! And it wasn't any of their business, either, how many days he'd racked his brains, puzzling out an adequate solution to the question Clarihue had flung at him! He shook two impressive fat fingers at Noonan.

"One dollar a day, every day, and the spare men proportionately, that's what! Do you get that, Noonan?"

"Rats!" said Noonan. "You'd better go into the shops for repairs. You need new stay-bolts on your dome cover!"

"Never you mind my dome cover," McQueen flung back, beginning to get exasperated. "It may need a little tinkering, but it's not ready for the scrap-heap yet, the way some are I could mention -- but won't. It all goes back to what I said. It's a subject that requires brains -- which you haven't got. There's no use explaining anything to you because ---- "

"You can't," Noonan interrupted craftily. "You're only long on wind, Mac."

"You listen to me, you rust-jointed disgrace to the throttle!" cried McQueen, stung into retort. "You listen to me! What are you paid for? Mileage, ain't it? How do you get your mileage? Steam! What makes steam? Coal! D'ye hear? Coal! Coal, and don't you forget it. Well then, poor coal means poor steam, and poor steam means poor mileage, don't it, what?"

Noonan burst into a loud and derisive guffaw.

McQueen glared. "You're a wild, uneducated, hee-hawing ass!" he choked. "What do you know, anyway? Nothing! But *I* know! A dollar a day I said, and I say so now. I figured it out. It's the difference between high grade coal and the muck we burn. It's the difference between the mileage we make and the mileage we *could* make in the same time. That totes up one dollar a day. Supposing they wouldn't let us have any more mileage than they do now, well, we'd do it in better time, and the difference would be ours, wouldn't it? And time's money. And *that* totes up one dollar a day just the same. It's the same either way -- time or mileage. Take your choice!"

"There, Johnny, that's a good boy, run along and fetch me a bucket of steam," Noonan scoffed.

With a snort of unutterable contempt, McQueen turned to swing himself into his cab.

"Hold on a minute, Mac," Noonan cried, afraid that he had overstepped himself. "Don't get whiffy. I swear, I believe you're right. Let's see how you figure it."

And McQueen, mollified, figured it. Figured it with the stub of a pencil in greasy, scrawling characters on the back of a time order. As to the process by which the conclusion was arrived at, that was something of which Noonan was in profound and utter ignorance. Whether it was right or wrong, he did not know. He never knew -- and cared less! Certainly the result was there.

McQueen completed the last figure of his calculation with a flourish. "There!" he cried exultingly. "How about it now, eh?"

Noonan took the paper, wrinkled his brows, pursed his lips, and stared at it with the air of a connoisseur of calculus. "H'm," said he slowly, "are you dead sure it's right, Mac?"

"Right!" McQueen fairly yelled, touched in another tender spot. "Right!" Confound you, it's there in black and white, ain't it? Figures don't lie, do they? Well, what in thunder's wrong with you, then?"

"I wanted to be sure, Mac, that's all. Holy fish-plates, I knew it was bad, rotten bad, but I didn't think they were handing it to us like this."

"You bet it's bad. It's the worst ever. There's more kinds of coal than there are spikes in the right of way from here to Big Cloud and back again, but the coal we get is the last on the list. Bad! It's what I've always said, ain't it?"

"It's fierce!" continued Noonan with rising emphasis. "And when the boys hear this, it'll be the last straw. They'll fix 'em!"

"Fix who?" inquired McQueen, blankly.

"Why, ain't I telling you! The company."

"I -- I was talking about the coal," said McQueen a little uneasily.

"Sure you were," Noonan agreed heartily. "Sure you were, and how the company is robbing every engineer on the division of a dollar a day, to say nothing of the firemen and the train crews. It's enough to make a man mad. Well, I should say yes!"

"I -- I didn't say the company was robbing us," protested McQueen.

"What's that!" cried Noonan sharply; then in apparent disgust: "So your crazy old figures are just gas-bag filling like the rest of your coal talk, eh? They *did* look pretty scaly, and that's a fact. I had my suspicions. That's why I asked you if you were sure they were right. But I might have known they weren't without asking."

"Oh, you might, might you?" exploded McQueen, goaded once more into angry outburst. "You and your suspicions! Who are you! I tell you they *are* right, and that's the end of it!"

"Well, if they're right, why don't you stand by them, then? We're being robbed every day we work, ain't we?"

"Ye-e-es, I suppose we are," McQueen admitted reluctantly; "but I didn't figure it out for the purpose of -- -- "

"Mac," Noonan interrupted unctuously, " 'tain't for you nor me to say the purpose it's to be put to. There's others besides us. But I do say, Mac, you're almighty smart."

McQueen shook his head. "I'm a company man," he said dubiously.

"Company man! Of course you are. We're all company men. But right's right and wrong's wrong before anything else. Well, ta ta, Mac, see you again. I'm off. There's Hake with the tissue. I'll tell the boys where you stand."

It was a somewhat dazed McQueen that in turn pulled himself up into his own cab. He stood in the gangway and squinted meditatively at the coal heaped high on the tender. To his conscientious self-communion, his triumphant vindication had somewhat the appearance of a boomerang. "I don't know," he reflected. "It *is* damn poor coal, and -- and figures *don't* lie. We -- we've been getting the worst of it, and -- and a man *should* stand up for his rights."

And while McQueen, busy with new and momentous problems, was steaming west into the Rockies, Noonan, with his tongue in his cheek, was cutting along for Big Cloud with a wide-flung throttle.

That night, at Big Cloud, Noonan's cronies got the story. That is, they got what Noonan saw fit to tell them. And the burden of his tale was that McQueen was with the Brotherhood and against the company. That was sufficient. They looked with appreciative admiration at the man who had done the trick, and then they flew to obey his orders.

By morning, every engineer on the division had the news. On way freights, on stray freights, on regulars, specials, and sections, they got it -- every last one of them. And McQueen coming east again on Number Two got it, and marvelled a little at his new importance, never seeing Noonan's hand in the marked deference paid to him.

First and last it was a bad business. Bad for the company, bad for the hot heads led by Noonan, bad for the others, and bad for McQueen. It caught the company none too well prepared, and Carleton, for this happened in the days of his superintendency, was hard put

to it to move anything. There was pretty bitter feeling; and before it was over there was blood spilled. But the roughs at Big Cloud, who didn't know the pilot from a horn-block, were responsible for the most of that, though, in their own way, too, they ended it.

It came to a show-down the night they carried young Carl Davis home from the yard on a door they had wrenched from a box-car. Davis was braking in the yard then, and he was a nephew of McQueen's. He had lived with the engineer ever since, as a little chap of ten, he had come out to the West. Childless themselves, McQueen and his wife thought as much of the lad as though he had been their own.

McQueen in his grief didn't get the rights of it. Only in a confused sort of a way he understood the roughs had winged the boy with a cowardly shot, meaning perhaps to do no more than shoot out his lamp as he swung by on the top of a car. And while his wife with tender hands busied herself in rendering such assistance to the surgeon as she could, McQueen sat in a chair and stared, dry-eyed and bitter of heart, at the white face on the bed.

Also McQueen was getting sense. Certainly, he had never intended to strike. Now, the shock of Carl's hurt had sobered his judgment and he saw things as he should have seen them, saw them as he cursed himself for not having seen them before he had allowed his senseless egotism to carry him off his feet. As the thoughts came crowding through his brain, his cheeks burned dull red at his own shame. But through it all he blamed only himself, with never an inkling that he had been used as a cat's-paw by the crafty Noonan -- that was to come afterward.

McQueen waited only to wring a half-grudging assurance from the doctor that the boy would pull through, then he took his hat and left the house. It was getting on toward eleven o'clock when he walked into the hall across from the station where the boys had their headquarters, and had been in the habit of congregating each night ever since the strike began. Usually noisy in a good-natured, devil-may-care way, there was a subdued and serious quiet pervading the room as McQueen stepped in. The shooting in the yard was something they had not counted on and, like McQueen, it was acting on them as a tonic. All except Noonan who, evidently bolstered up with a few drinks, was more noisy, hilarious and quarrelsome than ever.

McQueen answered the questions they crowded at him as to the boy's condition soberly, and going over to Noonan took him by the arm and led him into a corner.

"The game ain't worth it," he said shortly. "I've had my lesson to-night and I'm through!"

"What for?" demanded Noonan aggressively. "We didn't have anything to do with it. We're not responsible, are we?"

"We are," said McQueen sturdily. "Morally responsible."

"Morally responsible!" Noonan mocked with a sneer. "Oh, mamma, listen to him! Streak of yellow, that's you, McQueen." Then fiercely: "You play the scab and I'll bash your head to jelly."

"You're drunk," retorted McQueen contemptuously.

"Drunk, eh? I'm not so drunk but that I know who's running this strike. It's me, and don't you forget it! And what I says goes, d'ye hear?"

"I'm asking you to call it off. Blood on our heads I won't stand for. Our grievances don't warrant what's likely to happen here if things go on. You owe it to the men who followed you into the strike, Noonan."

"Oh, I do, do I? Followed *me* into the strike, eh? How about the men that followed *you*?"

"That followed me?" repeated McQueen in amazement.

"Sure, that followed you! You didn't think I took any stock in your batty coal talk, did you? You must think I'm green! All I wanted was *you* -- you bit fast and easy enough -- the rest of the softies came along then like a pack of sheep. What d'ye think now about *me* owing it all to the men, Mr. Morally Responsible, eh?"

It took McQueen a minute to get the whole of it -- the bitter whole of it. Then the blood rushed to his face in a crimson flood. He reached out and grasping Noonan by neck and shoulders shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. "You cur!" he cried hoarsely, and flung the other suddenly away against the wall.

The men at the sound of the scuffle came running over.

"He's a scab! Kill him!" shrieked Noonan.

McQueen turned to face the men. "If beating this strike's a scab, I'm a scab," he said quietly. "I'm out to beat it right now! I've been a fool and I'm ready to admit it. But I didn't know until to-night that I'd been bait for a whining thing like that!" pointing at Noonan. "He says some of you men came in on the strike because I did. If that's so, then get out of it because I do. Get out of it before there's more on our hands than we'll be able to answer for when we go into Division for the last time. That's all I've got to say. I'm going over now to ask Carleton to put me on again, if it's nothing better than pulling a way freight. And -- and I hope you'll come with me."

As the flood follows the fracture in the dam, so the breaking of the tension filled the room with pandemonium. Cheers, yells, hisses, curses, shouts -- the Brotherhood was divided against itself. But ten minutes later, the majority of them were clustered behind McQueen in the super's office.

Carleton and his staff were sleeping at headquarters those days, and they gathered in a group around the green-shaded lamp on the dispatcher's table to face the delegation.

"Mr. Carleton," McQueen began, "we ---- "

That was all. He never got any further. From the platform outside came hoots and cat-calls, and above the chorus Noonan's voice:

"Soak the scab! Kill him! If he's so fond of it, let him have it! *Now!*"

The window pane was shattered with a crash, and McQueen, struck full in the head by a huge hunk of coal, sank without so much as a moan to the floor.

They cured him of brain fever in the course of time all right, but they never cured him of coal. Up and down from one end of the division to the other, when he got around again, he talked coal harder than ever -- it was his business. McQueen was doing the buying for the road.

“There wasn’t anything wrong with what I said about coal,” he asserts with a smile, when the boys put it up to him. “Not for a minute! Good coal makes better steam, better everything, and pays the company. They saw that all right. That’s why I’m buying it, see? As for figuring it into the schedule, the sum was too hard and they couldn’t do it. Me? Oh, I can’t either, I lost the paper I did it for Noonan on. I ain’t so good on figures as I was, what?”

-- 1911