1992

Treasure in Black

John L. Adams

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
TREASURE IN BLACK

JOHN L. ADAMS

SO HERE WE ARE, ME AND MY BROTHER Ez goin' home from school and kind of draggin' our feet 'cause we don't want to get home too fast. The minit we're home it's chores, chores, chores and then off to bed. It's better'n school, but this is the most relaxing time of day, just workin' our way along the railroad track to the edge of town where the house is.

"'No luck today. No trains,'" I says.

"'Not much coal left either,'" says Ez. He picks a chunk out of the dirt and puts it in his bag.

See, we just moved up to Abbington from our old ranch in Bear Valley (where most of us kids was born) 'cause Pa wanted the family by a town with people and jobs. It's a coal minin' and railroad town and plenty's goin' on. Problem is, livin' so close
to town makes it hard to find much wood for cookin' and stuff. We can't 'ford to buy much coal either, so it's our job to pick up what we find by the tracks on the way home from school—stuff that comes rollin' off the coal cars.

"Darn it. Someone's musta already been by to get the best stuff," I say, stoopin' to get a piece for my own bag. I look up and there's Ez runnin', balancin', down a beam of track.

"Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch—WOUAH WOUAHHH!"

He's pullin' out pretty fast. I pick up another clump and jump up to the rail to try to catch up to him. Even though he's a year older'n me we're about the same size, and I can do about anythin' he can.

"Ha! You're just a freight and I'm a passenger train from Cheyenne," I yell at Ez.

He turns 'round and starts runnin' back toward me.

"Somebody made a mistake and we're both on the same track!" he screams.

We collide and our books, bags, and bodies topple onto the ties in a jumble. I imagine great destruction. At home we dump our coals into the storage box by the back door and head inside.

The next day our school buddy, Timmy Feldson, announces to us that he's goin' to ride with his Pa in a caboose of a train goin' to Utah. He always says someday his Pa will let us ride with him, too, on a short trip, but it never happens. Sure 'nough, while we're gathering coal on the way out of town, here comes Timmy and Mr. Feldson ridin' the back of the caboose. We wave all wild and friendly, but Timmy just acts cool like it's nothin' and barely waves at all, just holds his hand up like he thinks he's a signal man or somethin'. We kind of stand there envious until the train follows the track 'round the next bend near our house, which goes t'wards the red bluff outside town.

Then we look 'round and notice all the new coal that come tumblin' off the cars and we forget Timmy for now. This is chores-made-easy with all this new coal lyin' 'round and we're the first kids to it! I never understand why they stack coal so high above the top of the railroad cars when so much of it falls off before it gets where it's goin' anyway. But I'll never complain.
We get enough coal from Timmy’s train that the next day we got time to stay in town after school and explore with our friends before it starts gettin’ dark. Me and Ez saved enough pennies last couple months to go with Mark and Josie to see a movin’ picture. Mark and Josie’s mother died a year ago givin’ birth to their little brother, and their Pa always gives them a few cents to entertain theirselves with ‘til he gets home at night from the mines. They’re lucky.

Anyways, durin’ this picture we’re watchin’, the hero in it has to rescue some lady in lots of fancy clothes from a held-up train. Well a course the robbers aren’t gonna stop the train to let the hero on, so the hero just runs along next to the train, which is just gettin’ goin’. He grabs the handle by the door of a car and swings on up. Ez and I just look at each other like why didn’t we think of that before. Then the guy goes in and gets the girl and takes her to the handle where he clumb up on so they can swing down off the train. The fancy lady faints at the sight of the danger so he swings down with’er on his shoulder. I never seen a lady faint from excitement or danger before. I wonder if a lady was watchin’ me and Ez do that if she would faint, too.

Well, before we know it, we’re walkin’ down the tracks t’wards home again a few days later. I’m kinda quiet tryin’ to ‘mime some girl in school faintin’ if she saw me swingin’ up onto a train. Ez is balancin’ on one of the rails behind me practicin’ his train whistle.

‘Wuoah WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!’
‘Hooo HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!’
‘Hey! That’s pert good,’ I call back to Ez, but before I finish what I’m sayin’, I see a coal train comin’ slowly round the bend t’wards us. Like instinct, me and Ez jump across the tracks to the side that is outside the curve. The man in the caboose will always watch the train from the inside side.

‘Are you thinkin’ of tryin’ that stunt from the movin’ picture, Rich?’ Ez yells.

‘Heck, Ez! It ain’t no stunt,’ I yell back, louder, ’cause the train’s gettin’ closer. ‘We can do it, easy.’
"I dunno . . . ."

I can see the engineer all plain, leanin' out the window. My heart's really goin' now, but we stand back from the track, so as to look casual. Dang! them engines're so loud. Those girls from school'd prob'ly be faintin' already, on 'count o' the noise. We stand there and wave to the engineer. The stupid thing takes forever to get past us, it's movin' so slow. As soon as the engineer can't see us, we make like mad coyotes up the track bed and start runnin' along right next to the train. Heck, this thing's goin' faster than it seemed to be from further back, I think. Finally, I get runnin' fast enough that the cars seem to be passin' a little more slowly. A handle and a narrow ladder slowly pass by my head and I reach up, grab, and pull myself up with all my energy, it seems. I'm on! I can't believe it. I look back to see how Ez's doin'. He's just pullin' himself up on a ladder of the car behind mine. Finally he looks up'n sees me. I can see him let out a conquerin' yell, but I can hardly hear it 'cause the racket's so loud. We climb up onto the tops of our cars and fling ourselves down.

I never experienced such an excitement! Goin' along with the wind blowin' on us and the train makin' all that screechin' and whistlin'. I reach up to flip my hair back that blew in my eyes, and I see my hands are blacker'en bullchips. Great Sammy! I realize that I'm sittin' up on top o' heaps an' heaps o' coal! I look back at Ez. Our eyes meet and I know we're thinkin' the same thing. So we start rollin' 'round in a mock struggle to stay on the top o' the car and the coal's rollin' off in waves. A couple times I get so carried away I practic'ly go over with'em. We climb up to the top of our mounds, slippin' and slidin', pushin' the coals underneath our feet down and over the edge of the car. It'll be a week before we have to pick around for more coal!

Well, the train starts movin' 'round the next bend and up ahead we can see home. The turn takes the train away from the valley t'wards the bluff, so me and Ez edge carefully over to the ladders and climb down to the lowest rungs. Now I think I know why that lady in the movin' picture fainted when she had to jump off the train with the hero. It's easy 'nough to climb up with a runnin'
start, but how the heck d’y’a get down? I look over and see Ez holdin’ on and danglin’ his feet down. He carefully touches his feet to the ground—barely—still holdin’ on ’til he gets runnin’ fast enough and lets go. He charges down off the rail bedding and heads for a clump of brush. I try it, too, and before I know it I’m runnin’ off the bedding mound, but I’m runnin’ too fast for my legs—takin’ these huge, long bounds—and I trip and slide on my stomach right into the bush I was aimin’ for, just in a humiliatin’ way. I crawl behind the brush, coughin’ on the dust, and wait ’til the caboose comes ’round the bend and follows the train behind the bluff. The man inside’s lookin’ out our side of the tracks, which is strange, seein’ it’s the outside o’ the curve.

Well, now it’s time to pick up the fruits of our labors. Ez and me, we’re so excited about the ride and pullin’ it off so well, we run back along the track to where the coal should be waitin’ for us. We get back around the last bend, and we see coal layin’ everywhere along the side of the track. “Black gold,” they might say. I never thought a bunch o’ coal would make me as happy as all that did.

“Maybe we knocked off a bit much,” Ez wonders aloud.

“Let’s see how much we can take home,” I say.

“Heck, there’s ’nough here to burn for a month solid!”

We fill our burlap bags in no time and drag’em over the ground ’til we get home, they’re so heavy. We empty them into the storage container on the back of the house and head back for more. We get two more bags and could keep goin’ but it’s startin’ to get a little dark so we think we’d better get inside. We get back to the house and there’s Pa with his eyes about as wide as I’ve seen’em for a while, lookin’ at all the coal we’re bringin’ in. His voice is all calm, though:

“Where’d you boys find so much coal?”

“Along the tracks.”

—He’s still lookin’ at us, waitin’ for more—

“I swear, Pa, we found it along the tracks, comin’ home,” Ez adds with as innocent a voice and face as only he can do.

I see Pa’s eyes lookin’ us over. I guess we look perty dirty, but I think anyone would be, handlin’ that much coal, even if they didn’t
ride on top of a railroad car. I can't quite read his face, but I don't dare look in it too long.

"Well, you boys hurry and get cleaned up for dinner. Don't keep your mother waitin'."

Me and Ez look at each other with relief that only brothers know and get busy cleanin' ourselves at the water pump. Well, wouldn'cha know, we're just comin' in for dinner when there's this knock at the door. Dad gets up from the table to answer.

"Hello, Mr. Feldson, what can I do for you?" we hear. Lucky for us, Pa doesn't open the door wide 'nough for Mr. Feldson to see into the house.

"He never come over here before, has'ee?" I whisper to Ez.

"Maybe he knows, since . . ."

Ez just shakes his head, listenin'. Mr. Feldson's speakin'.

"Sorry to bother you at dinner, but I was asked by the railroad company to come out and check on a report. The last train going west out of town reported some possible trespassing on our moving stock. Since you live out here on the last stretch out of town, we hoped maybe you might have seen any of the suspicious activity."

"Well, I haven't noticed anythin', but my boys just came in from their errands. Maybe they've seen somethin' of the sort."

Pa turns to us for an answer and opens the door wider so Timmy's dad can see us standin' by the table. I'm so worried I can't hardly say—"No." Ez is much better at this and takes over.

"No, Pa. We haven't noticed anythin'." He looks as honest and innocent as I've seen'im in a while.

"Sorry, Mr. Feldson. We'll keep an eye on the area for you. Anythin' else we can do?" Pa leaves the door wide open in his friendly, hospitable way, and makes it so me and Ez can see him, and I'm awfully uncomf' terble. Seems like forever before they finally say their polite g'byes and Pa makes his way back to the table lookin' perty stern. He knows the whole story now, I just know it. He always figures us out, like he's a prophet or somethin'.

"Boys, you know that trespassin' is not right."

We nod meekly.

"So be sure and keep an eye on anythin' suspicious."
We nod again, "Yes, Pa." Maybe he doesn't know!
Everybody is at the table now—all nine of us—ready for dinner.
We wait for Pa to ask someone to give the prayer.
"I'll say the prayer this evenin'," he says.
"Oh, God, we are so grateful to be all together this evenin' for our dinner, which Mother has made for us. We are grateful for your blessin' of food and health upon our family."
His voice rises a little.
"We are also grateful for the unexpected blessin' of so much coal, of which we are in so great a need, and we hope it hasn't caused trouble for somebody else."
He does know.
His voice is gettin' more authority.
"And if the boys do somethin' like that again, keep them in line—a little lightnin' and thunder or somethin' should do the trick. And now, please bless the food we are about to eat, to keep us strong. Amen."
Amen!