

MACBURNIE AND THE CHEESE

BY J. R. STAFFORD

WITH PICTURES BY C. F. PETERS



THE call for brakes, resounding through the desert stillness, meant that the engine pulling the local was in need of a tank of water; trains rarely stopped for anything else at Dope Flats. Nevertheless, MacBurnie, station agent, like a man who expected important business, rose from his chair in the dingy office and conscientiously made sure of a lead-pencil.

Five days before, a package containing a can of tea and a bottle of whisky had been tossed from a passing train upon the platform, and several hours later, MacBurnie, on his way from the station to Mulligan's for supper, found it. Therefore he knew that now within a few minutes the conductor of the local would come in demanding receipt for that item of freight.

Presently the man with the way-bills entered the waiting-room. He thrust two sheets of yellow paper through the wicket and demanded, "Well, Mac, how 's the war between Scotland and Ireland?"

He referred, of course, to the immemorial feud between MacBurnie and Mulligan. Mulligan ran the only establishment in Dope Flats where food was obtainable; MacBurnie boarded with him. The two could not meet and say "Good morning" without getting into a violent quarrel because of their radically opposing views on the value of beans as a steady diet.

But MacBurnie, seeing no connection between this and the freight-bills, calmly ignored the conductor's question. Anyhow, the bills were the business.

The first sheet was a statement of one parcel of freight shipped from Albuquerque and delivered to the company's agent at Dope Flats. MacBurnie compared the date on the manifest with the one marked with red ink on the wall calendar, and then methodically scribbled his O.K.

The second sheet was an itemized statement, showing that the package from Albuquerque had contained, in good order, one can of tea, one bottle, one drum of cheese.

MacBurnie made his check-mark for the tea and the bottle, and then pushed the bill back with the explanation, "The cheese did no' come."

"Well, ye went an' receipted fer the package; that included ever'thing in it. Don't go ballin' up the bills over a little thing like that. Let the party that got it make a claim for shortage."

MacBurnie pointed to the name of the consignee on the top of the bill. It was his own. "Mon," he demanded, "d' ye think me soft enou' to permit mysel' to be eemposed upon by mysel'? Na! I wu' no' do anything o' the sort. Gang along wi' yer bills. If the cheese should come, I wu' receipt for it; but no' before."

"Lookie here, Mac, that ain't reg'lar. You gotta receipt for it, and if you did n't git the stuff, all you got to do, is to put in a claim for shortage the reg'lar way."

MacBurnie's light-blue eyes gleamed dully. He said nothing.

"Come, Mac, you know I can't go on without this receipt. Say, it would go clear to the freight auditing department, and make no end of trouble. Be a good feller and sign reg'lar."

The look of all Scotland with its mind

made up was upon MacBurnie. He shook his head as he declared: "If ye can no' go on wi'out the receipt, then ye wu' stay. But unless ye ha' a digestion like a burro, or other food than Mulligan's, ye wu' no' stay verra long. As for the freight audit-in' department, I ha' no thing to say about that. An' ye only waste wind tryin' to make me play the boy by your recommendation o' gude fellowship. I wu' no' sign, an' that is the end o' it."

"Awh, say, Mac—"

"Ha' ye naught muir wi' the station than jist this?"

"No, Mac; I have n't anything else. But, say—" He did not finish his appeal, because at that moment the wicket door, sliding down gently within three inches of his nose, left him talking to the wall. He strode up and down the waiting-room, pausing only to pound at the shutter or to swear at the man behind it.

Presently the voice of MacBurnie came from the other side, advising dispassionately: "Henderson, ye wu' do weel to cexamine yer watch. It wu' be no excuse to the train-master that ye were late because ye wasted ten minutes in antics so fulesie that I wad no' even raise the wicket to watch them."

The conductor looked at his timepiece. It showed that he had been fifteen minutes in Dope Flats. The time allowed for taking water was five. He dashed through the doorway.

Relieved of the possibility of further annoyance, MacBurnie hoisted the shutter and then sat down, with his heels cocked up on the key-table, his arms folded, his head bowed in profound retrospection. He was thinking about that cheese.

Some eight days before, he and Mul-

ligan had fallen out. Mulligan had exacted pay for a meal too many, or else he had failed to put a proper allowance of canned corn on the table. MacBurnie had insisted on reparation for breach of his rights. Getting no satisfaction, he had resolved to board himself.

Accordingly he had ordered a can of tea, a bottle of Scotch, and a drum of cheese from Albuquerque.

The very next morning, Mulligan, desperate at the thought of losing his one sure-pay boarder, had come down to the depot, keen to do whatever had been asked.

But MacBurnie had accepted the belated satisfaction only on condition that Mulligan, when the supplies came, would take the cheese and serve the same generously when any one wanted it. Cheese, no matter what it might cost, must become henceforward a part of Mulligan's menu.

Simply because there was no help against this ruinous exaction, the boarding-house keeper had suffered it. MacBurnie chuckled now as he recalled the expression on Mulligan's face at the time.

However, his victory had not been complete; for when he picked up the parcel there was not even the familiar odor of cheese about it. Instead, there was a strong smell of kerosene.

Now, of course he had no means of knowing that Mulligan had lain in wait for that package; that the moment it had been flung down on the platform, unknown to MacBurnie, Mulligan had dashed round the corner, whipped out the cheese, and then, after carefully retying the bundle, had sprinkled coal-oil over it; that, with crowning astuteness, the Irish-



Drawn by C. F. Peters

"'WELL, MAC, HOW 'S THE WAR
BETWEEN SCOTLAND AND
IRELAND?'"

man had already sent a check to the wholesale house in full payment for the purloined item.

All unaware of this, MacBurnie yet cherished his first theory. This was that the wholesale merchants had either made a mistake or had been out of cheese when his order came in. Sometime within a few days, or at the latest by the end of the month, he would receive a letter or a statement or perhaps the cheese. In any event, the matter would be made clear.

In the meantime he did not purpose to receipt for something he had not received. The conductor, the freight auditing department, aye, the whole organization of the G. & T. might come in and rant in his waiting-room: he would shut down the wicket, and they might howl at the bare walls.

To this determination he adhered faithfully. Once or twice before the end of the month the freight office wrote him, but he paid no attention to the letters. Henderson dropped in again, too, but he paid no heed to Henderson. Finally the statement came from the wholesale house. It showed that he was indebted for one can of tea and one bottle of whisky. Nothing was said about the cheese. If they chose to overlook a part of his order, that was their fault. He would waste no time in calling their attention to such childish disregard of business principles.

Accordingly, when he made up his report and remittance at the end of the month, he struck the sum of thirty-seven cents from the accounting of moneys received for freight. By careful calculations, based on the rate-schedule, he had ascertained that the proper charge on ten pounds of cheese from Albuquerque to Dope Flats was exactly that sum.

Along with the amended balance-sheet, he sent a letter, which ran as follows:

FREIGHT AUDITOR, G. & T. R.R. Co.

The wholesale house has me charged with nothing but a bottle and a can of tea. No other man in Dope Flats but me would order a cheese: Mulligan is too stingy; neither Norris nor Miller would order one because Norris would spend all of his money for whisky and Miller has no money at any time. It is therefore plain that no cheese was shipped here. I ordered one, but it did not come. I have therefore refrained from

sending the thirty-seven cents, which would make up the balance to correspond with the receiving manifest. It is a plain matter that, since the cheese did not come, I could not collect for it. But I may add that if it should happen that a cheese were shipped here, I would doubtless be able to collect for it, unless it were shipped to Miller. He is no pay at all. However, I do not believe he could get credit at any wholesale house where he was known. So I believe there will be no further misunderstanding in this connection.

Two or three days passed; then this came to him from the auditor's office:

Your attention is called to the fact that a cheese *was* shipped to your station and delivered to you in the usual manner. Who or who would not buy a cheese in Dope Flats cuts no ice in this office. Neither do we propose to lose any sleep over the risk of a cheese being shipped to Mr. Miller. The one important fact is that you are thirty-seven cents shy in your remittance. You *must* send this money at once. We cannot and will not keep open accounts with station agents, not even with such an exceptional station agent as you seem to be, with your tabulated rating of the financial abilities of all the men in your town.

MacBurnie read the letter carefully, and then made pipe-lighters of it.

Four days afterward another written demand came. MacBurnie filed it—in the stove. For a week, then, the mail, every time it passed, threw off a bag. The bag always contained a lone envelop. This envelop invariably held a few tensely constructed sentences, requesting payment of the thirty-seven cents.

Finally, instead of the usual demand, came this query:

How, in your estimation, can this account be closed unless this thirty-seven cents is remitted by you? If the G. & T. is to be compelled to reorganize its system of business, we should like to know how we are to proceed.

He answered immediately:

If you ask for my suggestion in your difficulties, as it seems you have done, in a

more genteel manner than I had conceived of you, I can only recommend that which any wise person would see at a glance. You should refrain from nineteen letters to me. The saving in postage will close the account, and leave one cent over. Any sum on that side will never cause you any trouble.

Shortly afterward, all communication from the auditor's office ended. MacBurnie decided that the auditor had seen the wisdom of that suggestion. Being human, he felt good over it.

But at the end of the month he was shocked from his complacency. His paycheck, instead of calling for even money, demanded only forty-four dollars and sixty-three cents. Pinned to the voucher was a note which explained:

We regret that while your suggestion may have seemed feasible in your office, it would not work out in ours. Accordingly, since the account had to be closed, we held out the required balance from your last month's pay. Now, should you be dissatisfied with this, should you wish to balance this account in your own favor, we would suggest that you try your own suggestion. Refrain from nineteen letters to this office relative to this matter, and then send us the odd cent. However, you may use your own pleasure in the matter. The account had to be settled. It is settled.

MacBurnie made neither protest nor reply; but at the end of that month, when he made up his report, he included a claim-voucher, filled as follows:

Paid to A. MacBurnie, claim of thirty-seven cents. Same proved by said A. MacBurnie, and approved by station agent at Dope Flats. Authority for same taken under Rule IX of Instructions for Station Agents, in which it is said that any just claim not exceeding fifty cents shall be settled by the agent, provided the complaining party will not be put off. He will not be put off, for the cheese did not come.

On the remittance-sheet he wrote as follows:

I made no request of you for suggestion as to how my claim was to be settled. It seems to me you have mistaken the man you are dealing with. I am no boy. You may

conceive this to be a fact now. I trust you do, for I have no desire to be bothered with matters that do not belong properly to my office.

Two days later a very jolly, yet very impressive, gentleman got down from the "limited" at Dope Flats. It was the first time in years that the "limited" had so much as slowed up for the sidings. Plainly the mission of the man on the platform was important.

Entering the deserted waiting-room, he introduced himself through the wicket. He was the company's claim agent, and he said he had dropped off just to see how MacBurnie was making it.

MacBurnie, seeing in all this a very proper spirit, invited him to come inside the office and sit in a chair.

The claim agent accepted eagerly. Then, as he took in the unsuggestive detail of the station agent's appearance, he began to laugh. Finally he said: "MacBurnie, now this is a great joke, is n't it? Come to think about it, the office did send me up here on a bit of business with you. What the dickens have you been quarreling about with the freight auditing department for the last sixty days? Baled hay or groceries or mining machinery?" Then as he waited to be informed exactly of the business which he had come two hundred miles to discharge, he opened his grip with great method, bringing to view at last a big box of cigars.

But MacBurnie did not thaw at the prospect of the cigars. There was nothing funny to him in a man like the claim agent pretending to have come so far on a purpose too light to be recalled. But divining that this was only another scheme for getting his thirty-seven cents, yet not wishing to discuss such an absurdity, he said: "Ye ha' come a few days too late. I settled the business wi'out ye."

"Yes, yes; but you see they sent me, anyhow."

"The sillies! Did they no' see that if I justly owed the thirty-seven cents, I wad noo be owin' the eexpense o' ye comin'? D' ye no' see that yoursel'?"

"Now, MacBurnie, that 's not it, at all. Of course it 's all foolishness. But, here, you know I 'm on a salary to attend to all such matters. The office would send me a thousand miles for a cent. It

was a matter of thirty-seven cents, you say? Well, now, would n't that jar you? Here we 'll have to smoke on that. Take a cigar."

MacBurnie took the weed. Having lighted it, he smoked reflectively. Presently he cleared his throat.

The claim agent smiled in spite of himself. This was going to be an easy matter after all.

"It is a fairish bit o' tobaccy," said MacBurnie. "I wu' noo treat ye to a dram o' verra fine whusky." And rum-

ble fiddled wi' jist wind out o' what is justly his? If yer ain daddy were a true Scotsmon, ye canna forgit o' him. Was he a tall mon wi' high cheek-bones an' light hair? If so, he was like to be a Lowlander."

The claim agent laughed quietly. He seemed to have forgotten any interest in his father or matters pertaining to Scotland. "Of course," he said, "I know it does look like an imposition to you. But, see here: the company must have a system or it would go to pieces. In order to keep



Drawn by C. F. Peters

"LOOK HERE, THIS HAS GOT TO BE SETTLED!"

maging under the key-table, he produced his bottle of Scotch, capped as to the neck with a water-glass.

The eyes of the claim agent bulged. Things were not going at all as he had anticipated. However, he took his drink, set the glass down, and then, after a revising sort of stare at MacBurnie, he observed: "Mr. MacBurnie, you were born in Scotland, were you not? It is a great country. I have had that from my father. He was born near Glasgow. Let us get rid of this foolish business, so that we can have all the time between now and the next train for talking over things that mean something to Scotchmen."

"Mon," MacBurnie answered impressively, "d' ye no' see that a Scot is no' to

the system from going to pieces, everything must be strictly accounted for. Not a single rule can be violated. Even the management dare not violate a rule."

"I ha' no thing to say consarnin' the management o' the company," MacBurnie returned, with the gravity which wishes to correct without offense.

"Look here, this has got to be settled!" The claim agent was desperate at the fear of having to stay overnight in Dope Flats.

"Ye need ha' no alarm,"—MacBurnie paused to blow a cloud of smoke through his nose,— "the account is a'ready settled. An' if ye really wished to discuss matters that ye conceived to be interestin' to Scotchmen, ye may as weel begin."

The claim agent was human. He

swore. Leaping from his chair, he threatened, "Why, you lobster, we 'll fire you if you don't settle this."

"As I said before," MacBurnie postulated, "I ha' no thing to say in the management o' the company. If ye wish to discharge me, ye may do so. But I shall no' pay the thirty-seven cents. The cheese did no' come."

"Oh, come off, MacBurnie!" The claim agent reseated himself. "Come off! Be reasonable! You 're the only man that ever could stick it out at Dope Flats. It takes a sensible man to do that. Use some of your patience in this deal. Come, settle it like a good fellow."

"Mon, ye wu' no' whim-wham me wi' yer palaver any muir than ye could affright me wi' yer bluff."

"You are as stubborn as a mule."

"Ye may conceive that to be true o' me; but it is like many o' the defiecient perceptions o' the management. I am no' at all obstinate: I am right."

Under the burden of sudden laughter the claim agent nearly rolled from his chair. Regaining his composure, he said: "Well, MacBurnie, I guess we 'll let the matter end in so far as it concerns you and me. But I warn you, I 'll have to report it just as it is."

"An' why should ye no' report it so? D' ye no' see that my position is impregnable? Mon, I tell ye that the cheese did no' come at all."

On the next train the official left.

Two days later a very seedy gentleman got down from the "local." His air was that of a man who intended to run off with whatever he could find, provided it was not too heavy for him. He presented a letter, authorizing him to take charge of the office at Dope Flats.

MacBurnie, having verified the letter by a telegram, turned over the keys and the books. Then having packed his trunk, he bought a ticket for division headquarters. There was pay due him for six days' work since last settlement, and he knew how they would try to settle with him.

Sure enough, when next day he presented himself at the paymaster's window, a clerk tendered him his proper wage, less thirty-seven cents.

"I wull see ye in the Supreme Coort." The Scotchman refused solemnly, though there was a faint glow on his swarthy

cheeks. Hastening out into the town, he hunted up a lawyer, whom he employed to file suit.

Two days later this counselor told him that the company's attorney had just called up for a conference in the company's office.

"Ha!" MacBurnie exulted, "they ha' taken the wit to inveestigate. They ha' deescovered, as I told them, that the cheese did no' come at all." And without waiting for further information, he marched out like a Highlander to the music of bagpipes. His mien was so grandly challenging that people on the street thought him some newly made Bonanza King.

Of course when he reached the office he learned that the officials had made no inquiry at all about the cheese. That was all that he learned. It was no part of their plan that he should know of the new station agent at Dope Flats having run off with three dollars of the company's money. Nor did they want him to know that they were trying to hire him to go back to his old place.

Presently the company's attorney proposed the drinks at a convenient bar.

MacBurnie, who was without malice, gladly accepted the invitation.

"Now," said the lawyer, when they leaned against the rail and tipped glasses, "here 's to a speedy settlement of this business between you and the pay-roll, or whatever department you 've sued! It 's a rotten mess, of course; they are always getting me mixed up in their foolishness. Still, there will always be a little pleasure to me in the memory of this particular case, because of the fact that it has brought me your acquaintance. That will be something, even if I do have to go into the court-room and take the hide off you."

"Ha' no' worriment about that. Ye wu' lose muir hide than I. I ha' the right side o' the case. The cheese was no' shipped."

"Blow your old cheese!" The legal adviser of the G. & T. artfully held his glass at arm's-length. "But, see here, that was n't what I was driving at, at all. I want to have you dismiss this suit. I 'll get your wages in full for you."

"Are ye done wi' yer toast—if that was what ye were tryin' to deliver to me."

The attorney dropped his glass on the bar.



Drawn by C. F. Peters

"NOW, MACBURNIE, . . . I 'M GOING TO SEND YOU BACK
TO YOUR OLD JOB AT DOPE FLATS'"

MacBurnie took his whisky seriously, then observed: "I shall treat ye in turn, after a decent interval. In the meantime, syn there is naught else to do, I wu' discuss what ye were attemptin' to bring round a minute ago. Ye should ha' thought o' settlement in full before ye dro' me to employ counsel. D' ye no' see that I wu' be bound to pay him for advice?"

"Well, I can fix that, too. I will fix it."

"Verra wise o' ye," MacBurnie commented judiciously; "verra wise."

But without stopping to argue or approve the Scotchman's dictum, or to let pass the decent interval for the return of the treat, the compromisor took the victor by the arm and hurried him back into the general offices. He marched him into the auditor's office, which was next that of the claim agent. The claim agent got up from his revolving-chair and, coming in, shook hands with MacBurnie. Then he loitered expectantly near the door.

Presently the general freight agent entered. He was a disheveled-looking man, for he was burdened with the care of many station agents. He was worried now over the possibility of never getting another man who, like MacBurnie, could withstand the terrific internal pressure of nothing to do in Dope Flats. But when he saw MacBurnie, he smiled gladly.

The division superintendent came in.

He grinned like a boy waiting for the parade to come around the corner.

The auditor of course was already there; but he did not smile at all. The auditor had been compelled to make some three hundred entries—extra entries—on account of that thirty-seven cents. In fact, he was very angry.

As soon as the papers for withdrawal of suit had been signed, the general freight agent started brusquely to dismiss his own troubles:

"Now, MacBurnie, having got rid of all this foolish business, I 'm going to send you back to your old job at Dope Flats. There won't be any more foolishness."

"Na," MacBurnie returned, with a shake of his head. Then with a more emphatic nod, he added, "There wu' no' be any fuleishness."

The claim agent tittered.

The general freight agent looked daggers at him; then turning to MacBurnie, he addressed him: "All right, then. Everything is O.K. Here is a trip-pass back to Dope Flats. And I 'm mighty glad that it 's all settled and you 're on the pay-roll again."

No wave of gratitude swept the inflexible MacBurnie. He did not mutter a mechanical set of thanks; neither did he take the proffered trip-pass; he observed dryly: "But, mon, it is no' at all settled. Did ye think I was jist mouthin' words when jist noo I said that there wad be no

muir fuleishness? D' ye no' see that I am out money for a ticket fro' Dope Flats to this place, in addition to the differ' between my board at the hotel and at Mulligan's for the same length o' time? I admit that the food at the hotel is better—so much better that my grateful stomach prompts me I should pay the whole differ'; but it is a matter of principle, and I wu' no forsake my contention that ye should stand at least half o' it. Ye wu' be payin' me eleven dollars before things are settled between me an' the G. & T."

The eyes of the auditor rolled like a pair of jostled marbles. He foresaw the necessity of opening an entirely new set of books if such a preposterous claim was allowed. So he fairly shouted: "Good Lord, man, do you imagine a railroad company can do business in such a fashion?"

"Mon,"—MacBurnie looked down on him as from a great height,—“I ha' no thing to do wi' the troubles o' a railroad company. Its defeeciencies are no consarn o' mine. Neither ha' I any worriment ower the deeficulties ye ha' eemposed upon yoursel'. But as a candid man, who bears ye no ill for a' yer excitable way o' ad-

dressin' him, I canno' refrain from suggestin' that if ye wu' but inveestigate, ye wu' ha' no muir call to go bogglin' ower this matter. Because, when ye git to the bottom o' things, ye wu' apprehend that the cheese did no' come at all."

"See here, MacBurnie," the lawyer intervened, "I would n't have settled this suit this way, if I had known you were going to cut up—"

"Rats!" snorted the general freight agent, who knew he would get no more sleep for weeks under the strain of experimenting with new men at MacBurnie's old station. "Here, you, MacBurnie. Take this ticket and this fifteen dollars, and don't let me hear of you until you are at work."

"Verra weel. But ye ha' owerlooked the fact that I must return the four dollars, an' syn I ha' but eighty cents in my posseession, I can no' make the change until I go out an' come in ag'in." Then, with the faintest glimmer of a smile, he added: "But I will presently return ye the change, for I will go out noo an' buy a cheese, for which Mulligan must credit me on my board an' serve upon the table as was agreed."



THE FERMENT IN THE WEST

THE political spirit recently shown in many Western States, in both of the great parties, has sorely perplexed politicians in the East. They have stood before it as much puzzled as Dr. Holmes's pointer dog gazing at the turtle. They could not be blind to the facts, but they have not known how to interpret them. They could see that this political manifestation went deep and wide, that there was something in it like a revolutionary stir, that men's minds were bubbling with new thoughts and emotions; but the cause and the aim of it all they have not been able to discern. They could see no principle in it, and so they read into it personalities:

they said that it was a movement for or against one or another political personage, or what not. Partizan motives were alleged; ambitious men were scheming to bring about new political alinements to their own profit, and so on.

All this is so gross a misunderstanding of what has been and is actually going on in the West that it is highly desirable to try to ascertain the truth. Whatever may be the differences of opinion between the different parts of the country, it is important that one part should at least know the tendencies of another. And it needs only the slightest contact with Western men, and with the press and the elected officials that speak for them, to see what a mistake many in the East are mak-