

The Decision

TOM BURNAM

"That looks like a nice spot," said Myra Bagley hopefully. She was tired, and the boy Kit was irritable; the day's ride had been long and dusty.

"Well, I don't know," said her husband, slowing the car as they studied the grassy meadow ahead. "Maybe we're not supposed to camp there."

"For heaven's sake, we're in *Montana*," said Myra. "They told us we could camp anywhere that wasn't posted. You know that." She had not meant to sound so sharp.

"We'll flip a nickel," said John Bagley, but then Kit wailed, "Oh, Dad, make up your mind."

John set his lips and stepped on the gas; and though it was too late now, Myra wanted to say, "*Kit, keep quiet!*"

Then a miracle happened. A mile farther, beyond a curve, was a Forest Service marker, "Camp Ground Ahead," and then a triangular sign with an arrow pointing down a narrow winding road which led from the highway to the bank of the stream below.

John slowed the car.

"Will this do?" he asked. Myra bit her lip and didn't answer. The trouble with being married to a scientist, she had long ago decided, was that everything had to be so scientific. First the Hypothesis: This camp ground will serve us well. Then the Examination of the Facts: Is there water? Do poisonous snakes abound? Are there adequate toilet facilities? Will the slope provide surface drainage in case of rain?

Sometimes she protested while they were trying to buy a new car (this one had a good transmission, he would say, but that one has better brakes) or new furniture (will foam rubber stand up?) or even a new can opener for the kitchen (the consumer people say it drops metal shavings into the soup). Then John would withdraw in offended silence after pointing out that he had been *trained* to think on all sides of a question before making a decision.

But for once she had no cause for alarm. "We'll camp here," John said, and Myra and Kit sighed in relief.

Somewhat downstream from the Bagley's camp ground, though on the other side of the large creek, a huge rock had for uncounted years squatted on the brow of the narrow defile at the bottom of the canyon where now the railroad ran. The train crew sometimes used it as a kind of informal checkpoint: "There's the rock. Two minutes behind today."

Near the point where the rock hung over the tracks was a small fault. Over the years, this fault had resulted in a slight slippage and settling, so that the rock began to tip just a trifle more toward the tracks some sixty feet below. None of the train crews noticed the almost imperceptible increase in the angle of the rock's inclination; and certainly none of them knew that the rock was now very precariously balanced, so that the slightest further movement in the fault—indeed, perhaps just the right vibration set up by a passing truck on the highway or a locomotive on the tracks—might send it hurtling down.

At such locations as this small canyon where the rock was, the railroad maintained protective fences; any slides or falling chunks would break one or more of the electric wires, setting into operation certain warning devices. An hour or two before the Bagleys found their camp ground, a boy who lived on a nearby backwoods ranch had aimed his new .22 rifle at an insulator atop the electric fence. The bullet shattered the insulator but did not sever the wire, which merely hung an inch or two lower, the electric circuit remaining unbroken.

"Let's not try to push on too fast tomorrow," Myra said after they had pitched the umbrella tent and Kit had set up his own pup tent close by. "I'm tired."

"But—" John started to say. Then he grinned. "Suits me," he said. "I'm tired too. And maybe tomorrow Kit and I can get in a little fishing. This is a nice spot."

The camp ground-they were a little surprised to have it all to themselves-was secluded from the highway. Close by tumbled a large creek which rushed through the canyon; on the opposite side were the railroad tracks, and the rock above them.

"Come on, son," said John the next morning. "let's cross the bridge and see if we can stir up a trout or two."

The bridge was of heavy but ancient timbers; once used by logging trucks, it was now placarded "Unsafe for Vehicles."

"Be careful," said Myra Bagley. "Don't get run over by a train."

"Oh, Mom," said Kit, but he saw that she was joking, or at least mostly joking.

The man and his son picked up their fishing rods and set off.

"Did you hear that old train go past last night, Dad?" said Kit. "I thought it was going right through my pup tent."

John Bagley grimaced. "I think it did go through our tent," he said. "It woke your mother up in fine fashion."

"I bet it did," said Kit, and they grinned together, sharing companionably their masculine delight at the way the noise of the train had alarmed mother.

"I'll bet that's why we had the camp ground to ourselves," said Kit. "Probably all the natives around here know about the trains."

"Probably," agreed his father.

They had reached the other side. The old truck crossing was barricaded now, though a footpath remained, and a sign said "NOTICE. Property of Montana & Pacific Railway. Permission to Cross Revocable at Any Time."

"What's that mean?" said Kit.

"It means the railroad doesn't want to lose its legal title to the right-of-way," said John.

"Oh," said Kit, who was willing to accept his father's explanation even though he did not wholly understand it. "Can we walk up the tracks?"

"I guess the railroad won't care," said his father, laughing. "It's certainly easier than scrambling along the bank."

"Let's go toward that big rock," said Kit. "See? The one above the tracks, there. I'll bet there's some good fishing right about there."

"Why?" said his father.

"Well," said Kit, "well, that rock makes a shadow on the water, and trouts like to stay there."

"Trout," said his father. "It's the same, singular or plural."

"O.K.," said Kit, who secretly could not see that it mattered much.

Together father and son walked up the track. It was straight only for a short distance; at either end of the straight stretch the tracks curved away, following the S sweep of the stream and the canyon.

"Better keep our eyes open," said Kit, proud of remembering caution like an adult. "If a train came roaring along, we wouldn't see it."

John looked ahead and behind. For only a quarter-mile or so, until the tracks curved around rock cliffs at either end, did one have a clear view. He smiled at his son. "We'd hear it in plenty of time," he said. The thought of the shattering, surrounding roar the train had made last night caused him only half-consciously to prick up his ears a little. Evidently the trains came through here fast, faster than one would think for mountain country. On a sudden impulse he stopped, went down on one knee, and placed his ears on the rails.

"What are you doing?" asked Kit, astonished.

"An old trick I learned when I was about your age," his father said. "Didn't you ever try it?" Then he realized that, of course Kit, raised in the city, had never learned how to listen for the trains. Kit at once laid his own ear to a rail. "I don't hear nothing."

"Good heavens," said his father. "*Anything.*"

"Anything," said Kit. "What are you supposed to listen for?"

"It's a kind of humming," his father said. "I didn't hear anything either, as a matter of fact. But if a train were coming, maybe even five miles or so away, you'd hear it."

"Gee," said Kit. "Five miles?"

"Maybe even more," said his father.

"Here's that old rock," said Kit, pointing up. It did indeed a shadow on the stream; John noted that there was a small indentation in the bank and the water looked quite deep. There just might be trout, at that.

"Hey, Dad," said Kit. "What's that fence for?"

John looked where Kit was pointing. "Why, I don't know," he said. "It must be electric, from the look of those insulators. Maybe to keep animals off the track."

"Like bears?" said Kit.

"More likely cows," said his father, "Montana's an open-range state. Though I don't know what a cow would be doing on this side of the creek, or what good a fence would do there, between the canyon wall and the track. Anyway, don't touch it."

"O.K., Dad," said Kit. "Let's put some bait on." He pulled out of his pocket the tin of worms he had dug from the bank of the stream before they started. They were standing in the middle of the track directly beneath the rock, Kit intent on impaling a wriggling worm on his hook, his father tying on a black gnat.

At that moment a huge truck with M.A.D. on its side, for "Montana and Dakota"-the "mad-trucks" were a regional joke -hit a sizable chunk hole in the road across the stream out of sight behind the tall thick pines on the opposite bank. The driver swore and slammed into a low gear.

John Bagley felt, or thought he felt, the slightest tremor in the cross-tie under his feet. And something, in a brief split second, struck him as odd about the shadow in which they stood. It was-it was moving, and Kit's scream and John Bagley's instinctive leap as he tried to grab Kit (but instead, because his foot hit a small pebble, got only empty air) were all a part of a kaleidoscopic nightmare of confusion, alarm, and incoherent noise as the great boulder above crashed mightily down, splitting in two with a great cracking sound as it did so, one large chunk stopping inches short of the electric fence in such a position that the other and larger piece falling immediately behind struck it, hurtled into the air, and cleared the fence by the merest fraction of an inch.

Had the bottom chunk not stopped where it did, had the other half not happened to strike it exactly as it did, or had the shattered insulator not permitted just enough slack in the electric wire to enable the rock to leap it without touching it, the electric fence would have flashed its warning.

For a confused moment John Bagley stared wildly around. Rock dust hung in the air and he had fallen as he slipped on the pebble and *where was Kit?*

"Dad! Dad!" he heard, and he whirled around.

Kit was half-lying on the track. The great split-off chunk of rock, resting partly on one rail, was across his leg.

John Bagley moved swiftly to his son. With horror in his eyes, he knelt down and took Kit's hand.

"I can't move, Dad!" cried Kit. "I can't move."

John looked at the boulder. Maybe, maybe it had not crushed or broken his son's leg; it appeared to be resting on the rail and a crosstie.

"Does it hurt much?" he asked softly, but Kit was weeping hysterically and could not answer.

"Kit!" He was ashamed of speaking so sharply, but it did what he hoped: Kit stopped crying.

"It doesn't hurt," Kit said. "Not much anyway. But I can't pull loose. Move the rock, Dad. Please, move it!"

John Bagley looked at the rock. "Move it, Dad," Kit whimpered. John put his shoulder to the rock, knowing the futility of it, knowing that no one man could budge it, but knowing too that for his son he had to try. He pushed until his heart pounded and his eyes misted. The rock did not budge, and John hated it for its stolid resistance to his human muscles.

He realized that he must not succumb to hysteria. What he could see of Kit's leg showed no obvious deformation, and thank God there was no blood. He would need to proceed calmly, efficiently, exploring every possibility. Don't lose your head he said to himself, don't, don't.

Again he knelt beside his son. Apparently the boulder was resting on a rail and the firm ballast beneath the ties, or on a tie itself. The lower part of Kit's leg disappeared beneath the boulder in the small space between the bottom of the boulder, the rail, and the ground.

"I think it's my foot, Dad," whispered Kit. "My leg's all right but I can't move my foot, I can't pull it out."

Then the horror struck his father, and his face turned white as he thought, *Oh, God, let me keep Kit from thinking of it.*

"Dad!" cried Kit. "Oh, Dad, what if-what if-"

It was too late. Kit had thought of it too.

"Come on, son," said John. "Let's pull you loose." He seized Kit by the shoulders.

"You're hurting me," said Kit, sobbing again.

It was no use. Only if help could be found, enough help to take the weight of the rock off the rail and open up what (thank the good Lord for this, at least) must be the small pocket in which Kit's foot was caught, would Kit be free.

"Dad," Kit said, "what are you going to do?" He had stopped crying, but he was shaking, shaking all over, violently.

At that moment they both heard, from some indeterminate distance and direction, the faint hoarse blat of a diesel locomotive's air horn.

"It's a train," whispered Kit, his eyes wide with terror. "Oh, Daddy, it's a train." He had not called his father "Daddy" for a long time.

Get control of yourself, thought John Bagley. Don't throw yourself at the rock, don't try to move it, you can't move it, you can't pull him loose, you've tried to the limit of your strength, and more. You haven't even got a knife, or a hatchet. . . .But he could not pursue this thought further.

"Kit," said John, "I'm going to have to leave you here and run up the track and stop the train." He spoke as rapidly as he could, knowing at the same time that he must not communicate the full extent of his fear to the boy. "Then we'll get help from the trainmen and push the rock off."

The hoarse blat of the horn came again. It seemed noticeably closer.

"Dad!" cried Kit. "Where's it coming from? What if you run the wrong way?" He twisted and wriggled as he spoke, pushing and crying as he tried to free himself. *"Where's it coming from?"*

Faintly, in the distance, they could hear now a dull rumbling clattering roar, echoing and re-echoing through the canyon.

"It's from that way," said John, and he started swiftly to run toward the direction from which the sound seemed to come when his son's cry stopped him.

"No, Dad, no! From there, from there!" Kit pointed in the opposite direction. If only they could see! If only the tracks did not curve out of sight in either direction! If only every rock and tree did not twist and distort and bounce the sound, now seeming much louder, of the train approaching fast and invisible, approaching-but from where? If only diesels made smoke. . . . Now he could not tell at all where the sound originated, and he was afraid his son knew he could not tell, and no matter what happened, this, at least, his son must not know.

Sweating, John Bagley put his ear to the rail and fought down his fear as the loud humming sounded so close by his head.

"You can tell that way, Daddy, can't you?" said Kit. "You can tell where it's coming from?"

John straightened and looked at his son. All his life he had dreaded some such moment as this. He knew-had always known-how to make decisions in the laboratory. Always there was something to go on, a collection of data to assess, or a logical corollary to what had been before, or a table of figures which, even though capable of misinterpretation, was nevertheless *there*. But always he had feared that the time might come when the data or the corollary or the figures simply did not exist, and yet a step had to be taken even though taking it meant plunging ahead in darkness.

"You can tell, Daddy?" Kit was nearly hysterical again. John Bagley had tried never to lie, to himself or others.

"Yes, Kit," said John. "Now I know. Don't worry." Then he was running desperately up the track, as fast as he could in the direction from which he and Kit had come, and he prayed incoherently as he ran.

Another bleat of the horn? Was it louder? Less loud? And the rising-fading-rising rumble. . .it seemed farther away. John Bagley almost stopped, but it was too late now, too late: his course was set, the step in the dark had been taken, and for the first time in his life he knew fully what it was to be committed irrevocably to action without evidence, without the slightest shred of proof that the decision was correct. Yet he knew he must go on. There flashed into his mind a crazy picture of himself running frantically first one way, then the other, betrayed by the mountain echoes, like a foolish base runner trapped between second and third.

His feet pounded on the cinders between the ties, which he cursed for being so spaced that now and then he stumbled. Once he fell, tearing the knees out of his trousers, then scrambling to his feet, pounding on. Again the horn, and his heart almost stopped, for it seemed much less loud. But he forced himself on. The decision had been made. Right or wrong, it had been made.

He reached the curve somewhere beyond which-if he was right-would be the train. *Would have to be the train*. Over his shoulder, he caught a last quick look at Kit, pinned by the rock, seeming much too close behind (surely he had covered more ground than that!) and he ran faster, blood-pounding, heart-pounding, sweat-streaming faster. He had hoped that once into the curve he would be able to see (and be seen) a long distance. But the curve was sharp enough, or the walls of the cut through which it ran were close enough to the tracks, so that still he could see nothing.

He stopped, sobbing with exhaustion. He could run no farther. Here he must stand if he was to have even enough strength to wave his arms. But there was no train at which to wave. The twin tracks, shining in the sun, curved mockingly away until they disappeared behind the canyon wall, and they were empty. He strained with terrible intensity to hear something, to hear anything, but only the pounding rush of exhaustion filled his ears. He felt himself waver at the edge of consciousness; and for the first time, trying to fight it off but losing ground, he knew that futility and despair were beginning at last utterly to overwhelm him.

Then suddenly above the roaring in his ears sounded a tremendous alien noise, the rasping blast of an air horn, very close, and three hundred yards away, its great steel snout roaring .into view, he saw the train bearing down. Standing squarely in the middle of the track he mustered his final reserves to wave and, foolishly, yell, and he stayed where he was as he heard the increasing roar of the horn, jumping aside so late that for a fright-filled moment he was afraid he himself would be the one to ground beneath the wheels.

Thank God, now, that it was a diesel, for that meant a clear: view ahead for both engineer and fireman: they *must* have seen him. Then he heard the grinding squeal of brakes, and he saw the sparks fly as wheel after wheel locked and slid on the rails, and before he fainted he thought dimly, I got through to them, they're going to flatten every wheel, by God. Thank God they saw me, they saw me, and they're stopping.

He returned to consciousness as the last of the cars ground to a shuddering halt and a trainman, leaping down, ran to him.

"My son," he gasped, pointing. "My son ...down there."

Later, after the train crew had pried the rock up so that Kit could be pulled free, and the brakeman had put a small splint on Kit's ankle, though it seemed only to be bruised, and they were all back at the camp ground together (the burly brakeman had insisted on carrying Kit all the way), Myra Bagley looked at her husband and whispered, "Oh, John, how could you tell which direction the train was coming from? How could you tell, in mountains like these where everything echoes so?"

"Myra," John started to say, "I-"

Then he stopped. How could he tell her? The imponderable brooding fact of chance, of Fate, the dark reminder that beyond the shining realm of the controlled experiment, the offer of proof, the calculated risk, lay something incalculable-it was too much now for her. Later maybe, later. Let Myra (and Kit) think now that he *had* known.

"I used an old Boy Scout trick," he said, smiling a little, feeling his strength return. "I put my ear to the rail."

"And you could tell the *direction*?" Myra asked.

"Sure," he lied. "Sure, if you know how."

"I'm so relieved," Myra said. "Oh, John, if you'd had to *guess*. ..."

He knew then that he would never tell her.