They Also Serve

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WE BROKE into a trot as we came abreast of the observa-
tion car and learned that car six was down the line a
block or so. Porters were slamming doors shut, and conductors
were signaling ahead to their brothers in blue. Trot gave way
to canter, and canter to gallop, and two frantic boys rushed
through a hailstorm of rice being donated by a wedding party to
a couple of newlyweds safely inside the car.

By common, unvoiced consent we pulled up puffing at car
five and ordered the porter in no uncertain terms to open up.
He did open the door, but try as he might, he couldn’t let the
steps down. A whistle tooted up ahead, and the City of Denver
started to get under way. So did we. As it started we swung
up on to the car platform, past the protesting porter, and into
the car. The last posts of the station flashed by as we stood
there catching our breaths and . . . . wondering.

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By Maurice J. Kirby, ’37

IT WAS a flat piece of prairie, with vague, low hills some-
where to the west, and an electric railroad running
straight through the center, each regular step marked
by a sentinel trolley pole. At no particular place there was a
siding, and a row of trolley poles left the main line and ran
off into a field. A switch lamp clung to its slender stand be-
side the track there, burning quietly and constantly, day after
day, night after night, like a vigil light to an iron god. It was
a frugal flame; all that it asked was a little oil and a new
wick now and then, and it was content. It did not even send
up a plume of smoke to advertise its existence.
Yet it was always burning. On muggy, summer nights, when the world was sweating and tossing in its bed, the switch lamp was there. On jet black nights, when even the stars were afraid to come out, the switch lamp burned like a round, red hole in the velvet night. On soft, moonlit nights, when living was an unsung song, and the whistle of the midnight freight train floated over the plain like the haunting, wavering call of a far-off flute, it waited beside the gleaming switch points.

There were shaking, stormy nights, when the locomotives all had fearful, high-pitched whistles, and the wind snarled around the housing of the little lamp, like a cat around a canary's cage when the master is away. And there were cold, blue winter nights, with the moon like a yellow signal light in the sky, when all the world was a frosted birthday cake. Then the switch lamp painted little red and green reflections on the snow, and furry parties of rabbits played hide-and-seek while, away in the distance, a trolley wheel drew blue-green arcs along the ice-covered wire. As each succeeding winter came blustering in, bellowed awhile, and went away again, the switch lamp kept on burning, until it became as natural to the prairie as the rabbits playing in the snow, or the sudden drop of the winter sun behind the hills.

It is almost the same now, in the winter. Most of the poles are standing nearly straight yet; the farmers have chopped up only a few for firewood; and the snow, lying fresh over the abandoned grade, looks as if it had fallen just since the last train ran, perhaps an hour ago. There are the same cold, blue nights, and a new generation of rabbits scampers enthusiastically back and forth, with fluffy tails glistening in the moonlight. And sometimes—when there is absolutely no one around to see—a small, round light clings to a slender something (it might be only a young box-elder shoot) and paints little red and green reflections on the snow. If anyone were there to see, he would not believe his eyes, for who ever heard of a switch lamp's having a ghost?