Behind the Roundhouse

Maurice Kirby*
Behind the Roundhouse
By Maurice Kirby, '37

EVERYWHERE there is smoke — beastly stuff that insinuates itself into your very soul if you work in it long enough. Heavy, gagging particles which swirl into your throat with every breath until you choke and fume and gasp for an instant as though someone had laid a finger on your lung. The place is not beautiful; the roundhouse and shops behind and the grimy little tower across the yards look as if they were made of smoke which had frozen into stone and been butchered into building blocks. But there is sunshine occasionally, the more welcome for its novelty. Here and there a sunbeam dances on the red and yellow of a freight car or glistens on the confident black of a newly-painted locomotive.

And always there is motion. Perhaps only a string of box cars writhing through the yards on their way to the mill; perhaps a passenger train clicking rapidly over switch frogs and crossovers. It is the movement which fascinates, the military something about the cars. They are the steel-shod troops of commerce, marching and countermarching in companies, platoon upon platoon following docilely behind fuming, blustering leaders. Most of them are being hurried to the finish of one journey only to begin another, but there are a few soldiers in that legion who are making their last march. A broken arch bar . . . a loose rail . . . and what was a first class private in the army of steel and steam becomes a tangled mess, ready for the rip track.

Anything may be heard for the listening. Here is the gurgling snort of a freight engine blowing off steam, there the complaining squeal of flange on ungreased curve. A huge black monster pokes its snout through the roundhouse gate with a grunt, and you realize why railway men call their locomotives “hogs.” Somewhere a freight train starts, amid

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much rheumatic grumbling and querulous chirruping. Down in the yards a switch engine puffs dependably, and through the roundhouse window floats the heavy patter of a gas-electric car, warming up for a local run. Occasionally the air is burdened with the deep bay of a whistle.

There are men who love the railway, just as there are men who love the sea, or the air, or the roar of cannon. Lives are given—some consumed suddenly, with a startling flash, others burned slowly away like hidden votive candles—that the iron road may go on. And there are men, otherwise sane, who delight to spend a holiday squatting on a rail—watching, and dreaming childish dreams.

Girl Thirteen

By Helen Cunningham, '40

"LOST, a heart as good as new," she hums before a mirror. "If I fix my hair a new way I might look like Katherine Hepburn. See, my skirt twirls like a yellow top. —Yes, Tom, I would love to dance with you. No, Jack, I'm busy, but thank you anyway. —Oh, gee, I wonder if this rouge is too high. I didn't think plucking your eyebrows hurt so—but I do kinda look sophisticated. How long do you 'spose it will take me to fill out up top; I hope not long. . . . . . . I think I'll be a dancer . . . . . . . No, I really don't roller skate anymore. You know how child-like it is; one does grow up . . . My silver lamé tonight, Marie . . . What, mom? Dishes? Yeah, I'll be right down."

Sketch