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# Sweet Pearl River

an excerpt from *Pelican Road* (McAdam/Cage)

by Howard Bahr

Not long after he met Anna Rose, Artemus got bumped off the Silver Star and bid on a daylight freight job as conductor. One afternoon, southbound, they were stopped on the main line waiting for a northbound local to get out of the way. The local had pulled a drawbar and had to set the car out and had lost time, and Artemus's train was stuck. His drag was so long that the engine was at the south switch of the passing track, and the caboose was stopped in the middle of the Pearl River bridge. Max Triggs the flagman was flagging behind, Hubert Craft the swing brakeman was reading *Field & Stream* in the cupola, so Artemus filled his pipe and went out back to smoke. He was glad to have the chance, for he loved rivers, and he usually passed quickly over the Pearl, the iron bridge trusses flickering by and gone. Now he could study it for a while, take the evening air, sit on the porch as he might at home.

It had rained in the early afternoon, so the river lay under a fine mist. The water stretched away on either side, but Artemus sat down on the west-side steps, among a whine of mosquitoes, so he could watch the sun fall. In fact, it had already passed below the trees, painting the feathery tops of the cypress and pines with a delicate bronze light. Cypress and pine and oak were all draped in gray moss and hung with vines. In the shadows below, in the rank grass where white and yellow flowers bloomed, the fireflies were rising. Among the shadows, too, a single great sycamore leaned from the bank, whose silver leaves and white trunk seemed to hold still to the light of day. The leafy top of the sycamore dragged in the water, and Artemus thought he saw movement there. In a moment, a graceful pirogue poked its nose out, parting the mist, rounding the tree slowly. A boy sat in the stern, paddling lazily. He looked up at the bridge, and when he saw Artemus, he lifted the paddle from the water.

"Hidy," said the boy.

"Hidy, yourself," said Artemus.

"Say, can I come up there?" asked the boy.

Artemus beckoned, and the boy landed his boat and scrambled up the bank. The steps of the caboose were so high above the bridge timbers that Artemus had to pull the boy up by his hand. When he was aboard, the boy sat down next to Artemus, comfortable as if he were an old friend. He was about ten, a black-haired lad with a solemn face tanned the color of dark walnut. He smelled of fish and child-sweat, and Artemus remembered how his niece Fanny sometimes smelled that way at day's end in the summer. The boy wore a cotton shirt and jeans britches rolled to the knees. His legs and bare feet were spotted with chigger and mosquito bites, some bloody where he had scratched them. "Dern these muskeeters," he said. "It aint been a breath of air all evenin'."

Artemus laughed. "What's your name, sport?" he said.

"Sturgis Montieth the Third," said the boy. He pulled a corncob pipe from his pocket. "You got a Lucifer?" he asked.

"I do," said Artemus, and gave the boy a match, which he lit expertly with a flick of his thumbnail. He puffed great clouds of acrid smoke, then rested his elbows on his knees and squinted into the twilight. "That'll do for the 'skeeters," he said. "They can't abide Injun terbaccer." Then, after a moment, he looked at Artemus and asked, "What's *your* name?"

Artemus told his name, and the boy put out his hand, and they shook. "Pleased to meet you," said the boy, then pointed with his pipe stem as an old man might. "The river's pretty, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Artemus. On the sand bar, a green heron—Artemus had not noticed him before—posed motionless, one foot raised. In the yellow sky, swallows darted and chirped to one



another. Artemus and the boy could smell the warm creosote from the bridge, and the old rank smell of the slow-moving water. They heard the secret voices in the long grass, the voices of night, and a bull frog tuning up, and his lesser cousins making a loud chorus: the leopard frogs, the spring peepers, the trilling of toads courting on the muddy banks. Here a kingfisher came darting down the tunnel of trees, there a flight of egrets crossed the sky. Silver minnows flicked and dodged in the shallows, and a snake traveling upstream scattered them. A big snake doctor came and perched on the pigtail whistle of the cab and watched them with his quick, bulbous eyes.

“Say, can I see your watch?” asked the boy.

Artemus was wearing overalls, and his watch chain was looped across the bib. He took out the gold Hamilton and showed it to the boy who said, “I wish I could have one like that.”

Artemus was suddenly aware of the piece, the weight of it, the delicacy of the numbers and the fine deep blue of the hands. The watch was ticking away, and time was passing, and right now Anna Rose was maybe going to Mass, passing through the doors of Immaculate Conception with her hat on and a little veil of netting over her face. Artemus could see her dip her hand in the holy water font, make the sign of the cross, walk down the nave alone with her head bowed.

“You will, one day,” said Artemus, and slipped the watch back in his pocket.

“Huh,” said the boy. “It’s always One day this, and One day that—I’d like to know what day you all are talkin’ about.”

Artemus laughed, for he knew the feeling well. He said, “Well, Sturgis Montieth the Third, what you doing out here on the Pearl River with night coming on?”

“Well, I was scoutin’, sir, mostly,” the boy said. “Too much fresh water to fish. We live on the county road about a mile upstream. My daddy is the game warden—I pretend a lot, to exercise my

imagination. This evenin’, I am a Royal Canadian Mounted Po-lice.”

“I expect that is a good trick in Louisiana in the summer,” said Artemus.

“Well, it’s summer in Canada, too,” said the boy. “I guess they got muskeeters, too, and they speak French like Daddy. I learned that in school.”

“All right,” said Artemus. “I see your point.”

“So why are you-all settin’ here on the bridge?” asked the boy.

Artemus explained that his train was delayed by another train, and sitting on the bridge was all they could do at the moment. He said, “I cannot begin to tell you how much I am disappointed by this state of affairs.”

The comment was lost on the boy. He said, “How you know to do it? How you know to stop?”

“We got a train order at Picayune,” said Artemus. “It said to stop at the south switch of the siding, so that’s what we did, and here we are,”

“Huh,” said the boy. He smoked for a moment, then said, “I hear you-all in the night, and I hear the engines whistle for the crossin’ down at Gant’s store. Such a lonesome sound in the dark.”

“Yes, it is,” said Artemus. “You don’t ever get used to it.”

Artemus Kane, at least, never got used to it. He loved to be out on the car tops on a warm day while his train rambled through a town: cap cocked over one eye, hands in his pockets, posing in the same careless, infuriating way that sailors have. He never missed a chance to lean from an engine cab or the cupola of a caboose and wave at the poor mortals down below—citizens in motorcars huddled like sheep at a crossing; children racing the train on their bicycles; pretty girls hanging laundry in their backyards—as if to say, *Why, this is nothing—I do this every day.* He believed he saw the envy in all their eyes—the longing for motion and speed, for freedom, for the privilege of walking always on



the edge of doom that could make even ordinary moments of life a sweet possession. And late on a moonless night, when the lamplit windows of houses winked across the fields, and the whistle of the striding locomotive drifted back from some nameless crossing, Artemus thought of himself and his comrades as the last tragic heroes, traveling forever into the darkness, forever apart, with nothing for their passage but a hint of coal smoke borne away by the wind, the glow of their marker lamps fading and gone, and this: a deep silence that embraced all the sorrow and mutability of a race that had owned Eden once.

He never got used to sixteen-hour days, pitch-black nights, clouds of mosquitoes, surly hoboes with knives and guns lurking in empty cars. He remembered slipping on ice-caked ladders and stirrups—Once trying to grab a hand hold but feeling the grab iron slip away, falling between the cars, catching himself at the last possible instant before the wheels had him—and how it was to look for car numbers in the dark, and switch in the blinding rain, and walk the tops at fifty miles an hour against a wind that slashed like a razor and blew your lantern out, or what it was like to work the head end, to be in the engine cab on a hundred-degree day with the firebox doors opened and a gasoline truck racing you to a crossing.

The world the railroad men inhabited was an alien masculine world with a language all its own—the runic timetables, the peculiar idioms, the complicated rules. Hecate was real, and Death was real, and the landscape was wrought of solid things, of iron, steel, gravel, piney woods, weathered freight offices and scale houses—a lonely, complex, unforgiving place.

One night. One day. One afternoon. That's how the men told their stories, every incident a particular moment in time, captured forever, immortal, always dressed in weather, in light or dark, full of voices and the quick, moving shapes of men. It was sleeting, raining, hot, cold, pitch-black dark—trains were always moving, wheels groaning, the

clock in the freight house ticked for no one, and something was about to happen—something *was* happening. Ghosts spoke, laughed, did mischief, got hurt, were stupid or clumsy or annoying—but in the telling they were not ghosts, for you could see their faces, see their arms move, see the pencils in their pockets, the grease on their pants, see the rain running off the bills of their caps, smell the whiskey on their breath. You could see a black yard engine coming down in the blinding rain, all the crew in sou'-westers so it looked like a shrimp boat, but never mind the rain, for the trains had to move just the same. Here a man grinned at you from the line of a story, and you knew he was real, no matter he died two decades ago from too much drink. You saw a man sitting amazed in the welter of his own blood—a man lying dead, cut to pieces, among the tall spring grass—men shambling up the yard in circles of lantern light—or running, taking a leak, choking on a chaw of Red Man, hanging off the side of a car—a man framed in the window of a locomotive cab or riding the footboard—bending to throw a switch, stepping off a moving engine or caboose, setting a hand brake, climbing a long ladder, walking the tops—each one real, all real in their grace, their sweat, their stinking in the heat, their noses running in the cold, their hemorrhoids and hangovers. Here a man flings his cap down and stomps on it in frustration. There a man throws a cup of water in another's face, and everybody tenses for a confrontation that never comes. A man curses, one fires a pistol in the air for no reason, another vomits bootleg liquor out the cab window, another cuts you with his meanness, then an hour later says something kind that saves you.

This is what he might have told the boy, but he didn't for there was no time, and no words to tell so a boy might understand. He wanted to tell Anna Rose, too, and maybe he would, for he hoped to have the time for that. Someday pretty soon, anyhow, if he didn't lose her.

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“Sometimes I like to come up here to watch





*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

the trains go by," said the boy, and pointed with his pipe stem. "I stand right over yonder."

"Well, you must be careful," said Artemus. "These things will hurt you."

"Oh, I stand 'way back in the grass. I always give the fellers on the engine a highball." He waved his hand in the way that signified a highball, the universal signal to proceed. "They always like that," he said.

"All right, I will teach you something," said Artemus. "When you watch a freight train by, you always look for sticking brakes and hot journal boxes." He pointed out the journal boxes on the caboose, and the brake shoes against the wheels. He said, "One makes fire around the wheels, the other

makes smoke, maybe fire, too. You see something like that, here's what you do when the shack comes by." Artemus showed the boy the hand signals for sticking brakes and for a hot box. "Then the boys will know they have trouble," he said.

Sturgis Montieth practiced the movements. "Now, that's somethin' like," he said, pleased with himself.

"Only," said Artemus, "if you give those signals just for fun, the lord God will strike you dead with a lightning bolt. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can't be fooling around out here," said Artemus.

"No, sir." The boy thought a moment. "What



if it's night?" he said.

"You can signal with your lantern, but never mind that, because you better not be up here at night. Now, pay attention." Artemus showed the boy the hand signals for coupling air hoses, cutting off, backing across, and the signs for numbers one through ten. The boy picked them up easily.

"That's good," said Artemus. "You learn quick."

"One day, I would like to be a railroad man my own self," said the boy.

"I thought you wanted to be a Royal Canadian Mounted Po-lice," said Artemus.

"Shoot," said the boy, "that was only pretend. Don't you think I'd a whole lot rather ride up here like you, with a fine watch, on a fast freight train?"

"You think so?" said Artemus. He wanted to tell the boy about Anna Rose, about the pain of craving her and how he wouldn't see her tonight or tomorrow night, maybe not for a long time, because that's how it was on the railroad, and you had to accept it or get out. However, this was only a boy, and he would not be moved by a sentiment of that kind. Artemus Kane would not have been moved when he was a boy, standing by the high iron, watching the trains go by and dreaming of travel and speed. In that distant time, Artemus believed in a future that owned no room for yearning, and speed was all that mattered.

Far ahead, the engine's whistle blew a series of long and short notes.

"What's that?" asked the boy.

"The engineer is calling in the flags," said Artemus. "It means the local is tucked away in the hole at last, praise God, and we are about to leave." He dug in the pocket of his overalls and produced a rubber ring, its diameter a little larger than a dollar coin. "This is an air hose gasket," he said, laying it in the boy's palm. "You keep it. When you hire out,

show it as a sign. You'll be that much ahead."

The boy looked at the gasket as if it were the Holy Grail. "Mankind!" he said. "Thanks, mister!" he said, and Artemus laughed.

From the rear, Max Triggs the flagman was trotting toward the caboose. The engine gave two quick notes on the whistle.

"That's the highball," said the boy.

"Time to go," said Artemus. He helped the boy make the long step down. "Stay off the bridge, now. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

"I'll watch for you," said the boy.

In a little while, the Pearl River and Gant's store and the local in the siding were far behind them. Hubert Craft was still up in the cupola, reading, lifting his eyes now and then to watch for trouble along the train. Artemus and Triggs stood on the back of the caboose, holding fast to the handrail. They were making good time now, and the rails slid rapidly beneath them, the caboose wheels clicking on the joints. The air smelled of coal smoke and friction and rain. It was dangerous to linger this way on the narrow platform and the train racing along. It was against all the rules. Sometimes, though, and especially on a summer evening, you just had to do it, just for a little while.

Triggs asked, "Who was that little feller you were talking to?" He was a droll man whom Artemus had never seen disturbed or agitated. Hubert Craft was the same way, and sometimes their calmness drove Artemus crazy. Neither Hubert nor Max Triggs ever raised his voice, and Triggs didn't raise his voice now, so he was all but inaudible over the noise of their passage.

Artemus shouted in return. "Just a boy, though a smart one. He has ambitions to be a railroad man."

"Huh," said Triggs. "He ain't that smart, then."

