



## The men who did it

*By Ernst Didring*

*Translation by Joan Tate*

For more than two hundred years the iron ore mountains in Lappland lay inaccessible to modern mining. The Swedish Crown and state, private national and international capital spent millions to open up the area for exploitation. But not until the railroad between the Gulf of Bothnia and the Atlantic was finished, in the beginning of the 20th century, could the industry develop.

The Swedish writer Ernst Didring has written a trilogy called »Ore», about the men who lay the foundations for iron ore mining in Sweden.

Didring's work is not only a tribute to the working man, but also a reminder of what is at stake today, when a few men decide over the future of Swedish iron ore mining, when the work of »The men who did it» can be destroyed by the stroke of a pen.

Ernst Didring lived between 1868 and 1931.

»The men who did it» (1914), is the first part in his trilogy »Ore». The following two parts are »The song of the mountain» (1915) and »The gamblers» (1919). The excerpts from »The men who did it», published in this issue of RMR, is the first translation into English of Didring's work.



*Working on the railroad.  
On the way to Kiruna in the late 1890s.*

The embankment was a hive of activity, the men sweating in their shirtsleeves in the heat, picks and spikes flashing without pause on the slope, gravel and stones clattering down the escarpment, while the larger boulders slid down with dignity. The tipping wagons rattled and creaked on the tracks, culverts spewing out ice and water frothing with white foam, broad streams of slush rushing down the side ditches. Explosions rocked the ground along the embankment and sometimes a whole craterful of rock and timber hurtled into the air, taking with it bundles of dwarf birches. Occasionally a warning shout rang out, and from up on the mountain, huge masses of rock came flying over the track, to land crashing into Tornejaur sending the water sky-high.

That made the men laugh. They were re-shaping the earth in their own small way. This was work suited to men. They set about it with backs stretched taut like steel cables, spikes ringing, picks rattling, cranes screeching and explosions blasting away. Up on the mountain, the drills went on and on at an untiringly even pace. It was the music of work. Algren thought of it as a great symphony. And what men! Tall stately men, each one of them selected, apparently able to tackle the devil himself if necessary. Look at that one, wasn't he lifting a hundred-kilo boulder and hurling it over the escarpment!

Following Algren's gaze, Hansson at once enlarged.

"That's Sköld, he said. "He's from Norrbotten, a rowdy, as they say. He came with Hjort. He's as strong as a horse. He beat up five men last week when they set on him with a knife. Two of them are still in hospital. Serve them right, as they started it. Sköld is the most peaceful man in the world and the best driller we've got on the whole line."

"Where did you get the men from?" said Algren.

"From all over Sweden. But we take only the best. People come flooding in down in Kiruna. They get twenty-five kronor up and twenty-five kronor down, and free transport there and back. Things have changed since we started. Then we had to look everywhere to find the men." He broke off, and then said: "There's Gerell, the engineer."

A slim figure leapt over the ditch and came over to them.

"You must be Algren?" he said. "My name's Gerell. It doesn't look too promising, does it?" he said, as Algren gazed up at the mountain looming raggedly exposed above them. "I think we'll have to abandon it all. We daren't go ahead here any more. I was saying the same to Hjort just now, and he looked fairly doubtful himself. We've had nine avalanches this last week, one this very Monday morning, wasn't it, Hansson? Swept away everything down here on the line, wagons, tools, cranes – the lot. We just escaped going too. We hadn't yet got here that morning. It's a hell of a mountain."

They all three gazed up at Nuolja.

Some of the slopes were bare of snow, but farther up there were dirty grey drifts on the pint of falling at any moment. Lower down the mountain, the ground glittered and shone in the sunlight like a million diamonds rolling down, but the peak was shrouded in a woolly white hood, almost mingling with the snow up there.

Gerell took Algren's arm and pulled him along with him.

"I'm sure we've got to get into the mountain via a tunnel," he said. "It'll be a tricky job, but at least we'd then be safe from the snow."

Algren realised at once that his task was much more difficult than he had first thought. He didn't know whether it was his imagination, but he was freezing cold. The whole landscape quite suddenly became heavy and menacing.

"Let's go in and have a look at Abiskojokk, because if we're going to go into the mountain, that's where we'll have to take the power for the drills from," said Gerell.

Gerell unfolded the whole plan for damming and timbering, culverts and generators, drills and all the rest. But Algren was scarcely listening. He was thinking about something else.

Why had the landscape changed character and become so menacing?

(...)

The torment of mosquitoes increased with the heat, affecting the men's tempers as the torment worsened. The men's mosquito veils became spotted with blood in one day from slapping thousands of mosquitoes against their faces. There was no question of sleeping, only hours of stinging, scratching and swearing in the huts all night, and it was best to keep out of the men's way when they came tumbling out in the mornings, the desire for sleep still in their drooping eyelids, murderous thoughts shining in the whites of their eyes. With no discernible cause, fights would flare up in a whirl of sand and stones and boot-heels as knives flashed.

On Saturday nights especially, when the bootleggers were busier than usual and bottles were hauled out of crevices and holes, it was like living at the foot of a mountain breathing fire.

During long summer days with the sun continually beating down from the sky, nature's seething hot life seemed to send the blood in human veins round faster. Sometimes a flurry of snow would spread a white blanket over the landscape, cooling the air and paralysing the mosquitoes, but within a few hours the sun would break through again and devour the snow, making the mosquitoes doubly active after the pleasant respite.



Algren had been given the task of calculating the graphs for the line and he was being driven insane. After a thorough search every morning, he had actually managed to make his room more or less free of mosquitoes by flicking a towel round and smoking his pipe, but it was not long before the creatures became acclimatised to his smoking and chose the stem of his pipe for their walks. He used up kilos of mosquito oil, but noticed no difference, except that their drilling instruments seemed to find it easier to slip through his skin. His face, neck and hands were all covered with bumps that took it in turns to itch.

It was pointless even to think about sleeping. After touching on the borders of insanity, he sank into profound apathy, imagining he would eventually become immune, but even that hope faded and he took to fury instead, flinging compasses and protractor away and leaping swearing round the room, cursing himself for ever having applied for the position.

"Come in", growled a voice so harsh, Sarri's knees trembled. They went in.

A man was sitting behind some kind of desk on which a lamp was humming and yellow reflections from drawing instruments glistened among the papers and rulers. Sarri noticed a half-empty bottle of brandy and a glass in the middle and thought that seemed especially promising.

"For Christ's sake shut the door! D'you think we die of heat in here", the man snapped, as Sarri hesitated to close the door behind him. "Who's this Lapp fool you've got hold of, Jonsson?" the man went on.

"He's got a letter for you, sir", said Jonsson submissively.

Landström waved at Sarri, who at once came forward with the letter.

The engineer put down the compasses and took the letter, turning it over several times, each time looking up at Sarri.

Landström opened the letter and read it, his expression darkening as he read on. When he had finished reading, he flung the letter away with an oath, then poured out half a glass of brandy and tossed the liquor back.

"Hjort has sent the letter, but it's written by the damned boss", he said to Jonsson. "D'you know what he says, Jonsson?" He bent down to retrieve the letter.

"I'm expecting the line to have reached Torneträsk shortly", he read out aloud. "Expecting!". He laughed bitterly, smoothing out the letter, then reading on.

"The delays have been long enough now, and according to my calculations, the line should have been completed in the autumn. The cuttings are insignificant and..."

Landström leapt to his feet as if possessed by an evil spirit.

"Insignificant!" he shouted. "That idiot thinks he understands, lying in his warm bed down there in Gällivare, cooking up mischief for us!"

He sat down and went on reading.

"Expenditure seems to have exceeded our calculations. You know how much we have budgeted for. Under no circumstances may this be exceeded."

Landström burst out laughing. "Idiot!" he said. Jonsson nodded in agreement, glancing sideways at the brandy bottle.

The engineer was rummaging in his papers and did not notice.

"Is Hansson's team complete again?" he said.

"I think so", mumbled Jonsson.

"Remind them to go carefully with the dynamite in this cold. We can't afford to lose any more men. And then we must put a stone escarpment against that sludge as soon as possible. And the windlass on the lower cable line is broken. That last snowstorm finished it off, so that has to be seen to."

Jonsson's face grew more and more gloomy. It was the same every day, a flood of different jobs to be done. This Landström man certainly knew how to put the pressure on! Jonsson felt embittered. He would have liked to have answered back sharply, but did not dare. Today was clearly not the right moment. Landström was frowning so heavily, a deep furrow had formed between his eyebrows, and he was fidgeting nervously with the papers. Clearly there would be no brandy today.

"Understood, Jonsson?" said Landström abruptly.

Jonsson disappeared with Sarri out through the door far more rapidly than he had come in.

Landström started striding up and down inside the cabin.

It was not a very long walk. Three steps across and three back, and he had to be careful not to hit his head on the beam on the third step. His face flushed alternately red and white with fury, and he felt a violent desire to kick and strike out all round. He happened to strike the coal shovel in front of the stove, and for want of anything else, he gave it a kick that sent it halfway into the earthen wall. That diverted his rage somewhat, presumably because it made him think of the heating, and for a while he busied himself filling the stove.

But he went on striding up and down for a long time afterwards, muttering curses at the letter-writer before his thoughts would settle. Then he threw himself down on his bunk and started thinking.

Ingratitude was the worst thing he knew. He had lived in this muddy hole for over a year now, a hole even a vole would despise. He had sometimes been so cold, his blood had ceased circulating and his mind had refused to function, his whole brain turning to slush. There had been days when his fingers had been incapable of holding a pen, they had been so cold,



*On the way to Kiruna in the late 1890s.*

the small thermometer registering seventeen below zero, although the stove had been as glowing red as a stage demon. For several days he had had to retreat to his sleeping bag to keep alive when the coke had not come up the line in time. Then that idiot writes that he expected the line to be complete! Expected? Just as if it were the simplest and most natural thing in the world to build lines hundreds of miles north of the Arctic Circle, where you had to live in the hell of mosquitoes and eternal sun in summer and petrifying cold and eternal darkness in winter! And then saying the budget must not be exceeded! As if anyone could take snowstorms into account up here. And all these wild men he had to deal with, too, good lads when sober, but who went mad when they got hold of cards and liquor and were likely to smash up everything and each other as well! Well, no doubt it was just as well there was liquor. Otherwise not many of them would have stayed. And what would he have done?

Landström thoughtfully scratched his nose and glanced across at the brandy bottle. That had helped him through a great deal, most of all the loneliness. It was all right for the men, living and snoring and eating together.

But all the same, I don't think I'd change with them, he thought.

He looked at the time. Soon half-past eleven. He got up and opened the door for a while. He had to laugh. Half-past eleven and scarcely light enough to read by.

He closed the door again and sat down at his drawing board, but found he was incapable of collecting his thoughts. The figures danced about before his eyes and he was forced to abandon the attempt. He had been working for almost seven hours at a stretch when Jonsson and the Lapp had interrupted him. He was indifferent to what time of day he worked. It was always night.



The phantom appeared in the spring when work was at its most intense and the line almost complete.

The tip-trucks had got a good way along the lower part of the line with sleepers and rails, and the locomotive was already creaking along with the wagons. The upper part of the line was still without rails and work there was going ahead at high pressure.

The winter had been severe and the line had frozen everywhere into humps, giving them some idea what they would have to face in future. They could do nothing but dig out the clay and fill up instead with gravel to stop the frost damage.

The worst work of all was shifting the huge boulders craftily embedded in the embankment and festering into vast chilblains that had to be operated away, every single one of them. They fought over the little coal ash available to block up minor hollows, but in some places they had to dig out as good as the whole of the embankment and put down drainage ditches at the bottom with stones and moss to let the water drain away down the sides through the escarpments. The engineers swore and froze. Unequal and persistent as it became, it was the battle that tried their patience more than was good for them. If they cut away the hump for a few hundred metres one week and completed the insulating base, then the following week another hump would appear a little further on. Hjort muttered something about it being better to insulate the whole of the line first, but that would have taken ten years and then the politicians would have expired from sheer rage and they would have had another lot of preachers making their lives even worse. All they could do was to toil on with all their strength to get the line ready on time.

That was when the phantom appeared, in the middle of the worst part, silently and hideously, as phantoms usually do. First it came to the Norwegian part of the line and took thirty-two men with it. Then the phantom crossed over and started ravaging in the Swedish part. The sick quarters down in Tomehamn were overflowing, nurses and doctor almost collapsing with the strain, as diptheria always came with the phantom.

Rumour ran ahead of the phantom, enlarged by the talk – fourteen died yesterday – eleven the day before.

The men were not easily frightened, but all the same they could not avoid thinking rather more than usual about the life hereafter. Some of them tried immunising themselves with liquor, but that did not improve matters. Others dispatched their packs of grimy banknotes down south to the bank, preparing for the worst. But no man left his post and fled. They had so many strange experiences up there, they were hardened against phantoms, and a few of them boasted that there was nothing on earth a railroad man couldn't look straight in the eye. But there some who did not realise that the most dangerous enemies are those that cannot be seen, least of all looked straight in the eye.

Twenty-seven had as yet escaped. The phantom had shown itself in teams above and below, and called away men in its secretive way, but in Twenty-seven, things went on as before. Nothing unusual was noticed, except perhaps that pauses between conversations in the evenings grew longer and card games showed a disquieting tendency to dry up. The good Hansson maintained to Hjort that Twenty-seven was anyhow the finest team on the line and nothing in the world could affect that as long as Sköld kept the little demons at bay with his gigantic arms.

The phantom must have heard his boast, for that very same day it appeared in the Twenty-seven hut.

The men were having their dinner, seated along the two sides of the long table in the hut. Maja had just served the pea-soup on to their plates. The door to the porch was open as well as the outside door, as Maja had not been entirely successful in her cooking that day, and they needed some fresh air instead of the fumes that stood like a cloud round the stove. The men ate the pea-soup and pork, munching at the great rolls of bread they got from Rombaksbotten as often as possible with the provision wagons from Norway.

The roaming phantom must have slopped in through the open door, for suddenly it was standing behind Sköld, holding him by the throat. Sköld turned scarlet in the face and dropped his spoon.

Hansson stopped eating. "What's the matter?" he said. The whole team stopped eating.

Sköld seemed to be choking. He got up and ripped open his woolen shirt, sending buttons flying all over the table. His face turned purple and he was shaking all over, making the table quake. He kept mouthing until his cheeks turned chalk white and finally a roar came out of his mouth which made even the men jump. His eyes were rolling round with no sign of humanity in them, and suddenly he fell forward across the table, scattering the contents of the soup plates. Maja screamed.

"That's it", said Hansson. "It's got here now."

"It" was the phantom, typhoid fever.

They tried to carry Sköld across to his bunk, but he turned quite crazy before they were able to. Six or seven men gathered round to calm him down, but he sent them flying with strength increased by fever, and they fell like ninepins. The other men hastened over to help stop him killing himself and at last they managed to get him down and send an urgent message down to the sick bay to prepare for Sköld's arrival.

The giant was lying on the hut floor, Hansson sitting astride his feet and holding his legs in an iron grip. One man was kneeling each side of him, holding down his arms, while two others tried to protect his head, which was showing an unpleasant tendency to beat itself against the wooden floor.



He was foaming at the mouth and his face was scarlet, while convulsive jerks shuddered through his huge body. One of the men tried to get him to suck on a wet towel they had dipped in the icy river water outside, but it was all in vain.

Sköld had no time for such things. He was fighting the phantom with all his gigantic strength, the veins in his forehead swelling with the effort. They could all see the muscles bulging in his arms and thighs.

The men strained to the utmost to hold him down. Impossible. What seemed like a high tension electric shock went through the giant and the men fell away like schoolboys. Sköld got to his feet on his own, scarlet in the face, his eyes staring, his hands and fingers stretched out in front of him as if he could see some hideous phantom he wished to strangle. Slowly, he took a few steps towards Maja, who was standing paralysed with terror, unable to flee. He had already raised his hands towards her throat and was about to rush at her, when one of the men on the ground thrust out his leg and tripped him up so that Sköld fell headlong. Once again they all fell on him, all of them together, and this time they managed to tie him up securely with some reins they had just received. They wound the reins round his body, legs and arms until he lay on the floor like a well trussed parcel. He stayed there calmly long enough for them to get the cart up the hut, but when they were to carry him out, he burst out of the straps as if they had been made of spun glass and then set off at full gallop down towards the river, the whole of Twenty-seven after him. Hansson caught up with him not far from the river bank and grabbed his trouser belt, but that simply caused Sköld to turn round and strike him a blow on the head that sent him reeling.

However, that gave the others time to catch up, and whether it was the sight of so many men, or that his strength had left him, no one knew, but suddenly Sköld became quite calm and allowed them to lead him to the road, where the cart was waiting. When he reached it, he got up on to it on his own and lay down on the blankets they had spread over the straw. As they were tucking more blankets round him, for he was very cold, he smiled gently and patiently, mumbling: "Very bad, lads – very bad." This simple observation made several of the men turn away and busy themselves with their eyes.

Sköld appeared to be asleep. On the advice of Hansson, now limping along, his cheek unnaturally swollen and red, they decided to tie another rope round Sköld while he was lying still on the cart, so that he would cause them no more trouble on the way. To make quite sure, most of Twenty-seven walked behind the cart, as no one knew what might happen.

Maja stayed behind in the hut, hardly able to see through her tears as she stood watching them go. It looked only too

like the last journey Sköld would make, a dead dark object lying on the cart as it slowly moved away, a long row of silent figures behind it.

The line had been provisionally opened for traffic for several weeks.

The iron ore train chugged its way along through the snow-storm with two engines at its head. Hjort was on the train. He had got into the front engine at the starting station. It was only just after ten in the morning, but as dark as night outside. The fireman was shovelling like a madman to keep the steam pressure up, and the great red mouth of the furnace was swallowing coal like a fire-eater. Hjort could feel the pistons trembling with the strain and occasionally he noted only too well how the whole framework rocked on the frost humps in a very unpleasant manner. The scream of brakes when the snow lifted was not all that encouraging, either, and occasionally he felt the wheels spinning round on the rails.

The engine driver was fully occupied checking the pressure and the glass tube, which kept showing signs of freezing up. Hjort could see nothing much but the driver's back, and there was no point in trying to talk to him. The storm was howling through the engine on all possible notes, sometimes mighty and powerful like the bass notes of a cathedral organ, the as angrily shrill and falsetto as a piccolo. Sometimes it sounded like the thunder of collapsing buildings and sometimes like the bursting of decks of sinking ships and cries for help from a thousand drowning people. If the storm paused for a moment, it then returned with redoubled force, hurling itself at the engine as if wishing to overturn it. The driver must have felt the engine lurching, for he turned to Hjort for a moment.

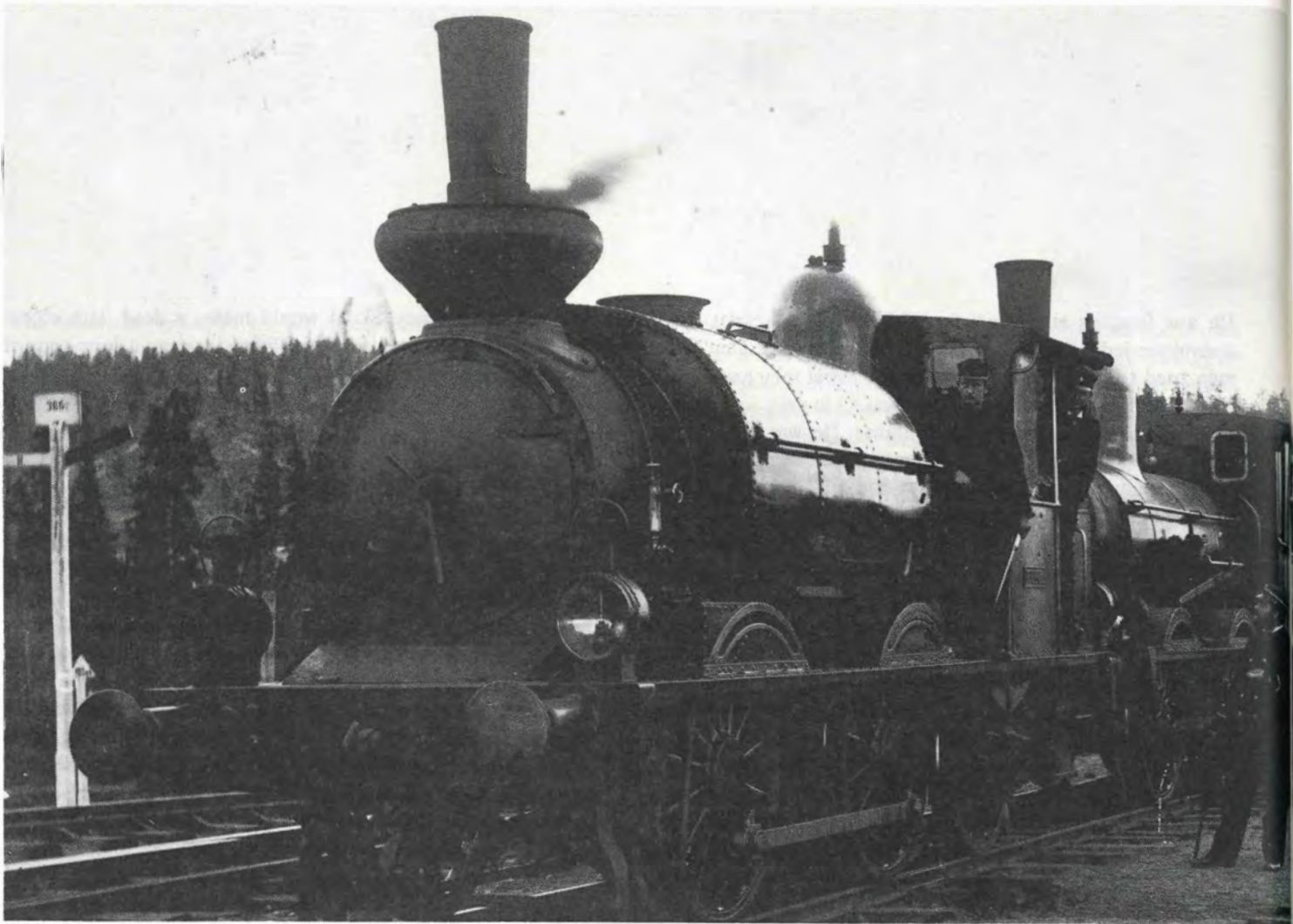
"'Tis all going to hell", he yelled into Hjort's ear.

The driver was from Skåne in the south and knew nothing of the caprices of the northern wilderness. He could not see the expression on Hjort's face as the snow swirled round them, but he was sure Hjort was smiling. This was the weather for him, this unconquerable man they all talked about, the man who was going to get there at any price. Hjort could not help laughing. No storm on earth would overturn this engine. As long as they were not derailed by the frost humps, then the engine would stay on the rails. The only unpleasant thing was having to drive on without signals. The linesmen seemed to have been blown away. Not a single light had been seen since the train had left the first station. The linesmen were of course asleep in their cottages, hoping the train had long since been driven to a standstill in the drifts, and that traffic had ceased.

Hjort leant over to the driver. "Where are we?" he shouted.

"Don't know", the man shouted back.





"Have we passed the cutting?"

"No."

The conversation ceased, their entire vocal resources used up. The fireman thrust his head out of the engine and pulled it back smothered in snow.

"Kaisepakte!" he shouted, pointing ahead into the grey darkness as he wiped the snow from his face with the back of his hand. The driver looked at his watch and pulled the steam whistle.

It sounded helpless and innocent in among all the other roaring and shrieking. Not one of the men on the engine could hear it, only the driver's grip on the handle telling them he was signalling for the great intersection where the ploughs forged a deep cutting through the snow.

Hjort leant out. He thought he could see the snow screens, but there was still no light in sight. The linesman should have signalled here.

The driver was still holding on to the whistle as the train pressed on through the storm. Now it felt as if they had come slightly into the lee of the snow screens and with increasing speed, the ore train drove into the cutting with Hjort muttering curses at the absent linesman.

For about the twentieth time, Linesman 4556 Jonsson struggled through the cutting. The large plough had gone through over an hour earlier, and he had been waiting in vain for the train ever since, trying to keep what little life remained in his body alive by struggling back and forth in the deepening snow.

He dared not leave the cutting, as the storm would have

immediately swept him away. He knew what that meant. He had had to struggle out of his own cottage to make his way there. He dared not go home, as the train might come at any moment. All he could do was to freeze and wait. Now he was down at the southern end of the cutting. He stopped and listened.

No, still no train, only the roar of the storm.

The snow was swirling round in a crazy whirlwind. The rails the plough had swept clean had already disappeared, and Jonsson had to kick the rail free of snow and bend down to shine his lamp on it to convince himself there was some connection between him and life and mankind. The colossal walls of snow the snowplough had formed did give him some shelter from the storm, but they also had him a horrible enclosed feeling that he came to understand only later.

What if he went back home after all? No train was coming. The telegraph wires were down in several places from the weight of snow. The train was naturally stuck out there in a drift in the swirling snow. It was foolish of him to go on stamping up and down any longer. Even if the kids did yell, it was a good deal calmer at home than here.

Jonsson stopped and instinctively raised his lamp in front of him. What was that? It sounded like a whistle. Was the train coming after all?

He listened.

No. It was the storm. The storm produced all possible sounds. The whistling had come from up on the snow screens. That often happened when the wind was high. Just like the engine. Of course it was the storm. He could hear that quite





clearly, roaring and shrieking again. God, what weather!

Jonsson stood quite still where he had stopped. He had lowered the lamp and yet continued staring into the swirling snow. There was something strange about it. He had never seen that before. A certain patch had turned yellowish, then gone again, swallowed up by the swirling grey. Then it came back again and vanished again. Incomprehensible. Like magic.

Jonsson felt uneasy, and all the strange stories of the wilderness in his blood from his railroading days rose again. Incomprehensible. Unless...

He raised the lamp. The patch over there moved. Strange. He swung the lamp round in a circle. The patch swung round, too. Oh, was that all? Only the light from his lamp.

At that moment, real terror overwhelmed him.

The yellow patch suddenly gathered itself into a great eye, and out of the greyness a dark obscure mass swelled forth, growing into a black monster spewing red sparks, a shrill angry whistling cutting clearly through, and with a thunderous rush the train broke through the swirling snow and bore down upon him. In a flash he heard the thumping panting sound of the engine, and the next moment he had flung himself aside to save his own life. To his horror, he felt the snow wall behind him was as hard as timber and he at once knew this was the work of the plough. He made a great effort to press back into the snow, but immediately, as if through a thin veil, he saw the wing plough of the engine sweeping forward, the movement of the couplers and the rolling wheels, and then he was struck a violent blow in the chest and dragged along into the roaring iron storm. He screamed once, one single

deathly cry...

"What was that?"

Hjort leant out of the engine, but could see nothing but walls of snow gliding past. Had he been mistaken, or had it been the storm making that sound? Strange. It had sounded just like a human being. But he could see nothing. Only snow.

He pulled back his head. Neither the driver nor the fireman could have heard anything, as they were still working as before, the driver's hand still on the whistle. Hjort pulled his fur collar up tighter. He suddenly felt horribly cold.

The driver let go the whistle. The cutting had been passed and now they were again riding into the storm, the snow still blowing from the rear like white foam, blinding them all, hissing and dancing round the pipes, the engine sighing and panting more and more as it chugged on into the swirling woolly greyness, the firebox gasping, the cylinders groaning, and although the driver had the regulator at top pressure, the train moved only slowly through the drifts. The fireman was shovelling away at top speed, and the driver looked out for a moment to see how high the snow was. As he could see no sign of the slides, he knew what expect. The train was moving more and more slowly. Creaking and groaning, it pressed on a few more metres, then stopped helplessly in the drifts.

"Well, we're stuck now!" yelled the driver to Hjort, as he opened up the ventilator.

Hjort had already jumped down into the waist-deep snow. The driver followed. They struggled along the length of the engine to find the snow right up to the top of the boiler, an even higher drift ahead of it. ■