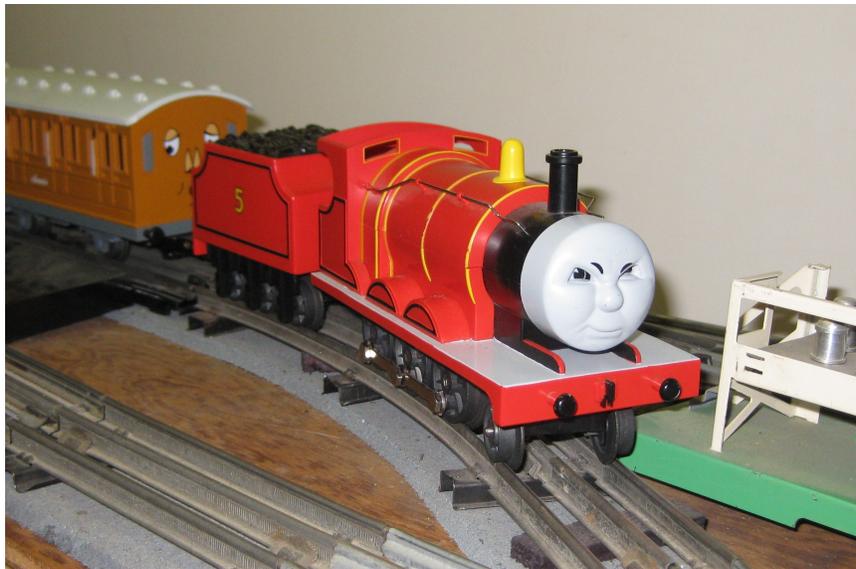


Thomas in America Book 7

Why Is Everything Broken Around Here?

James wasn't happy. His roof was missing. In fact, it had been missing for a while, after an unfortunate minor collision with the roof of the sawmill. How long ago was that? Days? Weeks? Months even? It was hard to say. James didn't really have a clear sense of time. He made twice per day runs from the Girard station here to Glendale, with a couple of old coaches named Annie and Clarabel. Thomas, if he was working at all, would shunt freight wagons around. A diesel, that obnoxious 2338 with eyes like a haddock, would come through once a day and pick up or drop off the freight wagons that Thomas shunted. It was much the same every day.

Except, recently Thomas was "out of commission," as James's driver, Frank, had explained. That meant that James sometimes had to do the shunting of freight wagons, something that Thomas ought to be doing. That made James even less happy. But, things were about to get worse.

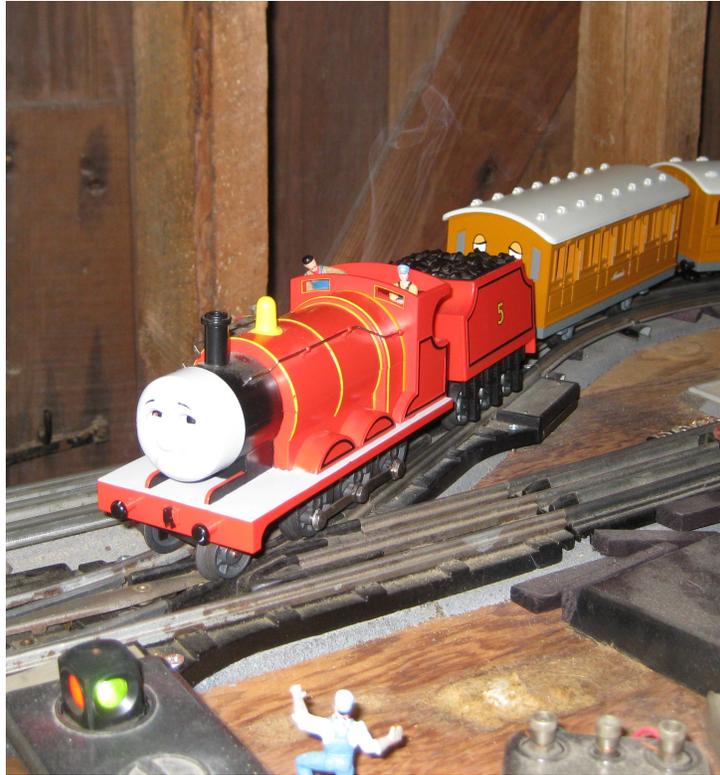


James had just picked up his morning passengers from the Girard passenger station, and was cruising around the far loop toward the Glendale grade. The signal showed that the track was clear, but as James came around the bend, he realized too late that the points were set wrong! Instead of going down the grade, he was headed back into the Girard yard!

His driver Frank saw it too, and applied the brakes quickly. Too quickly. James passed through the points going the wrong way but came to an immediate stop. He felt something happen behind him, something that felt wrong. But Frank and his fireman were focused ahead, as they called to one of the yard workers to come over and set the points right after James had backed up. The yard worker was saying he wasn't authorized to do that.

"I smell something," said the fireman.

Just then, Annie, who was right behind James, called, "Fire!"



Frank turned, saw the smoke, and yelled, “Quick! Cut the power!”

Passengers panicked and jumped out the doors of the coaches as fast as they could. But soon they could see that the fire was not in the coaches, but instead coming from right behind James, from the front of his tender. As the smoke dissipated, everyone gathered around to see what had happened.

“It’s the wires back to the tender, nothing else,” the fireman told the passengers.



Sure enough, the wires, normally red like James himself, were all blackened, and bare wire was showing. And, that wasn't all that was wrong.

"Here's the problem," called Frank, as he surveyed the situation. "The tender jumped the track. I guess that happened when we had to stop suddenly. Shorted out the circuit." He gave the tender a kick, and surprisingly enough, the tender fell back into position on the track.

"Yeah, mister, that was a jolt of a stop. I fell out of my seat!" remarked one of the passengers."

"I banged my head," another complained.

Frank asked the yard worker to run over to the station and tell the Station Manager and ask for help. Meanwhile, he and the Fireman tried to see if they could ease James forward and pull the tender back onto the track. But James wouldn't move; he felt powerless.

"It's not a short anymore; that wire burned out all the way," remarked the fireman.

"We're on that dead spot," Frank remarked. "The pick-up on the tender usually gets us through the switch here, but now we just have the one contact on the engine. So, no juice. This thing isn't going to move without help. Why they didn't put two pickups on this darned engine is beyond me."

Now, James was already upset at the points being set wrong. Then the tender derailing, the fire, and now finally the indignity of being called a "darned engine." As though it was his fault. He was about to say something to set Frank straight, but the passengers started complaining first.

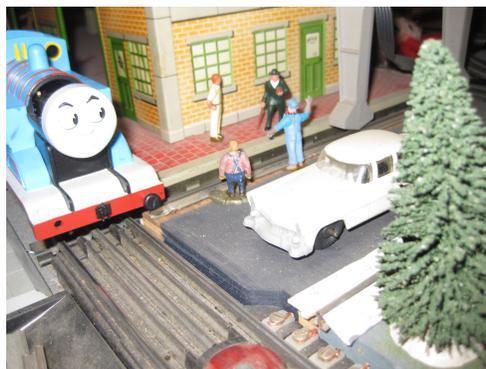
"Hey, I gotta get to Glendale! I got a train to meet!" Others had similar stories.

All Frank could do was promise that help would be there soon. He hoped.

Fortunately, help was coming. The yard worker reported the problem. The Station Manager told the Foreman to get steam up in "the blue number one" and in number 224 as well. "We need a heavy locomotive to move that red one, number five. As soon as the switch is clear have number one push the passenger cars down to Glendale."

The Foreman complained, but the Station Manager replied, "We have to get those passengers to Glendale, or I'll be hearing from the Owner. Is that what you want?"

The Foreman started issuing orders, and so it was done.



Thomas was right there, but he was supposed to be "out of commission". The cover of his smoke chamber had been removed, as well as the roof of his cab, and his coupler was missing. How could he do anything, he wondered. But someone started up his fires right away anyway.

On a nearby track was Number 224, known to Thomas as “Black Bart.” Black Bart had no tender; it needed to be repaired. The Foreman commanded the Fat Engineer, who Thomas knew well. “Just throw in enough coal for now, and throw in some extra into the cab.” Of course, the Fat Engineer had his fireman actually do that. He was an engineer, not a fireman.

Hmmm, thought Thomas. Black Bart was going to operate like a tank engine today! Thomas hoped he didn’t run out of water. An improvised coal supply was bad enough.

Fortunately, the Foreman thought of that and the Fat Engineer had Black Bart, as soon as he had enough steam to move, couple to a gondola to serve as a makeshift tender. Black Bart moved down the track to where James was stranded.



Ropes were used since no couplers were available, and Black Bart backed up, dragging James free of the Glendale Grade switch. “Just wish that thing didn’t lock wheels every time it stops!” complained Frank. “It’s that darned worm drive.” Frank then hurried back to the station to take charge of Thomas.

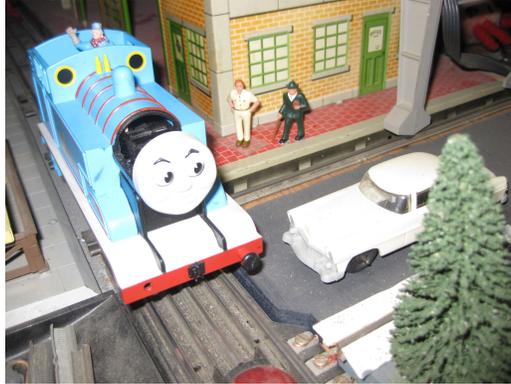
“Take care of those passengers,” the Station Manager told him. “You’ve got to push those coaches easy; be gentle. Don’t you know, we’re going to be getting plenty of complaints as it is.”

“You sure this is legal?” asked Frank. “I mean, no coupler on this hunk of junk. Smoke pouring out loose with no proper stack, and the fires won’t draw right, and, well, I don’t know what else is wrong. You know how things are.”

“Yes, I do know how things are!” exclaimed the Station Manager with irritation.

“Look, Frank, you’ve got orders,” the Foreman added. “We have to get those passengers moved.” The Foreman had mentioned what kind of passengers they were too, but Thomas pretended he didn’t hear that.

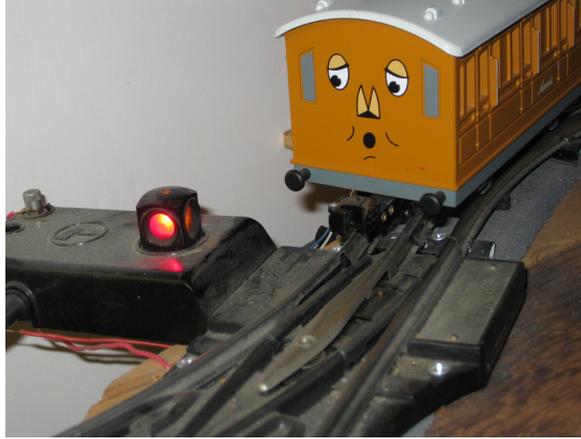
The Station Manager finally said, “I’m the one responsible. Just do it.”



Thomas didn't feel right. The fires in his belly didn't burn right with no stack, and that was especially true as he started to move. He felt strangely weak, and smoke poured out around the boiler from the open smoke box. Still, he could move, but didn't know how he would be able to pull the coaches, Annie and Clarabel, back home.

Frank took Thomas around the far loop, and as the Station Manager had said, pushed Clarabel and Annie, with passengers aboard, down the Glendale Grade. Annie didn't like going first. Clarabel didn't like being face to face with Thomas. Thomas didn't like having to push against Clarabel's coupler. But he didn't have to push very long. As they started down the grade, Annie and Clarabel were going faster than he was! And, with no brake van or guard!





Thomas caught up with the two coaches as they slowed on level ground prior to getting to Glendale. He gave them a final push to reach the station platform.



The Glendale Station Manager was most cross. “You’ve made my passengers late! And look! No coupler! You can’t pull these coaches back to Girard! I won’t permit it!”

“Fine,” replied Frank. “Have it your way. I’ll just leave them here. My orders were to bring them here. Nothing about taking them back.”

“But wait! You have to take the passengers for the return trip! I won’t permit you to leave them here!”

“Excuse me,” a woman nearby interjected. “It seems I’m the only one going to Girard.”

“How would you like to ride with me in the engine?” called Frank.

“Oh, that would be exciting!” she answered. “What’s your name?”

“Frank,” said Frank.

“Thomas,” said Thomas, almost at the same time.

“No, really, it’s Frank,” said Frank, and then under his breath, “Be quiet, Thomas, we don’t want to mess this up.”

So, Nora, that was her name, rode with Frank and his fireman in Thomas’s cab back up to Girard. It was a little crowded, but nobody complained. When Nora climbed down, she asked Frank if she could see him again sometime.



Thomas saw that James had been left on the track in front of the sawmill. His tender was uncoupled, but that ugly blackened electrical wire was still there.

“That local freight’s going to be coming through soon,” said the Station Manager to the Foreman and the engineers. “And now, no useful locomotive except number 224, and that with a gondola for a tender.”

“Tell you what,” said the Foreman. “We’ll load some barrels of water into that gondola, pick up some coal, take a few of the yard men to help the fireman, and we’ll be able to pick up those coaches when the commuters get back this afternoon.”

“Telephone for you!” called a voice from the door. The Station Manager’s secretary, Becky, appeared. “Glendale Manager on the phone. He’s upset about something. As usual.”



“I’ll see that things get cleared up,” the Foreman said. “I could use some help loading barrels of water into the gondola.”

The Station Manager was headed for the door, but stopped to say, “Becky, typing those maintenance requests will have to wait. Clock in, would you, and give some help lifting those things with the crane.”

“OK, but the telephone’s still waiting.”

Everybody got busy loading and filling barrels and getting them into the gondola, and then Black Bart visited the coal loader for some more coal. Fortunately, things were clear as the local freight came through, and eventually Black Bart, number 224, made the trip to Glendale, and returned with Annie and Clarabel.

After the passengers left, the Station Manager and Foreman talked about the situation. “Well, we made it through today,” the Foreman remarked.

“Yes, but I’m worried about tomorrow. Just one operational locomotive, old 224, and we had to improvise a tender. I think we can make the two runs to Glendale tomorrow with it, and that’s with a water fill from the barrels at the other end. Can we get that rig with the two passenger cars onto the station siding?”

“Should fit. Not that we’d have it measured and could calculate whether it would fit or not, of course.”

“No, of course not.”

“We’ll try putting it there and see.”



Of course, Black Bart was facing the wrong way, and before he could move again more water had to be pumped into the boiler from the drums. After a trip around the far loop Black Bart recoupled to Annie and Clarabel and backed down onto the siding where Thomas usually was. Thomas was put on James’s siding near the milk platform.



“Just barely fits! What a relief!” the Station Manager said approvingly.

“Uh, we still have a problem. The pilot wheels are on the automatic switch control rail,” explained the Foreman. “It’s fine now, but when the local comes around the barrel loader and hits the control rail, the switch will trip and get stuck half way. That’s a derailment of the Geep. And you know how much labor it takes to get that bugger back onto the track. Nobody’s going to be happy at the delay, either.”

“So, what can we do about it? We’re required to keep the loop free; we can’t just leave this train in front of the station,” the Station Manager replied. “And we need to keep it simple; I’ve already had to pay too much overtime today.”

“What we do is disconnect the automatic safety switch control,” the Foreman said. “We can set it manually by turning the lantern.”

“So, we have to break yet something else in order to make up for the other things that are already broken,” the Station Manager sighed.

“We could uncouple, put the number one on the coal siding, and put 224 where the red five was,” the Foreman said. “But, that’s extra labor, and more tomorrow. And the next day...”

“I know. OK, disconnect the switch. I’ll tell Becky to type the safety violation report.”

Since Black Bart, Annie, and Clarabel didn’t have to move, the day’s work was over. The Station Manager, Foreman, the Fat Engineer, Becky, and the yard workers all left. Frank had left earlier since he was in a hurry about something. With things finally quiet, Thomas and his friends could talk.

“Well, that was fun!” exclaimed Clarabel. “James! We were taken for a ride by Black Bart! And, it was interesting to go first in Annie’s place, though I shouldn’t make a habit of it.”

Annie commented, “I didn’t like that ride down the grade!”

“Looks like we’re Black Bart’s train now,” continued Clarabel.

“I was glad he could bring you back,” said Thomas. “Without a coupler, and without my smokestack, I don’t think I could have. Yes, we are very fortunate to have our friend Black Bart here! Black Bart to the rescue!”

James didn’t say anything. He was not at all happy. He not only had the indignity of having been dragged with wheels locked back from the switch. Now Black Bart had shoved him onto this siding, and had taken his train! And Thomas, Annie and Clarabel seemed cheerful about it! What would happen? He was in despair. His tender was broken, and nothing ever seemed to get fixed around here. Thomas wasn’t working right either, and Black Bart had a broken tender too! Why didn’t they improvise a tender for him instead of Black Bart? That wasn’t all. The tracks ahead of him were blocked by a couple of misplaced automobiles and a tree across the tracks. This was not a well-run railroad! What would go wrong next?