



Uncle Zwingle's Boiler **Explosion**

by James Vale Downie

John Galbreath Downie (1855-1917), left, was a principal in Keystone Driller Co. of Beaver Falls and, according to all who knew him, a mechanical genius. He was also the man on whom James Vale Downie's fictional "Uncle Zwingle" character was based.

UNCLE ZWINGLE TODD operated a small factory (foundry and machine shop) located on a part of the Butler County farm where he and my father had been raised, and where I spent most of my summer vacations when a boy. His doings were a constant source of interest and fascination to me; but there was a slap-dash, dreamy carelessness about many of his practices which gave rise to the frequent predictions of neighbors and friends that he would some day blow himself to Kingdom come, and anybody else who happened to be standing around at the critical moment.

For example, his way of finding out whether there was gas in an old well was to strike a match and throw it into the hole. If there was no gas, the match went out; but, if gas was

present, Uncle Zwingle found himself sitting in Breakneck Creek with his goatshorn moustache burnt to a stubble. He owned one of the first automobiles in Butler County, and on one occasion, he came within three feet of beating a B & O express train to a track crossing. Uncle Zwingle, being well fortified with rye whiskey at the time, took an easy fall in a neighboring meadow and escaped with minor injuries. The railroad gave him a new car.

I looked with a tolerant eye upon all of his numerous faults and shortcomings save one, and that was the outrageous code of business ethics he employed in his dealings with boys. His idea was that boys, and nephews in particular, did not need money and consequently nobody was under any obligation to pay them for the work they did. He hired me to carry mail

for the Pump Company from a village post office a mile up the track, and paid me ten cents a trip. I found out the job was worth a quarter. He also hired me to run a steam pumping plant in a lonely hollow a quarter of a mile from the farmhouse at a dollar a night, five nights a week, pumping water for his garden.

At the end of the first week, payday came. I asked for my five dollars.

"What do you want with money?" drawled Uncle Zwingle. The question took me off guard.

"Why — I want a pocket knife," I said.

"Sure — every boy needs a pocket knife," he replied. "Come with me."

He took me to Winhorse's crossroads store nearby and bought me a 25-cent Barlow, with two blades.

I had a country pal named Norval Deane, whose father was a member of the Board of the Directors of the Pump Company. Norval fell heir to the mail carrier's job, also to that of pump engineer.

I warned him to use every possible precaution in his dealings with Uncle Zwingle, and told him of my experience. He replied that he felt it would be safe to go ahead and intimated that he would get his money on payday or raise a rumpus. He seemed unaffected by my sufferings and I gathered that he believed Uncle Zwingle had skinned me only because I was his nephew, and he probably would not dare to practice such unscrupulous methods against one outside the family.

My opinion was that he didn't know Uncle Zwingle as I did — and so it turned out. At the end of the week Norval came to me with tears in his eyes.

"He owes me five dollars and he won't pay me. Oh, gosh darn the gosh darn luck."

"Are you going to keep on running the pump?" I asked.

"No, we had rain. He doesn't need the water any more."

This was the state of affairs along Breakneck Creek as that halycon summer drew to a close.

Uncle Zwingle invented the double stroke pump. He put two sucker rods in the same well, one inside the other, and

balanced the weight of the pumping machinery on the cross head, tripling the capacity of any single-stroke pump then known. This was the first new idea in pumps since Archimedes invented his water screw in the third century B.C. Uncle Zwingle had no technical education. His method was to whittle out a pattern and give it to the boss moulder, who would come back next day with a casting. After that, he would put the casting in a lathe, or planer, and chew it down to the dimensions necessary for a fit in whatever sort of contraption he was inventing at the moment. This was an expensive method He made the best pumps in the world, but he never made any money.

Uncle Zwingle often went back to the shop after supper to work on his latest whim-wham, and, when I saw lights in the pattern shop, I sometimes went down the hill from Grandfather's home to see what he was up to.

On a summer night of the week following Norval's tour at the pump, he was working late on a pattern of a seven-foot pump column in white pine. He had occasion to use a wood turning lathe and had therefore kept fire in the fifty-horsepower horizontal boiler which drove the pump, after quitting time. The boiler and horizontal steam engine were situated in a wooden ell at the rear of the plant.

As I entered the shop about eight o'clock in the evening, I found Uncle Zwingle swinging the pump column pattern into his lathe with a jib crane.

"Hello, Muggins," he called affably. "Glad to see you. I need a boy about your size right bad. Go back and stir up the fire in that boiler. Throw in a shovel full of coal and you'd better put in some water, too. I'll need to start the line shaft in about ten minutes."

I went through the dim shop as summer dusk closed in, but I looked at the glass water gage closely before turning the injector valve. What I saw sent me scurrying back to the pattern shop.

"There's no water in the glass, Uncle Zwingle," I cried. "Maybe we'd better pull the fire."

"Nonsense. I put water in that boiler

before I went to supper. Go stir up the fire and give her water."

"I'm scared, Uncle Zwingle," I warned him. "If that crown sheet is dry she'll go higher than Gilroy's kite."

"Fiddlesticks," observed my uncle, or something of similar import. "You are the laziest, good-for-nothingest, gleeketest fellow around a shop that I ever saw or heard tell of. You'll never amount to shuck, the gait you're going. If I was your pap I'd take you in my hand. Get out of the way...."

"Gosh," said Uncle Zwingle. After a pause he added: "I'd give my half interest in Hades for a drink of liquor."

Uncle Zwingle started for the boiler room and I made for the country road through the nearest door.

I was half way to the bridge over Breakneck Creek when the boiler went through the roof, travelling in a high parabolic trajectory toward the northeast. I saw it soaring majestically, if somewhat awkwardly, northward. Its course carried it over the railroad and into a pasture field at a distance of five or six hundred yards. It did no great damage, I learned later, beyond tearing a hole into the roof of the shop and mowing down a couple of maple trees along the avenue in front of Uncle Zwingle's house, but with a slightly greater impetus and a stiff breeze from the southwest, the old kettle would undoubtedly have landed on his front porch.

I went back to the shop. A night watchman and a railroad switchman were looking for Uncle Zwingle. It took some time to find him.

He had been very lucky. He had first stirred up the fire and put coal in the fire-box. Then he turned on the injector,

experimentally, and left it working while he went toward the pattern shop. The steam caught him there and rolled him into a pile of sawdust and shavings. He looked like a chicken croquette when he was discovered eventually under the work bench and dragged out by the watchman and the railroader, who was a sort of innocent bystander, having been on the point of setting in a box car for a load of pumps when the boiler soared over his switching engine on its notable flight toward Mars, or more precisely, toward Tallacavey.

"Gosh," said Uncle Zwingle, "that belt bar must have cracked me on the coco. Go turn off the injector, Muggins, before that boiler drowns herself."

"There ain't any boiler, Uncle Zwingle," I said.

"What do you mean, Muggins? Are you daffy?"

"It's gone, Uncle Zwingle. The old kettle's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Up in the field.... It looked like a flying horse in the sky. I saw it ... higher than"

"Hell and damnation," muttered Uncle Zwingle. "That just can't be so. It was here a moment ago."

"It's all true, Mister," said the railroader.

"Gosh," said Uncle Zwingle. After a pause he added: "I'd give my half interest in hades for a drink of liquor."

When I saw my uncle next morning about ten o'clock he was in a somewhat more disordered condition even than the night before.

He gave indications of having spent a bad night. He was seated at his desk in a blue flannel shirt, whittling a piece of white pine. His thick, dark hair and heavy goatshorn moustache were still full of sawdust and a ribbon of white pine hung from his ear. His blue eyes were watery, and his voice was freighted with despair.

"Well, Muggins, my lad," he said lugubriously, "this is the day of judgment. What do you think of that?"

"I thought it came last night," I replied, "when the old boiler let go."

"I ain't thinkin' about the boiler, Muggins," said Uncle Zwingle. "Tain't that. But this is Board meeting day. A parcel o' preachers is comin' out here to pick my bones with farrier's tongs and drop 'em in hell. We ain't makin' any money. Our boiler's done flew away like a wild turkey, and now your pap is comin' out from Allegheny with these preachers to hold the obsequies on the Pump Company. Your pap sure is hell on preachers."

It is a fact, beyond my power to explain, that Father always did go for preachers in a fashion passing strange. He was mixed up in a dozen enterprises, served on an equal number of directorates, and never had less than two members of the clergy, as it seemed to me, in any one group. Sometimes there were as many as three to a board. If there were no preachers on a board when Father was elected to it, he made sure that a couple of pulpit pounders were nominated at the next annual stockholders' meeting. Some of these bodies were so loaded with theology that they could hardly function as directors of industrial enterprises; and they looked and talked more like synodical committees, or sessions of presbyterial elders, than like manufacturers of machinery. The preachers, I feel bound to say, were no more penurious, grasping, jealous, back stabbing, double dealing and incompetent than the lay members of these managing bodies, but you could never have made Uncle Zwingle believe that.

"Preachers have the curse of my life, Muggins," groaned my uncle. "Your pap's a crackerjack, I grant you. He's been to college. He got book learning — Latin, Greek, geometry. If I'd had his chance (he had) maybe I'd 'a been a crackerjack too. But, how does it come he can't take a step without a parson hanging on each arm? Plague on it, nephew, we can't buy a new cupola for the foundry without listening to a lecture on Shadrack and fiery furnace from Dr. McCall. And we dursent mention firebrick to line it with, for that will sure as Hades bring on the plagues of Egypt and Pharaoh and the pyramids of Cheops. My goodness, goshness Agnes, Muggins! What am I going to do?"

With this Uncle Zwingle lifted a pint bottle from a drawer and tilted it ceilingward. The soothing amber-hued contents descended from the bottle with a comforting gurgle into uncle's interior. He lowered the bottle, not hastily, and restored the cork, licking his lush moustache and blinking as though his vision had gone blurry, as it no doubt had.

"Preachers, Muggins," he groaned. "My God, I can't bear it much longer."

At this moment a tall slender young man entered the office. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with a lanyard anchored in the button hole of his coat lapel by means of a peg. His starched collar was 3 inches high.

"Mr. Zwingle Todd, I believe," he said, advancing across the wooden floor. "My name is Mead — Morrison B. Mead, of the Bush Industries. You doubtless know Joe Bush, Mr. Todd. He has his thumb in many a bowl of clam chowder."

"I'd rather you'd come some other time," said my uncle. "You find me in the midst of deep sorrow and bereavement."

"You have lost a relative?"

"No... not just that.... What is the nature of your business, Mr. Mead?"

"I'll come at once to the point, Mr. Todd," said the fashion plate, sinking upon a deal chair. "I have observed that you are preparing to drill for oil on that part of

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your land lying along the railroad west of the station. I notice that a large Oil Country boiler has been moved to the location in question. Fact is, I saw it this morning as I passed on the train, going west. I changed my plans instantly, got off at Callery Junction, hired a horse and buggy and here I am."

"Is that the truth, Mr. Mead?" asked Uncle Zwingle. "You want to lease that land — to drill for oil?"

"The precise truth. Now, I am going to be frank with you, Mr. Todd. My employer, Mr. Bush, owns the Bush Oil Company, as you no doubt know. He has had his eyes on Breakneck Valley for some time — and why shouldn't I lay my cards on the table? — on *your* land. Now, I am unaware whether you have leased the land or are drilling by contract. If you are committed to another company, perhaps we can assist you to break, or withdraw from, your arrangement with them. If you are not, I am prepared to negotiate with you for a lease of your land to drill for oil within six months. I will pay you \$10,000 outright, or five hundred a month and one-sixteenth interest in the well. I can give you \$50 hand money to bind the arrangement and bring the contract for your signature tomorrow morning. Fair enough?"

Uncle Zwingle mildly proposed a variation in the procedure.

"I could come in to the city myself, tomorrow morning, to sign the lease and get the check," he suggested, thickly. But he may not have been as thick as he sounded.

"Fine, Mr. Todd. Just fine. You accept the first proposition or the second?"

"The first — cash outright. The fact is I was going to — I mean I've figured on drilling that land for a long time. I did move the boiler out there... just yesterday in fact. But... I dunno... I've been too busy to watch a temper-screw bobbing up and down.... I'll sell you the oil for ten thousand, Mr. Mead."

"Scrumptious, Mr. Todd. Sign the memo... and here's the hand money. I've just time to catch the 11 o'clock train back to the city and communicate my good news to Mr. Bush."

Mr. Mead took out a wallet and counted ten \$5 bills down on Uncle Zwingle's desk. I had never seen money so crisp and green.

Uncle Zwingle rolled it up and put it into the pocket of his shirt. "Give old Burning Bush my kind regards, Mr. Mead. Tell him I'll be in to see him in the morning," he almost giggled.

Mr. Mead left. I saw him cross to the railroad station, a stone's throw away. He walked up and down upon the platform. I heard the noon train whistle for the Mars [Butler County] stop, a mile west of Toddville.

Hastily I took the chair Mr. Mead had vacated and, reaching across the desk, twitched Uncle Zwingle's sleeve. He blinked at me, happily, almost sentimentally. I thought he was going to cry. Instead, he laughed.

"Great is Diana of the Ephesians, Muggins," said Uncle Zwingle. "Do you know who she was?"

"A woman in the Bible," I said. "Look, Uncle Zwingle; you could pay me the \$10 you owe me for two weeks' work on your irrigation pump. Two of those nice crinkly bills would pay me for two weeks' work."

"Two weeks — you young weasel — you only worked five evenings."

"But you hired me for two weeks. Then you didn't pay me and I struck. So you owe me for the week I was striking just the same as the week I worked."

Uncle Zwingle snorted.

"Muggins — I'm ashamed of you," he sighed. Tears rolled down into his moustache.

At this moment, Mr. Oscar Deane, father of Norval, and a member of the pump works board, entered from the road.

"And you can pay Mr. Deane the five dollars you owe Norval," I added. "The two pocket knives you gave us will be birthday presents. My birthday is on the 12th of August."

"Do tell," smiled Uncle Zwingle, treacherously. "And how old will you be, Muggins?"

"I'll be 12."

"I wouldn't have thought it. Oh, well,

you will learn, as you get older, not to grab an old hawk by the foot. You are a lot like your pap... except I've never seen you honeyin' around any preachers.... Good boy, no harm askin' me, Muggins. Big head — nothin' in it."

Uncle Zwingle reached across the desk and grabbed a fistful of my tousled hair. He shook me playfully until I was dizzy and then released me.

I jumped up. From the middle of the room, I called: "There is just time for me to catch Mr. Mead on the station platform and tell him how that boiler got up in the field...."

Uncle Zwingle blinked and fumbled in the drawer. He stopped the bottle half way to his lips and stared at me transfixed. Mr. Deane remained motionless.

"Muggins... Muggins, my nervy... you wouldn't...."

"I will! I will! unless you fork over ten dollars to me and five to Mr. Deane for Norval!"

"Muggins... my child... no... oh, not that.... You wouldn't have the heart to stab your own kin in the back like that!"

"I will — as sure as shooting. I will — unless you put spot cash on the barrel

*"Great is Diana
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head! Spondulix is what I want."

Uncle seemed suddenly to find me funny.

"Ha, ha... good boy," he laughed.

"Chip off the old block. What a screw for a business deal his daddy always was! Takes your eye teeth and comes back for your bicuspid. All right, Muggins... come and get your money. Here it is."

I stepped forward warily, took the two bills from his hands, ready at the slightest

false move to break for the door.

Mr. Deane had a jovial, twinkling personality. He put in good humoredly:

"I heard something of some such contract from Norval. Five dollars was it? Thank you, Zwingle. That's very nice of you. Norval will be very grateful to get this money. I like to see these lads learning the value of money by working for it." He held out his hand and my uncle gave him one of the bills.

As I looked back from the doorway, Uncle Zwingle had the pint bottle in his hand. He removed the cork and took a long pull.

Mr. Deane shook his head sadly and clucked his tongue with a moral man's audible dubiety and concern.

"The preachers are comin'," explained my uncle. "I've got to keep myself up the best way I can, Oscar."

"I don't know but you are right," laughed Mr. Deane. "Is there anything left in that bottle?"

"Nary drop!" sighed Uncle Zwingle.

A half hour later, I waylaid my friend Norval as he came down the tracks with his sack of morning mail and told him the good news that Uncle Zwingle had paid up on the pumping job and that he had handed Norval's wages to Mr. Deane. Norval grinned broadly, happily.

"Gee, that's wonderful," gurgled my friend. "You know what I'm gonna do, Muggins? I'm gonna get me a .22 rifle that I saw in the hardware store at Mars. The slickest little gun you ever laid your chin to. I been dreamin' about that rifle for months. Gosh, Muggins... thanks. I'll get

the money from Father at noon."

At two o'clock, three members of the board of directors of the Pump Company got off the accommodation train from Allegheny — Father and two preachers. The Reverend Dr. Horatio Flemington was a striking figure — tall, white-haired and of ruddy complexion, with a stately yet genial manner. He wore a frock coat — alpaca at this season, and a high silk hat. The other was Dr. Marvin McCall, a man of great and varied attainments, formerly occupant of the chair of political science in a nearby college. He was of slighter build and he affected less formal attire. I knew them both and they looked all right to me. Dr. McCall, in particular, had always treated me with the utmost friendliness. I could not understand why Uncle Zwingle hated these fine gentlemen just because they were preachers. After all, he didn't have to go to church every Sabbath and listen to long sermons. I did.

The meeting of the board I did not attend. Uncle Zwingle, fortified with a quart of rye and the promise of \$10,000 in cash for the oil under his 30 acres of farmland, was able, seemingly, to appease the directorate, explain the boiler explosion to their satisfaction and obtain reappointment as superintendent of the factory for another year. In the afternoon, I saw the five men, including Mr. Deane, of course, inspecting the flown boiler, which had landed on its fire box in an upright position in the field east of the railroad right-of-way. It was this singular accident of position which had deceived Mr. Morrisoon Mead, leading him to assume that somebody was about to erect a derrick

on Uncle Zwingle's land and drill for oil. The boiler, I learned, was not too much damaged, and equipment was already at hand for moving it back to its foundation in the factory.

At five o'clock, I saw Father and Mr. Deane on the station platform, speeding the preachers back to town. When the train had gone, Mr. Deane took his way toward his home on the west side of the valley and Father went up the hill toward Grandfather's house. I did not see Uncle Zwingle, who was in the factory.

When the coast was clear, Norval Deane got out of a boxcar back of the station and caught up with me under the water tank. His broad face writhed in the agony of disappointment and despair. His eyes were wet and his lips trembling.

"Muggins... I ain't gonna get that gun," he groaned. "Fa... Father put my \$5 into my school book saving fund... for la... last year's book and the year before.... He says its all gone and spent and a lot more. So he kept the \$5. Oh, gosh darn the gosh darn luck!"

"Gosh darn," I said. "That's tough. But, to tell the truth, I thought that might happen. People — grown-ups — are queer about money, Norval. Where money is concerned, there ain't nothin' I would put past them. They'll do any gosh darn thing for \$5. I just figured there might be some slip like that, so, while I had Uncle Zwingle on the skillet, I fried an extra \$5 bill out of him. Here it is."

I handed Norval one of the two bills I was carrying in my pants' pocket.

"Gosh, Muggins," gasped Norval. "Oh, gosh darn... Gosh darn, I'm glad!"

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