

A Narrow Escape:  
Letter to the *Social Democratic Herald*  
(August 8, 1902)

Cañon City, Col., Aug. 8 [1902].

Dear *Herald* and Comrades:—

My light came so near being snuffed out on Saturday [Aug. 2, 1902] that I'm still wondering how it happened; and I about half conclude that the day of miracles has returned. I figured in a wreck on the Colorado & Southern Railway, in Alpine Tunnel, over 12,000 feet altitude, the highest steam railway pass in America, located between Gunnison and Buena Vista.

We were on a mixed train, all coal and other freight except one combination day coach and baggage, in which we rode. There were five passengers, two women and two men besides myself. We had four engines on the train to climb the steep mountain grade, two at head of train and two at rear, just ahead of our car. The road is rickety and the rolling stock run-down and it is criminal to rush that kind of a train through that kind of a hole. The continental divide is in the center of the tunnel and with two engines at each end the train is very apt to break in two and the tunnel is so dark that the engineer can't see a foot ahead of him after the first engines have filled it with smoke. The enginemen have often protested against running this kind of a train through the tunnel, but the company has paid no attention to it, for it's cheaper to get all the cars through in one train, for more trains would require more crews.

Well, we entered the tunnel going east at 1 p.m. Saturday, the 2nd, and just after we passed the red light in the center that marks the continental divide and were rushing down the other side our train broke into three pieces and our engine and car crashed into the engine ahead of us. The shock was terrific and as the only dingy lamp in the car went out, we were left in blackest darkness. The scream of a woman, an unearthly shriek, pierced me to the marrow. Our car was derailed, seats smashed, baggage piled around us, engines off the track and jammed into each other. I picked myself together and felt that I wasn't seriously injured, although I found

later that my leg was bruised and my back wrenched, from which I am still suffering acute pains.

I had some matches in my pocket and in the flickering light of these we concluded that we must get out of the tunnel without delay. With the four engines in the tunnel, pouring out their dense volumes of smoke and gas, we began to suffocate and the horrible thought came to use that we might be strangled to death before we could grope our way through the tunnel. At the same spot in the same tunnel five men were suffocated to death in a previous wreck, they being unable to withstand the fumes of the gas, perishing there before help could reach them.

For a few minutes I saw my doom, and the feeling began to settle over me that this black hole in the mountain peak was to be my tomb. I now understand how the unfortunate miner feels when he finds escape cut off and realizes himself buried alive. But we acted quickly and concluded to start for the other end of the tunnel.

There were some deep holes between the ties, and the walking and stumbling in the pitchy darkness was a trial not soon to be forgotten. I took one of the women by the arm and our procession started, and after a weary march the first ray of light greeted us around the curve and it had all the glory of the primal fiat, "Let there be light!"<sup>1</sup> I shall never forget it. It was our good fortune that a stray current of wind was blowing in at the east end of the tunnel, or we would probably never have emerged from it alive.

Once out, we had to climb the steep mountain, over the tunnel, to reach the other side. On the very summit I plucked a daisy and sent it to Mrs. Debs as a souvenir of the escape from the Alpine tunnel. That daisy came near blooming over my grave.

We reached Buena Vista about 7 p.m., and I spoke there that night, although a far better subject for the hospital than the opera house.

I am entirely satisfied and thanking my stars to have escape so fortunately. I confess to a stray desire to remain on this side a while longer — long enough, indeed, to see how the folks enjoy the cooperative commonwealth.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Genesis*, chapter 1, verse 3.