Spearman Frank Hamilton

Held for Orders: Being Stories of Railroad Life

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Содержание

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The Switchman's Story
SHOCKLEY

"He's rather a bad lot, I guess," wrote Bucks to Callahan, "but I am satisfied of one thing – you can't run that yard with a Sunday-school superintendent. He won't make you any trouble unless he gets to drinking. If that happens, *don't have any words with him*." Bucks underscored three times. "Simply crawl into a cyclone cellar and wire me. Sending you eighteen loads of steel to-night, and six cars of ties. Blair reports section 10 ready for track layers and Mear's outfit moving into the Palisade Cañon. Push the stuff to the front."

It was getting dark, and Callahan sat in that part of the Benkleton depot he called the office, pulling at a muddy root that went unaccountably hot in sudden flashes. He took the pipe from his mouth, leaving his foot on the table, and looked at the bowl resentfully, wondering again if there could be powder in that infernal tobacco of Rubedo's. The mouthpiece he eyed as a desperate man might ponder a final shift.

The pipe had originally come from God's Country, with a Beautiful Amber Mouthpiece, and a Beautiful Bowl; but it was a present from his sister and had been bought at a dry-goods store. Once when thinking – or, if you please, when not thinking – Callahan had held a lighted match to the Beautiful Amber Mouthpiece instead of to the tobacco, and in the fire that ensued they had hard work to save the depot.

Callahan never wrote his sister about it; he thought only about buying pipes at dry-goods stores, and about being, when they exploded, a thousand miles from the man who sold them. There was plenty in that to think about. What he now brought his teeth reluctantly together on was part of the rubber tube of a dismantled atomizer; in happier post-Christmas days a toilet fixture. But Callahan had abandoned the use of bay rum after shaving. His razor had gone to the scrap and on Sunday mornings he merely ran a pair of scissors over the high joints – for Callahan was railroading – and on the front.

After losing the mouthpiece he would have been completely in the air but for little Chris Oxen. Chris was Callahan's section gang. His name was once Ochsner, but that wasn't in Benkleton. Callahan was hurried when he made up the pay roll and put it Oxen, as being better United States. I say United States because Callahan said United States, in preference to English.

Chris had been in America only three years; but he had been in Russia three hundred, and in that time had learned many ways of getting something out of nothing. When the red-haired despatcher after the explosion cast away with bitterness the remains of the pipe, Chris picked it up and by judicious action on the atomizer figured out a new mouthpiece no worse than the original, for while the second, like the first, was of rubber, it was not of the explosive variety.

Chris presented the remodelled root to Callahan as a surprise; Callahan, in a burst of gratitude, promoted him on the spot: he made little Chris foreman. It didn't bring any advance in pay – but there was the honor. To be foreman was an honor, and as little Chris was the only man on the yard force, he became, by promotion, foreman of himself.

So Callahan sat thinking of the ingenuity of Chris, reflecting on the sting of construction tobacco, and studying over Bucks's letter.

The yard was his worry. Not that it was much of a yard; just a dozen runs off the lead to take the construction material for Callahan to distribute, fast as the grade was pushed westward. The trouble at the Benkleton yard came from without, not from within.

The road was being pushed into the cattle country, and it was all easy till they struck Benkleton. Benkleton was just a hard knot on the Yellow Grass trail: a squally, sandy cattle town. There were some bad men in Benkleton; they didn't bother often. But there were some men in Benkleton who thought they were bad, and these were a source of constant bedevilment to the railroad men.

Southwest of the yard, where the river breaks sheer into the bottoms, there hived and still hives a colony of railroad laborers, Russians. They have squatted there, burrowed into the face of the bench like sand swallows, and scraped caves out for themselves, and the name of the place is Little Russia.

This was in the troublous days, when the cowboys, homesick for evil, would ride around Little Russia with rope and gun, and scare the pioneers cross-eyed. The cattle fellows spent the entire winter months, all sand and sunshine, putting up schemes to worry Callahan and the Little Russians. The headquarters for this restless gang were at Pat Barlie's place, across from the post office; it was there that the cowboys loved to congregate. To Callahan, Pat Barlie's place was a wasps' nest; but to Chris, it was a den of wolves – and of a dreader sort than Russian wolves, for Barlie's pack never slept.

The east and west section men could run away from them on hand cars; it was the yardmen who caught it, and it grew so bad they couldn't keep a switchman. About ten o'clock at night, after Number Twenty-three had pulled in and they were distributing a trainload of bridge timber, a switch-man's lantern would go up in signal, when *pist!* a bullet would knock the lamp clean out of his hand, and the nerve clean out of his head. Handling a light in the Benkleton yard was like smoking a celluloid pipe – you never could tell when it would go off.

Cowboys shot away the lamps faster than requisitions could be drawn for new ones. They shot the signals off the switches, and the lights from the tops of moving trains. Whenever a brakeman showed a flicker, two cowboys stood waiting to snuff it. If they missed the lamp, they winged the brakeman.

It compelled Bucks after a while to run trains through Benkleton without showing ever a light. This, though tough, could be managed, but to shunt flats in the yard at night with no light, or to get a switchman willing to play young Tell to Peg Leg Reynolds's William for any length of time, was impossible. At last Bucks, on whom the worry reflected at headquarters, swore he would fight them with fire, and he sent Shockley. Callahan still sat speculating on what he would be up against when Shockley arrived.

The impression Bucks's letter gave him – knowing Bucks to be frugal of words – was that Shockley would rise up with cartridges in his ears and bowie knives dangling from his watch chain. To live in fear of the cowboys was one thing; but to live in fear of the cowboys on the one hand, and in terror of a yard master on the other, seemed, all things considered, confusing, particularly if the new ally got to drinking and his fire scattered. Just then train Fifty-nine whistled. Pat Barlie's corner began to sputter its salute. Callahan shifted around behind his bomb-proof, lit his powder horn, and looking down the line wondered whether Shockley might be on that train.

It was not till the next night though that a tall, thinnish chap, without visible reasons for alighting, got off Fifty-nine and walked tentatively down the platform. At the ticket office he asked for the assistant superintendent.

"Out there on the platform talking to the conductor."

The thin fellow emerged and headed for Callahan. Callahan noticed only his light, springy amble and his hatchet face.

"Mr. Callahan?"

"Yes."

"Bucks sent me up – to take the yard."

"What's your name?"

"Shockley."

"Step upstairs. I'll be up in a minute."

Shockley walked back into the depot but he left the copper-haired assistant superintendent uncertain as to whether it was really over; whether Shockley had actually arrived or not. As Callahan studied the claimant's inoffensive appearance, walking away, he rather thought it couldn't be over, or that Bucks was mistaken; but Bucks never made a mistake.

Next morning at seven, the new yard master took hold. Callahan had intimated that the night air in the yard, it being low land, was miasmatic, and that Shockley had maybe better try for a while to do his switching in the daytime. Just before the appointed hour in the morning, the assistant had looked out on his unlucky yard; he thought to himself that if that yard didn't drive a man to drink nothing ever would. Piled shanty high with a bewildering array of material, it was enough to take the heart out of a Denver switching crew.

While he stood at the window he saw their plug switch engine, that had been kicked out of every other yard on the system, wheeze out of the roundhouse, saw the new yard master flirt his hand at the engineer, and swing up on the footboard. But the swing – it made Callahan's heart warm to him. Not the lubberly jump of the hoboes that had worried the life out of him all summer, even when the cattlemen didn't bother. It was the swing of the sailor into the shrouds, of the Cossack into the saddle, of the yacht into the wind. It was like falling down or falling up or falling on – the grace of a mastery of gravitation – that was Shockley's swing on the footboard of the yard engine as it shot snorting past him.

"He's all right," muttered Callahan. It was enough.

A man who flipped a tender like that was not like to go very wrong even in that chaos of rails and ties and stringers and coal.

"Now," continued Callahan to himself, timidly hopeful, "if the cuss only doesn't get to drinking!" He watched apprehensively, dreading the first time he should see him entering Pat Barlie's place, but Shockley didn't appear to know Pat had a place. The cowboys, too, watched him, waiting for his lamp to gleam at night down in the yard, but their patience was strained for a long time. Shockley got all his work done by daylight.

To the surprise of Callahan, and probably on the principle of the watched pot, the whole winter went without a brush between Shockley and the cowboys. Even Peg Leg Reynolds let him alone. "He's the luckiest fellow on earth," remarked Callahan one day at McCloud in reply to a question from Bucks about Shockley. "There hasn't a shot been fired at him all winter."

"He wasn't always lucky," commented Bucks, signing a batch of letters.

"He came from Chicago," Bucks went on, after a silence. "He was switching there on the 'Q' at the time of the stock-yards riots. Shockley used to drink like a pirate. I never knew just the right of it. I understood it was in a brawl – anyway, he killed a man there; shot him, and had to get away in a hurry. I was train master. Shockley was a striker; but I'd always found him decent, and when his wife came to me about it I helped her out a little; she's dead since. His record isn't just right back there yet. There's something about the shooting hanging over him. I never set eyes on the fellow again till he struck me for a job at McCloud; then I sent him up to you. He claimed he'd quit drinking – guess he had. Long as he's behaving himself I believe in giving him a chance – h'm?"

It really wasn't any longer a case of giving him a chance; rather of whether they could get on without him. When the Colorado Pacific began racing us into Denver that summer, it began to crowd even Shockley to keep the yard clean; he saw he would have to have help.

"Chris, what do they give you for tinkering up the ties?" asked Shockley one day.

"Dollar an' a half."

"Why don't you take hold switching with me and get three dollars?"

Chris was thunderstruck. First he said Callahan wouldn't let him, but Shockley "guessed yes." Then Chris figured. To save the last of the hundred dollars necessary to get the woman and the

babies over – it could be done in three months instead of six, if only Callahan would listen. But when Shockley talked Callahan always listened, and when he asked for a new switchman he got him. And Chris got his three; to him a sum unspeakable. By the time the woman and the children arrived in the fall, Chris would have died for Shockley.

The fall that saw the woman and the stunted subjects of the Czar stowed away under the bench in Little Russia brought also the cowboys down from Montana to bait the Russians.

One stormy night, when Chris thought it was perfectly safe to venture up to Rubedo's after groceries, the cowboys caught him and dragged him over to

Pat Barlie's.

It was seven when they caught him, and by nine they had put him through every pace that civilization could suggest. Peg Leg Reynolds, as always, master of ceremonies, then ordered him tied to the stove. When it was done, the cowboys got into a big circle for a dance. The fur on Chris's coat had already begun to sizzle, when the front door opened. Shockley walked in.

Straight, in his ambling, hurried way, he walked past the deserted bar through the ring of cowboys at the rear to Chris frying against the stove, and began cutting him loose. Through every knot that his knife slit he sent a very loud and very bad word, and no sooner had he freed Chris than he jerked him by the collar, as if quarreling with him, toward the back door, which was handy, and before the cowboys got wind he had shoved him through it.

"Hold on there!" cried Peg Leg Reynolds, when it was just too late. Chris was out of it, and Shockley turned alone.

"All right, partner; what is it?" he asked amiably.

"You've got a ripping nerve."

"I know it."

"What's your name?"

"Shockley."

"Can you dance?"

"No."

It was Peg Leg's opportunity. He drew his gun. "I reckon maybe you can. Try it," he added, pointing the suggestion with the pistol. Shockley looked foolish; he didn't begin tripping soon enough, and a bullet from the cowboy's gun splintered the baseboard at his feet. Shockley attempted to shuffle. To any one who didn't know him it looked funny. But Peg Leg was a rough dancing master, and before he said enough an ordinary man would have dropped exhausted. Shockley, breathing a good bit quicker, only steadied himself against the bar.

"Take off your hat before gentlemen," cried the cowboy. Shockley hesitated, but he did pull off his cap.

"That's more like it. What's your name?"

"Shockley."

"Shockley?" echoed Reynolds with a burst of range amenities. "Well, Shockley, you can't help your name. Drink for once in your life with a man of breeding – my name's Reynolds. Pat, set out the good bottle – this guy pays," exclaimed Peg Leg, wheeling to the bar.

"What'll it be?" asked Pat Barlie of Shockley, as he deftly slid a row of glasses in front of the men of breeding.

"Ginger ale for me," suggested Shockley mildly. The cowboys put up a single yell. Ginger ale! It was too funny.

Reynolds, choking with contempt, pointed to the yard master's glass. "Fill it with whiskey," he shouted. "Fill it, Pat!" he repeated, as Shockley leaned undecidedly against the bar. The yard master held out the glass, and the bar keeper began to pour. Shockley looked at the liquor a moment; then he looked at Reynolds, who fronted him gun in one hand and red water in the other.

"Drink!"

Shockley paused, looked again at the whiskey and drew the glass towards him with the curving hand of a drinker. "You want me to drink this?" he half laughed, turning on his baiter.

"I didn't say so, did I? I said DRINK!" roared Peg Leg.

Everybody looked at Shockley. He stood fingering the glass quietly. Somehow everybody, drunk or sober, looked at Shockley. He glanced around at the crowd; other guns were creeping from their holsters. He pushed the glass back, smiling.

"I don't drink whiskey, partner," said Shockley gently.

"You'll drink that whiskey, or I'll put a little hole into you!"

Shockley reached good-naturedly for the glass, threw the liquor on the floor, and set it back on the bar.

"Go on!" said Shockley. It confused Reynolds.

"A man that'll waste good whiskey oughtn't t' live, anyhow," he muttered, fingering his revolver nervously. "You've spoiled my aim. Throw up your hat," he yelled. "I'll put a hole through that to begin with."

Instead, Shockley put his cap back on his head.

"Put a hole through it there," said he. Reynolds set down his glass, and Shockley waited; it was the cowboy who hesitated.

"Where's your nerve?" asked the railroad man. The gun covered him with a flash and a roar. Reynolds, whatever his faults, was a shot. His bullet cut cleanly through the crown, and the powder almost burnt Shockley's face. The switchman recovered himself instantly, and taking off his cap laughed as he examined the hole.

"Done with me?" he asked evenly, cap in hand.

Peg Leg drained his glass before he spoke. "Get out!" he snapped. The switchman started on the word for the front door. When he opened it, everybody laughed – but Shockley.

Maybe an hour later Reynolds was sitting back of the stove in a card game, when a voice spoke at his ear. "Get up!" Reynolds looked around into a pistol; behind it stood Shockley, pleasant. "Get up!" he repeated. Nobody had seen him come in; but there he was, and with an absolutely infantile gun, a mere baby gun, in the yellow light, but it shone like bright silver.

Reynolds with visible embarrassment stood up.

"Throw your cannon into the stove, Reynolds, you won't need it," suggested Shockley. Reynolds looked around; there appeared to be no hopeful alternative: the drop looked very cold; not a cowboy interposed. Under convoy, Reynolds stumped over to the stove and threw in his gun, but the grace of the doing was bad.

"Get up there on the bar and dance; hustle!" urged Shockley. They had to help the confused cowboy up; and when he stood shamefaced, looking down on the scene of his constant triumphs, and did a painful single foot, marking time with his peg, the cowboys, who had stood their own share of his bullying, roared. Shockley didn't roar; only stood with busy eyes where he could cover any man on demand, not forgetting even Pat Barlie.

Peg Leg, who had danced so many in his day, danced, and his roasting gun sputtered an accompaniment from the stove; but as Shockley, who stood in front of it, paid no attention to the fusillade of bullets, good form prevented others from dodging. "That'll do; get down. Come here, Chris," called Shockley. Chris Oxen, greatly disturbed, issued from an obscure corner.

"Get down on your knees," exclaimed the yard master, jerking Reynolds with a chilly twist in front of the frightened Russian. "Get on your knees; right where I threw your whiskey," and Shockley, crowding Reynolds down to his humiliation, dropped for the first time into range civilities himself, and the shame and the abasement of it were very great.

"Boys," said the yard master, with one restless eye on Reynolds and one on everybody else, as he pointed at Chris, "this man's coat was burnt up. He's a poor devil, and his money comes hard.

Chip in for a new coat. I've nothing against any man that don't want to give, but Reynolds must pass the hat. Take mine, you coyote."

Nearly everybody contributed as Reynolds went round. Shockley made no comments. "Count it," he commanded, when the fallen monarch had finished; and when the tale was made, Shockley told Pat Barlie to put in as much more as the cap held, and he did so.

"There, Chris; go home. I don't like you," added Shockley, insolently, turning on Reynolds.

"You don't know what fun is. This town won't hold you and me after to-night. You can take it or you can leave it, but the first time I ever put eyes on you again one of us will cash in."

He backed directly towards the front door and out.

Peg Leg Reynolds took only the night to decide; next day he hit the trail. The nervy yard master he might have wiped out if he had stayed, but the disgrace of kneeling before the dog of a Russian was something never to be wiped out in the annals of Benkleton. Peg Leg moved on; and thereafter cowboys took occasion to stop Shockley on the street and jolly him on the way he did the one-legged bully, and the lights were shot no more.

The railroad men swore by the new yard master; the Russians took their cigarettes from their mouths and touched their caps when Shockley passed; Callahan blessed his name; but little Chris worshiped him.

One day Alfabet Smith dropped off at Benkleton from Omaha headquarters. Alfabet was the only species of lizard on the pay roll – he was the West End spotter. "Who is that slim fellow?" he asked of Callahan as Shockley flew by on the pilot board of an engine.

"That's Shockley."

"Oh, that's Shockley, is it?"

But he could say little things in a way to make a man prick hot all over.

"Yes, that's Shockley. Why?" asked Callahan with a dash of acid.

"Nothing, only he's a valuable man; he's wanted, Shockley is," smiled Alfabet Smith, but his smile would freeze tears.

Callahan took it up short. "Look here, Alfabet. Keep off Shockley."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you and I will touch, head on, if you don't."

Smith said nothing; he was used to that sort. The next time Bucks was up, his assistant told him of the incident.

"If he bothers Shockley," Bucks said, "we'll get his scalp, that's all. He'd better look after his conductors and leave our men alone."

"I notice Shockley isn't keeping his frogs blocked," continued Bucks, reverting to other matters. "That won't do. I want every frog in the yard blocked and kept blocked, and tell him I said so."

But the frog-blocking was not what worried Shockley; his push was to keep the yard clean, for the month of December brought more stuff twice over than was ever poured into the front-end yard before. Chris, though, had developed into a great switchman, and the two never let the work get ahead.

So it came that Little Russia honored Chris and his big pay check above most men. Shockley stood first in Little Russia; then the CZAR, then Chris, then Callahan. Queen Victoria and Bismarck might have admirers; but they were not in it under the bench.

When the Russian holidays came, down below, Chris concluded that the celebration would be merely hollow without Shockley; for was not the very existence of Little Russia due to him? All the growth, all the prosperity – what was it due to? Protection. What was the protection? Shockley. There were brakemen who argued that protection came from the tariff; but they never made any converts in Little Russia, where the inhabitants could be induced to vote for president only on the assurance that Shockley was running.

"Well, what's the racket anyhow, Chris?" demanded Shockley lazily, after Cross-Eyes trying to get rid of the invitation to the festivities had sputtered switch-English five minutes at him.

"Ve got Chrismus by us," explained Chris desperately.

"Christmas," repeated Shockley grimly. "Christmas. Why, man, Christmas don't come nowhere on earth in January. You want to wind up your calendar. Where'd you get them shoes?"

"Dollar sefenty-vife."

"Where?"

"Rubedo."

"And don't you know a switchman oughtn't t' put his feet in flatboats? Don't you know some day you'll get your foot stuck in a tongue or a guard? Then where'll you be, Dutch, with a string of flats rolling down on you, eh?"

However, Chris stuck for his request. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Next day he tired Shockley out.

"Well, for God's sake let up, Chris," said the yard master at last. "I'll come down a while after Twenty-three comes in. Get back early after supper, and we'll make up Fifty-five and let the rest go."

It was a pretty night; pretty enough over the yard for anybody's Christmas, Julian or Gregorian. No snow, but a moon, and a full one, rising early over the Arikaree bluffs, and a frost that bit and sparkled, and the north wind asleep in the sand hills.

Shockley, after supper, snug in a pea-jacket and a storm cap, rode with the switch engine down from the roundhouse. Chris, in his astrakhan reefer and turban, walking over from the dugouts in Rubedo's new shoes, flipped the footboard at the stock-yard with almost the roll of Shockley himself.

Happily for Christmas in Little Russia, Twenty-three pulled in on time; but it was long and heavy that night. It brought coal and ties, and the stuff for the Fort Rawlins depot, and a batch of bridge steel they had been waiting two weeks for – mostly Cherry Creek stuff – eleven cars of it.

The minute the tired engine was cut off the long train, up ran the little switch engine and snapped at the headless monster like a coyote.

Out came the coal with a clatter; out came the depot stuff with a sheet of flame through the goat's flues – shot here, shot there, shot yonder – flying down this spur and down that and the other, like stones from a catapult; and the tough-connected, smut-faced, blear-eyed yard engine coughed and snorted and spit a shower of sparks and soot and cinders up into the Christmas air. She darted and dodged and jerked, and backed up and down and across the lead, and never for a fraction of a second took her eye off Shockley's lamp. Shivering and clanging and bucking with steam and bell and air, but always with one smoky eye on Shockley's lamp, until Twenty-three was wrecked clean to the caboose, and the switch engine shot down the main line with the battered way-car in her claws like a hawk with a prairie dog.

Then there was only the westbound freight, Fifty-five, to make up with the Fort Rawlins stuff and the Cherry Creek steel, which was "*rush*," and a few cars of ties flung on behind on general principles. It was quick work now – sorting and moving the bridge steel – half an hour for an hour's work, with the north wind waking at the clatter and sweeping a bank of cloud and sand across the valley. Shockley and Chris and the goat crew put at it like black ants. There was releasing and setting and kicking and splitting, and once in a while a flying switch, dead against the rubrics; and at last the whole train of steel was in line, clean as the links of a sprocket, and ready to run in on the house-track for the caboose.

For that run Chris set the east house-track switch, crossed the track, and swung a great circle with his lamp for the back. To get over to the switch again, he started to recross the track. In the dark, his ankle turned on a lump of coal; he recovered lightly, but the misstep sent his other foot wide, and with a bit of a jolt Rubedo's new shoe slipped into the frog.

Up the track he heard a roll of stormy coughs from the engine gathering push to shove the string of flats down. They were coming towards him, over the spot where he stood, on his signal; and he quietly tried to loosen his heel.

The engine's drivers let go, and she roared a steaming oath, and Chris could hear it; but he was glad, for his heel would not work quietly out of the frog; it stuck. Then the engineer, unruffled, pulled at his sand lever, and his engine snorted again and her driver tires bit, and slowly she sent the long train of steel down on Chris's switch; he heard the frosty flanges grinding on the face of the rails as he tried to loosen his foot.

Coolly, first, like a confident man in a quicksand; soon, with alarm running into fright. But there was time enough; the head car was four or five lengths above the switch and coming very, very slowly, heavy-like, and squeaking stiffly under its load, yet coming; and he wrenched harder, but his foot stuck. Then he yelled for Shockley. Shockley had gone over to open the caboose switch; Shockley couldn't hear, and he knew it. And he yelled again.

The sweat broke over him as he turned and twisted. The grip of the frog seemed to stifle him; half the time was gone; the near truck wheels screeched two car-lengths away: and the switchman played his last card. Time and time again Shockley had told him what to do if that moment came in the night; had told him to throw his lamp in the air like a rocket. But Chris had forgotten all that till the flat dropped heavily on the tongue in front of him; then he threw his lamp like a rocket high into the night.

No help came. He raised his arms frantically above his head, and his cries cut the wind. Desperate at last, he threw himself flat to lie outside the rail, to save all but a foot; but the frog held him, and crying horribly he struggled back to his feet, only to sink again half crazy to the ground. As his senses left him he was hardly aware of a stinging pain in his foot, of a wrench at his leg, an instant arm round his back, and his yard master's voice in his ear.

"Jump!" screamed Shockley.

Chris, scrambling frantically on the deadly rails, unable to jump, felt himself picked from the ground, heard a choke in the throat at his ear, and he was flung like a drawbar through the dark. Shockley had passed a knife blade from vamp to sole, slit the Russian's clumsy shoe, jerked his foot from it, and thrown him bodily into the clear.

Chris staggered panting to his feet. Already the steel was moving slowly over the switch; he heard the sullen pounding of the trucks on the contact; a lantern, burning yet, lay on its side near the stand – it was Shockley's lamp. Chris looked wildly around for his yard master; called out; called Shockley's name; listened. No scream, no groan, no cry, no answer; no sound, but just the steady pounding of the wheels over the contact. The little switchman screamed again in a frenzy, and turning, raced stumbling up the track to the cab. He swung into it, and by signs made the engineer shut off. He tried to talk, and only stammered a lingo of switch-pidgin and the name of Shockley. They couldn't understand it all, but they shut off with faces pinched and sallow, threw open the furnace door, and grabbing their lanterns ran back. The fireman on his knees held his lamp out under the flat that spanned the contact; he drew shrinking back, and rising, started on the run for the depot to rouse Callahan.

It was Callahan who pulled the pin a moment later, Chris shivering like a rabbit at his side. It was Callahan who gave the slow pull-ahead order that cut the train in two at the frog, and Callahan who stepped wavering from the gap that opened behind the receding flat – back from something between the rails – back to put his hands blindly out for the target-rod, and unsteadily upon it. He heard Shockley breathing.

Some carried the headlight back, and some tore the door off a box car, and they got him on. They carried him unevenly, stumbling, over to the depot. They laid him on Callahan's mattress in the waiting room, and the men stood all about him; but the only sound was his breathing, and inside under the lamp the receiver, clicking, clicking, clicking, of Bucks and the company surgeon coming on a special ahead of Fifty-nine.

They twisted tourniquets into his quivering flesh, and with the light dying in his eyes they put whiskey to his lips. But he turned his head and spit it from his mouth. Then he looked from face to face about him – to the engineer and to the fireman, and to little Chris and to Callahan, and his lips moved.

Chris bent over him, but try as he would he could not catch the words. And Callahan listened and watched and waited.

"Block – block – " said Shockley's lips. And Callahan wiped them slowly and bent close again and put his ear over them. "Block – block – the – frogs."

And Shockley died.

They lifted the mattress into the baggage room; Callahan drew over it a crumpled sheet. A lantern left, burned on the checking desk, but the men, except Chris, went their ways. Chris hung irresolute around the open door.

The special pulled in, and with the shoes wringing fire from her heels as she slowed, Bucks and a man following close sprang from the step of the coach. Callahan met them; shook his head.

Twenty minutes later Fifty-nine whistled for the yard; but in the yard all was dark and still. One man got off Fifty-nine that night. Carrying his little valise in his hand, he walked in and out of the depot, hanging on the edges of the grouping men, who still talked of the accident. After hearing, he walked alone into the baggage room, and with his valise in his hand drew back the edge of the sheet and, standing, looked. Afterward he paused at the door, and spoke to a man that was fixing a lantern.

"What was his name?"

"Shockley."

"Shockley?"

"Yes."

"Yard master here?"

"Yes. Know him?"

"Me? No. I guess not." He walked away with his valise, and drew his coat collar up in the wind that swept the platform. "I guess I don't want him," he muttered to himself. "I guess *they* don't want *him*; not now." And he went back to the man and asked when a train left again for Chicago. He had a warrant for Shockley; but Shockley's warrant had been served.

After the others had gone, Bucks and Callahan and the surgeon talked together in the waiting room, and Chris hanging by, blear-eyed and helpless, looked from one to the other: showed his foot when Callahan pointed, and sat patient while the surgeon stitched the slit where Shockley's blade had touched the bone. Then he stood again and listened. While any one talked Chris would listen; silent and helpless, just listening. And when Bucks had gone up stairs, and the surgeon had gone up stairs, and Callahan, tired and sick, had gone up stairs, and only the operator sat under his lamp at the table, Chris stood back in the gloom in front of the stove and poked stealthily at the fire. When it blazed he dropped big chunks of smutty coal in on it, and wiped his frost-bitten nose with the back of his dirty hand, and looked toward the baggage room door and listened – listened for a cry, or a sound, or for that fearful, fearful breathing, such breathing as he had not been hearing before. But no cry, no sound, no stertorous breath came out of the darkness, and from under the lamp in front of the operator only the sounder clicked, always talking, talking, talking – talking queer things to Russian ears.

So Chris drew his cap a little lower, for so he always began, pulled mechanically from his pocket a time-table, tore off a strip, and holding it carefully open, sprinkled a few clippings of tobacco upon it, and rolled his cigarette. He tucked it between his lips; it was company for the silence, and he could more easily stop the listening. But he did not light; only pulled his cap again a little lower, buttoned close his reefer, looked at his bandaged foot, picked up his lamp, and started home.

It was dark, and the wind from the north was bitter, but he made a great detour into the teeth of it – around by the coal chutes, a long way round, a long way from the frog of the east house-track switch; and the cold stung his face as he limped heavily on. At last by the ice house he turned south, and reaching the face of the bench paused a moment, hesitating, on the side of the earthen stairs; it

was very dark. After a bit he walked slowly down and pushed open the door of his dugout. It was dark inside, and cold; the fire was out. The children were asleep; the woman was asleep.

He sat down in a chair and put out his lamp. There was no Christmas that night in Little Russia.

The Wiper's Story
HOW McGRATH GOT AN ENGINE

This came about through there being whiskers on the rails. It may not be generally understood that whiskers grow on steel rails; curious as it seems, they do. Moreover, on steel rails they are dangerous, and, at times, exceedingly dangerous.

Do not infer that all steel rails grow whiskers; nor is it, as one might suppose, only the old rails that sport them. The youngest rail on the curve may boast as stout a beard as the oldest rail on the tangent, and one just as gray. They flourish, too, in spite of orders; for while whiskers are permitted on engineers and tolerated on conductors, they are never encouraged on rails. Nature, however, provides the whiskers, regardless of discipline, and, what is more, shaves them herself.

Their culture depends on conditions. Some months grow better whiskers than others: September is famous for whiskers, while July grows very few. Whiskers will grow on steel rails in the air of a single night; but not every night air will produce whiskers. It takes a high, frosty air, one that stays out late, to make whiskers. Take, for example, the night air of the Black Hills; it is known everywhere among steel rails as a beard tonic. The day's moisture, falling as the sun drops beyond the hills is drawn into feathery, jewelled crystals of frost on the chilly steel, as a glass of ice-water beads in summer shade; and these dewy stalagmites rise in a dainty profusion, until when day peeps into the cañons the track looks like a pair of long white streamers winding up and down the levels. But beware that track. It is a very dangerous track, and its possibilities lie where Samson's lay – in the whiskers.

So it lies in early morning, as pretty a death-trap as any flower that ever lured a fly; only, this pitfall waits for engines and trains and men – and sometimes gets them.

It waits there on the mountain grades, in an ambush really deadly for an unwary train, until the sun, which is particularly lazy in the fall, peeping over into the cuts, smiles, at length, on the bearded steel as if it were too funny, and the whiskers vanish into thin air.

A smooth-faced rail presents no especial dangers; and if trainmen in the Hills had their way, they would never turn a wheel until the sun had done barbering. But despatchers not having to do with them take no account of whiskers. They make only the schedules, and the whiskers make the trouble. To lessen their dangers, engineers always start, up hill or down, with a tankful of sand, and they sand the whiskers. It is rough barbering, but it helps the driver-tires grit a bit into the face of the rail, and in that way hang on. In this emergency a tankful of sand is better than all the air Westinghouse ever stored.

Aloysius McGrath was a little sweeper; but he was an aspiring one, for even a sweeper may aspire, and in point of fact most of them do aspire. Aloysius worked in the roundhouse at the head of the Wind River pass on the West End Mountains. It is an amazingly rough country; and as for grades, it takes your breath merely to look down the levels. Three per cent, four per cent, five per cent – it is really frightful! But Aloysius was used to heavy falls; he had begun working for the company as a sweeper under Johnnie Horigan, and no engineer would have thought of running a grade to compare with Johnnie's headers.

Horigan was the first boss Aloysius ever had. Now Aloysius, if caught just right, is a very pretty name, but Johnnie Horigan could make nothing whatever of it, so he called Aloysius, Cooney, as he said, for short – Cooney McGrath – and, by the way, if you will call that McGraw, we shall be started right. As for Horigan, he may be called anything; at least it is certain that on the West End he has been called everything.

Johnnie was ordinarily boss sweeper. He had suffered numerous promotions – several times to wiper, and once to hostler; but his tendency to celebrate these occasions usually cost him his job, and he reverted to sweeping. If he had not been such an inoffensive, sawed-off little old nubbin he wouldn't

have been tolerated on the pay rolls; but he had been with the company so long and discharged so often that foremen grew tired of trying to get rid of him, and in spite of his very regular habits, he was hanging on somewhere all the time.

When Johnnie was gone, using the word in at least two senses, Aloysius Cooney McGrath became, *ipso facto*, boss sweeper. It happened first one Sunday morning, just after pay day, when Johnnie applied to the foreman for permission to go to church. Permission was granted, and Johnnie started for church; but it is doubtful whether he ever found it. At all events, at the end of three weeks he turned up again at the roundhouse, considerably the worse for his attempt to locate the house of prayer – which he had tried to find only after he had been kicked out of every other place in town.

Aloysius had improved the interval by sweeping the roundhouse as it never had been swept before; and when Johnnie Horigan returned, morally disfigured, Aloysius McGrath was already promoted to be wiper over his old superior. Johnnie was in no wise envious. His only move was to turn the misfortune to account for an ulterior purpose, and he congratulated the boy, affecting that he had stayed away to let them see what stuff the young fellow was made of. This put him in a position to negotiate a small loan from his *protégé*– a position of which he never neglected the possibilities. It was out of the question to be mad very long at Johnnie, though one might be very often. After a time Aloysius got to firing: then he wanted an engine. But he fired many months, and there came no promotion. The trouble was, there were no new crews added to the engine service. Nobody got killed; nobody quit; nobody died. One, two, and three years without a break, and little Aloysius had become a bigger Aloysius, and was still firing; he became also discouraged, for then the force was cut down and he was put back wiping.

"Never y' mind, never y' mind, Cooney," old Johnnie would say. "It'll come all right. You'll get y'r ingin' yet. Lind me a couple till pay-a-day, Cooney, will you? I'll wahrant y' y'r ingin' yet, Cooney." Which little assurance always cost Aloysius two dollars till pay day, and no end of trouble getting it back; for when he attempted collection, Johnnie took a very dark view of the lad's future, alluding vaguely to people who were hard-hearted and ungrateful to their best friends. And though Aloysius paid slight attention to the old sweeper's vaporings, he really was in the end the means of the boy's getting his engine.

After three years of panic and hard times on the mountain division, the mines began to reopen, new spurs were laid out, construction crews were put on, and a new activity was everywhere apparent. But to fill the cup of Aloysius' woe, the new crews were all sent up from McCloud. That they were older men in the order of promotion was cold comfort – Aloysius felt crowded out. He went very blue, and the next time Johnnie applied for a loan Aloysius rebuffed him unfeelingly; this in turn depressed John.

"Never mind, never mind, Cooney. I'll not be speakin' t' Neighbor agin t' set y' up. If y' like wipin', stick to ut. I'll not be troublin' Neighbor agin." Johnnie professed a great pull with the master mechanic.

That Aloysius might feel still more the sting of his coldness, Johnnie for some days paid much court to the new firemen and engine runners. Nothing about the house was too good for them, and as the crafty sweeper never overlooked an opportunity, he was in debt before the end of the week to most of the brotherhood.

But the memorable morning for Aloysius came shortly thereafter. It was one of those keen October mornings that bite so in the Hills. The construction train, Extra 240 West, had started about five o'clock from the head of the pass with a load of steel for the track layers, and stopped for a bite of breakfast at Wind River. Above the roundhouse there is a switchback. When the train pulled in, the crew got off for some hot coffee. Johnnie Horigan was around playing good fellow, and he climbed into the cab to run the train through the switchback while the crews were at the eating house. It was irregular to leave the engine, but they did, and as for Johnnie Horigan, he was regularly irregular. There were sixteen cars of steel in the string, besides a caboose ful of laborers. The backing up the

leg of the nipper was easy. After the switch was newly set, Johnnie pulled down the lower leg; and that, considering the whiskers, was too easy.

When he pulled past the eating house on the down grade, he was going so lively with his flats that he was away before the crew could get out of the lunch room. In just one minute everybody in Wind River was in trouble: the crew, because their train was disappearing down the cañon; the eating house man, because nobody paid him for his coffee; and Johnnie Horigan, because he found it impossible to stop. He had dumped the sand, he had applied the air, he had reversed the engine – by all the rules laid down in the instruction car she ought to stop. But she didn't stop, and – this was the embarrassing feature – she was headed down a hill twenty miles long, with curves to weary a boa-constrictor. John hung his head wildly over the drivers, looked back at the yelling crew, contemplated the load that was pushing him down the grade and his head began to swim. There appeared but one thing more to do: that was to make a noise; and as he neared the roundhouse he whistled like the wind. Aloysius O'Cooney McGrath, at the alarm, darted out of the house like a fox. As he reached the door he saw the construction train coming, and Johnnie Horigan in the gangway looking for a soft place to light.

The wiper chartered the situation in a mental second. The train was running away, and Horigan was leaving it to its fate. From any point of view it was a tough proposition, but tough propositions come rarely to ambitious railroad men, and Aloysius was starving for any sort of a proposition that would help him out of the waste. The laborers in the caboose, already bewildered, were craning anxiously from the windows. Horigan, opposite the roundhouse, jumped in a sprawl; the engine was shot past Aloysius; boarding was out of the question.

But on the siding stood a couple of flats, empty; and with his hair straight on centres, the little wiper ran for them and mounted the nearest. The steel train was jumping. Aloysius, bunching his muscle, ran the length of the two flats for a head, and, from the far corner, threw himself across the gap, like a bat, on a load of the runaway steel. Scrambling to his feet, he motioned and yelled to the hoboes, who were pouring frantic out on the hind flat of the string, to set brakes; then he made ahead for the engine.

It was a race with the odds all wrong, for with every yard Aloysius gained, the train gained a dozen. By the time he reached the tender, breathless, and slid down the coal into the deserted cab, the train was heading into Little Horn gap, and every Italian aboard, yelling for life. Aloysius jumped into the levers, poked his head through the window, and looked at the drivers. They were in the back motion, and in front of them the sand was streaming wide open. The first thing he did was to shut half it off – the fight could not be won by wasting ammunition. Over and over again he jerked at the air. It was refusing its work. Where so many a hunted runner has turned for salvation there was none for Aloysius. He opened and closed, threw on and threw off; it was all one, and all useless. The situation was as simple as it was frightful. Even if they didn't leave the track, they were certain to smash into Number Sixteen, the up-passenger, which must meet them somewhere on the hill.

Aloysius's fingers closed slowly on the sand lever. There was nothing on earth for it but sand, merely sand; and even the wiper's was oozing with the stream that poured from the tank on the whiskered rails. He shut off a bit more, thinking of the terrific curves below, and mentally calculated – or tried to – how long his steam would last to reverse the drivers – how he could shovel coal and sand the curves at the same time – and how much slewing the Italians at the tail of the kite could stand without landing on the rocks.

The pace was giddy and worse. When his brain was whirling fastest, a man put a hand on his shoulder. Aloysius started as if Davy Jones had tapped him, and between bounces looked, scared, around. He looked into a face he didn't know from Adam's, but there was sand in the eyes that met his.

"What can I do?"

Aloysius saw the man's lips move, and, without taking his hands from the levers, bent his head to catch the words.

"What can I do?" shouted the man at his elbow.

"Give me steam – steam," cried the wiper, looking straight ahead.

It was the foreman of the steel gang from the caboose. Aloysius, through the backs of his eyes, saw him grab the shovel and make a pass at the tender. Doing so, he nearly took a header through the gangway, but he hung to the shovel and braced himself better.

With the next attempt he got a shovelful into the cab, but in the delivery passed it well up Aloysius's neck. There were neither words nor grins, but just another shovelful of coal a minute after; and the track-layer, in spite of the dizzy lurching, shot it where it belonged – into the furnace. Feeling that if one shovelful could be landed, more could, Aloysius's own steam rose. As they headed madly around the Cinnamon bend the dial began to climb in spite of the obstacles; and the wiper, considering there were two, and the steam and the sand to fight the thing out, opened his valve and dusted the whiskers on the curve with something more than a gleam of hope.

If there was confusion on the runaway train, there was terror and more below it. As the spectre flitted past Pringle station, five miles down the valley, the agent caught a glimpse of the sallow face of the wiper at the cab window, and saw the drivers whirling backward. He rushed to his key and called the Medicine Bend despatcher. With a tattoo like a drum-roll the despatcher in turn called Soda Springs, ten miles below Pringle, where Number Sixteen, the up-passenger, was then due. He rattled on with his heart in his fingers, and answer came on the instant. Then an order flashed into Soda Springs:

To No. 16.
Take Soda Springs siding quick. Extra 240 West has lost control of the train.
Di.

There never was such a bubbling at Soda Springs as that bubbling. The operator tore up the platform like a hawk in a chicken yard. Men never scattered so quick as when Number Sixteen began screaming and wheezing and backing for the clear. Above the town, Aloysius, eyes white to the sockets, shooting the curves like a meteor, watched his lessening stream of sand pour into the frost on the track. As they whipped over bridges and fills the caboose reeled like a dying top – fear froze every soul on board. To leave the track now meant a scatter that would break West End records.

When Soda Springs sighted Extra 240 West, pitching down the mountain, the steel dancing behind and Aloysius jumping before, there was a painful sensation – the sensation of good men who see a disaster they are powerless to avert. Nor did Soda Springs know how desperate the wiper's extremity had become. Not even the struggling steel foreman knew that with Soda Springs passing like the films of a cinematograph, and two more miles of down-grade ahead, the last cupful of sand was trickling from the wiper's tank. Aloysius, at that moment, wouldn't have given the odd change on a pay check for all the chances Extra 240 and he himself had left. He stuck to his levers merely because there was no particular reason for letting go. It was only a question of how a man wanted to take the rocks. Yet, with all his figuring, Aloysius had lost sight of his only salvation – maybe because it was quite out of his power to effect it himself. But in making the run up to Soda Springs Number Sixteen had already sanded the rails below.

He could feel the help the minute the tires ground into the grit. They began to smoke, and Aloysius perceived the grade was easing somewhat. Even the dazed foreman, looking back, saw an improvement in the lurch of the caboose. There was one more hair-raiser ahead – the appalling curve at the forks of the Goose. But, instead of being hurled over the elevation, they found themselves around it and on the bridge with only a vicious slew. Aloysius's hair began to lie down, and his heart to rise up. He had her checked – even the hoboes knew it – and a mile further, with the dangers past, they took new ones by dropping off the hind end.

At the second bend below the Goose, Aloysius made a stop, and began again to breathe. A box was blazing on the tender truck, and, with his handy fireman, he got down at once to doctor it. The

whole thing shifted so mortally quick from danger to safety that the two never stopped to inventory their fears; they seemed to have vanished with the frost that lured them to destruction. They jumped together into the cab; and whistling at the laborers strung back along the right of way Extra 240 West began backing pluckily up hill to Soda Springs. The first man who approached the cab as they slowed down for the platform – in fact, people rather stood back for him – was Bucks, Superintendent of the Division; his car had come in attached to Number Sixteen.

"How did your train get away from you?" he asked of Aloysius; there was neither speculation nor sympathy in his manner and his words were bitten with frost.

"It didn't get away from me," retorted Aloysius, who had never before in his life seen the man, and was not aware that he owed him any money. But the operator at the Springs, who knew Aloysius and the superintendent both, was standing behind the latter doing a pantomime that would shame a medicine man.

"Quick talking will do more for you than smart talking," replied the superintendent, crisply. "You'll never get a better chance while you're working for this company to explain yourself."

Aloysius himself began to think so, for the nods and winks of the operator were bewildering. He tried to speak up, but the foreman of the steel gang put in: "See here, sport," he snapped, irreverently, at the angry official. "Why don't you cool your hat before you jump a fellow like that?"

"What business is it of yours how I jump a fellow?" returned the superintendent, sharply, "who are you?"

"I'm only foreman of this steel gang, my friend; and I don't take any back talk from anybody."

"In that case," responded Bucks, with velvet sarcasm, "perhaps you will explain things. I'm only superintendent of this division; but it's customary to inquire into matters of this kind."

Aloysius at the words nearly sank to the platform; but the master of the hoboes, who had all the facts, went at the big man as if he had been one of the gang, and did not falter till he had covered the perspiring wiper with glory.

"What's the reason the air wouldn't work?" asked the superintendent, turning, without comment, when the track-layer had finished, to Aloysius.

"I haven't had time to find out, sir."

"Find out and report to me. What's your name?"

"McGrath."

"McGraw, eh? Well, McGraw, look close into the air. There may be something in it for you. You did the firing?" he added, turning short again on the unabashed steel foreman.

"What there was done."

"I'll do a little now myself. I'll fire you right here and now for impertinence."

"I suppose you're the boss," responded the man of ties, imperturbably. "When I made the crack, I'd made it harder if I had known who you were."

"You know now, don't you?"

"I guess so."

"Very good," said Bucks, in his mildest tones. "If you will report to me at Medicine Bend this afternoon, I'll see whether we can't find something better for your manners than cursing hoboes. You can ride down in my car, sport. What do you say? That will save you transportation."

It brought a yell from the railroad men crowding around, for that was Bucks's way of doing things; and the men liked Bucks and his way. The ex-captain of the dagoes tried to look cool, but in point of fact went very sheepish at his honors.

Followed by a mob, eager to see the finish, Superintendent Bucks made his way up the track along the construction train to where Aloysius and the engineer of Number Sixteen were examining the air. They found it frozen between the first and the second car. Bucks heard it all – heard the whole story. Then he turned to his clerk.

"Discharge both crews of Extra 240. Fire Johnnie Horigan."

"Yes, sir."

"McGrath, run your train back to Wind River behind us. We'll scare up a conductor here somewhere; if we can't, I'll be your conductor. Make your report to Medicine Bend," Bucks added, speaking to the operator; and without further words walked back to his car.

As he turned away, the engineer of Number Sixteen slapped Aloysius on the back:

"Kid, why the blazes didn't you thank him?"

"Who?"

"Bucks."

"What for?"

"What for? Jiminey Christmas! What for? Didn't he just make you an engineer? Didn't he just say, 'Run your train back behind us to Wind River'?"

"My train?"

"Sure, your train. Do you think Bucks ever says a thing like that without meaning it? You bet not."

Bucks's clerk, too, was a little uncertain about the promotion. "I suppose he's competent to run the train back, isn't he?" he asked of Bucks, suggestively.

Bucks was scrawling a message.

"A man that could hold a train from Wind River here on whiskers, with nothing but a tankful of sand and a hobo fireman, wouldn't be likely to fall off the right of way running back," he returned dryly. "He's been firing for years, hasn't he? We haven't got half enough men like McGraw. Tell Neighbor to give him an engine."

The Roadmaster's Story
THE SPIDER WATER

Not officially; I don't pretend to say that. You might travel the West End from fresh water to salt – and we dip into both – without ever locating the Spider Water by map or by name.

But if you should happen anywhere on the West End to sit among a gang of bridge carpenters; or get to confidence with a bridge foreman; or find the springy side of a roadmaster's heart; *then*, you might hear all you wanted about the Spider Water – maybe more; anyway, full plenty, as Hailey used to say.

The Sioux named it; and whatever may be thought of their interpretation of Scriptural views on land-grabbing, no man with sense ever attempted to improve on their names for things, whether birds, or braves, or winds, or waters – they know.

Our General Managers hadn't always sense – this may seem odd, but on the system it would excite no comment – and one of them countenanced a shameful change in the name of the Spider Water. Some polytechnical idiot at a safe distance dubbed it The Big Sandy; and the Big Sandy it is to this day on map and in folder – but not in the lingo of trackmen nor the heart of the Sioux. Don't say Big Sandy to trackmen and hand out a cigar. It will not go. Say Spider Water without any cigar and you will get a word and a stool, and if you ask it, fine cut.

The Spider Water – although ours is the pioneer line – was there when we first bridged it. It is probably as old as sundown, and nothing like as pretty. The banks – it has none to speak of. Its stones – they are whiskered. Its bed – full of sand-burs. Everything about the villain stream has a dilapidate, broken-down air: the very mud of the Spider Water is rusty.

So our people bridged it; and the trouble began. A number of matters bothered our pioneer managements – Indians, outlaws, cabinet officers, congressional committees, and Wall Street magnates – but at one time or another our folks managed all of them. The only thing they couldn't at any time satisfactorily manage was the Spider Water. Bridge after bridge they threw across it – and into it. Year after year the Spider Water toyed with our civil engineers and our material department. One man at Omaha given to asthma and statistics estimated, between spells, that the Spider Water had cost us more money than all the water courses together from the Missouri to the Sierras.

Then came to the West End a masterful man, a Scotchman, pawky and hard. Brodie was his name, an Edinburgh man with no end of degrees and master of every one. Brodie came to be superintendent of bridges on the Western Division, and to boss every water course on the plains and in the mountains. But the Spider Water took a fall even out of Brodie. It swept out a Howe truss bridge for Brodie before he got his bag unpacked, and thereafter Brodie, who was reputed not to care a stringer for anybody, did not conceal a distinct respect for the Spider.

Brodie went at it right. He tried, not to make friends with the Spider, for nobody could do that, but to get acquainted with it. For this he went to its oldest neighbors, the Sioux. Brodie spent weeks and weeks up the Spider Water hunting, summers; and with the Sioux he talked Spider Water and drank fire-water. That was Brodie's shame – the fire-water.

But he was pawky, and he chinned unceasingly the braves and the medicine men about the uncommonly queer water that took the bridges so fast. The river that month in and month out couldn't squeeze up water enough to baptize a pollywog and then, of a sudden, and for a few days, would rage like the Missouri, restore to the desert its own and living image, and leave our bewildered rails hung up either side in the wind.

Brodie talked cloudbursts up country; for the floods came, times, under clear skies – and the Sioux sulked in silence. He suggested an unsuspected inlet from some mountain stream which maybe, times, sent its storm water over a low divide into the Spider – and the red men shrugged their faces.

As a last resort and in desperation he hinted at the devil; and the sceptics took a quick brace with as much as to say, now you *are* talking; and muttered very bad Medicine.

Then they gave him the Indian stuff about the Spider Water; took him away up where once a party of Pawnees had camped in the dust of the river bed to surprise the Sioux; and told Brodie how the Spider, more sudden than buck, fleeter than pony, had come down in the night and surprised the Pawnees – and so well that the next morning there wasn't enough material left for a scalp dance.

They took Brodie out into the ratty bed himself and when he said, heap dry, and said, no water, they laughed, Indianwise, and pointed to the sand. Scooping little wells with their hands they showed him the rising and the filling; the instant water where before was no water. And dropping into the wells feathers of the grouse, they showed Brodie how the current carried them always across the well – every time, and always, Brodie noticed – southeast.

Then Brodie made Hailey dig many holes, and the Spider welled into them, and he threw in bits of notebooks and tobacco wrappers, but always they travelled southeast – always the same; and a bigger fool than Brodie could see that the water was all there, only underground. But when did it rise? asked Brodie. When the Chinook spoke, said the Sioux. And why? persisted Brodie. Because the Spider woke, said the Sioux. And Brodie went out of the camp of the Sioux wondering.

And he planned a new bridge which should stand the Chinook and the Spider and the de'il himself, said Brodie, Medicine or no Medicine. And full seven year it lasted; then the fire-water spoke for the wicked Scotchman – and he himself went out into the night.

And after he died, miserable wreck of a man – and of a very great man – the Spider woke and took his pawky bridge and tied up the main line for two weeks and set us crazy – for we were already losing our grip on the California fast freight business. But at that time Hailey was superintendent of bridges on the West End.

I

His father was a section foreman. When Hailey was a kid – a mere kid – he got into Brodie's office doing errands; but whenever he saw a draughtsman at work he was no good for errands. At such times he went all into a mental tangle that could neither be thrashed nor kicked out of him, though both were conscientiously tried by old man Hailey and Superintendent Brodie; and Brodie, since he could do nothing else with him, finally kicked him into learning to read – and to cipher, Brodie called it. Then, by and by, Hailey got an old table and part of a cake of India ink himself, and himself became a draughtsman, and soon, with some cursing from Brodie and a "Luk a' that now!" from his paralyzed daddy, became chief draughtsman in Brodie's office. Hailey was no college man – Hailey was a Brodie man. Single mind on single mind – concentration absolute. Mathematics, drawing, bridges, brains – that was Hailey. But no classics except Brodie, who himself was a classic. All that Brodie knew, Hailey had from him; and where Brodie was weak, Hailey was strong – master of himself. When Brodie shamed the image he was made in, Hailey hid the shame best he could, – though never touched or made it his own – and Brodie, who hated even himself, showed still a light in the wreck by molding Hailey to his work. For, one day, said Brodie in his heart, this boy shall be master of these bridges. When I am rot, he will be here what I ought to have been – this Irish boy – and they will say he was Brodie's man. And better than any of these dough-heads they send me out, better than any of their Eastern graduates he shall be, if he was made engineer by a drunkard. And Hailey was better, far, far better than the graduates, better than Brodie – and to Hailey came the time to wrestle the Spider.

Stronger than any man before or since he was for that work. All Brodie knew, all the Indians knew, all that a life's experience, eating, living, watching, sleeping with the big river had taught him, that Hailey knew. And when Brodie's bridge went out, Hailey was ready with his new bridge for the Spider Water which should be better than Brodie's, just as he was better than Brodie. It was to be

such a bridge as Brodie's bridge with the fire-water left out. And the plans for a Howe truss, two pier, two abutment, three span, pneumatic caisson bridge to span the Big Sandy River were submitted to headquarters.

But the cost! The directors jumped their table when they saw the figures. We were being milked at that time – to put it bluntly, being sucked, worse than lemons – by a Wall Street clique that robbed our good road, shaved our salaries, impoverished our equipment, and cut our maintenance to the quick. They talked economy and studied piracy. In the matter of appropriations, for themselves they were free-booters; for us, they were thrifty as men of Hamelin town. When Hailey demanded a thousand guilders for his Spider Water bridge, they laughed and said, "Come, take fifty." He couldn't do anything else; and he built a fifty guilder bridge to bar the Spider's crawl. It lasted really better than the average bridge and since Hailey never could get a thousand guilders at once, he kept drawing fifty at a time and throwing them annually at the Spider.

But the dream of his life – this *we* all knew, and the Sioux would have said the Spider knew – was to build a final bridge over the Spider Water: a bridge to throttle it for all time.

It was the one subject on which you could get a rise out of Hailey any time, day or night, – the two pier, two abutment, three span, pneumatic caisson Spider bridge. He would talk Spider bridge to a Chinaman. His bridge foreman Ed Peeto, a staving big, one-eyed French Canadian, actually had but two ideas in life: one was Hailey; the other the Spider bridge. When the management changed again – when the pirates were sent out on the plank so many good men had walked at their command – and a great and public-spirited man took control of the system, Ed Peeto kicked his little water spaniel in a frenzy of delight. "Now, Sport, old boy," he exclaimed riotously, "we'll get the bridge!"

So there were many long conferences at division headquarters between Bucks, superintendent, and Callahan, assistant, and Hailey, superintendent of bridges, and after, Hailey went once more to general headquarters lugging all his estimates revised and all his plans refigured. All his expense estimates outside the Spider bridge and one other point were slight, because Hailey could skin along with less money than anybody ever in charge of the bridge work. He did it by keeping everything up; not a sleeper, not a spike – nothing got away from him.

The new president, as befitted a very big man, was no end of a swell, and received Hailey with a considerate dignity unknown on our End. He listened carefully to the superintendent's statement of the necessities at the Big Sandy River. The amount looked large; but the argument, supported by a mass of statistics, was convincing. Three bridges in ten years, and the California fast freight business lost twice. Hailey's budget called, too, for a new bridge at the Peace River – and a good one. Give him these, he said in effect, and he would guarantee the worst stretch on the system for a lifetime against tie-up disasters. Hailey stayed over to await the decision; but he was always in a hurry, and he haunted the general offices until the president told him he could have the money. To Hailey this meant, particularly, the bridge of his dreams. The wire flashed the word to the West End; everybody at the Wickiup was glad; but Ed Peeto burned red fire and his little dog Sport ate rattlesnakes.

The old shack of a depot building that served as division headquarters at Medicine Bend we called the Wickiup. Everybody in it was crowded for room, and Hailey, whose share was what was left, had hard work to keep out of the wastebasket. But right away now it was different. Two extra offices were assigned to Hailey, and he took his place with those who sported windows and cuspidors – in a word, had departments in the service. Old Denis Hailey went very near crazy. He resigned as section boss and took a place at smaller wages in the bridge carpenter's gang so he could work on the boy's bridge, and Ed Peeto, savage with responsibility, strutted around the Wickiup like a cyclops.

For a wonder the bridge material came in fast – the Spider stuff first – and early in the summer Hailey, very quiet, and Peeto, very profane, with all and several their traps and slaves and belongings moved into construction headquarters at the Spider, and the first airlock ever sunk west of the Missouri closed over the heads of tall Hailey and big Ed Peeto. Like a swarm of ants the bridge-workers cast the refuse up out of the Spider bed. The blow-pipes never slept: night and day the sand

streamed from below, and Hailey's caissons, like armed cruisers, sunk foot by foot towards the rock; by the middle of September the masonry was crowding high-water mark, and the following Saturday Hailey and Peeto ran back to Medicine Bend to rest up a bit and get acquainted with their families. Peeto was so deaf he couldn't hear himself swear, and Hailey looked ragged and thin, like the old depot, but immensely happy.

Sunday morning counted a little even then in the mountains. It was at least a day to get your feet on the tables up in Bucks's office and smoke Callahan's Cavendish – which was enough to make a man bless Callahan if he did forget his Maker. Sunday mornings Bucks would get out the dainty, pearl-handled Wostenholm that Lillienfeld, the big San Francisco spirit-shipper, left annually for him at the Bend, and open the R. R. B. mail and read the news aloud for the benefit of Callahan and Hailey and such hangers-on as Peeto and an occasional stray despatcher.

"Hello," exclaimed Bucks, chucking a nine-inch official manila under the table, "here's a general order – Number Fourteen – "

The boys drew their briers like one. Bucks read out a lot of stuff that didn't touch our End, and then he reached this paragraph:

"'The Mountain and the Inter-mountain divisions are hereby consolidated under the name of the Mountain Division with J. F. Bucks as Superintendent, headquarters at Medicine Bend. C. T. Callahan is appointed Assistant Superintendent of the new division.'"

"Good boy!" roared Ed Peeto, straining his ears.

"Well, well, well," said Hailey, opening his eyes, "here's promotions right and left."

"'H. P. Agnew is appointed Superintendent of bridges of the new division with headquarters at Omaha, vice P. C. Hailey,'" Bucks read on, with some little surprise growing into a shock. Then he read fast looking for some further mention of Hailey. Hailey promoted, transferred, assigned – but there was no further mention of Hailey in G. O. Number Fourteen. Bucks threw down the order in a silence. Ed Peeto broke out first.

"Who's H. P. Canoe?"

"Agnew."

"Who the hell is he?" roared Ed. Nobody answered: nobody knew. Bucks attempted to talk; Callahan lit his lighted pipe; but Ed Peeto stared at Hailey like a drunken man.

"Did you hear that?" he snorted at his superior.

Hailey nodded.

"You're out!" stormed Peeto.

Hailey nodded. The bridge foreman took his pipe from his mouth and dashed it into the stove. He got up and stamped across to the window and was like to have sworn the glass out before Hailey spoke.

"I'm glad we're up to high water at the Spider, Bucks," said he at last. "When they get in the Peace River work, the division will run itself for a year."

"Hailey," Bucks spoke slowly, "I don't need to tell you what I think of it, do I? It's a damned shame. But it's what I've said for a year – nobody ever knows what Omaha will do next."

Hailey rose to his feet. "Where you going, Phil?" asked Bucks.

"Going back to the Spider on Number Two."

"Not going back this morning – why don't you wait for Four, to-night?" suggested Bucks.

"Ed," Hailey raised his voice at the foreman, "will you get those stay-bolts and chuck them into the baggage-car for me on Number Two? I'm going over to the house for a minute." He forgot to answer Bucks; they knew what it meant. He was bracing himself to tell the folks before he left them. Preparing to explain why he wouldn't have the Sunday at home with the children. Preparing to tell the wife – and the old man – that he was out. Out of the railroad system he had given his life to help build up and make what it was. Out of the position he had climbed to by studying like a hermit and working like a hobo. Out – without criticism, or allegation, or reason – simply, like a dog, out.

Nobody at the Wickiup wanted to hear the telling over at the cottage; nobody wanted to imagine the scene. As Number Two's mellow chime whistle rolled down the gorge, they saw Hailey coming out of his house, his wife looking after him, and two little girls tugging at his arms as he hurried along; old Denis behind, head down, carrying the boy's shabby valise, trying to understand why the blow had fallen.

That was what Callahan up with Bucks at the window was trying to figure – what it meant.

"The man that looks to Omaha for rhyme or reason will beggar his wits, Callahan," said Bucks slowly, as he watched Ed Peeto swing the stay-bolts up into the car so they would crack the baggageman across the shins, and then try to get him into a fight about it. "They never had a man – and I bar none, no, not Brodie – that could handle the mountain-water like Hailey; they never will have a man – and they dump him out like a pipe of tobacco. How does it happen we are cursed with such a crew of blooming idiots? Other roads aren't."

Callahan made no answer. "I know why they did it," Bucks went on, "but I couldn't tell Hailey."

"Why?"

"I think I know why. Last time I was down, the president brought his name up and asked a lot of questions about where he was educated and so on. Somebody had plugged him, I could see that in two minutes. I gave him the facts – told him that Brodie had given him his education as an engineer. The minute he found out he wasn't regularly graduated, he froze up. Very polite, but he froze up. See? Experience, actual acquirements," Bucks extended his hand from his vest pocket in an odd wavy motion till it was lost at arm's length, "nothing – nothing – nothing."

As he concluded, Hailey was climbing behind his father into the smoker; Number Two pulled down the yard and out; one thing Hailey meant to make sure of – that they shouldn't beat him out of the finish of the Spider bridge as he had planned it; one monument Hailey meant to have – one he has.

The new superintendent of bridges took hold promptly; we knew he had been wired for long before his appointment was announced. He was a good enough fellow, I guess, but we all hated him. Bucks did the civil, though, and took Agnew down to the Spider in a special to inspect the new work and introduce him to the man whose bread and opportunity he was taking. "I've been wanting to meet you, Mr. Hailey," said Agnew pleasantly after they had shaken hands. Hailey looked at Agnew silently as he spoke; Bucks looked steadfastly at the grasshopper derrick.

"I've been expecting you'd be along pretty soon," replied Hailey presently. "There's considerable to look over here. After that we'll go back to Peace River cañon. We're just getting things started there: then we'll run up to the Bend and I'll turn the office over."

"No hurry about that. You've got a good deal of a bridge here, Mr. Hailey?"

"You'll need a good deal of a bridge here."

"I didn't expect to find you so far along out here in the mountains. Where did you get that pneumatic process?"

It touched Hailey, the pleasant, easy way Agnew took him. The courtesy of the east against the blunt of the west. There wasn't a mean drop anywhere in Hailey's blood, and he made no trouble whatever for his successor.

After he let go on the West End Hailey talked as if he would look up something further east. He spoke about it to Bucks, but Bucks told him frankly he would find difficulty without a regular degree in getting a satisfactory connection. Hailey himself realized that; moreover, he seemed reluctant to quit the mountains. He acted around the cottage and the Wickiup like a man who has lost something and who looks for it abstractedly – as one might feel in his pockets for a fishpole or a burglar. But there were lusty little Haileys over at the cottage to be looked after, and Bucks, losing a roadmaster about that time, asked Hailey (after chewing it a long time with Callahan) to take the place himself and stay on the staff. He even went home with Hailey and argued it.

"I know it doesn't seem just right," Bucks put it, "but, Hailey, you must remember this thing at Omaha isn't going to last. They can't run a road like this with Harvard graduates and Boston

typewriters. There'll be an entire new deal down there some fine day. Stay here with me, and I'll say this, Hailey, if I go, ever, you go with me."

And Hailey, sitting with his head between his hands, listening to his wife and to Bucks, said, one day, "Enough," and the first of the month reported for duty as roadmaster.

Agnew, meantime, had stopped all construction work not too far along to discontinue. The bridge at the Spider fortunately was beyond his mandate; it was finished to a rivet as Hailey had planned it. Three spans, two piers, and a pair of abutments – solid as the Tetons. But the Peace River cañon work was caught in the air. Hailey's caissons gave way to piles which pulled the cost down from one hundred to seventy-five thousand dollars, and incidentally it was breathed that the day for extravagant expenditures on the West End was past – and Bucks dipped a bit deeper than usual into Callahan's box of cross-cut, and rammed the splintered leaf into his brier a bit harder and said no word.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.