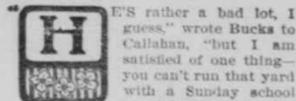


The Switchman's Story

SHOCKLEY

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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ES 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 tonight and six cars of ties. Blair reports section 10 ready for track layers and Mear's outfit moving into the Palisade canyon. 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 had 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 to 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 morning 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 Ochsen, but that wasn't in Benkleton. Callahan was hurried when he made up the payroll 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 300 and in that time had learned many ways of getting something out of nothing. When the red haired dispatcher, 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 remodeled 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' letter.

The yard was his worry—not that it was much of a yard; just a dozen rods 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 not, 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 bedeviling to the railroad men.

Southwest of the yard, where the river breaks sheer into the bottoms, there lived and still lives 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 postoffice. It was there that the cowboys loved to congregate. To Callahan Pat Barlie's place was a wasp's nest, but to Chris it was a den of wolves, and of a drier 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 10 o'clock at night, after No. 23 had pulled in and they were distributing a train load of bridge timber, a switchman'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 Benk-

ton 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 top of moving trains. Whenever a brakeman showed a flicker two cowboys stood waiting to snuff it. If they missed the bump, they winged the brakeman. It compelled Bucks after awhile to run trains through Benkleton without showing ever a light. This, though tough, could be managed, but to stunt fists in the yard at night with no light or to get a switchman willing to play young Teli to Peg Leg Reynolds' 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' 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 yardmaster on the other seemed, all things considered, confusing, particularly if the new ally got to drinking and his fire scattered. Just then train 59 whistled. Pat Barlie's corner began to sputter its salute. Callahan shifted around behind his bombproof, lit his powderhorn and, looking down the line, wondered whether Shockley might be on that train.

It was not till the next night, though, that a tall, thinish chap, without visible reasons for alighting, got off 59 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 ambles and his hatched 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 to 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 7 the new yardmaster 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 awhile to do his switching in the day time. Just before the appointed hour in the morning the assistant had looked out on his unlovely 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 yardmaster dirt 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.

thing 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 of switching with me and get \$3?"

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 \$3, 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 7 when they caught him and by 9 they had put him through every piece 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, burried 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 banded, 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 steeled 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 yardmaster's glass. "Fill it with whisky!" he shouted. "Fill it, Pat!" he repeated, as Shockley leaned undecidedly against the bar. The yardmaster held out the glass and the brakemaker began to pour. Shockley looked at the liquor a moment, then he looked at Reynolds, who fronted him with gun in one hand and red water in the other.

"Drink!"

Shockley paused, looked again at the whisky and drew the glass toward him with the curving hand of a drinker.

"You want me to drink this?" he half laughed, turning on his balter.

"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 whisky, partner," said Shockley gently.

"You drink that whisky 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 whisky oughtn't to 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 burned 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.

"Get out!" he snapped. The switchman started on the word for the front door. When he opened it everybody laughed but Shockley.

"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'd get his scalp, that's all. He'd better look after his conductors and leave our men alone."

"I guess Shockley isn't keeping his frog blacked," 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 left 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 admired, 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 Christmas by us," explained Chris desperately.

"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 seventy-five."

"Where?"

"Rubedo."

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

However, Chris stuck for his request. He wouldn't take up for an answer. Next day he tired Shockley out.

"Well, for God's sake let up, Chris," said the yardmaster at last. "I'll come down awhile after 23 comes in. Get back early after supper, and we'll make up 55 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 pen jacket and a storm cap, rode with the switch engine down from the roundhouse. Chris, in his astrakhan refter and turban, walking over from the dug out in Rubedo's new shoes, flipped the footboard at the stockyard with almost the roll of Shockley himself.

Happily for Christmas in Little Russia 23 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.

er tires bit, and slowly she sent the long train of steel down on Chris' switch. He heard the frosty flanges grinding on the face of the rails as he tried to loo-oo 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, heavily laden 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 screamed 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 around his neck and his yardmaster's voice in his ear.

"Jump!" screamed Shockley.

Chris scrambled 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 drawer 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 yardmaster, called out, called Shockley's name, listen-d. 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 pined 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 set 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 un-

steadily 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, creaking, clicking, of Bucks and the company surgeon coming on a special ahead of 59.

They twisted tourniquets into his quivering flesh, and with the light dying in his eyes they put whisky 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.

"Block—block," said Shockley's lips. 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 59 whistled for the yard, but in the yard all was dark and still. One man got off 59 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 who was firing a lantern.

"What was his name?"

"Shockley. Know him?"

"Me? No. I guess not." He walked away with his valise and drew his coat 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, bear 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 upstairs, and the surgeon had gone un-



The only sound was his breathing.

stairs, and Callahan, tired and sick, had gone upstairs, 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 frostbitten nose with the back of his dirty hand.

Chris drew his cap low, 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 handaged 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.

NEXT WEEK, "THE ROADMASTER'S STORY."

Place for Red Tape. "There is too much red tape about your business here," said the shopper, after a long wait for her package and her change.

"But I thought you said you liked red tape in its place?" replied the manager of the dress goods department.

"So I do."

"Well, if a dry-goods store is not the place for red tape, what is?"—Yonkers Statesman.

If the Coat Fits. See that hen changing her feet to prevent their freezing. Her comb is winter-bitten already. Here are her winter quarters. Well ventilated. Like a summer house. Billiards sweep through grandly. See the bare corn cobs and the ice! Let's collect the eggs. Lots of money in eggs! Why, not one? Chase her, she doesn't pay. What, nothing in her crop? Where's that corn I gave her yesterday? I'll have her for a stew; she's too old and tough to roast.—Orange Judd Farmer.

Frost eats fat from the bones of the stock. The landlord said this flat was "swell," and I guess the landlord knows; for there isn't a window that opens well or a door nor hard to close.—Cleveland Leader.

Kept His Word. "Papa, papa! you said that if I would tell you all about it not a hair of my head should be harmed."

"Well (whack!) not one will (whack!) will be. Your head (whack!) is higher up."—Judge.

And They're Not. Mrs. Jawback—You'll never succeed in politics. You're neither a Webster nor a Blaine.

Mr. Jawback—No, but by Gum, I'm alive!—Cleveland Leader.

Infant Terrible. "Say, Maw."

"Well, son?"

"What is environment?"

"Environment, my son, means the things around you."

"Then paw's arms must be environments, 'cause I saw him have 'em around cook yesterday."—Milwaukee Sentinel.

Thrown Down. Patience—Just as he was about to propose, I took the down pillow and threw it at my feet for him to kneel on.

Patric—That was a bad break.

"How so?"

"Why, it looked as if you were throwing him down."—Yonkers Statesman.

Net Result About the Same. Mrs. Naybor—Isn't it a luxury to be able to buy eggs 20 cents cheaper than they were last winter?

Mrs. Crossway—Yes, but when my husband finds he has saved 20 cents in buying a dozen he isn't easy till he has spent it for cigars or something of that sort.—Chicago Tribune.