



HELD FOR
ORDERS: BEING
STORIES
OF RAILROAD
LIFE



### Frank H. Spearman

# Held for Orders: Being Stories of Railroad Life

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## The Switchman's Story

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#### **SHOCKLEY**

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"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 drygoods 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.

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"Mr. Callahan?"
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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

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Bucks sent me up—to take the yard."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What's your name?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Shockley."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Step upstairs. I'll be up in a minute."

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.



**Chris** 

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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,