

Winter's Rage

By Caldwell Butler

It all went down back in the late twenties high up in Colorado on the Rio Grande's line from Chama, New Mexico to Antonito, Colorado. I don't remember what year exactly, but I know the winter was the worst in a century. That's what they said, at least. I was still young with strength in my bones and my mind, and you needed both those things to fire a locomotive. That's what I was doing back in those days, firing the big narrow-gauge engines on the Rio Grande high up in the mountains. There were many stark happenings on that road back in those days, but this one beats all in my book.

I was called in during the Christmas holiday. My mother didn't want me to go because of the cold, but I needed the extra cash because I was trying to move down out of the hills to the city. The branch super called me specifically; not because I was the best, but because he knew I'd take the job.

There was enough snow on the ground that winter that railroading had been deemed 'unsafe.' The line was closed until things got safer, but a strange group of men rolled into town and said different. When I met with the super, he told me they were Pinkerton detectives. He didn't tell me why they had come to the railroad, and I got the feeling he didn't quite get the full picture himself. What I did know was they had paid the railroad for their own train up the mountain. It was the only way up; any roads were blocked so horses or any automotive vehicle was completely out of the question, but the snow was stacked on the rails ten feet high.

The super told me they were putting together a special train to get everyone up the line in one piece and without icicles hanging from their noses. Two engines lashed together with a single coach and caboose for the unexpected passengers and crew with the War Wagon up front. The War Wagon was what the railroaders called the rotary. It was like an engine only the boiler fired a giant rotating blade instead of the wheels. The engines pushed the beast into the snow banks covering the line as it chewed its way up the mountain.

The machine worked all well and good, but the snow banks were ten feet high and rising. It was Thursday when those Pinkertons arrived and the biggest damn blizzard since the War Between the States was expected to hit Friday morning. The Pinkertons were made aware of this, but they demanded to be driven up that mountain at the earliest convenience. I thought this was funny since there wasn't a thing convenient about it.

They got the line cleared enough that we could get the engines out of the shed. The two big 3-foot-gauge Mikados were built for the winter with big snowplows on the front instead of cowcatchers, and what they lacked in speed they made up for with brute force. Those engines were built like boulders and hung over the narrow tracks several feet on either side.

It was Thursday evening when the train was put together. There weren't many railroaders crazy enough to brave the conditions, so the crew on that run was made of a wild bunch of characters. I was firing the lead engine behind the War Wagon; my engineer was Klein Benson. Klein was short, thuggish-looking man with a wicked liking for the bottle and fists that could break steel. He always carried a flask of scotch in his

engineman's coveralls to keep an almost permanent buzz. Despite his habit, though, his intentions were for the better and we always managed to keep a smile on his face, a good man.

In the engine behind us was "Wild Bill" Hudson, an ancient engineer out of Kentucky with a lazy eye and a temperament worthy of his nickname. To put it simply, the man was twenty pounds of crazy in a five-pound bag. He never left home without a gun belt holding a Smith & Wesson Schofield, which he always said he'd never hesitate to use. I didn't doubt it. His fireman was Floyd Webster, who happened to be his younger cousin. Not quite as crazy as Bill, but he was definitely from the same blood as him.

Up front in the War Wagon were two men almost as crazy as the two in the rear engine. The man on the boiler was Simon T. Lassiter, he'd driven captured trains in Europe during the War. He was a small man who was shell-shocked beyond help, but when it came to boilers there was no one better. The fireman was "Little Joe" Simms, a veteran black fireman from Alabama. He hadn't always worked on the railroad, he'd been a fireman on a riverboat back in the teens before he moved west firing engines. He stood at least six-five and could probably stop a train by just standing in front of it.

This band of madmen needed to make an impossible run up the mountain, stop in the middle of nowhere in the dead of winter, then come back down alive. That's right, the middle of nowhere. The Pinkertons didn't want to go to the end of the line, they had a designated point to stop at somewhere up the grade a bit past the Cumbres Depot. It puzzled me as much as everyone else involved at that point, but I got in that engine all the same.

It was nearly dark by the time the engines were lashed to the War Wagon and the coach and caboose were coupled behind them. It was already near freezing and the wind was sharp as a knife, slicing through anything and anyone foolish enough to be outside. Klein had wrapped his face up in an old pillowcase and donned a pair of welder's goggles so his face wouldn't be ripped to shreds when we looked out the cab. The fire was roaring in the firebox but the cold still snuck inside. I looked out for a moment as the Pinkertons got on board. They were a mean-looking bunch, all dressed in black and carrying leather cases I assumed held their guns.

My pocket watch read 7:30 when the conductor, a man I didn't know, waved from the caboose signaling that everyone was on board. Klein yanked out two blasts on the whistle. Lassiter whistled back from the Wagon first, Hudson did the same from behind us a moment later. Klein opened the throttle and we inched forward. He opened it too far at first and the wheels spun on the icy rails, but he got a grip once he slowed down again and got the sander working. Hudson's engine boomed to life behind us as we pounded out of the yard. We passed the coaling and water towers and only had the cold and the dark ahead of us. I fed the raging locomotive coal all through the night as Klein kept his head outside, looking up past the War Wagon as the dark tracks ahead.

The night went by without incident. The wind and snow pounded against the engines as we crept through the darkness like strange winter beasts. The War Wagon screamed like a banshee as it ate its way through the drifts of snow that were steadily growing as the night went on. When morning broke we saw no sun, it just went from dark to light with visibility remaining minimal.

The first setback came just past dawn. A fifteen-foot avalanche had fallen on the track ahead of us. We stopped and had to check the snow to make sure we wouldn't bring

the whole hill down on top of us if we tunneled through it. The Pinkertons weren't happy about this, they sent who appeared to be their leader out to haggle us about why we weren't moving. He was a big brute who looked like a cowboy with a black coat and hat and a big Colt automatic in a shoulder holster. He barked complaints at Lassiter and Simms, taking careful care to throw racial slurs at Simms, about why the plow couldn't get through the drift. Simms could've broken the man in half for his remarks, but kept a cool head and simply asked in his deep booming voice, "You want a hundred tonna snow up your ass?" For a moment there was silence, only the wind and the hisses and creaks from the engines kept things interesting. The Pinkerton told us to get the train moving or we'd all be tried with obstructing justice. I had no idea what justice we were obstructing, neither did the others. They shrugged their shoulders, Klein took a swig from his flask and offered me one as well, and then we climbed back up to our posts. Lassiter put the War Wagon on full power and we pushed into the drift. Snow went flying as it chewed through the white, sending powder into the air a hundred feet up. We all watched patiently as we crawled by, wondering if the whole mess would come down and send us careening off the rails into the gorge below. I wouldn't doubt a few of them probably wanted it to happen just so that damn Pinkerton could have what was coming to him.

It didn't, though. The snow stayed up there and let us pass. That wasn't the end of our hardship, though. A few miles later there was a bridge across a creek that snaked its way down the mountain in the warmer months. At that point it was just a line of ice in the cold rock, and the trestle was a stack of wood covered in icicles six feet long. There was plenty of snow on top of the bridge and we didn't know if we could make it across, that much weight was already straining it and the freeze had probably weakened the wood. It was the same thing; the Pinkerton came ahead and cursed us all for stopping, wondering why we were so incompetent. This time he decided to let his hand sneak towards his pistol. Wild Bill had that big Schofield out so fast if you'd had blinked you'd have missed it. The Pinkerton told Hudson "a piss-hat like you won't do a damn thing." Hudson replied by shooting a round off just close enough to the Pinkerton's shoulder that it ripped his coat. That certainly shut him up, but it also got the rest of the Pinkertons out of the train with him.

There were six of them, one for each of us, jumping out of the train with rifles and shotguns leveled at us. Myself and the other four raised our hands, but goddamn Hudson stood there with that Schofield aimed right at their honcho's head. They told him to drop it but he just laughed, saying if they shot the crew they wouldn't be going anywhere too fast. He felt the Pinkertons needed to be educated on the fact that trains didn't drive themselves.

Eventually the situation was defused when everyone literally got cold feet. We decided to uncouple the War Wagon and the first engine to test the bridge, then bring across the second one with the coach and caboose.

Klein was downing a particularly long swig from his flask when he gave me a look I hadn't seen him make before. He looked uneasy. Not scared, but definitely discomforted. "What do you think?" he asked me. I told him the bridge might hold the two halves, but the whole thing would probably crunch it. Klein nodded in agreement as he let off two blasts from the whistle. Lassiter whistled back from the War Wagon.

We crept across the bridge slow as winter itself. It felt like an eternity to the other side even though it was a mere hundred feet. I didn't feed the fire, I just leaned out of the cab and stared down into the icy abyss below us.

The tender finally cleared the bridge onto solid ground after the seemingly endless crossing. Klein moved forward far enough so Hudson would have room to get off the bridge. He pulled on the whistle, Hudson whistled back. The second engine crept forward with the coach and caboose following obediently behind it. At first it seemed like they would make it across, but they were around the halfway point when we heard them. Loud, ear piercing cracks from far below. I yelled at Klein and pointed down as the lower supports began to give. Klein grabbed the whistle cord again and yanked it frantically. He didn't form an exact signal and he didn't have to, Hudson got the message. Hudson must've opened that throttle wide because smoke exploded from the stack and the wheels began pounding like mad. The whole second half jumped forward like it'd been bit. Klein opened up too because he knew Hudson would need more room to stop.

Even the sounds of two working engines didn't drown out the sound of splintering wood. Once the lower supports fell out, the entire bridge began to move with the second half still on it. I'll never forget watching that engine sway like a drunken dancer as the trestle fell, it was like someone had given it just enough of a push to send it all toppling down.

Hudson came screaming off the bridge at a brisk clip, and it wasn't half a second after the caboose cleared the bridge as well when the rails snapped. The whole mess fell like a stack of toothpicks and went crashing into the ravine, wood and ice flying through the air like confetti.

Sparks flew from the second half's wheels as Hudson slammed on the brakes. Klein had given him around four car-lengths but he was coming in too hot. Klein yelled at me to grab something and I managed to get ahold of a handlebar just as the engine slammed into us. We were thrown down on the floor, I almost hit the firebox door but managed to roll out of the way.

We managed to stop and we all piled out again to make sure everyone was okay. Both engines, the War Wagon and the cars were all still on the rails, and aside from a few bruises the crew wasn't hurt. The Pinkertons came flowing out as well, guns still in hand, all ready to give us merry hell for the operation. One of them had bumped his head and was pitching a fit like a little girl, but he shut up when he saw the tinder stack behind us he'd almost been a proud feature of. One of the silly bastards, a big, stupid looking dunce, actually stepped forward and asked how we were getting back. The whole crew laughed. We stood there in the blizzard, freezing our asses off and slapping our knees at his little quip. We all silently agreed on giving Hudson the privilege of explaining to the shithead that due to the fact that there was no bridge, we wouldn't be going back to Chama. We would have to ride the rest of the line, across the state border to Antonito. That added another forty miles to the trip, as well as braving the Cascade Trestle (which was taller than the one we'd just knocked over by quite a stretch), breakneck curves, two tunnels, not to mention the Toltec Gorge. At first it seemed like the Pinkertons would be making a fuss, but even they realized there wasn't much of a choice.

The Pinkertons grumbled for a bit before climbing back aboard. We checked over everything again to make sure we wouldn't derail, Lassiter and Little Joe got the War Wagon running again, and we pushed on ahead.

Winter slammed us left and right all the livelong day. Wind blew through the cab and gave me a chill. Klein always kept coffee and an old tin pot, the kind you'd hang over a campfire, under the engineer's seat. I kept the pot boiling over the firebox as we gulped out way through three bots of the burning liquid that gave us enough life to keep the engine breathing. I shoveled and drank and shoveled and drank, the coffee and the fire keeping my belly warm. Klein had some bread and salted meat as well, but we had to thaw the bread over the fire before we could eat it.

By the time the sun, wherever it was, started to fall we'd reached the Windy Point water tower. We had to stop to water the Wagon and the engines, which proved to be quite the chore. The water in the tall tower was almost frozen. We had to chip away at ice with our shovels to get enough flowing into the tender, and even then it was almost ice by the time it flowed into the tank. It was almost an hour before we got each tender refilled, but the Pinkertons surprisingly kept to themselves. Fireman Floyd Webster guessed it was the cold, I wouldn't doubt it.

Night had fallen by the time we reached Cumbres. It wasn't a town, it was a singular station house in the pass the route winded through. There was nobody there when we arrived. The Pinkertons' stopping point was just a mile or so further, so we decided to push the rest of the way while we were moving and wait the night out.

We made it to the milepost around two hours later. It was dark, the wind was howling, and all we could do is take turns between sleeping and keeping the engine hot so it wouldn't freeze.

The storm broke first, then came morning. The wind still stung but the snow had stopped. The landscape looked like a white desert with no sign of tracks in front of or behind us. The snow looked like frozen waves, white dunes carved by the wind covering everything in sight.

The locomotives were still hot when the sun finally made an appearance, but they were also buried under ten feet of snow. We'd have to dig a bit before we were moving again. The Pinkertons didn't complain because it was time for them to go to work, too. They came out of the coach and climbed to the roof with their gear because the top of the snow was closer to the top of the coach than the doors at either end. They got their guns out and strapped on big snowshoes so they could walk on top of the snowdrifts. They stalked off over the icy white tundra like six stoic black soldiers.

We went about digging the train out and keeping everything from freezing solid. The sun warmed things up by one or two degrees, but nothing we could depend on. We lit some small oil fires along the rails to melt the wheels and running gear out, and then got the fireboxes burning nice and hot so we could get the engines moving.

We were just about ready to try moving again when we heard it. Gunfire, and whole lot of it, too. High-pitched pistol shots, deep rifle and shotgun blasts, we even heard machine gun fire echoing from somewhere over the hills. We all climbed up on the tops of the tenders or catwalks so we could try and see what was going on, but it was too far off. "Now what the hell do you suppose all that fuss is about?" Klein asked us. We all came up short on reasons. Hudson checked to make sure his Schofield was loaded and Floyd Webster asked if he thought that would be much of a fight against those Pinkertons' big guns, Hudson said if he was going down he'd give 'em hell and empty his pistol beforehand. He scurried back past his engine to the end of the tender. He opened the small storage compartment near the back wheels and pulled out a few guns

none of us knew had been in there. "Always make sure I gots some fight in me," he said, cackling like the madman he was. He had two long guns and a few pistols with quite the supply of ammunition. "Well shit, Bill," Simms grumbled. "With the steam pipes running back there keeping the water from freezing, didn't you ever wonder if the heat would set them bullets off?" Hudson said it'd never crossed his mind before cackling again and shrugging his shoulders.

I'd gone hunting with my Pop and therefore had more experience on rifles than handguns, so Hudson handed me a .30-06 Springfield fitted in a sporter stock along with a box of shells. I quickly loaded the weapon and stuffed the rest of the ammunition in the pockets of my coveralls before going back to work.

Lassiter and Simms got the War Wagon chewing through the snow again. We moved a few feet forward to test the line and the engines creaked and groaned as Hudson and Klein coaxed them forward. We'd just stopped again after a few feet when Floyd Webster yelled up to us from the second engine. I scrambled up to the top of the tender and shielded my eyes from the sunlight glaring off the snow. I could see them, all six Pinkertons hiking over the snow. Only there weren't just six of them, there was a seventh man walking along behind them.

I asked Klein to hand me the binoculars he kept in his tool kit and peered through them at the approaching party. The seventh man hadn't joined the Pinkertons, they'd taken him prisoner. He was being led along in shackles by one of them as the others kept their guns on him. There was a black bag tied over his head and blood splashed on his shirt, they'd even taken the poor bastard's coat.

They never gave us the full picture on what happened. There'd been one hell of a gunfight, though. Two of the Pinkertons came back with gunshot wounds; one in the shoulder, the other had his ear shot off. Who knows how many bodies they left back wherever they'd been. The stories grew after the incident and said they'd assaulted a log cabin way out in the middle of the woods where the hoodlums they were after had been hiding out. Folks liked to say there were twenty men killed by those Pinkertons, but I never could believe twenty-guns-on-six in the Pinkertons' favor.

Apparently the bastard they were dragging along was a notorious criminal, but I didn't know who it was at the time. Some said he was a racketeer from Chicago, others said a bank robber from back East, a few thought he was a serial murderer the cops had been hunting through Nebraska and Kansas over to Colorado. I didn't find out who it was until years later, hell I didn't even see his face right away because they wouldn't take that bag off of him. But whoever he was there must've been a pretty bounty on his head.

The leader immediately pulled his gun and told us to drop our weapons. Even Hudson kept his firearm lowered as we explained that we'd heard the shots and only needed to protect ourselves. We even offered to keep eyes on their new friend in case he tried to escape. But for Christ's sake, if I'd known what that sonofabitch was going to do later on I'd have let him run off right then and there.

The Pinkertons didn't complain for long because they were cold, two of them were injured, and Hudson reminded them of the whole 'trains need crews to drive them' situation. They grumbled as they climbed on board, dragging their hooded prisoner along with them. Once they were all inside, we all returned to our posts and made tracks. The sun was out and blue sky was beginning to make an appearance as we pushed on, the shower of powder from the War Wagon blasting up into the sky like a frozen geyser.

We came down the grade where the Cascade Trestle, the second bridge on the route, was waiting for us. We performed the same routine we'd done before at the first ill-fated bridge we'd crossed, as a significantly quicker pace this time, but the bridge remained intact as we got both halves of the train across. We stopped for water at Osier without incident.

The real challenge was Toltec Gorge, a deep canyon the track snaked its way around on cliff sides for more than ten miles. The danger was pushing snow off the track and causing an avalanche that would push us right off the track down into the ravine below.

We entered the gorge in the early afternoon, navigating the tight curves inch by inch. The snow was piled up from the tracks onto the cliffs to the side, looming above us twenty feet at the least.

As the Wagon rounded a bend, a wall of white appeared ahead of us. It looked like a dead end, but it was actually the snow piled up in front of the mouth of Rock Tunnel. Rock came first, then Mud Tunnel second after a bend in the tracks. The War Wagon ate its way into the tunnel and we were immersed in blackness. Lassiter settled the Wagon down for a moment as we passed through the tunnel so the noise wouldn't deafen us, but started it up just minutes later as we came to the other end. You couldn't see outside at the opposite end of Rock Tunnel, just a steadily growing slope that rose up from the track bed up to the tunnel roof. The light from the Wagon's headlamp glistened in the snow as the thundering of the blades got louder. The report from the Wagon's boiler hit my ears like cannon fire as it hit the snow again in the closed space. After a moment, sunlight broke through as we appeared on the other side.

There's a sharp curve between the two tunnels, that's where it went down. The bum the Pinkertons captured had two things on his side: Some good friends, and organizational skills. It didn't hurt that he was apparently a smart man, it would've taken one to pull the stunt he had set up for us.

We pulled into the curve, which just looked like a snow bank that dropped onto the tracks and then fell a few hundred feet into the gorge, moving slowly but steadily with the War Wagon working hard. The train came into the bend when the first explosion hit, BAM out of nowhere! It came from right between the Wagon's tender and the front of our locomotive and sent a plume of fire and smoke into the air. We both jumped out of our skins thinking the Wagon's boiler had ruptured or something. Klein hit the brakes hard and Hudson did the same behind us. That was our first mistake. Granted, we weren't going anywhere fast, but stopping just let those creeps keep working.

When I realized the explosion hadn't come from one of the boilers, I grabbed Hudson's Springfield and began scanning the mountaintop for the source of the ruckus. Something caught my eye a moment later, something flying through the air. It looked like a bundle of sticks of a sack or some such thing, but I realized what it was when I saw the smoke trailing from the fuse sticking out of it. I yelled at Klein to hit the deck as the bundle hit the top of the War Wagon and exploded almost immediately. Wood and metal went everywhere, then there was a secondary blast as the boiler ruptured. It wasn't a fast BANG like the dynamite, it was a big, slow plume of white steam that shot from the destroyed rotary like a volcano.

I got up to run ahead. My head wasn't straight and I thought there might be some chance of getting Lassiter and Simms out of there, but Klein pulled me back down and

shook his head. "They're gone, kid," he said sadly. "Ain't no walking outta that." A sudden rumbling interrupted our thoughts. The blasts had loosened some of the snow on the hilltop, and it was just starting to shift. "Aw hell it's gonna yank us right off the goddamn track!" I yelled, jumping out of the cab. Klein tried to grab me but I was already gone and on my way. I wanted to look for more flying dynamite or whoever was throwing it but there wasn't time. I ran ahead to the front of the engine where the first bomb had gone off. The face of the engine was burnt and smoldering, the headlamp was bent back at a weird angle and the handrails were all sticking out like a bad haircut, but she was still on the rails and the coupler was intact.

Seconds counted and that snow was coming down on us. "BACK IT UP, KLEIN!" I hollered back as I grabbed the handle to open the knuckle. I yanked it hard and it opened on the first try. Klein whistled three times, so did Hudson, and the wheels began to spin on both engines. I waited until the coupling came undone and not a second longer because half the mountain was going to be on that track pretty damn soon. I heard the loud pops as the air hoses disconnected and made a break for the cab. "HOLD UP!" someone yelled from behind me. I looked back and saw a battered Simms limping after me. He was limping from his left leg and had a nasty cut on his head, but he was alive. I ran back and grabbed his arm and helped him to the cab. Klein was ecstatic when he saw Simms had made it out, but was solemn again when he asked about Lassiter and Simms just shook his head.

The engines were moving at a brisk clip by that point. We moved backward down the grade back towards Rock Tunnel as snow fell onto the tracks in front of us. "We gotta outrun that avalanche, Klein!" I said as Klein opened up the throttle. There was a sound on the roof like a rock tumbling onto it. We listened and looked out the right side of the cab where it fell: another smoking bundle of dynamite. We all took cover as the bomb exploded, shaking the whole engine. We stood up but dropped back down again as gunfire erupted from somewhere above us. Bullets hit the cab and whistled just over our heads. I tried to get a shot off with my rifle, but I couldn't even see the shooters. Not to mention I had a bolt-action and they were firing at us with machine guns and automatic rifles. I heard more shots from behind us and stuck my head out long enough to see the Pinkertons getting organized and returning fire. I also saw another bundle of dynamite go flying through the air, but this one didn't bounce off. Someone up there must've had a good throwing hand, because it went right down the smokestack of our engine. I screamed at Klein and Simms to duck again just as it blew. I could just see through one of the cab windows as the entire front of the engine was blown inside out. The stack rocketed upward off the boiler along with the headlight as shards of metal flew in all directions.

Klein said the boiler might rupture next, so we decided to make a break for the other engine when we hit Rock Tunnel again. I looked out and saw it approaching quickly. When the train backed into the tunnel we scrambled up over the tender, being careful not to stand up too straight and get our heads knocked off on the tunnel ceiling. We got to the pilot of Hudson's engine and I clambered down and opened the coupler. Our ruined locomotive broke free and slowed as the brakes self-applied. We had to wait until we were out of the tunnel to keep moving because there were only inches between the side of the engine and the rock walls, no room for us to climb up on the catwalk.

The gunfire didn't resume when the remainder of the train exited the tunnel, so we quickly made our way back to the cab. When we climbed in we saw Floyd Webster holding a bleeding Hudson. He'd been struck once in the chest, once in the leg. He gave us a smile and showed us his empty Schofield, confirming what he'd said about unloading it before going down. Klein quickly took his position at the engineer's seat and I got on the firebox. Simms took a seat on the fireman's side as Floyd got up to go talk to the Pinkertons. He climbed up over the tender to the coach as I got to shoveling. We were going faster than any engineer would've wanted to on those sharp curves, but we were all prepared to risk jumping the tracks to outrun those bullets.

Floyd returned a moment later with the leader of the Pinkertons, who was now sporting a bloody graze on his right forearm. He told us all that their prisoner's partners were aiming to take him back, something I found rather apparent but I just nodded at that point instead of making trouble. The leader told us to keep our heads down and shoot anything that moved up on the cliffs.

He was cut off as the gunfire suddenly opened up again. Bullets flew into the cab again as we ducked our heads like the man had told us, but he stood at the window and emptied his Remington autoloader at the shooters. He ducked back inside to reload and yelled "Heads up" as a body crashed into the coalbunker from the cliff above us. That was the first time I'd seen a dead man outside a funeral parlor, and I'll never forget the sound he made when he hit that pile of coal. His head fell to the side so I could see his empty eyes and the trickle of blood that ran from his mouth, and I haven't stopped seeing his face since.

The lead Pinkerton kept shooting off individual shots at intervals instead of unloading his gun on the creeps. Simms grabbed a shotgun Hudson had brought into the cab and got to shooting with him. I tried to take my eyes off the dead man but I was having trouble doing that. My eyes went from the dead man to the firebox, back and forth as I shoveled. But after a few shovels of coal, I didn't see the dead man. There was a pair of boots between him and me. I followed them up and looked at the man who had jumped down twenty feet onto the train. His face was covered by a large hat on his head and a bandana over his nose and mouth. He also wore a large overcoat and had a big revolver in his hand. He was cocking that revolver as I met his eyes, but a blast from Simms shotgun hit him before he could shoot. I watched him go down and land on top of his former partner and the image engrained itself in my mind further.

I heard a shout from behind us and saw more gunmen jumping down to the coach and caboose roof. The Pinkertons were still shooting but they couldn't get shots off at the ones up top. I got the leader's attention but he was reloading again. "Shoot 'em, kid!" he snapped, nodding at the Springfield I still had slung over my shoulder. I dropped my shovel and shouldered the gun. My hands shook as I flicked off the safety and aimed. The sights lined up on one of the goons and I fired and missed. I worked the bolt and fired again. This one hit the roof somewhere near his foot. He saw me and shot back, but the leader had recharged his weapon and dispatched him before he could shoot me. The lead Pinkerton shot two more thugs who had jumped on the roof of the train before they got too far as I took a few more shots myself. As far as I know I didn't hit any of them, that's what I tell myself at least.

"Come on, kid!" the Pinkerton yelled at me. I blinked and didn't respond, not exactly knowing what he wanted. He told me since Simms wasn't walking too well,

Klein had to drive, Hudson was hit, and he thought Floyd looked “like the kind of guy who’d have pie dough for brains,” I was supposed to go and back him up. Klein objected and said I needed to shovel, but dough-for-brains Floyd said he could do that. I was scared but I didn’t object, instead I topped off my rifle and followed the Pinkerton up the coalbunker.

We stepped over the dead shooters, pausing as the Pinkerton picked up that big revolver the one had been holding and handed it to me. “Good to have backup,” he told me. I nodded and stuck the gun in my belt before we moved to the back of the tender. Some more shots came from inside the coach and we ducked behind the brakeman’s shack. The Pinkerton yelled and identified himself, but the shots continued. I snuck a look and saw two people shooting at us from the coach: One was the prisoner, now free of his hood. He was the ugliest, hardboiled-looking bastard I’d ever seen with wicked eyes and a long scar on his face. The other was the conductor, the man I didn’t know. It didn’t cross my mind until an hour or so after the gunfire ceased that I hadn’t seen him since we left Chama, turns out he had been working for the prisoner. The conductor had snuck in from the caboose and shot all the Pinkertons and freed the prisoner, and was now trying to assist in his escape.

The lead Pinkerton got shots off when he could but the two were well sheltered in the coach. I tried some more shooting myself and put a bullet through one of the windows. There was a pause. We waited and watched as the prisoner stumbled out with blood streaming from his face. Broken glass had gotten in his eyes and blinded him. The lead Pinkerton took another shot, putting his bullet through the prisoner’s knee. He fell and landed on the floor like a ton of bricks. A moment later the conductor threw his gun out and surrendered.

The Pinkerton went back and smacked the conductor with the butt of his rifle before tending to his men. Four of them were dead, the fifth hurt pretty badly with bullets in his chest. I ran down and kept my rifle at the ready in case anyone else jumped on the train, but we were moving pretty fast by that point. The Pinkerton retrieved some handcuffs from his supplies and cuffed both the conductor and the prisoner. I asked about the prisoner’s eyes, the Pinkerton asked “what about ‘em?” He did nothing for the man as we rolled back down the line.

We reached Osier, Colorado towards the evening where the Pinkerton used the telegraph office to contact the Pinkerton’s nearest office. The railroad men at the Osier station took care of Hudson and tried to patch him up, but he needed medical attention they couldn’t give him at a backwoods railroad siding. The prisoner was thrown in a back closet of the station house. The Pinkerton told the stationmaster he wasn’t to give the prisoner any medical care under any circumstances.

The bridge was out on one end of the line and an avalanche covered the tracks on the other, so it took some time for the railroad and the Pinkertons to get to us. The injured Pinkerton held on until a big city doctor got to us, but old Hudson was exactly that, old. It took a little over a day for the doctor to get to us. Hudson died three hours before he got there.

It took them another two days to clear the roads enough that some cars could come to truck us all back to Chama. The Pinkerton took his prisoner and his injured man off to New York if I remember correctly, that prisoner was in quite a state by the time they trucked him out. There was no saving his eyes and the wounds had gotten infected

because the Pinkerton hadn't let anyone clean them before the big city doctor got there. Like I said, I didn't find out who he was until years later, I think it was in '37 or '38. An engineer friend of mine I ran into while I was in Denver said he'd read about the guy dying in prison after more than ten years and remembered I'd never heard who he was. He told me the bum's name was Elmore Winter, he'd owned a hardware store in Lincoln, Nebraska. He'd kidnapped and murdered seven people, three of them children. My friend was about to tell me how they'd found the bodies but I stopped him, I didn't want to know.

The traitor conductor was given a life sentence for the multiple homicides of officers of a law, I think he's in off in Yuma. The legend grew larger as time went on. Like I said, people liked to say there were twenty men killed at that cabin up past Cumbres. There might have been twenty men there, but the police chief in the area said they pulled out nine bodies and a whole mess of weapons, including a big Browning .30-caliber machine gun. There were six more bodies pulled off the train, not including the Pinkertons, so that makes fifteen. God knows where the other five ended up.

Floyd Weber buried Hudson in Chama, said it's where he would've wanted to be. He went back East after the funeral. They sent workers down into Toltec Gorge to clean up the War Wagon, but they never found Lassiter. Simms healed up and kept firing on the same line, and a few years later he became one of the first colored engineers on the Rio Grande. Klein retired only a few months after that run. He thought he didn't have much starch left in him, turns out he didn't because he hit the bottle hard after quitting the railroad. He left town one day and I never saw him again.

I fired locomotives on the Cumbres & Toltec line for two years afterward. After that I earned enough money to the city where I started firing yard engines, and then moved up to engineer. I drove big mainline Northerns and Mountains and Decapods until the forties. After the Second World War I went back working on the railroad for a brief time, but it had changed since I worked it beforehand. The supers were surprised when I put in my notice, they knew as well as I did that I was a railroader and nothing else. When they asked me why I decided to call it quits I told them "It just isn't the same anymore."