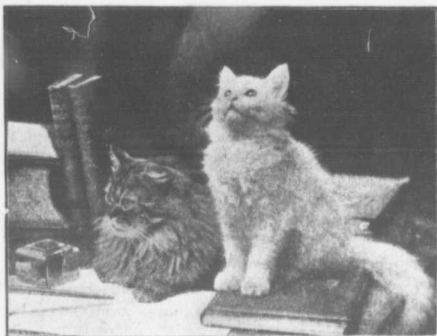


The Farm Home



Star Gazing.

The Promotion of Jeb Stark

A Story for Boys

Jeb Stark lay beneath the shade of the only tree in Scaly City which afforded any real protection from the blighting sun of an August day in Arizona. Not 20 feet away the tracks of the M., K. and T. road trembled before the eye in the heat haze beating up from the cinder roadbed. In the distance the lonely passenger shanty loomed out of the treeless waste, the ugliest object in an ugly prospect. Early in the morning Jeb had finished his "chores" about the shanty. For a time thereafter he had considered taking a nap in the "waiting room" on one of the side benches, but Krause, the operator, was in such an uncertain temper that a moment's reflection decided him on the wiser course of keeping out of sight. He betook himself, therefore, to the scraggy shelter previously mentioned, and carried with him into his retirement his two dearest possessions (sacred because they in themselves represented the highest pinnacle of his ambition), a battered old telegraph sounder and key and a coil of wire. Jeb was some day going to be an operator, and these were the means to his end.

With the agility born of long practice he had shinned the nearest telegraph pole and made a working splice to the main-line wire. From the moment that was done and the instrument adjusted a lonely Arizona wail in the midst of a sandy desert basked in the fascinating details of a world far beyond his ken. Absorbed in what to most people would have been dry and uninteresting enough, the routine of train orders and business messages held him interested to a point where he became oblivious to what was going on about him.

Therefore he failed to notice a thick-set man in blue overalls and jumper, who suddenly appeared out of the plain and glided into the office of the shanty. From there he emerged in a minute or two, preceded by the operator, neatly tripped up with clothesline and a broom-handle, after the approved method of the plains. It was not until they were close upon him that Jeb saw the pair. His first instinct was to hide his instrument as much from Krause as the outlaw.

"Who's the kid?" the stranger asked Krause sharply as they came to a halt in front of him.

"My help," the operator answered surlily.

"Sonny," the other said, addressing Jeb, "we're a-going down the road a piece, and if you want to grow up to be a man like your pap, don't you take no notion to see what we're about. See?"

As he spoke the outlaw readjusted the bandanna handkerchief across his nose and mouth and with a shove sent Krause forward down the track in the direction of Miner's Gulch, a soft-stone cutting, not more than a quarter of a mile from the station.

"Well, I reckon Krause is drunk again," the operator at the Junction muttered to himself as he banged away at the key of his sender in a vain effort to raise the Scaly City office. "Something's sure the matter," he said aloud, for the comfort the sound of his voice gave him in his perplexity.

"No answer from Scaly; No. 10 due in six minutes. What shall I do?" was the message he sent dir-

ect to the train dispatcher at the head of the line.

Before he had had time to receive an answer from his chief, the Junction operator was further puzzled by the slow, irregular ticking of the instrument on the Scaly City circuit. At first he could not make out anything from the jumbled beats of the sounder, save that something was materially out of gear in the system. As he listened, however, his trained ear began to pick out here and there a letter of the message that was coming through.

"Scaly City; Robbers is here, Krause is killed. Jeb—Scaly City; Robbers is here, Krause is killed, Jeb—" was the repeated warning that finally revealed itself to the Junction man's bewildered brain.

"I have you—I have you—I have you!"—he clicked back, as soon as the full meaning of what he had heard dawned upon him. Darting to the corner of the office he seized a red flag and tore up the main track in the direction from which the mail would approach in a scant minute and a half.

The conductor and chief mail clerk were both hanging from a step as the train ground by the operator in coming to a stop.

"What's the matter?" they asked in one breath as soon as they could get within hailing distance of him.

The operator repeated his experiences of the last ten minutes, and the three hurried to the office for instructions from headquarters.

"Word from Scaly robbers. Flag No. 10; proceed cautiously" with empty cars and effect capture, "was being ticked off over and over again as they came in.

The mail was hastily transferred from two cars into a third; a day coach and smoker were emptied of passengers, and the loaded cars backed out of harm's way down a siding. With the dummy train in tow the locomotive started for Scaly City, with six heavily armed mail clerks distributed over the tender and in the cab as a guard.

The engineer felt his way cautiously down the line, ready at a moment's notice to bring his train to a standstill. No sign of anything out of the ordinary was to be seen as they came in sight of the shanty. The fireman and two mail clerks made their way carefully towards the building to investigate. On the floor lay Krause's revolver. The room was in confusion, and there had evidently been a struggle. Not stopping to search further, the men hurried back to the locomotive and reported.

Without a word the engineer started his machine ahead down the track. Furthermore, he no longer ran at a cautious crawl, but opened the throttle wide and plunged away as if making up time on his regular schedule. The