

Barber Poles

by William Merriman Rouse

LUCK THOMPSON was riding hard. Little clouds of dust spurted from beneath his horse's flying hoofs, hung suspended in the air a minute, then drifted slowly to the ground again. Behind, dimmed by distance, loomed a huge mountain, its peak stretched out as if in effort to pierce the blue heavens; while far ahead the plain rolled gently to a crooked line of silver that marked a fast-flowing stream.

Somewhere between Luck's dust and the mountain lay the Curtice Ranch; beyond the silvered line a midwest city thrived.

Luck was a cowpuncher at the Curtice Ranch. Yesterday had been payday. Half an hour before Luck had come in from line-riding and found his two particular pals already gone to town. He had ridden the first few miles at a fast clip in an effort to overtake them.

When the speed began to tell on his horse, Luck slackened him into an easy trot. Then he let him walk a bit.

"If you could o' run that way for five more miles, Bony, I reckon we'd have headed them," he told his horse, patting his neck affectionately. Then he added, humorously: "If we had only five more miles to go."

Bronzed by sun and wind, Luck's features lost a certain clean-cut look that was indicative of an intelligence seldom found in men of his calling. Save for the crinkling eyes, a casual observer would have discovered nothing in Luck's countenance to distinguish him from any other sunburnt cow-puncher.

But there was a difference. Old Mas Curtice, proprietor of the Curtice Ranch, noticed it, and voiced the opinion that in Luck's curly head were real brains should he ever take the trouble to unkink them. But the trouble was, Luck never took the trouble.

It was the middle of the afternoon when Luck rode into town. He pulled up at the stable that had once faced a main street, but which had been crowded into the alley by the advent of a garage. He was dusty and tired, and not a little peeved at the world in general, and his two pals in particular for not having waited for him.

He had his mouth all set for his favorite thirst-quencher at his favorite saloon, but recalled that prohibition had hit the State the instant he glimpsed the barkeeper. Usurping the place of the familiar mustached drink-dispenser was a girl.

Luck never was a ladies' man. He walked right in, turned around, and walked right out and across the street to a cigar store. Here he invested in double his usual supply of tobacco. From the man behind the counter he learned that his two pals had preceded him by less than ten minutes. This information hurried him around to all the places they were wont to visit in the old days, but nowhere were they to be found.

The farther Luck traveled the worse his temper became. If it had been in the old days—which Luck had read about, but never enjoyed—he would probably have gone down the middle of the street with a spurting gun in either hand. But

times had changed, and instead of going on a rampage, Luck continued to walk aimlessly up and down the streets.

A gaudy barber pole setting out on the curb caught Luck's eye, and he suddenly decided he would invest in a haircut. He didn't need one—he had got one on his last trip to town a little less than two months ago—but he must pass the time, and this seemed as good a way as any.

Immediately he sat in the chair he dozed off. It looked to the barber as though Luck needed a few things other than a haircut, and he put them on. Besides, Luck had blundered into a shop he had never patronized before—one of those places where an industrious lad, the color of a cascade, dusts your shoes and polishes your hat while you sleep.

The size of his check took all the sleep out of Luck's eyes. He started to argue on the prices, and was informed that everything in the tonsorial line had been advanced within the last few days.

It looked like a thousand per cent raise to Luck, and he told them so in the best profanity at his command. If he had had a gun on him he might have illustrated his point. But he didn't, and, as two of the barbers were heavyweights, he soon found himself sitting on the sidewalk without having walked through the door. It is a fact, however, that they didn't charge him for the heaving.

Luck finished counting the funny little stars, collected his thoughts—and then his legs. He looked about for his hat, and it came sailing through the door to him. Finally he went down the street talking to himself.

He was still talking when Shorty Young and Slim Jones, the two he had trailed into town, bumped into him.

“Who you arguing with, Luck?”

Shorty wanted to know. Shorty's monniker was somewhat misleading, in that he measured six feet three with his shoes off and his socks on.

By way of answer, Luck merely continued the line of talk he had been entertaining himself with.

“Why, th' dirty, yellow, sneakin' coyotes,” he grated. “Get a man asleep, raise their prices pronto, an' then throw him out of th' door when they figger he's observin' th' State law that won't allow him to tote his gun.”

This was rather vague, but Luck's two listeners seemed to know just what he was talking about.

“Barbers, eh, Luck?” Shorty Young pulled off his broad-brimmed hat as he spoke, and exposed to view a pate that missed being of the billiard ball variety by a hair—or two. A short stubble appeared here and there. “An' they took a big hunk out o' my pay for doing that,” he explained.

Then Slim Jones, who was fat as a hog, uncovered his head for inspection, and uttered the plaint that made unanimous the ill feeling toward the profiteering barbers.

“It ain't provocatin' to gentleness to have no tinhorn face-scraper boost his prices indiscriminate,” he contributed, pushing back a few stringy red hairs that persisted in falling over his eyes, “but how're you going to argue when your gun's in th' locker in th' harness shed?”

“An' how'd they get two bits worth o' Rosa-something on them hairs o' mine?” Shorty inquired, rubbing his stubbles.

A seeker of sympathy need only to encounter some one nursing the same particular grievance as he. It was indeed balm to Luck's wounded pride to hear his pals' complaints. And yet, the memory of

his forcible ejection from the barber shop, and the price he was forced to pay, still rankled in his brain.

Shorty and Slim continued their discourse, but Luck paid no further attention. He began to think—to take the kinks out of his brain as the barber's scissors had taken them out of his hair. One persistent idea possessed him. It was to get even in some way with the barbers before leaving town, and he was due back at the ranch that very night.

Suddenly Luck got a real inspiration. He cut in on the two and began outlining his plan so clearly that even they could understand. As Luck went on, Slim and Shorty became enthusiastic, and agreed to follow wherever Luck should lead.

Finishing his explanation, Luck said: "We got to get square with th' sneakin' galoots. I reckon we could lick a few, but that wouldn't be all, an' we want to get them all, an' this is shore one great way to do it." To all of which the others heartily agreed.

It was two hours later.

Stabs of crimson and streaks of purple and yellow lit the western sky with a blinding radiance. Then a drab cloud loomed behind, slowly obliterating the wonderful sunset.

Luck puckered his lips to the sibilance of a ranch song and led his two cohorts town to a barber shop located on a side street. He had picked out this particular shop for a purpose. It was operated by a genial Irishman who was proud of the name of Kelly. Many times had he fractured the rules in favor of some tardy customer.

The three filed in as Kelly was about to close up for the evening.

"I'm sorry, boys," began Kelly, as

was his way, "but rules are rules. You should have come in earlier. You can't get anything done tonight."

"Don't want nothin' done, Kelly," reassured Luck. "We got some other business, though, which we reckon we can do with you."

In answer to Kelly's puzzled look, Luck continued:

"We reckoned we'd start a barber shop. What will you take for th' shack?"

Kelly's facial expression changed instantly. For the past year he had been trying to sell out in order to return East. This Luck, knew, but Kelly didn't remember having told him.

"A nice little shop it is, boys," lauded Kelly. "Now, what with the fixtures, good will and all, I might sacrifice for three thousand dollars."

"I reckon we don't care to stake all that," returned Luck, after appearing to consider it, "but I'll tell you what I will do, Kelly"—and he let his wandering gaze fasten on the gaudy barber pole visible through the window—"I'll give you three dollars for your pole."

"And what will you be wanting with a barber pole?" came from the astonished barber.

"If we start in the barber business I reckon we'll need a pole, won't we?"

After much bickering, Luck got the pole for five dollars, a figure at which Kelly maintained he would be lucky to buy a new one to replace it. Before Luck handed over the money, however, he produced a bill-of-sale, properly made out, which he made Kelly sign.

"Just to have something to show for," he told the inquisitive barber.

The trio then hoisted the pole onto their shoulders and made off with it down the street. But they had traveled only a few blocks when a big policeman intercepted

them, sneered at their claims of ownership, and roughly steered them toward the police station.

At the station, the policeman made his plaint to the desk sergeant.

"These three fellows were carrying this pole down Main Street, sarge, and I reckon they stole it."

"Names," demanded Sergeant Noyes, pen poised over the police blotter.

"Luck Thompson's my name, sergeant," drawled Luck slowly. "If you care to, you might look at this bill-of-sale here an' be convinced that we bought th' pole from Dan Kelly that runs a shop down on Colorado Street. I reckon you'll find it O. K."

A brief examination of the paper convinced Sergeant Noyes that Luck had stated a fact. He returned the paper, hoisted his feet on his desk, and resumed the newspaper he had laid down.

"Beat it," he invited tersely.

Luck carefully replaced the paper in his pocket, and the three lost no time in carrying out the sergeant's command.

Again they started out, choosing a different street, and celebrating their acquittal with a lot of noise.

Had Luck been so minded, he could have avoided the blue-coated guardian of the law standing on the next corner. Perhaps he thought him the same one they had encountered before that evening—they all look so much alike. However, it wasn't.

This officer smiled knowingly as they tried to convince him that the pole belonged to them.

"You're walking for your health, anyway," he sagely argued. "A little trip back to the station won't hurt you."

The sergeant reluctantly lowered his paper as the trio made their reappearance in tow of the policeman.

"Sergeant," commenced the officer, "I think the boys stole—"

"Just a minute, O'Reilly, just a minute," interrupted the sergeant. "You're the second policeman that thought that same thing inside of fifteen minutes. At this rate they'll have the entire force in here before midnight."

He turned and scowled at the boys. He was puzzled as to the disposition he should or could make of their case. The pole belonged to them, and they surely had the right to carry it where they pleased, but he couldn't allow his men to be interrupted in their regular routine in such a manner.

Luke offered a suggestion at this point.

"I reckon, sergeant, that you could write a note or something givin' us permission to tote th' pole around th' town, couldn't you? All th' cops would honor that, an' we'd have no trouble passin' them."

"What I ought to do is lock you all up for disturbing the peace," the sergeant threatened gruffly. "And I'd do it, too, if I thought your conduct really warranted it." Then, as he considered Luck's suggestion, and appreciated the advisability of carrying it out, he added: "Well, at that, what you suggest can't do any harm, and assuredly it will save the force a lot of bother."

He accordingly scribbled an order and landed it to Luck, who turned it to the light and read aloud:

"ALL POLICEMEN:

"Let these three cowpunchers and their barber pole go unmolested on the streets. They have bought and paid for the pole, as their bill-of-sale will show.

"SERGEANT JOHN A. NOYES."

Luck had a word of thanks for the

sergeant, but that crabbed individual refused to hear it, and curtly ordered them out of his sight.

Once again they left the station. This time they headed straight for the center of the town. Then began the culmination of Luck's well-planned plot. With the most difficult part of the undertaking accomplished, that of convincing the sergeant of their good faith, all remained was to use discretion, and indulge in a little hard exercise.

For several hours they seemingly paraded the streets with that barber pole on their shoulders, stopping from time to time to appease the wrath of a policeman with the magic slip of paper bearing the sergeant's signature. And the police invariably gave them right of way.

In reality, however, fifteen minutes after they had quitted the presence of the sergeant, the pole they had then carried was hidden in the rear of the city hall, and they were off in search of another barber pole.

They worked with untiring energy, and brought pole after pole to the hiding place. And even though they often met the same policeman a number of times, none was discerning enough to notice that each

time they carried a different pole.

When they had visited every section of the town likely to support a barber shop, and pilfered everything that resembled a barber pole, they procured a couple of ladders, by means of which they hoisted the two dozen poles they had collected to the top of the city hall.

It was midnight before Luck found his way to the stable where he had left his horse, and, joining his pals, started on the long journey back to the ranch, happy in the thought of having perpetrated a hoax such as the barbers of that town were not likely soon to forget.

Next morning the populace of the town was greeted with the spectacle of twenty-four barber poles of various sizes, shapes and designs, standing on top the city hall, their outlines boldly defined against the sky.

In the center of the group stood a huge placard upon which appeared in large, crudely painted letters:

**THE BARBERS RAISED THEIR
PRICES
BUT FORGOT TO RAISE THEIR
POLES**