

# OLD TIMER CUTS THE BUCK

*Bugged Up, Was  
He? Well Old Pop  
Duffy'd Show 'em.*

By WENDELL W. WILLIAMS

**T**HE local squealed like a stuck pig as it sat back on its haunches under the steady hand of Engineer Roberts and skidded down the steep grade from the black maw of the tunnel, to begin winding through the cedars with their misty rain shrouds. It slowed reluctantly but with painful precision for the stop board at Mountain Junction.

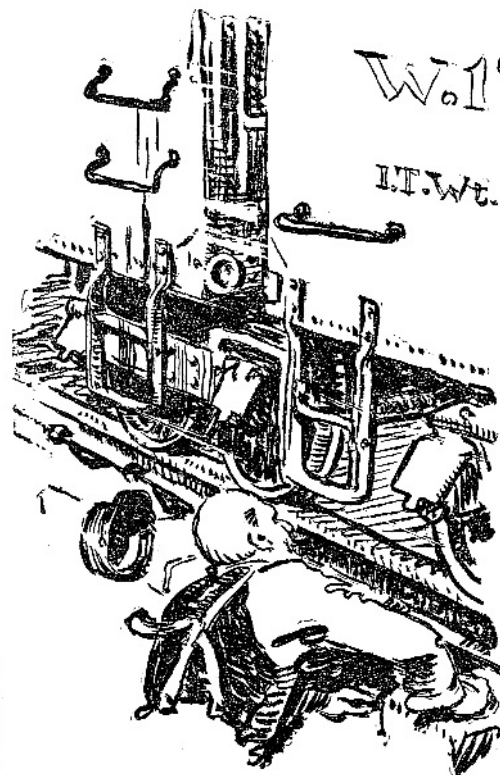
Within the box car body which had been made over for a depot, Pop Duffy stared out the window before his tidy table with an anxious eye to the heavy-laden sky. His glance stopped thoughtfully at the old wooden trestle and from it wandered to the squatty figure of "Bully" Barker hurrying from the caboose for his orders; then he saw the long, green private car coupled behind the crummy and the jaunty little man in tan raincoat who jumped down with a kind of aggressive importance. So J. A. was on today. He had a couple things to tell him.

The door flew open disclosing the swarthy, pugnacious face of the conductor, dripping with moisture. "Hullo, Pop. What yuh got?"

The old operator pulled his legs out from beneath the table with ponderous labor, exposing the cumbersome steel frames that encased them. He handed Bully the tissues. "Meet Number 235 at Helena," he said absently. "The Old Man's on, huh?"

"Watchin' my unloading." Bully smiled crookedly behind a dirty hand, looking over his shoulder cageily at the

snappily approaching superintendent. "Thinks he's cuttin' a fat hog in the—" He broke off quickly as the super got too close for intimacies, and retreated toward the engine.



J. A. Jackson brusquely entered the low room as the conductor disappeared into the weather with Roberts' copy of the order. "How are you, Duffy?" And then before the operator could reply, "By God, say! What's the matter with Donatelli that he can't keep those piles of rubbish and tin cans out of sight there by the section house? Looks like a pig pen."

"I gave him your message last week, Mr. Jackson. I didn't notice—"

“That’s the trouble with you old timers; you never notice anything,” Jackson stormed. He peered disdainfully about the small station, then turned quickly. “I got your bid for the third trick in Butte Yard. You don’t think for a minute you could handle that job, do you?” He glanced significantly at the braces.

“I don’t see why not, Mr. Jackson,” Pop said mildly, a hurt look on his face. “I can get around pretty well with the braces—and a cane.” There was a wistful quality about his seamed face as he faced the dynamic new superintendent. “You know the doc’s report said it was too high for rite up here. I just thought— It gets pretty lonesome since my daughter married—she lives in Butte—and I’ve given the best part of my life—and these,” he pointed to the maimed legs, “to the road.”

“Yes, yes. I know,” Jackson parried impatiently. “But you’ve got it comfortable here. Special privilege of living in the station.” He belligerently pushed his hat over one eye, a trick of habit, and looked with annoyance at the grizzled veteran. “What we want in the Yard is young men. Fellows who are active and can do something besides pound a key. Why—” he pointed baldly at the legs with their artificial bolsters, “—you’re all buggered up! You couldn’t cut the buck on a fast job. I should think you wouldn’t need reminding of that, Duffy. Guess you understand now?”

“I—I guess so,” dully.

Jackson took the knob in his white fingers and partly opened the door. “Anything else?”

“Yes, sir, there is,” Pop answered somewhat stubbornly. “I was wondering if you got my message about the old wooden trestle out there. It looks pretty shaky to me. Donatelli says he can hear it quivering

down at the section house. The stream’s getting mighty high, you know.”

JACKSON spat and turned angrily. “By God, I don’t see a thing wrong with it. I just walked up there when we came in. Lots worse bridges than that on the division. Maybe I’ll put it in the bridge program next year. Incidentally,” he fastened Duffy with a cocky, ironical grin, “your job has more to do with train operation than maintenance of way, I believe. That all, Duffy?”

“That,” Duffy said stiffly, “is all, sir.”

J. A. slammed the door and waved to Roberts to pull out, running for the steps of his car and making a slipshod enough job of reaching the moving platform. Or so Duffy thought, staring angrily at the green car. “All buggered up, hey?” he muttered bitterly. “And whose fault is that?” He kept up a running fire of question and answer, a habit he had acquired from being much alone. “I sh’d have taken the shyster lawyer’s advice and made ‘em pay plenty for these legs.” His gray head bobbed savagely.

After giving the trick dispatcher an O. S. on the local, Pop hobbled awkwardly to the far end of the car body where his sanitary couch was neatly made up, covers rolled back. He put a few sticks of the fragrant, dry cedar in the old caboose stove and shoved the tea kettle on. Since Mrs. Donatelli had gone to the hospital he had made his own simple meals. “All buggered up,” he repeated over and over with tired monotony. “At that I reckon I could show some of these uppity stenographer-to chief, clerk-to superintendents a thing or two.”

Jackson had been promoted from a routine office job straight through with, so the old rails conjectured, a singular lack of decorum. It was generally known he was a shirt tail relative of the Vice President of

Operation.

For a week Pop Duffy watched the gray clouds scud over the top of Old Baldy, showering out a steady downpour. Coupled with this, the snow was rapidly disintegrating on the peaks and adding its quota to the already swollen streams.

Down below the tiny depot a hundred yards and half way to the section house—the solitary buildings in Mountain Junction—Rattlesnake Creek tossed and tumbled through the cedars and tamaracks with an ominous roar. Duffy opened the door and surveyed the pine-clad ridges, misty and forbidding in an occasional burst of coy moonlight. High up on Old Baldy he heard the mournful wail of Number 2 as it emerged from the tunnel. Her brightly lighted windows flickered and twisted through the trees like a string of fireflies playing follow-the-leader. She came screeching down the grade, rumbled over the trestle, and flashed by the station like a tenuous ghost, soon swallowed in the mist and pine needles.

POP was about to go back in and shut the door when he saw a yellowslickered figure topping the path to the station. He lingered. “Hello, Angelo.”

“Hullo, Pop.” The young Italian flashed a set of gleaming teeth. “Listen, Pop. I think my wife she have the baby tonight. Me and Pete, we go down to Butte.”

“Down to Butte?” Pop’s startled eyes popped out in the dark. “How the blazes would you get to Butte tonight, Angelo? If you’d asked me I’d have got permission to stop 2.”

Angelo Donatelli’s eyelid drooped slyly. “I take the motor car. Nobody know the difference.”

“But you can’t do that, son. If you get caught on the main line with that you’re sunk.”

“Oh, I don’t get caught, Pop. I leave it down on the reep track. Then I call you and see if she’s all right to come back. Maria she feel awful seek today. I calla the hospital from Corbin today. I think maybe we get beeg son, huh?”

There was grave doubt in Pop’s headshake; a doubt overpowered by sympathetic understanding. “We-ell,” he said, “I never was so far away when my Molly was born. I know how you feel, kid. Good luck then. Be sure and call now. Don’t take any chances,” he warned, “I’ve seen better men than you get caught that way.”

Angelo waved a sprightly good-bye. He was thrilled to ecstasy with approaching fatherhood. Soon Pop heard the put-put of the single cylinder as the tiny motor car chugged away into the darkness on its ten mile journey to Butte—and a hoped-for son for Angelo Donatelli.

Pop filled the stove to capacity, tamped his pipe with the vile weed he used, and leaned back in the rocker before the gentle warmth. There was a sudden gust of wind outside accompanied by a rattle of rain on the roof. “Ain’t it ever going to quit?” he mused. “Meanest spring I ever did see, and the coldest.”

Slowly he rocked back and forth, eyes half-closed. Three years he had been in this lonely place. Ever since he had recovered from the effects of the derailment. He shuddered yet at the memory of that black demon hurtling on to the platform where he waited with his hoop. Perhaps he was lucky to be alive. But try as he might, he could gain no consolation from the thought. There was only a deep rancor in his breast. All buggered up, huh? Well, the next time the railroad could go to hell. He’d look out for Mister Duffy first.

For many long minutes he sat there steeped in the gall of retrospection. With a

start he pulled out the great nickel watch with its thong of rawhide. Surely Angelo should be calling soon. To pass the time he decided to call the Night Chief and get the baseball scores as well as find out what was on the road. Cane in hand, he clanked toward the desk, rang the chief dispatcher's office.

"Dispatcher Mountain Junction."

"Hello, Pop old boy," Murphy's genial voice sang over the wire. "How's the little eagle's nest?"

"Wide open town, Murphy. How's your railroad?"

"Pretty quiet, Pop."

"Anything on the road soon?"

"Got a drag coming out at midnight. Had a highball train of cherries out of Missoula at 10.05. She'll be going by you short— What's the matter, Pop? You sick?"

Pop *was* sick. Murphy's voice faded into the background as he heard an agonized groan from the direction of the trestle. Immediately there followed a snapping and cracking as of giant chicken bones. "My God A'mighty!" he yelled.

"Hullo, Mountain Junction! Hullo, 'Duffy!' the night chief bellowed, sensing tragedy in Pop's cry.

"Murphy, I—I think the trestle just went out. Sure sounded like i-it." His voice quavered.

"Wha-at?" Murphy croaked hollowly. The sudden terror that only a dispatcher can know at realization of a slopover, showed in Murphy's voice. "The cherry train—she's boomin' along about forty-five per," he groaned.

"Ibex," Pop said shakily. "M-maybe Jones is still hanging around the station."

"No chance," the night chief chattered, "but I-I'll r-ring him. I'll see—"

Murphy called harshly, "you've got to get them old legs of yours down to the section house and get Donatelli up that mountainside fast as his damn motor car'll run. He'll have to go way up nearly to the tunnel. Can't dynamite her on that grade above the trestle."

"But Donatelli—"

"What's that?" stridently.

"I said all right." Pop answered with blanched face. No use bringing Angelo into it when he couldn't help. "I'm leaving right now. How much time have I—has he got?"

Murphy's curse came clearly before he yelled, "About forty minutes I'd say. Hurry now! I'll get a bridge crew movin'."

Pop's parched fingers shook so he could scarcely fasten the buttons of his slicker. Over its yellow hue, his face seemed a dirty green. He plucked his electric lantern off the wall and with legs whose iron frames seemed as heavy as ships' anchors, he clanked slowly out into the steady rain. Hobbling along the path toward the footbridge he must cross, he heard subconsciously the tinkle of his phone. He sloshed on with a tortoise-like waddle, cane bolstering him as he nearly fell in the muddy path, slippery with last year's pine needles.

As he dragged across the narrow bridge over the charging, white-capped cataract beneath, Pop felt a sudden poignant stab of despair. The river was so fast; the trains were so fast; everything was fast but himself—and he was but a snail, a broken, crippled piece of human flotsam. Jackson was right. It took young, active men who could do something besides pound a key or copy an order.

Pop shuddered as he passed the black, rock-ribbed gorge where the trestle had stood; nothing there now but a few standing piers and portions of bracing, sticking up like jagged, decayed teeth.

**T**HERE was an insistent ringing of Ibex's call. No answer. "Pop!"

At the grade he found the braces unruly because of the slippery fill with its crumbling gravel ballast and washing sand. He fell flat on his face in the muck. Pop groaned with anguish as he made a feeble attempt to control the iron harness. "I've got to," he gritted. "Nothin' can keep an Irishman down, buggered or not buggered." Digging his fingers in the bank, he inched his way up on his belly like a crippled, yellow snake. The lantern and cane dragged in the mud. Like his face they were a streaked mess. With a last painful wiggle he was able to grasp the near rail and a tie end. With a sob at his slowness and a curse at his sob, he managed to gain his feet and wipe off the lantern.

No measuring device could count the many miles Pop Duffy inched along on that five-thousand-two hundred eighty feet to the tunnel portal; nothing but the laboring heart which had ticked in steadfast company with his watch for forty years in the railroad's service could have done so.

As the grade grew steeper, that same heart began to skip a beat too frequently. Pop felt that he could not longer force the warped legs over another tie, another piece of jagged mountain quartz. From the other side of the tunnel came the faint blast of the black tornado his puny body must stop. It struck a quivering note of terror in his panting breast. Pop's body slumped like a wind-tossed scarecrow. The rain poured off his old hat into dimming eyes. "If they—are—only looking—" he mumbled jerkily, "if they—can—pull her in."

And then without warning the braces refused to go farther without sterner guidance. Pop sank between the wet rails with a tired sigh, his lantern dropping from the nerveless hand and rolling down the fill. It twinkled out of sight in the underbrush.

A hundred yards back of the figure huddled on the track a racing section foreman with aching lungs pounded up the hill.

Out of the tunnel's mouth roared the giant engine, whistle screaming, a scant two hundred yards away. Fireman Tally called over to the engineer. "Hey, Dave, got any more of that spittin' tobacco?"

Dave Bunch tossed a mangled plug in the general direction of the fireman. It was a poor shot. Tally almost fell out the window to save the precious lump. His eyes distended wildly. "What's that shining in the track there, Dave? Looks like—like—"

Dave Bunch craned his neck through the dripping window. Face livid, he gave the engine the gun, but there was a hopeless look in his eyes. A sick look.

There was a jerk, a screeching of tires on wet rails. With a pained shriek the locomotive bucked and skidded toward the inert, yellow lump between the rails. Less than a yard away from the tails of the sprawled slicker it squeaked to a reluctant stop.

Pop's eyes fluttered open. There was a strong light in his face. Raucous voices rang dreamily in his ears. Someone was shaking him, calling on him to speak. From a far distance came the steady puff-puff-puff of an idling locomotive.

"Who is it?" he asked weakly, unable to hear his own words.

"It's me, Pop. Dave Bunch on the cherry train.

The old ears began to stop their unearthly ringing. "The bridge, Dave—it's—it's—"

"Yes, yes, Pop. Donatelli just told me. But are you all right, old timer? You're not hurt?" The solicitude in his voice paid tribute to the regard with which the veteran was held by the brotherhood.

Pop's face lighted for a brief moment

with a happy but feeble grin. "All right, Dave—but—" He motioned the engineer's greasy cap close and whispered haltingly in the other's ear. "His—wife—was having—a baby. Nobody needs to know but us here. Promise—Dave?"

The engineer looked at Donatelli sourly. "Okay," he promised gruffly. "Just the same that damned wop—" He mumbled on under his breath. But he told the rest of the crew what Pop had said.

**I**T WAS three or four days later. Pop was eating his simple lunch, watching a bridge crew through the open door as they put the finishing touches on a spanking new trestle. The sun shone warmly through the door and window. He felt grateful to it. His legs had ached dreadfully the last few days.

A bulky, kindly-looking man in brown coveralls detached himself from a group that had just arrived on a speeder, and unobtrusively sidled toward the box car station.

Pop glanced up, wiping his mouth with a blue chambray shirt sleeve as the man darkened the doorway. He walked over with an outstretched left hand, which Pop took awkwardly with his right, staring at the mangled one the smiling man held close to his side. "Duffy?"

"Why, yes sir."

"My name's Hobbins. New superintendent on the Butte Division."

Pop looked at him, puzzled. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Hobbins," he said, a faint memory gnawing at the back of his brain. Then in dawning delight, "Didn't you used to brake back on the Nickel Plate?"

"Why yes. Good many years ago." Hobbins smiled with friendly ease. "Did you—"

"Sure," Pop said breathlessly. "Don't you remember me, sir? I was a kid operator at Clinton."

The superintendent hesitated a moment, deep study on his weathered face. "Of course. And I was a student—"

"Yeah," Pop grinned, "and you left off flagging the rear end of 45 to duck in the lunch counter for a cup of java and the Old Man ate your tail out and I told him a lady passenger turned her ankle and you went with her to the waiting room."

Hobbins laughed heartily. "Good old days," he said. "But I came up here to talk to you about the—the near accident the other day. I want to thank you personally for your prompt—" he looked down quickly at the braces and back to Pop's face, "and heroic action in flagging the cherry train."

Pop's ears reddened. "But it wasn't me—"

"Oh, rats!" the superintendent said. "You didn't suppose that dam hogger could keep that. Anyway, Donatelli had a boy—I couldn't fire a man who'd just had his first boy, could I? So you see, Duffy, you have been party to a deliberate deception." There was a mock frown on his brow under the old hat. "I don't know whether to thank you or give you hell. But as the braces were quite a prominent factor in the matter and I can't bawl them out, I guess you must be treated equally well."

"The braces?" Pop looked down at them wonderingly.

"Sure," Hobbins laughed. "Didn't you know? Your lantern rolled down the fill. It was the braces gleaming in the track that stopped Bunch."

There was a long silence while Hobbins sat on the edge of Pop's table and watched the bridge gang cleaning up around the trestle. Finally he turned to the operator. "They tell me you made application for the third trick in Butte Yard; got turned down."

"Yes, sir," Pop said embarrassedly. "I guess probably Mr. Jackson was right. It

takes young fellows to cut the buck nowadays. I was thinkin' of that the night I crossed the footbridge and tried to climb that mountain. Anybody else would have been up there and had torpedoes out while I was getting as far as the grade."

Hobbins looked at the gray head admiringly. "I wouldn't be so sure of that," he said. "At any rate I think we'll see you in Butte Yard in a few days. If Jackson had learned to take advice from some of you old timers I probably wouldn't have had the chance to get you down off the hill."

The superintendent stooped down to try and tighten a dangling shoe lace. His bad hand was in difficulty, and Pop bent over. "Let me do that, Mr. Hobbins. You're all bugged up."

But Hobbins kept at the lace until it was secured. He looked up wily. "Relic of the link and pin. What did you say about bugged up?"

"I guess I shouldn't have said that," Pop apologized. "It isn't very pleasant is it? That's what Jackson said about me. It made me sore, too."

"Oh, he did?" Hobbins growled. "You know, Duffy, that's one of the things I can't understand about Jackson. Now you or I—" he smiled broadly "—you or I would know without saying, that a real railroader is never bugged—till he's dead. But I guess you have to grow up alongside 'em to know that."

He turned at the door. "I'll get that transfer made soon's I get back to the office. So long."

Pop sank back in his padded chair with a great exhalation. There was a misty curtain that kept obscuring his vision as he stared out the window where the man in brown coveralls strode in the direction of the bridge crew. "Salt of the earth," he mumbled. "Used to brake on the Nickel Plate."