

*Ducksoup Chones Was One of Those Fellas  
With a Nose for Oil*



## GRASSHOPPER OIL

By JOHN E. KELLY

MEL HARKNESS, the master mechanic, was just in to see how's chances for a new crown sheet in case we want little old 202, the yard engine, to keep on running. After I turned him down, like he expected, for the Uriah North & South never has money for new parts, and told him he's got first call for salvage from the next wreck, we got to yarning on what's the most useless thing in the world. Mel 'lowed it's grasshoppers. I said I heard they made fine chicken feed, dried and stored for winter. Harkness came back with one on his cousin, Ab Scroggs, who's dry-

farming down Fresno way. The hoppers lit on his fields and gobbled up every green leaf. But Ab's a philosophical cuss and then and there made up his mind to go into the chicken business. He grabbed an armful of gunnysacks and dashed out to stuff 'em with hoppers, figuring his first hundred dozen eggs would cost him nothing. But the bugs had different ideas. Scroggs barely made it back to the house, with his straw hat chewed off and his overalls nigh gone. And his shepherd dog, Terror, that won first prize at the County Fair for long fur, looked like a Mexican hairless. Then I reminded Mel of the time the hoppers

saved Pers Mallon's oil well. Harkness stamped out, hollering that the longlegs coppered their bets that day, but just the same he owes me a stogie next time we met in Angelino's quick-and-dirty across the yards where the train crew always eat.

THAT was back when the Old Man was breaking me in as relief telegrapher here. Usually I'd draw the owl or graveyard trick, when there was little coming over the wire, and being a young sprout, I made out to get in a full day running around with the other kids and sleep with my head on the table where the first clatter of the sounder brought me to. Or if things were dull in town, I'd come off shift in time to grab Number One, our daily passenger southbound, and ride down the line, matching nickels with the train butcher for eats and beer, until we met Number Two, which brought me back to Lumberton just early enough to beat the other boarders to the ham and eggs Miz Ellers served every night except Sunday. After the oil boom started, I made the round trip nigh every day.

It's called Petrolia now and the ranchers have a nice thing in oil royalties. Nothing gold-plated, like in Oklahomy, but enough to keep the mail-order houses hopping shipping out store-bought clothes and Grand Rapids fumed oak. We didn't even have a whistle-stop there before a duck hunter fell in a slough and couldn't wash the grease stain out of his canvas coat. There was plenty oil underground but for a while it looked like the only ones to make a dollar out of the boom would be Ducksoup Chones and our road. We got ours honest, hauling boilers and casing for the drilling wells, and Ducksoup made his pile outsmarting everybody else. Until he picked Pers Mallon as an easy mark and outsmarted hisself. Like the wise old Chinee, Confuse-us, claimed, anything can

happen and usually does. But Chones had figured all the angles—and a grasshopper hadn't been seen in Evergreen County in nigh twenty years.

Ducksoup musta had a nose for oil, for he showed up in the county while we were building the first siding at Petrolia. Mostly he hung around Uriah, which was nearer to the oil field, and handy to money. Wine grapes were bringing skyhigh prices that year and like Jesse James said, easy come, easy go. Chones got a few pieces printed in the Uriah *Nonesuch*, telling of the big wells he claimed to have brought in down in Texas, and the grape ranchers crowded around, waving checks and begging Ducksoup to count them in his syndicates. Chones gave them action, He had a drilling crew and a cable tool rig and weekends there'd be parties at the well, with a cold keg and barbecue pit serving all comers. None of his wells ever struck oil, but the excuse was always reasonable. Water would leak into the bore, or the casing collapsed or even sometimes—though Ducksoup made his own locations with expert geological savvy and a secret doodlebug he kept padlocked in a big chest—the well would hit a tight place in the sand and come in dry.

Chones was always so cheerful when luck was bad, so determined to try again, that lots of his subscribers went along for a second, sometimes a third ride. Only after he'd skedaddled a jump ahead of the sheriff did they learn Ducksoup's secret. He'd organize a syndicate with thirty-two equal shares and take two himself, so "my risk is twice anybody else's." But he was a mite careless counting and sometimes he'd sell eighty thirty-seconds of a wildcat. On failures he couldn't lose and the syndicates dissolved when the members got the bad news, so nobody got a look at the books, if Chones kept any. A real well would have ruined him and Ducksoup was mighty

Careful never to strike oil.

Nobody suspicioned him, then, but folks tagged him unlucky, which was nigh as bad for his business. After a while he couldn't raise syndicate money in Uriah anymore and began to beat the bushes for easier game. We saw him in Lumberton a couple of times before he latched on to Pers Mallon. The Old Man, who turned him down cold, called Chones a "black-headed ferret," and he did favor a weasel with his shoe-button eyes, high cheekbones and slit of a mouth in his thin face that fell away at the chin. He was a dude dresser, with a standing collar that plowed his jaw and a pearl stickpin in an oversize black satin tie. His tongue was hinged in the middle so's to wag on both ends and he could spot Willyum Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday four paragraphs and lap them in the home stretch.

I got Pers Mallon into the oil business. Once I'd say I 'took the blame for getting the youngster in,' but when he came up here some years back riding in his private car made from the start he got at Petrolia, I handed myself a few pats on the back and grabbed the credit. Like I said, I used to ride Number One most every day after oil was discovered and have about an hour's layover at Petrolia before I'd hear the northbound passenger whistling for the yards that had mushroomed about the whistle-stop. On good days I'd run out to the nearest drilling wells, in rainy weather I'd hang around Belgrano's chili joint and lap up the hot stuff and all the oilfield dope. Back in Lumberton I had the news a day ahead of the paper and a couple of wise-money boys around town took to boarding at Miz Ellers', choking down her razorback ham and stale eggs, to hear me sound off.

**M**ALLON roomed there then. He was working in the State Bank for about

what I was getting at the depot, not enough to keep a modern kid in cigarettes and cokes, but which we thought good enough to be going steady with the prettiest girl cousins in Lumberton. That drew us together. Pers never said much at table, but would quiz me after in my room and he knew a lot of the oilfield lingo heard at Petrolia. I could see he was getting itchy to get in, but I figured maybe the fellows in the bank were chipping in for a share in a syndicate, with Mallon putting up a couple of ten spots.

The first thing I knew Pers was dickering with Chones and Ducksoup was rarin' back like a galled mule. The kid came from Pennsylvania where it seems they've got oil, too, and his folks had a farm with a couple of wells on it. The blond hair he'd got from a Dutch grandpop had a hard trading head under it. Mallon wasn't playing Chones' game. He wouldn't join a syndicate, he wanted an option on a tract Ducksoup had leased, and planned to drill his own well. Chones held out for a cash deal, but money was tight with him right then and if Pers had luck, Ducksoup began to see some real gravy without cost to him. So he sewed the kid up in an option on a ten-acre tract smack in the middle of Chones' leases. If Mallon struck oil, the market for Ducksoup's surrounding acreage would skyrocket.

They had trouble over the length of the option. Pers held out for four months, Chones stuck on three. Finally Mallon took a day off and went down to Uriah to close the deal. They argued all through lunch and then through stogies, sitting on the porch of the old Empire House, getting nowhere fast. Finally Ducksoup jumped up, stuck out his arm like a ham actor telling his daughter to take her baby and vamoose, and pointed to the big dock on the courthouse across the square.

"Hear my last word," he hollered.

“When them hands mark twelve o’clock one hundred days from now, have the gold here to pay me, or you lose the lease.”

There’s folks who’ll take a Mexican stogie over a Havana perfecto any day, others’ll lay you odds their fillers are tar paper soaked in sheep dip. Pers was so sick from his first *puro* that he couldn’t talk, and Ducksoup got his way.

Mallon wrote his folks about his big deal and I guess they were proud of him. Anyway, with what they sent and what his friends in Lumberton chipped in, his syndicate was filled quickly. Marie and I wouldn’t touch the nest egg we’d been saving to get married on, but we swore off Sunday buggy rides and church socials for six months and anteed up fifty dollars for a half share. Ready cash was like catnip to Chones and he tried to change the option, but Pers stuck to his bargain. If he struck oil, he took up his option; if the hole was dry, Ducksoup got his lease back, all within one hundred days.

Pers threw up his bank job and moved into a tent ‘longside the drilling rig. He hashed his soft pencil-pusher’s hands helping the roustabouts run casing, and nights the clanking of the walking beam and the bullfrogs’ bellowing got him no sleep, but he wouldn’t have traded for Governor. For the first time he was boss of something. ‘Course, he was mostly in the way, but he learned fast.

**D**UCKSOUP was uncommon short of cash, even for him, and he figured to give Mallon a boost, unbeknownst, and rake in his purchase price. One Sunday night, when the rig was shut down while the crew were bending their elbows on Skid Row and Pers was holding hands with his best girl, Chones sneaked out to the well and poured a barrel of crude oil down the open hole. Ninety-nine wildcatters in a hundred, seeing the color of oil in the

bailer, would have hightailed it to town, paid Ducksoup off in jig time and got their title on record. But Mallon just kept on bailing until the hole was dry and then told the crew to run the tools and go on drilling.

When Pers didn’t come to Uria, Chones hitched up his buckboard and drove out to Petrolia. Wildcatters are always dancing on top of the derrick or lying down in the sump, in their feelings, I mean. All the other wells shut down and their crews come a-running as Mallon’s bailer had brought up oil. But when it played out, everybody got to thinking maybe the whole field was a flash in the pan and Ducksoup saw nothing but long faces. The blues got Chones, too, so bad that when a stranger came up and offered him a hundred dollars cash for a six months’ option on all his acreage, Ducksoup nigh picked his pocket to get the *dinero*. What Chones didn’t know was the hundred was Mallon’s, handled by a visiting fireman from Lumberton, namely me.

But then Mallon’s luck petered out. His old boiler blew a tube, then the drilling tools stuck in the well. Pers had a calendar hanging on his tent pole and he marked off the hundred days. There weren’t more than four-five left when they started making hole again, and Pers looked ten years older.

If this was fiction, Mallon’s well would come in on the morning of the last day, and that’s just how it was. She broke through into the oil sand late in the second tower, before sun-up, and when the tool dresser woke Pers, the well was flowing by heads over the top of the derrick. But the kid didn’t hardly stop to look at Petrolia’s first gusher. He grabbed his pants, making sure his wallet was in ‘em, and hiked for the railways, having no other way to keep his date with Chones at noon.

Gen’rally when we pulled into Petrolia half a dozen loafers would be spitting and

whittling on the cinder platforms, but this day there was only Mallon. Everybody else had skedaddled to see the gusher. Pers was pale, hopping up and down with nerves and as soon as I stepped down from the cab, where I'd been gassing with the engineer, he dragged me to the day coach. When I heard his story I broke away long enough to have the station agent wire the Old Man at Lumberton that I couldn't take my trick that night.

Number One was due in Uriah at eleven-fifty which gave Pers ten minutes to get to the Empire House and find Ducksoup Chones, who wouldn't be anxious to see him, for the wire had already spread the news of the gusher up and down the line. Chones was selling out for a plugged nickel with no way to recoup his loss from offset acreage. I looked for him to skip town, so Mallon couldn't locate him until Ducksoup had rigged some shenanigan to cut in on the bonanza. But Pers' only worry was that the train be late, which it was more likely than not. To calm him I went through the express car, over the blind baggage and the tender to get Mart Camerson to bear down on the throttle. He did, too; when my watch marked eleven-thirty we were only ten minutes running time out of Uriah.

**I**T'S open country north of Uriah, first swampy, next dairy and corn land, then you're running through vineyards until the whistle blows for the upper yards. Even a railroad office stiff gets to know the feel of a train and I'd been riding 'em nigh daily for the past three months. Sitting on the aisle beside Mallon, all of a sudden I noticed black spots raining down outa the sky, striking the windows, too big and *squashy* for cinders. I was just saying "Grasshoppers!" when I felt Number One slow down fast, like the engine's driving wheels were locked. But the airbrakes

weren't on. The train slid to a stop and as I heard Camerson whistling the conductor forward, I got out and ran to the cab.

Flying hoppers belted me in the face and covered my clothes. There was a black cloud of 'em over the telegraph poles, thick enough to shut out the sun, and they were 'lighting on the right of way. Camerson had plowed halfway through the patch, mashing the bugs by thousands before his drivers slid on the greasy rails. He dumped sand but the crushed bodies soaked it up into a slippery paste on which the big wheels couldn't gain a yard. The engineer let live steam spurt from his cylinders. He might have roasted a bushel of grasshoppers, but there were millions to take their place. For a hundred feet ahead the track was heaped as high as the cowcatcher with a squirming pile of waving legs and wings, like something you'd see only in a bad dream.

Pers stood beside me, up to his knees in grasshoppers and I saw he was going sick inside, figuring what the lost time meant to him. Anything was better than waiting. I got a spare coal scoop from the fireman and Mallon took another, to try to scrape the rails clean. But when I had cleared six feet, I looked back to find the track buried again. Finally we had to shovel a foot at a time, right under the pilot truck, while Camerson poured sand and inched ahead. Hoppers got in my hair, up my pants' legs and down my collar. I could feel 'em kicking inside my shirt. My ears rang with the noise of those millions of bugs rubbing against each other. But the worst was the sickly sweet smell of the crushed ones. I nigh to lose my lunch a dozen times and Pers nearly passed out.

When we finally worked dear and Camerson whistled us aboard, Mallon and I broke for the express car and stripped. There musta been a hundred hoppers in my clothes and our shirts and hair were soaked

with their juice. Just as I was scraping the last one outa my shoes, Camerson blew for the Uriah yards and we hustled into our clothes. The train was still rolling when I jumped, trying to knot my tie, and set out at a dead run for the Empire House, trailing Pers by two lengths.

**I**N URIAH the first things I saw were grasshoppers. The street crawled with 'em, blobs of bugs hung from poles and wires and broke branches with their weight. They had made a clean sweep of the rocking chair brigade on the Empire House porch and Chones was puffing a stogie in the lobby, looking mighty pleased with himself.

"Yer too late!" Ducksoup yelled when he sighted Pers. "You lost yer option and I'll thank you to git yer tent off'n my land!"

"Now look," began Mallon and he told Chones about the hoppers stopping the train. But Ducksoup wouldn't listen.

"That don't make no never minds," he barked. "You gotta expect anythin' in the oil business. You didn't show up here at noon and the gusher's mine. But I'm a reasonable gent. Gimme back the option on my other land that that skinny feller," and he gave me a dirty look where I was standing near the French windows of the lobby, "hornswoggled me out of, an' you kin take the boiler an' derrick off'n the lease after I get the well closed in."

Pers turned white. Ducksoup had him where the hair was short. There was nothing I could do to help. I felt pitiful and turned away, looking through the windowpane across the square to the courthouse. The tower was plastered with grasshoppers, the higher the thicker, so they almost hid the clock. I thought I was seeing things, but I scrubbed the dusty

glass with my sleeve and it was still the same. The hoppers had jammed between the hands and the clock was stuck at precisely ten minutes before noon.

"Pers!" I yelled. "The clock, the clock! Your gusher's safe, it ain't noon yet!"

They both looked at me like I was crazy, and I was, almost. I grabbed Mallon's arm and dragged him to the window. Ducksoup came, too, and he gave a dirty laugh.

"I've no time for fools," he yelled, and he meant me. "It's nigh two o'clock," and he yanked out his watch to prove it.

"That don't make no never minds, neither," I yelled, batting his timepiece outa his hand. "You gotta expect anything in the oil business. Pay him, Pers, and the lease is yours."

Mallon reached for his wallet. "You said when the hands mark twelve o'clock," he reminded Chones. "You made the deal and you're stuck with it."

Ducksoup didn't think so, at first. He grabbed for his hideout gun, a mite late, but at that, he took a heap of persuading. I broke a knuckle. The hotel clerk and Big Samba, the cook, came running, but in our country folks don't horn in on a private fight. After Chones 'lowed he'd take Mallon's money in his pocket 'stead a down his gullet, we let him up. While I held him, just in case, Pers got paper and a pen from the writing desk.

"Write the receipt and put in the syndicate's new name," he told Chones.

Ducksoup's tail was dragging, all the fight was out of him. "Whut is it?" he asked miserably, scribbling with his stove-up fingers.

Pers winked at me across Chones' head. "The least we can do," he said, "is call it the Grasshopper Oil Company."