

COMPOUND INTEREST

By HUGH PENDEXTER

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ATTORNEY BLAKE, the Union Railroad's lookout man at the State capital, smoothed the irritation from his brow as he entered the county recorder's office and suavely inquired—

"This is Mr. Peters?"

"This is," was the laconic reply of the elderly man, whose white hair, mustache and eyebrows contrasted sharply with his somber black clothes. "You're trying to find the Honorable Washburn W. Gilly, I'm told. He's tied up for a bit. You're the railroad feller. Squat an' smoke. He'll pass by this winder when he escapes."

"An outstanding man. A big man. A basic man. The State is proud of him," said Blake gustily as he dropped into an ancient armchair, lighted a cigar and left the cigar case on the desk for Mr. Peters to patronize.

"He's floor leader of the House," mumbled the ancient as he selected a weed.

"A big, sound, basic man!" warmly

repeated Blake.

"Yeah. Weighs two hundred. Oh, Wash is all right. But when I think of the old days, when you done your electioneering with a shotgun and opened court with a sixshooter, all this flying round in a white vest and 'fumery on your hair seems sort of tame and pindling. Regular he-men are fizzling out, young feller. Raddios and autermobiles and these danged smooth roads ain't helped the race any. And ukeleles and their slinking music have helped do the mischief. In the old days—ah, there was a man!" He stared through the window to the faded blue of distant hills.

"You were saying there was a man," prompted Blake.

Peters switched his head about and blinked at the speaker, then found the trail and nodded his head. In a reverential voice he elucidated:

"Cat-Foot Bill was some simon-pure

hellion. If he'd stuck to his knitting he'd be mighty big punkins today. I can see him now, walking in that easy, sly way of his, covering the ground with-out seeming to move a muscle. Sort of drifted along. He had the best outlook of any young feller I know. When in hard luck there was nothing in the State that could touch him. Prosperity sp'iled his career."

Blake eased him along by doubting if a man would be undone by prosperity. The elderly man did not seem to hear the attorney. Again he refreshed his recollections by consulting the blue silhouette in the west. Then he began: "Yeah, seems like yesterday that he got his start by stumbling over that dead man on the edge of Hays City. The two of us was making the town at nightfall. We'd lighted and was leading our hosses. The critters shied and balked, and Cat-Foot found himself staring down at some unfortunate man. We supposed the feller was drunk. Cat-Foot struck a match. Dawggone if the man hadn't a hanker tied across the lower half of his face! His open eyes stared up at us over the edge of the cloth, but they saw nothing. We'd heard gunfire east of the town when we was riding up, but s'posed some of the boys was having a little fun.

"Now, Cat-Foot was as quick with his head as he was soft on his feet. Sharp as a weasel, he said, 'This man's a train robber. At least, he's a robber of some sort. We'll pack him in and git the reward. The Union is paying a thousand a head, dead or alive.'

" 'But we didn't kill him,' I reminded. " 'Some one did. Railroad ain't fussy about who does the killing. They just want to know a robber is dead. Hope he's one of the James Boys.'

"That's how quick he was to see the main chance. Finds a dead masked man, drilled through the heart. Zing! Zip! Just like that he had it all thought out. I opened my mouth and closed it. For Cat-Foot had his

knife out and was making two holes in his shirt. Then with a lighted match he touched up the edges. You'd swear and vow they was bullet holes made at close range, barely grazing the hide. The man's gun was empty. Cat-Foot eased off three shots from his own .45. I'll admit I was scared. I didn't believe we could run any such bluff on the Union. Cat-Foot hushed me up and we packed the evidence to the railroad station. Sure enough, the westbound had been held up by five masked men and relieved of some seventy thousand dollars.

"Nearly the whole town was out to the scene of the holdup. We found the station agent seething with excitement and trying to telegraph. The man nearly had a fit when Cat-Foot stuck his head through the small winder. He jumped to grab a pretty little revolver. Cat-Foot yelled, 'Leave that trifle alone unless you want it to part your hair with. We've just dropped in to say we've killed a man we reckon is a robber. He fired two shots at me, and I nailed him. Come out and take a look at the scenery.'

"The man hesitated. I soothed him, explaining, 'My friend ain't no robber. He loves good folks. He's a robber killer.'

"He come out, sort of cringing and fidgety. 'Your watch is safe,' quieted Cat-Foot. 'Here's the evidence.'

" 'You've actually killed a train robber!' yelled the agent. 'You've brought along the corpus delicktoo!' An' he threw his arms around my friend's neck and kissed him before my friend could draw a weapon and protect himself. Then he ran babbling into the office and began punishing the talking wire. After a bit of waiting the wire got mad and spluttered back. The agent come to the ticket window and said, 'Superintendent says he must see the corpus. He's in Junction City. You take it into the junction and you'll git the money. You can ship it in an empty freight car. Take along your hosses if you want to.'

“Cat-Foot was disappointed. He had reckoned on the agent paying us. He said right out it was all dumb foolishness. The train was robbed. The money was taken. A masked robber was dead. And then have to go some two hundred miles to be paid off! But a thousand dollars just then was bigger than a Texas longhorn. We loaded our hosses and the evidence into an empty and suffered the worst ride we’d ever taken.

“I remember how Cat-Foot stood still and breathed deep after we got out at the junction, and how he said, real pious-like, ‘Thank God we’ve lit! Nothing will ever seem hard again. We sure earned that thousand.’

“We hired a man to fetch along the evidence in a cart and rode our nags up to the office. The super, a fat, fussy man with pale whiskers, was bent over a desk when we lugged in the evidence and removed the blanket. The super gave a yell and cried, ‘Cover it up! What’s this mean?’

“Cat-Foot gently explained, ‘It’s that train-robber you’ve been wanting to have killed. Here he is. Here’s us. Want to see the bullet holes in my shirt?’

“The super got back some of his color and shook his head. ‘We ain’t paying for what happened to you. Just for what’s happened to him.’ And he pointed to the floor. Then, picking up a pencil, he asked, ‘What’s his name?’ “We’d never reckoned on that. We gawped at each other, and I said that we didn’t know the man’s name. I spoke a split second ahead of Cat-Foot’s warning kick. The super threw down the pencil, sighed and explained that the road couldn’t pay for something that hadn’t any name. He added, ‘You seem to have the corpus delicttoo, but your claim ain’t valid till we have the man’s name.’

“ I’ll tell you, if you’ll give me a chance,’ said Cat-Foot.’ ‘It’s Jesse James.’

“The super shook his head sorrowfully and pointed to the morning

paper, front page. It seems that Jess was robbing a bank in Missouri on the day of the holdup at Hays City.

“ ‘What do you want us to name him?’ I asked.

“ ‘You don’t understand,’ patiently explained the super. ‘We must have his real name. I can’t report to headquarters that I’m paying out a thousand for an unnamed robber. Home office keeps books. There has to be a record for every cent that’s paid out.’ “Cat-Foot gave him a black look and asked softly, ‘If we tote the evidence into Kansas City we won’t be any better off?’

“ ‘Not unless you give the real name. You’ve told me you can’t name him.’

“ ‘Just where are you headin’, old hossfly?’ demanded Cat-Foot.

“The little man got pink at that. He replied mighty quick, I’m trying to tell you two that we won’t pay a cent for this man. We’ve let you have the use of an empty to travel here. I’ve decided not to make any charge for that. I believe you’ve got grit enough to bag real train robbers, and that you’ll remember next time to get all the necessary facts. If you fill all the requirements, we’ll be happy to pay for all you can slay and identify.’

“There was silence. The super reached for his hat. Then Cat-Foot said, ‘Of course we can ride back to Hays?’

“ I’ll be glad to give you passes, as I think your mistake was an honest one. But we can’t transport your hosses. It’s easy, coming east, as we have quite a few empties. But westbound trains are crowded. You could sell your hosses and buy new ones at Hays.’

“ ‘Yeah,’ agreed Cat-Foot. ‘Or we could hitch them on behind the last car and tell them to jump when we come to a bridge.’ Then, like magic, his face was all smiles. He said, ‘We’ll ride back. But you’re paying a thousand for every dead train robber, if rightly named and corpus

delivered?'

" 'We'll be glad to do that. You needn't bother to come along with the evidence. Just mail in all the facts and we'll send the money. But the body must be delivered.'⁵

" 'Thanks,' said Cat-Foot. 'You sure treated us noble. It's all right for us to wave our hands at the westbound train when she pulls out?'

" 'No! no! The express messenger might shoot at you, thinking you was a robber,' said the super. 'Take the evidence out, please. We'll have nothing to do with it.'



"IT COST us fifteen dollars to bury that robber. Cat-Foot insisted we look the town over, and asked where the super lived. We found the place, a big house if they'd let it alone instead of having sharp-pitched roofs with funny little wooden turrets all over it. I asked a man what sort of a building they called it. He said it was English Gothic of the purest type. Cat-Foot wasn't interested in architecture. He wanted to know the name of the street. The same man told us—Washington.

"We didn't do much talking on the ride west. Cat-Foot brooded and sulked until we was within a mile of Salina, when he suddenly became all sunshine.

" 'That's right,' I encouraged. 'Just wash it from your mind.'

" 'Wash a thousand dollars from my mind? Don't be so foolish.'

"We found Salina red-hot over a feud between some Texas Brush poppers and Kansas gunmen. I wanted to push on, but Cat-Foot would stay. But we kept in the background until the big fight was pulled off in Dent's saloon. Three men were killed. All needed killing to a certain degree. Cat-Foot surprised me by offering to handle the funeral.

"He had two carpenters make six boxes. He filled three with the right weight of stones and dirt. T'other three were used for the vanquished. The first three were buried. He made out a paper for each of the other three boxes. He gave each man's full name, age, birthplace, politics, the gang he used to ride with. He pasted the papers on the boxes and shipped the whole lot to the super's home address. We stabled our hosses and went along with the freight.

"Cat-Foot explained to me, 'He can't come any game this time. We'll keep out of sight till the delicktoos have been delivered. Then we'll march in and collect!'

"But what do you think? They delivered the boxes at the house while the super's wife was giving a party. She was expecting a lot of books from Kansas City. We was at the front door when the man run into the parlor and yelled that the boxes were filled with dead men. I've seen folks racing to new goldfields. I've seen folks leaving a burning house. But I never see folks git such a move-on as the folks did in quitting that Washington street house.

"We was a bit scared by the rumpus and kept hid till the next day. Then we called on the super and asked if he'd received our outlaws. He nearly threw a fit, but Cat-Foot was firm and, finding they'd been buried, paid out of our own pockets to have the boxes dug up. But the papers, pasted on the outside, had been scraped off, or something. The road refused to pay.

"On our way back to Salina Cat-Foot explained that he never would have sent the freight to the house except to make sure it arrived. 'After this,' he said, 'we'll send everything to the office. How could I know that woman was expecting a lot of books?'

" 'You mean some more are going along?' I asked, and beginning to feel queer in the head.

" 'I'll never quit just because luck seems to be running against me,' he said.

'I've got the big idea still up my sleeve. We'll git out at Abilene.'

"I couldn't see any point to it, but Cat-Foot had a head on him. 'Place in here I want you to see,' he told me on that first night in Abilene.

"It was some waxworks. Every well known murderer in the States was on exhibition in wax. Ding bust if I wa'n't fooled up to the hilt! I went for my gun when I came upon a glaring man with a .45 half drawn. I put two bullets through him quicker'n you can spit. Other men must 'a' been likewise taken in, as most of the male specimens were quite extensively shot up.

"It was the supper hour and the place was empty. Cat-Foot bluntly asked the owner, 'Will you sell five of these monsters?'

"I thought my friend was going crazy. The owner hungrily said, 'That's a promise. What'll you give?'

" 'They seem to be pretty badly bunged up,' said Cat-Foot. 'Maybe I'd better buy fresh ones.'

" 'No! No! No!' cried the owner. 'Them bullet holes increase the value. See how natural I've made 'em look. See here—I like you. I'll make a sacrifice. I'll take a hundred apiece for any five you want to pick out.'

" 'I won't let you make a sacrifice,' said Cat-Foot generously. 'I'll give fifty apiece for those five with the whiskers. Fetch out the boxes they come in.'

"The man see he meant business and did as told. All lettering, advertising the show, was scraped off. The weight was about right per box. Cat-Foot worked all night, until he had a paper made out for each. He made 'em in duplicate, one set to mail, one to send along with the boxes. You simply had to believe what he wrote. Then we had the boxes hauled to our room. I'd defy any coroner on earth to say they weren't the genuine article—unless he took

them out of the box. I was for sending them along 'pronto. But Cat-Foot was a thinker. He just waited till there was a holdup on the Union at Rock Spring. Four days later he shipped the boxes and sent a letter explaining as how they were members of the Rock Spring outfit that he and me had caught off guard while they were on a toot.

"The day they arrived in Junction City he received a telegram congratulating him and me on our noble victory. The super wanted us to jump a train to Hays City where we would be welcomed as heroes. The papers had columns on the big killing. We'd planned on having the money sent us according to promise, but Cat-Foot said if they wanted to make a hero of us there wasn't any reason why we shouldn't be accommodating. He went right out and bought himself a big finger ring and a watch. Station agent hunted us up to say Junction City was filled with people anxious to meet us.

" 'Where be they keeping the corpus delicktoos?' Cat-Foot asked the agent.

" 'Great Scott! How can I tell that. Buried 'em most likely. Your tickets are ready whenever you feel like going after the gold.'

"We bought him several drinks because his talk sounded so good. On the quiet Cat-Foot told me, 'I'm mighty glad they're buried. The papers done the business.'



"NEXT morning we went to catch the train dressed in our best. We got our tickets. The agent seemed awfully pleased to see us. The westbound came in and a freckled newsboy swung off and yelped:

" 'City papers! All about five outlaws melting! All about the disappearing train robbers!'

"Cat-Foot grabbed my arm and hustled me aboard. I was dazed. 'This train

is heading west,' I told him.

" 'The more west she heads the righter she heads for us,' he grimly replied. 'Those danged fools must 'a' kept 'em in the hot sun, or near a stove.' We pulled out, passing the eastbound on a siding. We bought papers, and there was the whole story, with a statement by the superintendent, in which he said he had always suspected us, and that he should insist the law took its course. Until we reached the next stop we rode with our hats over our faces. Quitting the train, we laid low until the evening eastbound pulled in.

"We boarded the smoker and left it when the train began slowing down for Salina. Then we hustled to the livery stable and got our hosses. The man charged us five dollers because my hoss bit him. Just a holdup. He knew we was wanted and he figured to cash in on us. We paid and lit out, heading south on hotfoot ...

"And right then and there began Cat-Foot's downfall. The first night out he confessed:

" 'We've been licked for lack of book l'arning. They can fool us every time with some new game because we haven't any savvy. The trail forks if you don't go along my way. I must git some book l'arning, or be arrested for what the fool newspapers call a fraud. Guns are going out. That fussy super with pink whiskers can outgame us every time. Newspapers, too, make it bad for innocent, ignorant men. What say?'

"I couldn't throw in with him on his new trail. He took it. It sp'iled what I call 'native genius'. Cat-Foot was a man who might have crawled high and handsome if he'd kept away from schools and books. Yes, sir, plumb sp'iled him. That was forty-five years ago."

He picked up the county paper and became absorbed in the real estate items. Mr. Blake was irritated. It was no way to

leave a man up in the air. He said as much. Mr. Peters shook his white head and stared bleakly at the blue hills. Gazing through the window, the lawyer beheld the Honorable Washburn W. Gilly swinging along. He was a large, portly man. Blake had heard much about him since coming to the Middle West. He was keenly interested in him, as his particular business would go forward, or be held up, according to Gilly's attitude. In the day of clean shaven men, Gilly, with his venerable white beard and sturdy bearing, was an outstanding figure.

Blake hurried forth to accost him. He presented his card and explained his errand.

Mr. Gilly pursed his lips and stared thoughtfully at the lawyer.

"Of course your road is hostile to the bill," he frankly admitted. "As chairman of the committee to which the bill is referred I have a clear idea of what you are after."

"We consider it an immoral bill, a confiscatory bill, and one the courts will pronounce to be unconstitutional," warmly insisted Blake. "If the railroad has to comply with its outrageous terms, then freight and passenger tariffs will be doubled."

"I have nothing to do with the mechanics of running a railroad," was the crisp reply. "Rates can't be advanced at the road's pleasure, thank the Lord! I'm a very busy man this morning. Going into conference now. The bill, *per se*, is all right. Its purpose is very humane—to save life. Perhaps there are phases of it that might be reconsidered . . . Ah! I see the Honorable James Colbrake Peters is in his office. A very conscientious, high minded citizen. I am not ashamed to confess that I often rely on his nature and sterling judgment in various legislative matters. He has what I term the unbiased, the detached viewpoint. A diamond in the rough but with a heart that's pure as the first snow, and a mind as clear as a crystal . . . Judge Peters! Oh, ho!" His deep voice boomed like a bell.

The window of the county recorder's office went up. Mr. Gilly advanced and explained:

"This gentleman is here on the railroad bill. I wish you would listen to him and digest his argument, and report to me sometime this evening. Good morning, Mr. Blake. Good morning, Judge Peters."

Feeling foiled, Mr. Blake returned to the recorder's office. Mr. Peters greeted him by eagerly asking:

"Did he say anything about the public weal? No? He usually does. Where in Tophet does he trap all those rare words. I know what a weal is. But weal! Two hundred pounds of sp'iled life."

"You know my business here, Judge Peters," said Blake. "I am fighting that bill that would abolish all grade crossings in the so-called Hackett Division. The country is as flat as this table. One can see for miles in every direction. Four roads and several trails cross our tracks in that division. There is no menace to life at any of those crossings. To elevate the tracks would be monstrous, both from an engineering and a financial point of view."

"We have to think of our citizens," explained Mr. Peters. "Railroad folks always kick. Folks in these parts are all het up because your road refused to put in that little spur track to my brother's place."

"Why, Judge, that little spur track, as you call it, would cost more than thirty thousand dollars. It's unthinkable! Your brother—first I've heard of the relationship—even hasn't any business. Not enough to justify a siding." "But he will build up a fine business after he gets the spur line," blandly explained Mr. Peters. "It will cost your road a hundred thousand to fight that righteous bill. And even then you'd lose."

"It's the most outrageous holdup ever attempted!"

Mr. Peters smiled and fluffed his

patriarchial beard. Then he replied: "No ranker than when train robbers were holding up your line for a hundred thousand dollars a crack. Why, if I'd had my share for what the company owes for the genuine train robber me and Cat-Foot took into Junction City, I could let my brother have what money he needs. If I'd put it to interest." "You and your friend didn't kill that robber, by your tell!"

"You never can prove that by findin' who did kill him," gravely reminded Mr. Peters. "We delivered him. Your road wanted him thoroughly dead. We took him in that way. One of the finest corpus delicttoos a person ever see. Red tape cheated us. It's that injustice that makes folks out here so set against the Hackett Division bill." Mr. Blake lighted a cigar, nodded his head slowly and murmured:

"So that is the little mouse in the meal? You folks can worry along with the grade crossings if the spur is built, or if that reward is paid?"

"You've got the ideal!"

"No other demands would be made on the road?"

"No."

"Very well, Mr. Peters. We see eye to eye. I realize the justice of your demand. It should have been settled before. How shall the check be made out? One thousand dollars."

"Make it out to James Colbrake Peters. Compounded at six per cent for forty-five years. It's a trifle longer than that, but we won't pinch pennies. But there is the five dollars paid the stable man, who was bit by my hoss. Then there was wax figgers. Certain burial expenses, two hundred an' fifty more—"

"Perpetuating a fraud!" groaned the lawyer.

"An' there's fifteen dollars for buryin' a genuine robber. It will cost you a hundred thousand to make a fight. There's a

hundred an' fifteen dollars for coffins an' carpenters. Well, well. We won't pinch a few dollars. Call it an even seventeen thousand."

The lawyer, checkbook in hand, eyed him venomously and ironically asked—"Any other little item you wish to add?"

Mr. Peters ruffled his ancient beard thoughtfully, and decided:

"Why, yes. We both lost much time. Call it a hundred 'n' fifty."

The lawyer abandoned sarcasm to demand—

"And if this claim is paid the grade crossings will not be disturbed, and your brother will worry along without his spur track?"

"That's right. I'll put my brother to work in some other business. It was to be his business in the Hackett Division, so-called, to build up such a population as to make the elevated crossings necessary."

"I'll write a check for an even ten thousand dollars."

"Don't sp'ile your paper. I can't

shade it a cent. Seventeen thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars. It's small pertaters, any way you look at it. Company waits almost half a century afore payin' for a dead train robber. I can see how the papers will play it up. We was the only folks to deliver a corpus delicktoo . . . On receipt of a proper check the committee on railroad legislation will report against the proposed elevated crossings. Of course, Cat-Foot will feel bitter along of being cheated out of the reward money all these years. But he'll stand by any agreement I make."

"Cat-Foot! When did he get back into the picture?" gasped the lawyer.

"I thought I explained that. Cat-Foot, full of promise years an' years ago, is that two-hundred pound failure, the Honorable Washburn William Gilly, who went to school an' dulled his native wits. Thanks—and goodbye. You'll find the north side of the train is the shady side."

"Everywhere I've been out here seems to be shady," was the bitter reply.

