

*An' Even a Flash Pilot Couldn't Produce a Preacher
at Will On the Rolling Columbia*



FLASH PILOT

By

GIFF CHESHIRE

IT WAS a hot day in late May, there on the upper Columbia, and the man on the landing pulled a red bandana handkerchief from under the tails of his dusty long-coat and mopped his palms carefully. The hip-shot saddled behind him was sweat-crusted, and it lifted its head as the steamboat hulled up, far down the river,

its patient chunking rocking ahead between the low but cliff-like banks.

"There'll be shade aboard her," the man told the mount. "I'll be as glad of it as you will."

Out in the channel, Ared Lambert had been worrying about Canoe Encampment ahead and the even worse stretch at Miller's

Drift, beyond that, when he sighted the figures far up on Castle landing. Uneasiness left him in a flare of interest, and he gave her three spokes to port, watching the bulky tow of sawed timbers snubbed ahead of the little stern-wheel *Chub* veer conversely to starboard and the Oregon shore.

It would be Parson Peel, he told himself; in Wallula he had heard that Rex Stanton had summoned the circuit rider to officiate at the wedding, come Sunday, which was the morrow. The preacher had been down in the John Day cow country, where Stanton's word must have reached him, and doubtless he was now waiting to be picked up by the big *Western Queen*. The *Queen*, with the flashy Rex Stanton at the wheel, was mainly a passenger boat and, regularly leaving the Deschutes at 10:30 in the morning on her up trips, she could not pass here for an hour yet, it now being half-past one. It was far too hot over there for the preacher to have to wait for her.

The young mate thought of these things even as he recalled that the Cap'n was now on the tail end of his after-dinner nap, back in the texas. Ared lined inshore, packet and tow working supplely, the freshet current, tawny and clouded, piling and swirling around the tow, pounding on the steamboat's beamy sides and chuckling on toward the Pacific. He belled the engine room softly, and as the *Chub's* old beam engine hushed down the surprised engineer, watching from the engine room windows, held her to the little landing with his throttle.

The headwind was light as a feather duster, cool through the dropped pilot house windows. On either shore bare brown hills rose above the sharp rock escarpments, the sandy desert soil on above blowing visibly and covered by thin, seared prairie grass studded thinly with clumps of sage brush.

THE preacher had gathered reins and led the horse to the landing's edge, but he was looking puzzled. Ared tilted his long, lean frame outward and called, "Come right aboard, sir."

The man hesitated. "Why, I figured it would be the *Queen* picking me up. Are you Captain Stanton?"

"I'm the man as means to marry the girl, sir," Ared told him, which was entirely so, though it omitted the girl's own intentions. "It must have been hot for you, waiting so long in the sun."

Juba Cox, combined cook and deckhand, had moved out to the side rail to investigate the ringing and sudden loss of way. He stared up at Ared, the eyes in his brown and seamy face blinking in the bright sun.

"Here's the parson, Juba," Ared said. "Why don't you run out the gangplank?"

Biting his thumbnail first, the cook bent to do it. The parson still looked puzzled, but he came aboard, leading the horse. Juba yanked the plank inboard, and Ared got the *Chub* away, a tight feeling suddenly in his stomach. To this point he had been intent upon the capture, and now that he had the circuit rider he was not overly clear on his further intentions.

CAP'N MASTERS was apt to be a mite cruffled, even if there was a fair chance that he would see the point. Of a hundred or so river men on the Columbia who harbored no affection for the show-off, lady-killing Stanton, the Cap'n's name stood just below that of his young mate. Then a heavy tread beyond the door on the texas side informed Ared that he would have precious little time to plan it out.

The door opened, and the Cap'n came in, a short and immensely wide figure, bald except for a band of frowsy red hair that clamped to his skull like a caterpillar clinging to a robin egg. Traces of his nap

lurked in his eyes, and the galluses attached to his patched duck trousers had slid off his bulging, red-flanneled shoulders and now hung well below his knees. He yawned, but he was puzzled and in an inquiring frame of mind."

"What'd we stop for, Ared?"

"Picked up a passenger."

"What for?"

"Was one standing there."

The Cap'n sucked in a big breath. "And us running nip-an'-tuck to make Wallula before dark! Why—!"

A suddenly aroused sense of propriety forced Ared to stem the flow. "Careful, Cap'n. It was Parson Peel."

The captain's big mandible snapped shut, though his eyes still bulged. He was a devout man, and while the words he had been using were not swearing, his tone of voice was. Upon occasion, with his river cronies in little Dalles City's twenty-odd saloons, Ared had seen the Cap'n stowaway a quart of forty-rod in an evening's sitting. "It ain't likker but drunkenness as is sinful, Ared," he would be careful to explain afterward. Since he never walked a quarter-point off course, as a result, once again the Cap'n's strict sense of propriety was kept intact. Now he stroked his jaw, eyes on his young mate speculatively.

"Heading for the wedding, huh? Stanton's gonna blow a cylinder head. He'll figure the preacher ain't got there, yet."

"I allowed something like that," Ared admitted.

The Cap'n's red face didn't show much expression as he took the wheel and picked up the course, but Ared figured that he was less angry. A complex individual, the Cap'n had received his early training on the old Mississipp'. Long since he had brought one of the first steamboats around the Horn to the gold-flecked waters of San Francisco Bay. After years in the river trade there he

had come on to the Columbia, this broad and violent stream that was the only avenue to the rich mines on the Clearwater, the Pend d'Oreille and down in the Boise basin, and to the sweeping and fertile farmlands newly opened to settlement. Here upon the upper reaches he had acquired the little *Chub* and entered the towing trade, and shortly thereafter he had gained his young mate and cub pilot.

It was partly over the Cap'n that Ared had quarreled with Miss Cindy Tyndale, of Wallula, Territory of Washington, who was now the promised Mrs. Rex Stanton. Like any good river man, Ared had done his courting when water transit matters allowed, yet Cindy Tyndale had held him personally accountable for the fact that he was more often at the Deschutes when the moon was waxing over Wallula, or again underfoot in Wallula when Miss Tyndale heartily wished him at the Deschutes. But the spark had come from the Cap'n's keeping chickens down in the little freight room, an enterprise designed to produce fresh eggs for the table but which also produced behind-the-hand levity on the upper Columbia.

"I don't know why you keep working for that old crackpot!" Cindy had stormed, one night when Ared was patently on the wrong end of the haul. "On a passenger boat you'd have some regularity and, too, you could wear a uniform."

"Cap'n's a river man," Ared had told her. "That's what I'm aiming to be."

This argument was wasted upon Cindy, to whom the river was only some water that ran down through Wallula Gap. She failed to picture it as Ared saw it, tumbling out of the Canadian Rockies, whipping through hundreds of miles of desert, drilling through the vaulting Cascades, creeping tiredly across the Willamette Valley's upper end, mountaineering again through the wide Coast Range, tumbling and lost at last into the sea. Any river man could tell you that,

like a voluptuous shrew, the Columbia could be cruel and mocking to the weaklings upon her, yet conquered by strong and daring men she was lush and yielding, though never faithful.

Easygoing until he was crowded, Ared had finally got his dander up, unfortunately only a short while before the arrival of Rex Stanton, owner and captain of the big new *Western Queen*, in the plush mining trade. And now the Tyndale parlor was festooned, and Parson Peel was on his way to do the honors.

AS HE turned down to the main deck, Ared grinned in mild wickedness. It would take but little to see the *Chub* tied up for the night somewhere short of her destination and to put a sour note in Captain Rex Stanton's wedding eve. Even a flash pilot could not produce a preacher at will on this upper Columbia of '66. And it was unlikely that Parson Peel could walk upon the waters, as some claimed, or put his ganted horse ashore and get more speed and endurance from it than Ared understood was resident in even the best of horseflesh.

The preacher's black had been tied in the freight room, just forward of the chicken-wired space where the Cap'n's white layers clucked and scratched away in the straw for wheat, the captain's means of exercising them being to make them rustle so for their subsistence. Juba Cox seemed to have put the parson in one of the dusty, rarely occupied staterooms on the upper deck, for he was not in evidence, though Ared would have liked to talk with him again. A pious and ascetic man himself, the popular circuit rider was wont to carry the gospel to the places where it logically seemed needed most, never haranguing and never condemning, and thus it was that in fleshpot, renegade camp or virtuous parlor there were many who would have come a-foggin' had they ever heard that he needed

help.

Her big paddle chunking softly, her 'scape pipes alternately puffing white steam into the dark sausage of smoke from her single stack, the *Chub* and tow were now lining on Miller's Drift and its three midstream islands. Out on the sepian water the zinnia sun was a splintering downpour, but the dark fringe of shadow tacked along the Oregon shore was mysterious and deeply pleasant. Ared whistled softly as he moved along a cross-passage and turned down into the little galley.

Juba Cox was presently free of the exactions of both his berths. A mild and insignificant man by his own choice, Juba would, upon occasion, fool those who—unlike Ared Lambert—had not seen him hurl a kettle of hot potato soup at a swaggering freight rouser who had attempted to snitch a dried peach pie cooling on a shelf just inside a galley window. Now Juba took his solemn ease on a three-legged stool, reading a frayed copy of the *Oregonian*. Without looking up, he jerked a thumb toward the blackened coffee pot simmering on the galley range. Ared filled a mug, brought it to the scrub-topped table and lowered his lean haunches onto a bench.

"You sure took the preacher," Juba said, his thin voice a shade cantankerous. "It ain't hard to see what you're figuring on, but look here. I wanta get home for the week-end. The wife's having prime ribs and noodles, she told me. And you don't know how sick I get of my cooking."

Ared allowed that it did not take a painful stretch of the imagination. He sipped his coffee, thinking; not, strangely enough, of the pert Cindy Tyndale, nor particularly of Parson Peel, but of the Cap'n. He drained the mug and, refreshed, climbed to the hurricane roof again and stepped into the wheelhouse.

They had cleared Miller's Drift and

were heading into the fairway again, with a couple of hours of untroubled running before they hit Devil's Bend and the even more dangerous Umatilla Rapids beyond. The Cap'n had been in a stew since early morning about negotiating this pair and being safely tied up with the tow in little Wallula by nightfall. It would be a nip-and-tuck proposition, in any man's steamboating.

NOW Ared glanced innocently at the rolling Washington bank, sun-struck and empty, glinting brown and broken and forbidding as it faded into the distance. "Fine black the preacher's riding, Cap'n. Blacker'n the devil himself."

The Cap'n swiveled his head. "Black horse? Preacher?" Ared waited. In addition to being a devout man, a strict Sabbatarian, the Cap'n was replete with river superstitions brought with him from the Mississippi. "White preacher. Well, now." He changed heading, giving her a spoke. "Damme, Ared, what does that mean? You take a nigger preacher or a white horse—I wouldn't have 'em on my boat. But this is turned wrong side out, kinda—and bother together. How'd you figure it, boy."

The mate shook his yellow head, cuffing back his battered boat cap. "Why, come to think of it, Cap'n that sure is a funny one. Maybe I shouldn't ought to have picked him up."

The Cap'n's piloting lectures, never abridged, had dwelt considerably upon such matters. He nodded thoughtfully. "Well, we can't put him off now."

Ared went down to his own cabin on the Texas, momentarily satisfied. Ashore, like sleeping, gravid women, the bare hills lay in timeless lethargy. Aloft a stripe-winged camp robber, strayed far offshore, flitted down as if to alight and rest on one of the hog-posts. Ared turned through the door, thinking of Cindy Tyndale. Daughter of a

growing stagecoach tycoon on hinterland lines, motherless and pampered, she ruled Wallula's limited society with a small, dainty hand. Though many men had aspired to the privilege of making her a lifelong study, perhaps Ared Lambert alone had glimpsed the real and tender girl behind the arch prettiness and beneath the whalebone and countless layers of scented ruffles. And resenting this involuntary psychological nudity, Cindy Tyndale had been wont to pick at him. Dwelling upon these matters, he began to rummage in the little chest of drawers under the small, slatted window through which golden sunlight spilled to run out over the frayed carpet.

They were within spitting distance of Devil's Bend when Cap'n Masters let out a whoop that could have been heard ashore, had anyone been upon those lonely, wind-scoured wastes. "Ared! Juba!" Simultaneously he dinged the engine room to slack off, his big fist halting only an inch short of the whistle pull, as well. Strangely enough, Ared Lambert appeared at once on the foredeck below, craning his head upward.

"I seen a rat!" the Cap'n yelled. "He run right across where you're standing!"

Ared merely stared. The Cap'n had already rung for headway again, and now he swung her hard for the Oregon shore, the tow scuttling like a chased cat. Tied up there above a little gravel bar, they searched the packet from stem to stern and from keelson to the main cabin monitor roof, with Parson Peel emerging inquiringly and joining in.

"We've got to find it!" the Cap'n kept insisting. "Dam-blamed if I'm going to run Umatilla till he's put ashore!"

"Why's that?" the circuit rider inquired. A tall, thin man, he had a weathered, intelligent face, but now he looked a trifle worried.

For a moment the Cap'n regarded him

as the complete heathen. "Why, a rat aboard, sir, is only a mite below a white horse or a nigger preach—!" He broke off, staring, then turned on his heel and stalked up the companionway and into his cabin.

Ared followed him. "You sure you seen that rat, Cap'n?"

There was a snort. "When I can see a bird blink a mile off? It's no good, boy. All week I've been having me this same dream—this fancy side-wheeler big as a battleship, and me runnin' and ownin' her, both. And I called her the *Miranda*, boy. Know what that means?"

Ared nodded, scenting a windfall. "Sure. The letter M's bad in a boat's name."

"It's worse than that," the Cap'n groaned. "It's plain asking for it to call a boat after a member of the owner's family. And I had a sister called *Miranda*."

At that moment the door pushed open, and Juba Cox walked in, holding a stuffed, black wool sock in his hand, to which a short string was attached. "Now, I wonder if you could've mistook this for a rat, Cap'n?" he asked. "Funny thing, but I found it stuffed behind a case of dried prunes, just inside the for'd freight house door." And he nodded and beamed at Ared. "Maybe it got dragged across the deck."

The Cap'n was regarding Ared, also, but he did not speak. Presently he stomped forward to the pilothouse, grabbed the big wheel, and rang for full speed ahead.

A WHISTLE sounded astern, and the big *Western Queen* came prancing up the fairway, whistling again to warn the little *Chub* out of her way while she took the rapids. The *Chub* was already swinging out, clearly entitled to make her run first, yet with screaming whistle the *Queen* came on, steering a collision course.

Passengers lined the big packet's rails, red-shirted miners, other men in high hats and long coats, and a few women in hoops

and frills. Impelled by the curious, yeasty and unleavened impulse that never failed to rouse a strong partisan interest in a steamboat's passengers, they began to laugh and jeer at the towboat.

The Cap'n held his course stubbornly, pointing into the channel and its swift and surging water. The big packet closed in, Rex Stanton at her wheel steering a close tangent ahead of the big tow, the wash lifting and shaking it. Then abruptly the Cap'n was ringing her down, clawing at the wheel and yelling into the speaking tube to the engineer.

"Slack her off!"

At his elbow, Ared Lambert grated angrily, "Don't let him scare you off, Cap'n!"

"Scare hell! Look up there!"

Ared saw then that some of the tow's forward lashings had snapped in the wild churn of water caused by the *Queen's* wash combining with the rapid's own boiling rush. Below decks the engineer performed miracles with Johnson bar and throttle and got her backing down faster than the current so that the fanning out up there ceased before the whole tow exploded. Grinding his teeth, the Cap'n swung her down to the gravel bar again and anchored.

When his anger at the flash pilot's recklessness with his passengers had subsided a little, Ared reflected that Cindy Tyndale should have been aboard her. Cindy did not understand that Stanton afloat was a different man to Stanton in the parlor. Presently he took grim satisfaction in the reflection that Stanton himself had practically guaranteed that tomorrow's wedding would be replete with everything except the preacher. He stared thoughtfully into the sky where, clabbered and cumulose, giant white clouds domed against a depthless atmosphere from horizon to horizon.

It was nearly five, and the *Queen's* time

indicated that Stanton had waited at Castle landing as long as schedule and impatient passengers would permit. Yet for all his taunting, he did not seem to suspect the *Chub*. The sun was well behind the distant Cascades when they had the tow rebuilt and jury-lashed well enough to limp on, and in view of the two bad stretches still ahead, the Cap'n decided to poke along until they found a good place, then tie up for the night. The afternoon's events at last had weighted him to the point of uncertainty.

Parson Peel did not learn of this decision immediately, having waited out the delay by napping in his cabin, but Juba Cox did. "Blast you, Ared," he told the mate down in the galley, where he was starting supper and where Ared had repaired for coffee. "If you hadn't pulled that danged rat trick, we'd've been to Cold Springs by now. You know how the Cap'n is about Sundays."

"Reckon so," Ared admitted, as casually as if he hadn't been thinking about it all afternoon. Come midnight on a Saturday and the *Chub* stood to, no matter where she happened to be, and nothing could compel the Cap'n to turn a wheel before midnight of the following day. "Too bad you're going to miss them prime ribs and noodles."

BUT Juba Cox, appetite and anger aroused simultaneously, was something to cope with. Having passed on through the rapids with no trouble from the weakened tow, the Cap'n decided to keep running until full dark, tying up somewhere short of the climactic Umatilla stretch and the lesser Mill Rock rapids still between them and Wallula. Juba took action at supper time, while Ared was at the wheel.

"Preacher, sir, that Lambert ain't the one getting married tomorrow, even if he would like to. It's Stanton, on the *Queen*, and Lambert fooled you into coming aboard. I just don't figure that's right to the real

lovin' couple." Ignoring the Cap'n's glare, Juba blew on his fingernails virtuously.

The circuit rider did not look surprised. "I had a feeling that I was being taken in. This girl—it seems to me she's passing up a real provider."

"And a real river man," the Cap'n said, and chuckled.

"But, of course, your cook is right, Captain," the preacher said, but not as though he relished it. "The boy has no right to interfere with somebody else's wedding plans."

"No—I reckon you're right, sir. Maybe if there's a good moon we can get you close enough to ride on horseback."

Juba Cox stirred the soup and grinned.

Having received a censored report on these developments from Juba, Ared was not happy at the wheel when he watched a bright moon emerge around 9:30, that night, with them only some twenty-five miles below Wallula.

Coming into the darkened pilothouse, the Cap'n said, "Damme, Ared, we ain't got any real excuse for not taking the preacher in. If we pound it and don't have no bad luck, we got a fair chance of making it before midnight." He sighed. "I reckon we gotta do it, boy, now that the preacher's come out with the right and wrong of it."

Ared nodded glumly. They were still a half mile short of the dangerous Umatilla Rapids when a whistle screamed up-river. Slowly out of the darkness the hulk of the *Western Queen* emerged, standing downstream and fast. Watching it, Ared decided that Stanton had got rid of his passengers and was running all the way back to Castle landing to try again to connect with Parson Peel.

Three lengths ahead of the towboat, the *Queen* veered hard to port, cutting so close, before she swung off that, for an instant, it seemed inevitable that they would collide head on.

Watching this from the port rail on the lower deck, Juba Cox heaved a sigh of relief before he caught himself and groaned.

"Damned if I ever did see a cuss so set on postponing his own honeymoon!"

And Juba was right, for the jury-rigged bindings were sprung again, and the little *Chub* stood to for better than an hour making repairs. By the time he stood her up through Umatilla, the Cap'n was in a grim frame of mind. Steamboating from 'way back, he gripped the wheel, a broken gallus dangling, his skipper's cap pulled tight over his eyes.

Then, in the fairway above, he turned the wheel over to Ared and stomped away. By the watch fastened to the binnacle, Ared saw that it was now a little after ten. He could not slack her off, or even set a zig-zag course to stretch the distance, without the old water buffalo detecting it instantly. His eyes clung to the watch, by which the Cap'n swore and which had a big sweeping second hand to assist the compass when resort was made to dead reckoning. As if detached from him, his fingers reached for it. He set the hands ahead exactly one hour. Within a few minutes he drew abeam the entrance to Cold Springs and headed her in.

Footfalls sounded in several directions as he rang down the engine. The Cap'n burst in from the nearby texas. "What in blazes'd you turn in here for?"

Ared pointed to the watch under the red binnacle lamp. "Take a look. We can't run fifteen miles in forty-five minutes. You want to be caught out there some place come midnight?"

After a long moment, the Cap'n grinned. "I figured I'd taught you some steamboatin', when I gave you the wheel." He ironed out his face quickly and was looking stern again when Juba Cox galloped in.

Juba had his watch in his hand, and he was panting hard from the fast climb. "I

knew he'd pull it!" he chortled. He jabbed a finger against the watch crystal. "Look, Cap'n! It's only a quarter after ten!"

The circuit rider stepped through the door. "What's the trouble now?"

"A—a little argument over the time, sir," the Cap'n told him. "You carry a watch?"

"I'm sorry; Captain, I don't."

The Cap'n stepped to the speaking tube. "Hey, Red, what time you got down there?"

Presently a hollow, tinny voice replied. "Eight o'clock. But it don't mean nothing. Looks like I forgot to wind it."

The Cap'n looked at the preacher with satisfaction. "Well, sir, would you say my expensive binnacle watch is right, or that turnip of Juba's?"

"I wouldn't think of doubting your navigating equipment, Captain," the preacher said, and grinned.

Ared was not asleep when, at 3:30 a.m., the panting *Queen* came ploughing back up the river, but rather had been sitting on the after deck realizing that there would be other days suitable to a wedding, that he had succeeded only in postponing something that he knew in the night's warm quietness was going to be painful to him privately. Now as he saw the *Queen* returning from her unsuccessful search, he climbed to his feet, aware from her veer that she had spotted the *Chub* in the moonlight and was turning in. Somebody down around Castle must have told Rex Stanton that the tugboat had picked up the circuit rider.

Ared raced through the texas, pounding on the doors of the Cap'n and Juba and the engineer. He galloped back out on deck just as the *Queen* hove up, dwarfing the *Chub* into insignificance. Men of her crew were coming overside almost before her big paddle had stopped turning, quiet but in a vicious mood. Then Stanton loomed before Ared, big and solid and patently ill-humored. "We'll take the preacher, fella!

And you're gonna learn a lesson! Boys, get to work on that raft!"

The Cap'n thundered out on deck, Juba behind him. It was obvious that they could do nothing to stop this forage, and Ared admitted glumly that he had asked for it.

Then a girl's voice sang out from the *Queen's* high upperworks. "Rex Stanton, you promised me there'd be no rough stuff!"

It did not stop the *Queen's* crew which, carrying fire axes, were piling over the *Chub's* prow and racing out onto the timber raft. Then something tugged at Juba's sleeve, and he turned and saw the preacher. Parson Peel said nothing, but Ared followed his gaze and yelled, "Come on, Juba!"

He clambered onto the rail and scrambled on to the *Queen's* deck with Juba racing behind him. Up in the pilothouse he tromped on the newfangled whistle treadle, then dinged the engine room bell with barked urgency, swinging the wheel hard to port. Below decks, the *Queen's* engineer had no slightest idea of who was at the controls, and he responded with the proper movements. The big packet peeled away from the towboat, then Ared headed her dead on down the slough. She was full ahead when she hit the mud bank, down there, so hard that pictures left her walls and china flew from her cupboards. Then, with modest aplomb, Ared rang down the engines.

He was trying to swing a skiff outboard when the girl came running along the deck.

"Ared—that was the cutest thing you did there!"

Juba galloped out of an opening, a granite pot in either hand. "Guess what they

had left over from supper? Prime ribs and noodles!"

When the little skiff, with its three passengers, rowed back to the *Chub*, it was through a considerable spread of drifting timbers. They found the Cap'n standing in the prow of the *Chub*, his old horse pistol in his hands and the *Queen's* crew lined up meekly before him.

Cindy Tyndale marched straight to Rex Stanton. "I'm glad it happened! He outsmarted you every step of the way. You—you gold-braider!"

Yet something more practical seemed to dawn on Rex Stanton at that moment. He stared at the distant *Queen* and groaned. "My God!" he gulped suddenly. "Even if we can pull her off, how're we gonna get her through them timbers?"

"You won't, until you've rafted 'em," the Cap'n told him. "And you ain't doing that till Monday morning."

It was a good dinner they had aboard the little *Chub*, there in Cold Springs slough that Sunday. True, there was no snowy table linen or shining goblets, but nobody seemed to mind.

While everybody was talking to everybody else, Ared got a chance to whisper to the young lady on his left. "The parson's sure a nice fellow. Seems a shame he lost the business, kind of."

Cindy looked at him with rounding eyes. "It isn't right, Ared. Nor to put Papa to all the expense he's been to for nothing."

"Well, I reckon there's only one thing to do about it."

"Now that I think of it, Ared," said Cindy Tyndale. "I expect you're right."