

# Crackerbox

by

Floyd T. Wood



“SAY, Fat,” queried old Hank Simpson, “does your mind ever get strong enough to make you wonder about things?”

“Sure!” said the portly one, grinning. “Every once in a while. I’m wondering right now what you’re going to spring on me this time.”

“Ever notice,” Hank continued, “how this world don’t run according to rules at no time? They say there’s two sides to a question. Now that’s plain bunk; I’ve seen lots of ’em with five or six, not counting the inside and the outside. Some problems you can thresh out by yourself and get a half decent answer. Others, the more you mull them over the worse mixed up you get.

“I’ve known fellows to throw their conscience away—just forget all about being human, and they’d shoot ahead to success like an animated skyrocket. Next door to them might be some quiet chap trying to live white and decent, and the boss would keep telling him he could have a raise soon as the devil come in to buy a pair of skates.

“Take me, for instance. Most of the time I’m sure I didn’t deserve the package old Lady Luck passed out to me; I know darn well I didn’t if what I done was right. But there’s the rub, and I’ve been stewing over it for forty years—was I right, or was I wrong?”

The fat drummer extended his cigar-case.

“Smoke, Hank,” he suggested, “I’ve got an hour before train time. You might just as well get this sad and sorry tale out of your system one time as another. I’m a regular 1918 model with the advice stuff.”

“Humph!” Hank sniffed. “Think you’re smart, don’t you? But, by Henry, I’m going to get this thing off my chest. And to do it right I got to start at the beginning.

“I was born and raised on a small ranch near the Canuck-Montana line, on the States side. I can’t remember my mother at all, and my earliest recollection of the old man is the long, white scar running through his hair over his ear. I only knew him by spells. Pete Moore, the hired man, was my duly elected godmother, an’ he wouldn’t have won no prizes in a nursing contest. In short, I pretty near raised myself, an’ I did just about as I pleased. There wasn’t much to do at that, except hunt an’ fish an’ ride. Our nearest neighbor was a bach, some twenty miles away; the nearest rail point was more than a hundred.

“The old man had quite a bunch of horses an’ cattle running loose on the range. About once a year we rounded them up, branded the young ones, an’ drove a bunch in for shipment to Omaha or some eastern point. I can remember how we always seemed to have a lot more to brand an’ sell than the natural increase would have come to. But, then, the

old man was forever over on the Canuck side buying up stock. Picking up bargains, he called it, an' he spent most of his time that way. He made it pay, too.

"But to make a long story short, we'll jump along to the summer I was nineteen. The old man had got the notion I ought to go away somewhere to school an' make something of myself. But I had run wild too long, an' had plans of my own all figured out. I saddled my pony one night an' hit out straight north, over the line. I landed into Macleod—there was a fort at that place—an' signed up with the mounties. If the old man knew where I went to he never made no signs; I never heard from him, nor of him, for a good many years.

"The next few years we can also hurry through. I knew horses, an' I was a crack shot. As soon as I got wise enough to understand the good hard sense that had built up the strict military law of the police I swam along O. K. I absorbed discipline along with wisdom. I grew as jealous of the honor of the force as the most cantankerous old officer, an' pride alone kept me straight an' busy. In due time I made good, an' I got my promotion to sergeant.

"In those early days you can bet we never lacked for something to do. We kept tabs on bootleggers, anxious for wealth; drunker punchers; cattle an' horse rustlers; thieving Indians; crazy an' murderous homesteaders, an' a whole big bunch of smaller fry. But the best hand our troublemakers had was a small bunch of stick-up men—road agents—an' the ace of this fist was a gent called Crackerbox.

"An odd name, you will think, even for a gunman; but like most things in the world, it had a reason. For a long time we knew next to nothing about this party; we didn't even know whether, he was one man or more. But after adding up reports for a year or so we decided a new sun had showed up in the road-agent's sky. Crackerbox was a man distinguished in a new way. Instead of the usual mask or handkerchief, he wore a box-cap or hat that

completely covered his face an' head. The corners of this queer headgear was said to be as square as though built over a box or framework. For several months everybody called him 'The Square-Hat Man,' but this title eventually shifted down into the shorter term of 'Crackerbox.' This last name stuck, an' by it he was known an' feared an' hunted over hundreds of square miles."

"Say," the drummer interrupted suddenly, "are you stringing me, or what? Why should a guy wear a box-hat? Can't see any good reason why—"

"Shut up!" Hank blared, "an' keep on being busy listening. Ain't I just got done telling you things generally has a reason? We'll get around to this particular 'why' after a while—that is, if you don't bust up the show yawping. You can talk when I finish."

The drummer subsided with a grin.

"I'm telling you," Hank went on, "that this here Crackerbox was either awful lucky or darn well posted. Mistakes an' him didn't know each other. He always picked on an outfit well heeled with dough, an' he always got it an' made good his escape. Once in a great while he had a pal, but for the most part he was alone an' a very successful artist. After about a year he started a new fad, just to make sure we wouldn't forget him. He would leave little white cards with some of the air-clawing passengers, an' would ask them to please deliver to the first an' nearest policeman.

"These here little cards was always the same, an' they was fuller of sarcasm than any fat scrap-seller I ever met. They ran something like this:

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Kindest regards to the Royal North West Mounted Police.

CRACKERBOX.

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“After we had about a dozen of these here valentines stowed away at headquarters, our boys was so mad they could spit sparks at noon. There was a standing government reward out for Crackerbox, dead or alive, but I do believe every man of us would have throwed that aside, an’ a month’s pay to boot, just for the personal pleasure of rounding up this Smart Aleck gun-artist. It was really serious, or it might have been funny. Gee, I can shut my eyes even now an’ hear an’ see our major blank-blanking everything in sight when he would get another card to add to the collection. Can’t say that I blamed him very much, neither.

“In the spring of eighteen-so-and-so I got transferred to Corbin. Corbin was on the Transcontinental line; but at that time there was no branch line connecting this place with Edmonds, a hundred and ninety miles north. Edmonds had started talking in its sleep, an’ was showing signs of life. The government put on a regular stage route to handle passengers, mail an’ express.

“I guess they must have sent Crackerbox notice of the new stage, for it hadn’t been going more than a week when he paid a call. There was a lot of value on board, too, going through to the Hudson Bay Company, at Edmonds, an’ things started to pop right away. Major Morris had come over from Macleod about the same time I did, an’ I suppose he figured Crackerbox would stay down in the south country an’ leave our new district alone.

“Wow! Didn’t he rave? If some drunken Blackfoot had of drifted in an’ tried to borrow the old man’s scalp he couldn’t have been any more peeved. If he hadn’t have been so danged healthy, he’d have got a sunstroke or some other blasting calamity.

“Before noon the next day there was eight parties of us headed out into the wilderness of scrub that represented most of the territory between Corbin an’ Edmonds. There was no

good air wasted, neither, tooting horns or making chin music. The dope we got certainly come straight from the shoulder.

“‘Sergeant Simpson,’ the major rips at me, just about as sweet as a rattler, ‘your orders are the same as the others got. I don’t care a damn where you go, what you do, or how you do it. I want Crackerbox, an’ I want him before snow flies. Bruce and O’Neil will go with you; draw supplies for two months. If you need more, draw on the keepers of the post-houses. If any one of you men in the charge of any one of these eight searching parties shows up here alive, an’ without Crackerbox, I will take great personal pleasure in kicking him off of the force. That’s all. Good day!’

“An’ now opened up one of the most strenuous man hunts ever pulled off on the whole North American continent. You needn’t look wise an’ pull a grin, neither, when I tell you that the boys of the force in those days was good two-fisted material right through. Generally speaking, when they set out to get a fellow it was all over but the trial. That’s the way we got our rep, by making good, an’ we made good mostly because we never quit.

“But I am willing to admit that when we endeavor to corral this here Crackerbox we sure struck an awful snag. It was something like trying to catch your day before yesterday’s shadow—only worse. We combed that country north, south, east, an’ west. We set cunning traps an’ sprung them—on air.

“Some of the boys disguised themselves as passengers an’ rode back an’ forth on the stage until they got sick of it. One trip they did scratch pay dirt—they seen Crackerbox; but that was all they did do—see. There was two of our fellows on the stage that day, all rigged out like a pair of sail-grubbers. Crackerbox had a helper that time, too, but we’ll come to that part in a minute. Our boys was game, of course, but they were badly handicapped by

having a woman in the stage alongside of them. This female party had climbed on at the last stop at the last moment. She was small an' heavily veiled an' acted kind of scared an' helpless.

"Naturally the boys didn't feel like drawing any poor lady into a gun-argument, so they kept right quiet till they got outside. An' would you believe it, when they got out to where they felt justified in trying to start something they discovered their hand artillery was entirely missing. An' what made it worse, that there well protected female had their guns. She kicked off her skirts an' changes into a runt of a man quite chummy with Crackerbox.

"The veil was replaced with a handkerchief, so nobody got a look at anything more than a pair of thin, evil lips, fuller of dirty words than beauty. Well, Crackerbox and the runt they sure skinned that outfit dry. They took everything but the boy's characters, an' even them was left badly lacerated. All they did leave was a pair of them cute little cards, one pinned on each one of the policemen.

"Can you imagine how a stunt like that riled our blood? Us scouring that whole country for weeks, an' then that old square-headed sinner pops right up in the center of things an' ha-ha in our faces. We had been covering ground before, but after that we pulled up our belts an' doubled our efforts. It was hard on men, an' hard on horses; an' for all the good we done we might just as well gone off somewhere an' sat down in the shade.

"But we didn't quit!

"Two or three weeks slid away. Bruce an' O'Neil an' I had stopped in for dinner, a late one, at a post-house kept by a Frenchman, Pete Le Froix. When he dropped in on Pete he darn near strangled himself in his hurry to get rid of the latest news. Seems that Crackerbox an' the runt had showed up the afternoon

before just two miles up the trail from Pete's. The runt, he was in he clothes at this time, consisting mostly of dirty chaps an' a cigarette. We translates from Pete's chatter that two or three big-wigs from the Hudson Bay Company had seen their valuables disappear into the brush, an' was all worked up with love for the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. Pete made it appear pretty strong. He wasn't no great shakes with word talk, but I never seen no one to beat him as a mitt orator.

"We was sitting there after dinner stoking our pipes an' waiting for the horses to get a half decent rest. I don't know what the other boys had on their brains, but I was wondering whether major could stand this last shock, or whether he would swell up an' bust.

"All to once I heard a sort of timid, scratchy knock at the door. Pete was a little deaf; he never noticed. I was next nearest. I stepped over to the door an' opened it. A runt of a man was standing there, sort of shifting his weight from one side to the other. He was wearing a pair of dirty chaps, an' a cigarette was stuck in his face. When I seen the thin lips I got a hunch; I stepped outside.

" 'Well,' I demanded, 'what can I do for you?'

"The runty man was nervous, no doubt about that. I think when I jumped outside so quick an' shut the door behind me he thought I was going to pinch him. He lost his nerve completely; he couldn't get a word out at all for several minutes. But when they did come it was a regular flood—tumbled out just like the booze did when we attacked some bootlegger's supply depot with an ax.

" 'It's Crackerbox,' he snarled hoarsely, 'damn him! Here I been helping him all summer—doing more work than he does himself—an' I just tumbled this morning the —— —— ain't playing square. He can't play that game on me an' get away with it; I'll see him in hell first! If you want him, get your

men an' follow me. I'll show you where he is, an' you can get him—asleep. Me, I'll be going then, an' going fast. I know that old devil, an' I don't trust him nohow.'

"Well, I agreed to the runt's terms. I suppose I should have gathered him in, too, but I felt pretty sure he was harmless by himself, an' Crackerbox was the man we wanted. I called the boys out, an' we struck off on foot. I wasn't much afraid of a trap; that wasn't Crackerbox's style. And more, I knew perfectly well that ninety-five bad men out of every hundred that are caught get nipped because some pal gets yellow or sore an' splits. I was simply gambling that this time was one of those ninety-fives.

"About two miles of a walk, an' we stopped on the brink of a deep ravine.

" 'You see that thick clump of spruce down there,' the runt said, pointing it out with his forefinger, 'it's darker than the rest; looks almost black against the green? Well, that's where Crackerbox holes up. He was there when I left, sound asleep. More'n likely he's still dreaming; he was out last night rustling grub, an' come home dog-tired. He's hitting the trail for the south country to-night; wanted to split our pile this morning. But when I seen he was taking the long end of the deal I told him to let be until he got slept out. Damn him! An' now I won't get any; he sleeps with the coin under his head for a pillow.

" 'There's two good horses tied down there near the creek; you might as well get them, too. But grab Crackerbox first, an' grab him good. An' whatever you do, don't tell him I squealed. It's his own fault, anyhow—playing the hog; I'd, have played square if he had.'

"Gosh! How I hate a welsher! I could have took a whole bunch of happiness in kicking the runt until he'd felt obliged to eat standing up for a week. But I didn't; I just stood there an' watched him as he pulled a cayuse out of a

patch of scrub an' galloped away into the rolling hills. Things smelled better when he was gone.

"An' then the boys and I went carefully down the slope. We split forces an' come in on three sides of that dark patch of trees. The job was so easy it seemed almost childish. Crackerbox was asleep, and in that shape no more dangerous than a baby. No doubt but that he was plum' tired out; he never batted an eye until we stood right over him with drawn guns. An' then when his eyes did fly open he was wise enough to see the game was up, an' sport enough to take his deal without a whimper.

" 'You've got me, boys,' he said simply; 'go to it. I ain't got no personal grudge against you chaps, but there is one party better keep out of my sight or he'll wish his mother had died before he was born.'

"I could see the ugly gleam that sparkled in the old bandit's eyes, an' I knew he was thinking of his yellow pal—the runt. We snapped the bracelets on the old man; gathered up the horses an' the sack of coin an' hiked back to the house. Pete, he near busted a blood-vessel trying to tell us what great man-hunters we were, but after a while we got him calmed down enough to start making supper.

"After supper Bruce dug up a pack of cards, an' us three policemen played until we was tired. Then we drifted into tricks, an' amused ourselves that way for an hour or more. Crackerbox sat off to one side, smoking an' saying nothing. Pete was busy with his housework.

"Finally I turned to Crackerbox. He was a hardened criminal, of course, an' cunning an' desperate; but after all he was an old man, an' down an' out. I felt sort of sorry for him.

" 'Come on up an' join us,' I said, motioning toward the table.

"Crackerbox drew up his chair to the corner nearest me. The one room of the cabin

was hot an' stuffy. Pete was a good bit of an old woman, an' this night he was squandering good hot wood baking bread. I took off my service-coat an' threw it on the bed. I unbuckled my belt an' threw it after the coat. I wasn't careless, though; I did take my guns out of the holsters an' stuck 'em in my boot-tops where they would be handy in case of need.

"Crackerbox was an interested spectator of Brace's card tricks; if he saw me making this change, he most certainly didn't show it. I sort of remember him moving his chair a wee bit closer to mine, but it was done so carefully that no one else noticed it.

" 'If you fellows will take off these ornaments,' he announced at length, clanking them on the table-top, 'I know a few tricks you don't often see. Suit yourselves, of course, but it ain't reasonable that three big policemen should be afraid of an unarmed old man.'

"Now, I could see no particle of danger in Crackerbox's request, an' I wasn't afraid to say so. Neither could the boys; it was O'Neil who dug out his key an' turned our prisoner loose. Bruce threw the deck across the table to the old man. He shuffled the cards around on the table as though trying to make up his mind just what trick to show us.

" 'I've got it now,' he said at last. 'Take six cards from the deck—any six at all; shuffle them well in your lap.'

"He suited his actions to the words. Underneath the cover of the table was a lightning movement! The nearest of my booted guns was snatched from its resting-place!

" 'Hands up—everybody!' Crackerbox barked savagely, leering behind his stolen gun. 'The first fellow to make a wrong move dies, an' dies quick! Nice trick that, ain't it, gentlemen?'

"Fat, I'm obliged to tell you that if our capture of Crackerbox had been so easy as to

seem almost childish, his escape was so easy as to be plum' ridiculous. The old boy had the drop, an' that was all there was to it. Ordinary men don't argue with a small cannon six feet away in the hands of a dead shot. Occasionally some chap does, an' then some other fellow gets a job digging a hole in the ground. We were wise; we stayed quiet.

"Crackerbox stripped the three of us of guns and cartridges; he borrowed all of Pete's ready grub; an' then he went outside an' took the two best police horses in the stable. We just stood there in the door like a pack of kids an' watched him fade away, as the runt had done, into the shadow of the scrub an' the hills.

"An' that is just about all there is to be said of our friend Mr. Crackerbox. Some weeks later a runt of a man with thin, evil lips was found lying dead near a lonely trail. Bruce—my man—was the policeman called in for the authorities. He looked, an' knew, an' told me; an' then we both forgot. So the runt went out into an unknown grave, an' I wasn't sorry for him then, an' I ain't yet. I sort of figured the cards he drew was good enough for him.

"But I'm a little ahead of my story. When we got back to Corbin an' I reported that we had captured Crackerbox, an' also let him go again, there was a hullabaloo for fair. Being in charge of the squad I naturally got most of the blame. Major Morris wasn't no slouch at manufacturing war-talk out of the English language, an' when he got done with me my dream of a career in the force was pretty badly shot. That winter my enlistment term was up, an' I wasn't much surprised when I was paid off without being asked to sign on for another stint.

"I knew why, of course, an' I went without a murmur. But I must say I was a little sore when they wouldn't even give me a 'Satisfactory Service Discharge.' Going without that was the next worst thing to

getting read out of the service, an' I didn't just like it."

"I should say not," agreed the fat drummer. "And say, Hank, you didn't tell me yet why Crackerbox wore a box hat."

"Y-e-s," Hank said, "I know I ain't. I hear you. But maybe you'd have howled, an' then again maybe you wouldn't. What would you have done, Fat, if that thieving old pirate had

been wearing his box hat to cover up a long, white scar—the kind of a mark a man could never forget, 'cause it made him think of home? That's the question, Fat; what would you have done then; an' was I right or wrong?"

"Phew!" whistled the fat one through his teeth and in his eyes came the nicker of a new understanding. "Who'd have thought it?"