

Word Count: 63,195

DAM!

By

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“Hoover Dam Magnet for Job Squatters”

--Headline, Las Vegas Age News

March 5, 1931

Chapter 1

Burnt Beans

It was news nobody in camp could get off their mind.

“Pretty girl like that...if she was *my* daughter...”

“Well, she just won’t quit.”

“...head strong is her problem.”

“Even her daddy can’t do nothing.”

“Shame...”

While, rolling into camp, an old Ford hit the red dust and gravel and slid into the river like a ride at an amusement park. Tires splashed, the driver let go of a yelp. And the passengers were given a head-jarring jolt.

“Hobbes, you okay? *Hobbes!*”

“I’m fine, Jacob. Jake. I may be old but I’m not...”

“I know...just...”

Two doors of the ford creaked open. Stepping out into the river, three pairs of feet sunk into the mud.

“Just *nothing*, Jake. Remember...”

“I know, Hobbes, doubts don’t make a rule. But darn this river’s cold!”

The driver laughed. “Should be, coming all the way from the Rockies, which makes me wonder if building a dam might just steal the life from this river.” He paused, adding, “But hey, welcome to Ragtown, gentlemen! Closest spot to where the dam will get built.”

The late afternoon light laid a glimmer onto smooth stones and debris at the shore. Jake shook water from his shoes with each step out. He kept his gaze steady. “Over there!” he pointed.

Hobbes squinted. “Good eye, Jake. An empty site and a fire pit.”

The driver added, “I had a good eye when I was young...but it was mostly for girls.”

Jake tried to smile, but with a glimpse of other occupied campsites, he asked, “Everyone here is waiting for jobs to start?”

The driver nodded. “Indeed. And folks are nice, just miserable. Spring already getting chased down by summer. Gets hotter than Hades around here, you’ll see.”

Hobbes shrugged then turned to Jake, “Well some things we can’t do anything about. I’m hungry how about you?”

“Sure,” Jake said... “Though...” his tone turned quiet, “What about the girl...” He stepped forward and suddenly his footsteps were tangled with an oily, smelly bush.

“Durn it!” he tugged himself free.

The driver gave a chuckle. “Desert’s no basketball court, eh, kid?”

Jake didn’t answer. He blinked. His eyes so dry it scratched and hurt. As the driver moseyed off, heading towards a huddle of women under the slim shadows of a pretty tree.

Hobbes spoke now. “We’re lucky don’t you think?”

Jake glanced up. “Lucky?”

“For Malcolm, for O’Mahoney, giving us a ride...”

“Do you think he’s really the mayor of this place?”

Hobbes laughed and swung his pack off his back.

Jake set his own pack down. Until now it hadn’t seemed that heavy. He unlatched it and reached in. Just then a hiker was coming down the same slope they’d slid in on.

Dressed up good, anybody in camp might have spoken Jake’s thoughts. New Levi’s the shade of midnight. A face shadowed by a sharp tan cap. His pack slim as a book on his back.

“He’s tracking a path straight to us.”

“Likely wants to share our fire pit.”

Jake's chest rose with a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. The newcomer neared.

"Ragtown?" The suntanned, stocky boy asked.

The answer was a nod.

"I knew I'd find this place. Close as a guy can get to the dam..." He swigged from the water bag rigged to his pack.

"Yeah, but nothing's started. No jobs yet," Jake bit his chapped lip, tasting blood.

"I say nothing's wrong with showing up early. My name's Eddie, Eddie McIntyre." His stubby, miner's hand reached out to meet a rosy ball-playing hand.

"I'm Jake, Jake Adams."

The two shook like they were men twice their age.

"And I'm Hobbes," speaking from a few feet away, washing his hands now in a small tub of suds. "So you're traveling by your lonesome, Eddie?"

Eddie's shrug told a story not yet done. "But there's a girl up the road. Saw her when I came in. Bad cough. Gypsum's my guess."

"We saw her too..." Jake glanced at Hobbes.

Hobbes noted the black bag at his own feet. "Sorry, I'm no doctor, if that's what you're thinking Eddie. A pharmacist...or, was..." Hobbes' eyes met Eddie's now. "Most can't afford much medicine these days anyway."

Eddie blinked agreeing.

Hobbes went on. "It's why I'm glad for remedies like Jake's."

Eddie glimpsed the small yellow can in Jake's hand. "Oh, you're cooking something for the girl?"

Jake nodded forgetting everything but the color of the girl's hair, how it had reminded him of Oklahoma wheat. Then he caught himself. Held the can up, shook his head.

“No, this is for a plaster to put on her chest.”

Eddie let go of a horselaugh.

“Is that funny?”

“It is...when you never heard of such a thing.” He grinned. “But you figuring you'll do the applying?”

Heat rose from neck to temples, but Jake didn't move. It'd been awhile since talking to someone his own age. He gazed at his and Hobbes' unpacked dinner. “Well, anyway, if you're hungry, we got ham and beans....”

“Shoot, I sure could use some grub. I hear that creosote makes a good fire.”

“But we were going to go see about the girl first,” Jake sucked in a breath.

“Hmm...the red bull,” Eddie said, staring now at the river.

“The red bull?”

“This river, the Colorado, I hear it's used to getting its own way,” Eddie bent a branch from the bush beside him.

“I thought you meant the girl,” Jake said, trying for a smile, finding his lips too chapped to move.

Eddie beamed brightly, like someone you'd feel ashamed to forget.

“Well, we'll be back,” Hobbes told Eddie, already heading up the road.

“And help yourself,” Jake added.

“Will do. No worries, Jake Adams.”

Up the road the wind was catching the thick smoke of every campfire. Jake tugged a handkerchief up over his mouth and nose. In the heavy haze campers settled in. Women stirred meals in large iron pots. Men hammered spare lumber. Squat shacks were everywhere, with soft colored blankets for roofs and walls. A little kid ran past, up from the river, wet rag in hand. Jake watched him hang the rag on the low branch of a spindly tree.

Hobbes smiled, watching too. "So what do you guess about that Eddie?"

Jake kicked a sand-streaked stone. "He seems all right."

"Smart anyway, figuring about the rock dust."

"I could have figured it."

"Least you remembered about the mustard."

"Least."

The girl's name was Cora White.

Up close she had a look about her. A look that said she didn't know where she was and didn't care about knowing, either.

Jake spoke fast telling Cora's mother how to make the plaster.

"It's simple, just mix the mustard powder with water, keep it thick and put it in a cloth...my ma would..." he stopped then started again but slower, "Then just set it on Cora's chest and keep it there, overnight."

He gave Mrs. White the can of mustard. Her hand was soft. It surprised him.

“Thank you,” she said. “We gave the last of our Mentholatum to a sick mother. But that was before Cora...”

Jake nodded. He spoke into the darkened space where Cora lay. “The dust will just keep cutting up your throat if you keep coughing. You got to stop yourself.”

Cora blinked.

Away from the tent, Mrs. White whispered, “Please tell your ma thanks.”

Jake swallowed hard.

He found Hobbes talking with Cora’s father. The two had something in common. Mr. White was actually Doctor White. “I brought my family here to build a hospital,” the doctor said. Hobbes added, “And then workers getting paid will be able to afford medicine.”

But when Jake and Hobbes said good bye, the White’s offered money.

“Why didn’t you take it?” Jake asked Hobbes afterwards. “We could’ve used it, since Las Vegas...”

“Forget Diggs Wilson. Forget that Las Vegas conman,” Hobbes smoothed his salt and pepper hair, caught now by the new breeze. “We’ll get jobs soon enough Jake and...”

“Just wish we really could have got our names on that hiring list. Then nobody could say nothing about me being too...”

Hobbes elbowed Jake, “Seems Cora’s about your age isn’t she?”

Jake couldn’t help it. He finally let go of a smile.

“Way I see it,” Hobbes added, “helping the White’s was a pleasure, Jake. Besides, when that hospital gets built...they’ll need a pharmacist, even if medicine is something a lot of folks can’t afford these days.” His long arms swung easy as they hiked back down the camp road.

The first star of the night caught Jake's eye. The sky was different than home, but wasn't everything so different now?

Suddenly Jake had to yank his handkerchief out again.

"Whew, do you smell that, Hobbes?"

Hobbes only pointed.

From their campsite, flames were trying to climb the canyon walls. Through the smoke, there was Eddie McIntyre standing over the fire. Coming closer, there was the slab of ham, black as the pan. And in a pot there were the beans. So burnt, the stink was being a bully to every nose in camp.

Next morning, the river stretched and groaned like an old bull.

Stomachs roared empty. And Jake's memory was jabbed.

It wasn't just the recall of last night's beans. Or Eddie's describing his work in silver mines. It was remembering his dream. A dream he'd had since he was his brother's age, to play pro basketball. He thought he'd banished that dream weeks before.

Pulling a pen from his pack Jake reached for the dog-eared notebook.

Letters to Moses the cover read.

So far, there'd been only one letter. About Las Vegas and the red-handed con man he and Hobbes had met there. Of course, using words a nine year old would understand.

But now he wanted to tell Moses about Eddie. So what if Eddie couldn't boil beans. Eddie had been hefting dynamite, doing a man's job, since he was ten years old. And he'd saved

enough money for a car. Never mind four flats or that the car got stolen in Las Vegas. When Eddie said he made his own luck it seemed true as sky.

Besides, talking to somebody his own age had felt good. And he wanted to tell Moses to do the same himself.

He steadied the pen to paper.

But darn if Jake couldn't write a single word to his brother about anything.

Someone was hollering now as if he'd discovered a mule deer made of gold. Down near the riverside Jake spied a whole host of men gathered in front of a small store and boat launch.

“The big boss is coming! The big boss is coming! We're going to get paaaaaid!”

The sun was warming the air fast as Jake hurried to put his things away. Before he knew it both Hobbes and Eddie were at his side.

They steered towards what sounded like crazed coyotes. Eddie remarked, “I've heard men get out of their minds when they've been too long in the desert...”

Hobbes laughed.

Jake kept the pace.

Then one voice above all the others sounded, as if trading hope for belief. “It *is* Frank Crowe. Crowe's finally come!”

Another voice rang out over the crowd. “Hey, over here, Mr. Crowe, we want to work!”

Jake, Eddie and Hobbes moved in closer to see the black Buick pulled up to the crowd. Frank Crowe was recognizable to everyone, his picture had been in the news for months, wearing the same Stetson high on his head, his face thin as an exclamation mark.

Crowe shot a look to the crowd. Like a lighthouse, some would say, a light cast on dark water.

Suddenly, a man at Crowe's side, put his hand up. "Step back, all of you. We're here only to survey the whole of Black Canyon for the dam. Mr. Crowe's got no time right now."

Some did as they were told, one step, then two. But others didn't budge. Just kept pushing against whoever was in front of them.

Finally someone called out, "Just tell us when the jobs start, Mr. Crowe. The News said..."

Frank Crowe finally raised his hand.

The herd hushed. Even the river seemed to comply.

"I suppose you read it in the news," Crowe sliced the air with his hand. "Listen. There'll be plenty of jobs, and soon enough. What the news doesn't tell is that I don't hire whiners. Only men not babies..."

"Of course," a voice from the crowd interrupted. And it was a serious reply. Not a trace of desperation to it.

Jake turned. "Hobbes?" he whispered. "What are you doing?"

But it was too late. Frank Crowe was pointing at Hobbes. "Okay, old timer. I imagine you lost your whine a long time ago. So, tell me, have you ever worked on a dam?"

"I have! I've worked on a dam!" somebody else yelled, a hundred others echoing the same.

"Hold on, gentlemen," said Crowe. He motioned Hobbes to come near.

Pats on the back and jealous jeers followed Hobbes. But so did Jake.

"Is the boy your walking stick or bodyguard?" somebody called out.

Yet every jeer faded away when Hobbes finally stood before Crowe.

“The name is Charles Welsby, Mr. Crowe, but folks call me Hobbes.”

The spindly fingers of Hobbes’ right hand stretched. The big boss found a firm handshake. Hobbes continued. “I simply need a job, like the rest of us here.”

Hobbes paused and rolled the sleeves of his white but worn shirt. He chanced a glance at Jake.

“And if it makes a difference Mr. Crowe...” Jake’s voice quivered.

“If what makes a difference?” Crowe set his eyes on Jake. Searching him like a hungry hawk.

“You see, Mr. Crowe,” Jake steadied himself, “Hobbes and me, we’d planned on working to...”

The big boss cut Jake off with a chuckle. “You mean the old guy sets the shovel and the young guy lifts and pours?”

All at once men in the crowd slapped each other’s backs. The joke was a relief, like shade under a car at noon.

“I’ll tell you what...” Crowe squinted at the river. Then he aimed his voice at Jake. “You know how to swim?”

A voice shot out, “Hey, Crowe, he’s just a kid. River’s rough. He’ll drown!”

“Or not,” Crowe was quick to answer, swiping sweat from his forehead with a starched, white handkerchief.

Jake’s wide eyes searched Hobbes.

Although Jake knew, like his pa knew too, it wasn’t in Hobbes’ nature to tell anybody what to do. And Jake had been glad for it, up until this moment.

He scanned the turbulent water. All he'd wanted for weeks now was a job on the dam. He worried about not having experience, being too young, needing money for Moses, all those things.

But now the red bull, the Colorado River, was going to decide if he'd be hired.

More like, if he'd live to be hired.

Was this Crowe's way of cutting the men from the boys?

Jake remembered then what Eddie had said the night before. Most times, it didn't matter how old you were, or that the only work you knew was driving a tractor. Never mind playing center on a championship basketball team. According to Eddie, so long as you could think things through and were quick with every move...

The muddy water snarled, splashing loud and angry.

Just like the roar from the sky before the storm hit his hometown of Guthrie.

The storm, Jake thought and sucked in a breath.

He set his hand to block the glare. "I'm sorry Mr. Crowe," he heard himself say. "I can swim fine. But I won't...I..." he paused.

Sighs from the crowd were jabbing at him like bony fingertips.

"Ho!" Crowe exclaimed again. He seized Jake by the shoulder. A mammoth grip, Jake didn't know to keep holding his breath or to let it out.

"See here," Frank Crowe said into the crowd. "This is a smart young man. He senses danger, and stays away from it." Crowe set his arm across Jake's shoulders as news camera's clicked. He turned towards Jake. "You'll make a fine water boy. Tell me your name."

"Jake Adams, sir. But Mr. Crowe, I'm here with Hobbes, and he..."

“Your friend here will make do as a mucker. Lucky for him this operation will need plenty. Now...” Crowe turned towards the company of men he’d arrived with and said something in a low tone.

Jake spoke fast. “Well, then, Mr. Crowe? I can muck, too.”

The crowd jostled.

“Ho, Jake Adams, you want work the hard way is that it?”

Fearing the right answer might also be the wrong one, Jake shrugged.

Crowe focused on the crowd. It was a moment that could be recorded all across the country. He stepped closer to Jake then cleared his throat to speak. “Just remember, and this goes for all you men. It doesn’t matter what you get hired to do. I won’t afford mistakes. You got that?”

The sound of a camera clicks for more photographs could be heard. And then Crowe added, “Men, listen here. This dam will be the best dam every built...and built ahead of schedule, yes it will, or my name ain’t Crowe.”

“Yes sir.” Came an echo from the men.

Until someone yelled, “Hey, wait a minute Mr. Crowe, you’re going to hire a kid? I can work double his weight!”

Another man hollered, “Yeah, and I’ll work twice as hard!”

“Ah, heck, when and where do we sign up?” A round-faced man shouted after that. Jake recognized that face. It was the driver of the Ford that’d given him and Hobbes a ride, Malcolm O’Mahoney.

Frank Crowe went motionless for a moment, staring past the crowd. Every man hushed to hear his final comment. He finally swung his arm across Jake's shoulders for the second time. Jake stood still as a statue.

"Do you all see this tall, whiskerless young man?" Crowe asked. "He stated his needs but he isn't begging or whining. Both he and his friend Hobbes here, they've got something I call moxie. Besides that, they know when to keep quiet. Everyone else, it'll be two weeks, sign ups at River Camp." Then Crowe nearly spun on his heels in the direction of the men he'd come with. There'd be no encore.

Besides, fear was a snake sometimes. And most of the men in camp had been bit one time or another. They sure didn't want to be fired before they even got hired. So the crowd got quiet. And after that, all that could be heard was the river turning and gushing forward.

Two minutes later Frank Crowe and two other men were climbing into a boat at the riverside. The small motor on the boat slapped at the water. Soon they'd be out of sight upriver.

Rambling back to their campsite, Hobbes just shook his head. "Moxie," he whispered.

Jake hardly heard Hobbes, he was so lost in his own thoughts. "I can't believe it..." he mumbled. "Hired, by the big boss himself..."

When suddenly Eddie jumped in, "yeah, he was feeling sorry for you."

"What...?"

Eddie kept on. "You think a boss wants anyone figuring him out? So he gives a chance to a guy he feels sorry for. It makes him look good. And so it seems, you're that guy."

Jake stopped in his steps. "Crowe don't know nothing about..." he tensed, "he never saw..."

Eddie kept walking.

“Listen,” Hobbes pace quickened. “Frank Crowe wouldn’t be the head engineer if he didn’t mean what he says,” he peered at Jake then Eddie. “Now...how about some breakfast? I think we got one pot we haven’t burned a hole through yet.”