

# THE FREELANCE DEMOLITIONIST

*Tom Wayman*

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"I'll explain what I can, Captain. But there's not much more to say than is written in my report.

"From the beginning, sir? After Shiloh, my unit was ordered to this area, where we helped establish the emplacements around Morrisburg. We were told these would block any advance of Confederate cavalry up Deer Creek valley. When that threat diminished, I was detailed to take a sergeant and ten mounted men of my choosing and proceed toward Box Crossing. Our orders were to deny the enemy any possible future use of the rail line, which cuts through the mountains in that country in roughly a northwest-southeast direction.

"We left the encampment here on Wednesday. Sir? No, last Wednesday: June twenty-fourth, Captain. We requisitioned two wagons with powder, provisions, tents, mess gear. I believe we rode through our lines about nine-thirty in the forenoon and set out toward...

"The colonel, Colonel Whitney, was the source of my orders, Captain. The orders were conveyed to me by the major. Sir? Yes, I... No, that's right. He's Artillery, but we've been functioning more or less as an engineering unit. Should I continue, sir?

"We headed approximately south along the Morrisburg road and intersected the railway by about two p.m. The country there is thickly wooded and hilly. Beech and maple in the bottoms, and juniper and piney toward the ridges. We encountered no sign of enemy troop movements, and indeed saw nobody. We came upon one or two stump ranches, but these were deserted. We found no livestock. Probably the inhabitants fled in May, when we know the 4th Tennessee Volunteers made a sweep through this region. Yes, sir. Possibly a recon, or a feint. But they burned down the courthouse at Box Crossing, and took the first hay which had been stored by farmers thereabouts, as well as their cows and pigs and all of their chickens they could get. Some barns were burned,

too, I believe. The colonel told us at that time that the 4th Tennessee was part of the brigade under General Crittenden, operating from a bivouac downriver, just over the state border.

“Once we reached the rail line we used the horses and hand tools to remove rails and ties for a considerable distance. We then began to work our way southeast. During the balance of Wednesday and on Thursday we destroyed four bridges using the powder we had brought with us. Three others we left standing, including the largest one over Still Woman Creek near the Lexington Pike. These we intended to wreck on our return journey. The bridges we left intact were all some distance from the road; that is, we would have to bring the wagons across them if we returned down the rail bed rather than along the road. I didn’t want to cut off a possible alternate route for us if we were forced to withdraw for any reason. My expectation, as I mentioned, was fully to render these bridges unusable on our way back to the camp at Morrisburg.

“Early Friday morning, however, we encountered an unexpected opportunity. The detachment was advancing along the rail line, when the woods suddenly opened up into a forested canyon. The extent of the canyon was not accurately indicated on the maps we carried: the canyon floor is seventy or eighty feet below the rail bed we were standing on. And the route of the railway follows a wide curve across the mouth of a tributary canyon of perhaps three-fourths that depth. Two very large wooden trestles—each curved—bridged the opening. The longest trestle had a span of three hundred and fifty feet—give or take a few feet—while the lesser was fully two hundred feet. The cribbing rising from the canyon floor in both cases was, of course, substantial. To take out these trestles would render the rail line impassable for a few months, at least, in my best judgment. Destruction of these structures would represent a far more decisive action against the enemy than the damage we had been able to inflict up to this moment. To be frank, what we had accomplished to that point could be repaired by determined crews within several days. But these impressive trestles—if we could remove or burn a large enough portion of them—could not be rebuilt without the deployment of considerable engineering skills, men, and timber. Such an undertaking naturally would also consume much time.

“The sergeant and I looked at each other, and I could see he instantly grasped our good fortune as well. Sir? Sergeant Mitchell. Yes, sir, Ethan Mitchell.

“We brought the troop to a halt, and the sergeant and I dismounted and walked a little distance out onto the nearest trestle, discussing how we might inflict the maximum damage. We knew roughly our inventory of remaining powder, and were inspecting the structure’s construction while debating the best manner to utilize that materiel. Our goal was not only to topple the cribbing into the canyon but also to render as much of the timber as we could unsuitable for employment in any attempt to reconstruct the trestles.

“These were erected of tarred wood, each beam about the height and width of a railway tie, although many of the struts were longer in span. The beams were spiked or bolted in place, depending on the stresses they were designed to bear.

“The sergeant and I were standing perhaps two dozen yards or more out on the trestle, talking. The troop was at ease close to where the trestles joined the rail bed; the men were dismounted, a few smoking their pipes, a couple more sprawled out taking some rest. Since as I mention we had seen no sign of human presence, let alone evidence of the enemy, I had not seen fit to post any sort of picket. The day was sunny with a few clouds; thrush and robin were singing in the woods around us. The gentlest of breezes was wafting up the canyon, shimmering the leaves in the woods all about.

“Suddenly an explosion erupted on a cliff face behind the troop, a face past which the rail line traveled and below which we had just ridden. The sound and smoke and force of the explosion was as if a ball from one of the heaviest cannons had landed. Or maybe twice that effect. So it appeared to me, since the scene about us displayed such utter tranquility just moments before. The war had seemed that summer morning very, very far away.

“In seconds, however, my men had responded with as much alacrity as any commander could wish. The horses were calmed and led under cover of the trees, the wagons spurred as well to a place of safety in the woods, the men were deployed by their corporal along the track under what protection they could find, carbines and Springfields had been loaded and were pointing back the direction we had come. A scout was dispatched to circle through the forest and ascend the rear of the cliff to observe what he could.

“As the sergeant and I ran back atop the trestle toward the men, I was braced for the crash of a second shell announcing a cannonade. I was in counter-battery fire at Shiloh, sir. The carnage in our lines there deeply terrified me; I confess it affects me still. That was the first place I saw a man dismembered, Captain. Literally dis-membered.

The arm and part of a shoulder was lying on the ground by itself. My friend from upstate, whom I had known since we both enlisted, had half of his face torn away and died on the ground after a while. There was screaming and shouting and the cannon fire kept landing without a trace of God's mercy. Sir? Yes, sir.

"My mouth was completely dry as I raced towards my troop; I had trouble swallowing. But I was also turning over and over in my thoughts a question as I watched my feet land on every second tie along the trestle. How could a battery of such heavy artillery be sited so as to have us in range, when we had no indication a Rebel force of any size was in the vicinity? No one but a madman would send heavy guns forward as the point of an advance.

"I flung myself down behind some boulders at trackside where the corporal was lying. The smoke and dust at the foot of the cliff had begun to dissipate, and I observed that a very large heap of shattered rock lay across the rails. From my vantage point, the pile of rubble appeared to effectively block our ability to take the wagons back up the rail right-of-way. Any tactical maneuver from here would mean either abandoning our wagons, or attempting to drive them across the trestles. Intentionally or not, the cannon shot had blocked any retreat with our equipment. And taking a wagon across a trestle under fire would be out of the question. We were finished, I felt, as a demolition detachment. The task ahead was to elude any Confederate patrols originating from a force that had to be at least the size of a division, to be accompanied by such heavy cannons. I was evaluating in my mind possible routes we could use to slip back to Morrisburg with news of the Rebel advance.

"By now the echoes of the cannon shot were dying away, and the birds again were audible from the branches of the trees about us. The last sounds of tumbling stones ceased, and I observed a fresh, clean aspect to the rock on the upper portion of the cliff. The cannonball obviously had dislocated and pulverized a sizeable slab of granite. Then I heard a yell from someplace on the far side of the pile of shattered rock, where a plume of dust still hovered: 'Union men. Union men. Do not shoot. I am your friend.'

"The voice was male, with a sing-song sort of intonation. There was also the trace of an accent. Sir? No, not Southern. European. Scandahoovian, as it turned out. But at the time it was the sing-song nature of the shout that seemed so odd. 'Union men. Do not shoot. I am your friend.'

"A white handkerchief lofted on a stick was raised behind the pile of stones. The corporal whispered at me: 'I sent McKay up through the woods, sir. Once he reaches the cliff-edge he'll have the drop on whoever is behind those rocks.' The sergeant rolled across open ground toward me from a sort of ditch where he had positioned himself. 'Think it's a ruse, Lieutenant?' he inquired. 'I wonder if there's more of 'em. Maybe they followed us down the line from where we blew the last bridge.'

"'I detailed McKay to scout the situation,' the corporal informed the sergeant, pointing toward the cliff. Mitchell snorted. 'McKay. He was in Albany when they handed out the brains. No telling whether he'll open fire single-handed on a regiment of Rebs, or turn tail and run from an old woman driving a cow in to be milked.'

"'Who *should* I have sent, then, Sergeant?' the corporal asked irritably. 'Do you want me to dispatch somebody else to help McKay?'

"'Likely as not, whoever came climbing up behind McKay would be shot dead sure,' Mitchell said. 'McKay don't think. Anyhow, damage is done. We'll have to work with what we got.'

"The corporal started to protest, but I hissed at them for quiet. I could hear the voice shouting something further from under the white handkerchief beyond the rocks.

"'Dis my verk,' the voice called. 'I explode dis, ya? I can help you wit' dese bridges here.' And after a pause, the voice repeated. 'Union men. I am your friend.'

"We three crouching behind the boulder stared at one another. 'Could it be true?' I whispered. 'That it wasn't cannon fire?' The sergeant raised his eyebrows and shrugged. I made a decision.

"'Show yourself,' I shouted. 'Hands up and come into the open.'

"Almost simultaneously a cry erupted from the top of the cliff. 'I've got him in my sights, Lieutenant,' McKay screeched excitedly, as if he were just off the farm and not already a veteran of nine months of war. Then, again from McKay above: 'Hands up, Reb. You heard the lieutenant.'

"'Take cover, McKay, you fool. There may be more of 'em,' the corporal bellowed. The sergeant shook his head resignedly. The white flag wavered, and around the rocks stepped a figure wearing a brown wide-brimmed hat, and a long brown canvas coat. His arms were raised, and one of his hands lifted the branch with the white rag fluttering from it.

"The man paced confidently toward us a few yards and stopped.

“I don't *see* nobody else, Corporal,’ McKay called down plaintively. He had followed orders, though, and was once more hidden from view. ‘What now, Lieutenant?’ the sergeant asked me.

“I was cogitating as fast as I could, attempting to give weight to every factor in our predicament. Was this man a diversion, to catch us off guard while an enemy patrol encircled us? His lack of uniform meant nothing, of course: you know how Johnny Reb has never been too particular about such matters. As if reading my thoughts, the man holding the white flag yelled again. ‘Dere's yoost me. I am a friend. I homestead over by da Rutland Lake. Dere's no Confeds be around.’ Then after a moment of silence from us, he uttered his strange boast once more. ‘Dis vas my verk. I can help you blow dose bridges.’

“I assessed our circumstances for another full minute. No other shots had landed since the initial explosion. The man before me claimed to be responsible for the blast, as unlikely as that sounded. I gave my orders. Two troopers were detailed to mount up and retrace our route a mile or so in search of the enemy. McKay was withdrawn from the heights and another man was posted aloft with my binoculars.

“I should interject that I had selected McKay out of my company for our present duty because I had witnessed him scrappy in a fight with the Rebs on the road to Corinth in April. But experience has led me to trust Sergeant Mitchell's judgment. If he regarded McKay as exhibiting crucial defects of character—I was not previously aware of this—I would accord his evaluation much weight.

“I directed that the horses be brought to trackside, although the wagons were left where they had been shifted. I established a picket in the woods to the east of us. To the west the canyon fell away; we could easily observe from out on the nearest trestle any enemy activity from that quarter. I had some logs felled and dragged a distance onto the trestle to create an observation post that offered its user some protection. Once these chores were completed, I commanded that the newcomer, whom I had placed under guard, should be brought over and seated on the ground before me for interrogation.

“From a closer vantage I could see he was larger than average in height, with straw-colored hair and eyes of an unusually deep blue. His face was clean-shaven, except for a full mustache. His clothing was rough but serviceable. He said his name was Olaf Jorgenson, and that he had emigrated as a child from Sweden with his family, who had settled in the Wabash Valley in Illinois. He had struck out on his own to try his

luck farming some miles northwest of our present location, traveling infrequently to Morrisburg or westerly to New Brighton, the county seat, to sell any surplus crops and purchase supplies. He said he felt no compunction to enlist, since 'dere seem to be plenty soldier-boys,' and until the previous month the war had seemed remote. He for the third time repeated his offer to assist in the demolition ahead of us. 'Ven I saw smoke from your verk de last couple days,' he announced, 'I got on my hoss and rode over to help you, ya? I figured you would vant to blow dese tings...' He gestured out at the trestles. 'I haf someting dat can make your job yoost like back dere....' He indicated the cliff. I asked how precisely he could aid us in our task.

"See dere, see dere?" he animatedly pointed up the rail line where the pile of rock lay. 'I can do dat to dese.' His hand now indicated the structures spanning the canyon.

"I was starting to wonder if the man might not have become crazed by loneliness, striving by himself to subsist on some break-heart farm in such sparsely settled country. But there was the nagging matter of the explosion that had heralded his presence. Had he really set off that blast?

"No trace of powder was evident on his hands. I commanded a search of his person, and he willingly turned out his pockets, revealing only a pocket knife, a length of string, tobacco, pipe, a few lucifers, an apple, pencil stub, handkerchief. Under the insole of one of his boots were a few coins, the discovery of which caused some excitement among the troopers inspecting the footwear. One private ventured the opinion that no farmer he'd ever known or heard of would carry cash money with him when about his ordinary occupations. The coins were taken as evidence that this was Judas himself in front of us, still in possession of his thirty pieces of silver. In this instance the thirty pence were payment for service as a Confederate spy rather than for the betrayal of Our Lord.

"Jorgenson exhibited the utmost calm during the soldier's outburst. Either his command of English was insufficient to understand the mortal threat implied by the private's words, or Jorgenson considered himself completely protected by his innocence. Or by his insanity, I was inclined to think. And yet there was that shattered rockface. If not his doing, whose?

"The sergeant beckoned me aside as I was mulling over these propositions. Mitchell had formed the opinion that the man was a Berry Picker who had been hiding out nearby. Fearing that our detachment would eventually discover his abode, he had



concocted a tale that... Captain? Berry Picker, sir. The men of this corps apply that term to deserters. Yes, sir, gone to pick berries. But also, I believe, a play upon 'to desert' and a 'dessert' that one eats, if you take my meaning. Yes, sir.

"I asked the sergeant how he could account for the demolished cliff side, if Jorgenson's story was false. Happenstance, was the sergeant's view. But that still left the mystery of who had fired a shot of such weight in our direction, and from where?

"I put the question directly to the prisoner, and he reiterated doggedly that the explosion was of his devising. 'Where is your gunpowder?' I demanded of him, and he began to recount a history of his family in Sweden, which further bolstered my inclination to regard him as lunatic. He had not spoken more than two or three sentences on this topic, though, when our scouts rode back into camp.

"The troopers had acquired two extra horses—one saddled and the other a pack animal fully laden, the load covered with a tarpaulin lashed in place. At the sight of these animals, Jorgenson became quite agitated. But I sternly bid him to remain seated and cautioned the trooper guarding him to keep him where he was. I walked over to hear from the scouting party, with some trepidation concerning what they might have discovered about the origin of the bombardment. I was already considering how best to deal with a madman if we had to speedily withdraw towards Morrisburg, especially since Jorgenson had the potential to betray us if the enemy were not aware of our exact position.

"However, my men had encountered nothing in the area that would indicate the presence of the Rebels. The troopers had pushed through the woods along a stream bed out to the road, and conducted a reconnaissance in both directions from that point. All was peaceful. On the outward leg of their excursion they had located the horses they had returned with. The horses had been tethered in a clearing a little distance from the rail line, not far up the track. As my men passed, their mounts had sensed the others, and the subsequent nickering back and forth had alerted the troopers to what was evidently Jorgenson's equipage.

"A quick check of the madman's saddlebags produced a content not so innocent as that of his pockets. A Colt long-barreled revolver plus a surprising quantity of cartridges were found within, along with a tobacco pouch containing what appeared to be percussion caps for a type of musket or rifle I was unfamiliar with. In addition, the saddlebags contained a well-creased map of the area with notations on it in a language I

couldn't read, presumably Swedish. If he was a spy, was he a spy for the Swedish army? I had read in the Cincinnati newspapers—which are delivered to the Morrisburg encampment from time to time, although why all the way from Cincinnati I have no idea—that the British and French navies are aiding the Confederacy in eluding our blockade. Were the Swedes now enlisted in the Rebel cause?

“Jorgenson began to shout something about the need for caution and care as we removed the canvas from his pack horse. Two heavy wooden boxes measuring about two feet in each dimension, with secured lids, served as panniers. The animal also carried tools and ropes of various sorts wrapped in a tent, and some foodstuffs and cooking implements.

“All the men not assigned to duty gathered around as Jorgenson's possessions were unloaded from the pack mare. After an unsuccessful attempt to use a bayonet to pry open a padlock securing the first of the wooden boxes, we backed away and one of the troopers, McKay, lifted his carbine to shoot the lock. At this Jorgenson shrieked something unintelligible—or perhaps Swedish—and leaped suddenly to his feet. He pushed the surprised private guarding him to the ground, and began to run in our direction, still hollering, with both arms windmilling rapidly. His guard came charging in pursuit several paces behind.

“McKay, who had been taking aim at the padlock, brought his rifle smartly up to shoot the onrushing lunatic. Not wishing to have the Swede summarily executed in this manner, I slammed my shoulder into McKay as he was about to fire. The weapon discharged and the bullet whistled past Jorgenson scant inches above and to the left of his head. Flocks of birds rose from the forest at the report, and wheeled in confusion a few moments before settling again into the trees. I pulled my revolver from its holster.

“Jorgenson crumpled to his knees at the sound of the rifle, put his hands over his face, and fell forward. For a second I thought he had been hit, but in a moment his guard and the other troopers pounced upon him. They quickly secured his hands behind him with a rope and hauled him erect. They shoved and kicked at him to encourage him to move in my direction. I had them seat him on one of the boxes we had taken from his horse; I sat on the other, my revolver still in my hand.

“While I was composing myself to resolve this situation, Jorgenson began to speak rapidly. He led me to understand that the boxes contained explosive materiel, and that he had used this substance to bring down a good portion of the cliff face. He

proposed to employ the contents of the boxes to assist me in the demolition of the trestles.

“I was dubious about the truth of his statements, given that the boxes could not possibly contain enough powder to do more than detonate one mine-like blast on the cliff. I pointed out to Jorgenson that he couldn’t have much powder left after effecting such an eruption. I experienced some pangs of foolishness at conversing so reasonably with an evident maniac in front of my men. But his eyes held a glint of intelligence that was at odds with his almost-fevered, repeated insistence that he could be of help in the venture we were embarked on.

“Jorgenson’s response to my observation was to suggest an exhibition of his abilities. ‘I joost show you, I show you,’ was how he phrased it. ‘Dis is not gunpowder but mooch better. You vill see.’ Such a trial struck me as a happy idea, since a demonstration of his qualities as an explosives mechanic would confirm to my satisfaction whether he had or hadn’t taken leave of his senses.

“The sergeant was wary. ‘What are you going to let him try to explode, Lieutenant?’ Mitchell wanted to know. I had been pondering that myself, and shared my conclusion. The sergeant and I had determined that we would try to eliminate the smaller trestle first. Our plan was to separate the upper deck from its connection with the ground on either end, before toppling the cribbing from below. ‘Let’s see if he can cut that trestle free on its furthest side,’ I told the sergeant. ‘If he can, I’ll believe his story. If not, we’ve still got the mystery of what hit the cliff, but...’

“‘But at least we’ll know this man’s a spy or a Berry Picker,’ Mitchell finished what he took to be my thought. ‘Or merely a charlatan, or a common lunatic, Sergeant,’ I cautioned him.

“Either way, I had resolved that with the discovery of suspicious items among Jorgenson’s gear we would have to keep him under watch until we returned to Morrisburg. I put my proposition regarding the second trestle to our prisoner and he responded enthusiastically. ‘Good, good. I can do it, ya?’

“He and I stood up from the wooden boxes. He then asked that he be untied. ‘I cannot do my verk trussed up like a goose,’ he said, grinning. The confidence in his smile rather annoyed me. I felt that by agreeing to the man’s request to verify his claims I had been talked into something I would later regret.

“‘Mr. Jorgenson,’ I stated, as formally as I could, ‘you are henceforth to consider yourself a prisoner of the Army of the Republic, held on suspicion of spying for the Confederacy. The penalty for espionage in time of war is death.’

“I let the silence hang to underscore the seriousness of the matter I wished to communicate to him. ‘We have discovered you armed, and not in the service of the Union. Furthermore, you claim to have detonated an explosion which could have grievously harmed if not killed a member of this detachment. If I see the slightest sign or activity on your part that I regard as a threat to the men under my command, or to the mission with which we have been entrusted, I shall shoot you myself.’ I waved my revolver at him. ‘Do you understand?’

“His face clouded. ‘Ya,’ he muttered. I ordered his hands to be untied.

“Once freed of his bonds, Jorgenson produced the keys to his padlocks from under his hat band, and opened the boxes. One container held coils of fusees as well as ordinary string, a couple of boxes of lucifers, a surveyor's measuring tape, and a waterproof packet containing several pages of writing in another language, including what looked to be recipes as well as sentences. Also in the packet were some lined pages, as though torn from a schoolboy's copybook, containing various arithmetical computations. Below these items, filling about half the box, were numerous paperboard cylinders measuring about ten inches in length by about two inches in diameter. They most closely resembled overly-large firecrackers, although missing a fusee attached to one end. The second box, which I had assumed would be full of powder, was about three-quarters filled with more of the cylinders.

“The troopers were delighted with these revelations. ‘Lieutenant, your Berry Picker here is going to wreck your bridges with firecrackers,’ was McKay's comment, accompanied by hoots of agreement from the other men. The response seemed to annoy Jorgenson. ‘You vait, you vait,’ he scolded, wagging a finger at his audience, who only jeered the louder at him. ‘Vait and see; you vill see,’ he replied doggedly. He extracted one of the cylinders from the pile and displayed the object at the end of an arm extended toward the troopers. ‘Dis you haf not seen before,’ he proclaimed. ‘Dis vill show you someding you haf not known.’

“The men were not convinced. ‘Medicine show, medicine show,’ one replied. ‘That's the “show” you're going to give us.’

“No, dese are special. Far more powerful than you haf ever seen... Boom!” Jorgenson's arms swept up and outward, miming an explosion, his right hand still holding the cylinder.

“Mitchell was as unimpressed as the men. ‘McKay’s right, for once. The Berry Picker sounds like a nostrum salesman.’ The sergeant addressed me earnestly. ‘I’ve seen shows where the faker plants his own people in the audience. They claim to be cured of their ailments after one sip from the miraculous bottle of extracts. We better be damn sure that what the Berry Picker blows up ain’t already rigged with powder, like with the cliff.’

“I appreciated the sergeant's need for caution. I suggested to him, though, that while the prisoner might have guessed our troop would follow along the rail line past the cliff, he couldn’t predict what we might ask him to demolish. The sergeant disagreed, pointing out that wrecking the trestles was the obvious next chore for us.

“I brought the argument to a close by recommending we thoroughly inspect the site we had chosen for a trial prior to giving Jorgenson access to it. With that concern laid to rest, I issued my orders. I was starting to be haunted by a conviction we were wasting time with this Jorgenson. Should he prove a fraud, I was anxious to destroy as much of the trestles as we could and return to Morrisburg before we discovered a far more threatening explanation for the blast on the cliff face than a mere lunatic.

“I decided only five of us were to proceed along the trestles: myself, the sergeant, Jorgenson, his guard, and a second private in case another hand was needed. The prisoner made a selection of about a half-dozen of the cylinders and a coil of fusee, plus he insisted on carrying with him the measuring tape, the copybook paper, and his pencil stub. From his saddlebag he selected two of the odd percussion caps.

“We traversed the first trestle, relieving the sentry at his outpost as we passed and sending him back to rejoin the others. I left the extra trooper on the rail bed between the two trestles, and four of us continued to the far end of the second structure.

“Here the sergeant and I made an examination of the locale as we had planned, to ensure it had not been earlier prepared for demolition by our madman. No evidence of powder kegs or loose powder or fusees were found. We then bid Jorgenson attend to his task.

“Like ourselves, he made a careful survey of the cribbing. He secured the surveyor's tape, paper, and pencil and began to measure and calculate with great

attention and care. He then called for a rope and assistance to lower himself from the edge of the upper deck, because he said he had determined from his figures that the proper spots to place his cylinders were the first junctures where beams intersected several feet out from the bank. These were about eight feet below the level of the rails, but I could well understand his wish for a rope to secure himself. On one side the drop to the ground was only a further eight feet, but on the other at least twenty.

“The private I had left stationed between the trestles was sent to obtain a suitable rope from some we had in our wagons. When this was fetched, Jorgenson clambered down along the cribbing and lashed three of his cylinders on each side where the beams forked.

“Once the cylinders were in place, he inserted a percussion cap into the end of one of his devices in each group of three. The fusee coil was then affixed to this cap. He passed the coil up to us from either side to be cut, so that in a few minutes a length of fusee led separately from the deck down to each cluster of his firecrackers. Regaining the top of the trestle, he knotted together the ends of the fusee lengths attached to the cylinders, and also knotted one end of the fusee coil to this point. He payed out a couple of arm lengths of the coil, and then held the spot up to be severed.

“‘How long?’ Mitchell asked. Jorgenson calculated briefly. ‘Three minutes.’

“We retreated back across the trestle to the furthest extent of the fusee now attached to the cylinders below the rails. I sent all but myself, the guard and Jorgenson to rejoin the rest of the troop, over the sergeant’s objections. None of the three of us having thought to bring lucifers, I had to call back the extra trooper to provide us with some he had in his pockets for lighting his pipe. We lit the fusee, and then dashed to the cover of the square of logs that had been built to function as our observation post on the first trestle.

“Jorgenson had indicated that the balance of my men were in no danger where they stood, but I ordered them to take cover as a precaution. The three of us out on the trestle huddled down within the crude log structure. I had my pocket watch out and watched the second hand sweep around with its usual tardiness in times of anticipation.

“‘Vat did you verk for your living, before de army?’ Jorgenson suddenly asked me. Had he concluded my commission did not antedate the war? I tried to review what in my performance of my duties had led him to decide I was a volunteer and not a regular. I did admit to him, though, that I formerly was employed at my father’s glass

manufactory, a little distance outside Berlin, Michigan. 'Burnett & Son Glassworks,' I said, as though he were a potential customer. 'I'm the son.'

"His reply was drowned out by the second roar of explosives I had heard that day, this one much magnified in scale. I later realized Jorgenson had probably used rather more of his cylinders than were actually needed. If his intent was to impress me, he succeeded. After all, I had as much as threatened him with execution should his story not hold water. The blast he effected now unquestionably established in my mind his bona fides.

"The rails we partially lay upon within our shelter throbbed and strained at their spikes with the force of the eruption. Later I observed how the rails directly above the epicenter of the blast were twisted back into fantastic loops and curves resembling metal embroidery. But in our shelter on the trestle I clutched a tie for support as a heave of the air rolled underneath us, rocking the structure ferociously. Down the track, a billowing cloud arose, out of which hurtled beams and ties in all directions. A portion of support strut arced above us, landing on solid ground past the end of the trestle, between ourselves and the rest of the men. A huge beam was propelled with wonderful vigor aloft, looking like nothing so much as a gigantic signal rocket as it streaked skyward, hesitated in mid-flight, faltered, and dived end-over-end into the woods of the canyon below. A rain of wood splinters and other fine debris began to splatter down on us, and then the scene was silent for an instant. Crows broke the stillness with a harsh expression of their outrage at the disturbance, followed by the melodious trill of some woodland songbird, and then another. One by one the ordinary sounds of the forested hills resumed. I glanced over at Jorgenson, but he had already risen and was staring fixedly down the tracks at the column of smoke. I had the impulse to extend my hand to him by way of apology for doubting his word. Yet at the same time I was in awe of the evident power of the invention he possessed. How had a backwoods homesteader like himself stumbled upon such a harnessing of nature's destructive energies? I was aware, too, that the explosive substance contained in Jorgenson's devices had the potential to be both a fearsome weapon of war and a vital tool of peace.

"We clambered over the logs of the sentry post and headed out to inspect at close quarters the destruction the cylinders had caused. The top two tiers of cribwork had ceased to exist at the second trestle's far end, having either been reduced to smithereens, hurled smoking to the canyon floor, or collapsed into a tangle of shattered lumber

precariously balanced atop a level of the cribwork sixteen or so feet below us. I complimented Jorgenson on his achievement. 'Ya, ya,' he muttered. Then grinned at me. 'I tink I did it, ya?' He started to laugh—out of relief, I believe. His good humor, however, was infectious, and in a moment the other two of us were chuckling along with him.

"In that pleasant spirit, we rejoined the sergeant and the men. The troopers were somewhat abashed at realizing Jorgenson's claims had a basis of fact. I ordered the preparation of our midday meal, and during its consumption the men regained their ordinary composure. I resumed my questioning of Jorgenson, although with a lighter heart than earlier in the morning.

"His story, which I have no way of verifying other than the circumstantial, is that the substance within his cylinders has very recently been invented by a Swedish relative. This man, a cousin and thirty years of age, has been anxious to exhaustively test the uses for his invention, both out of a scientific habit of mind and in order to impress potential backers for a commercial production of the substance. Also, according to Jorgenson, the cousin is aware of military applications of such material. Jorgenson states that his cousin is of the opinion that such is the devastating power of the cylinders that they will be the means to effect an end to all wars from this time forward. No general or government, in the cousin's belief, would be willing to risk the annihilation promised by widespread detonations of the cylinders.

"This notion I am inclined to doubt, if I may interject. My own experiences under fire have led me to conclude that if witnessing the hellish power of some piece of weaponry were able to ensure eternal peace among the nations, the means of prosecuting war we already possess were more than sufficient for that happy outcome. My guess is that a darker goal impels the cousin, in that he rather is cognizant that the utilization of his explosive substance in war would be of especial interest to governments and investors alike.

"Whatever his motive, the cousin strongly desired to see his cylinders put to use under actual circumstances of combat, with a careful record kept of the results. The Crimean War ended four years before the Swede's invention was perfected, and another protracted European war does not seem imminent. But the cannonade striking our Fort Sumter last year appeared a God-sent opportunity, since Jorgenson's cousin was aware that the branch of his family settled in America had a son of both a practical and



intelligent turn of mind. Naturally, Jorgenson did not describe his value to his relative in this fashion, but I deduce this by reading between the lines, as it were, of what Jorgenson did utter.

“To be brief, the cousin has shared the recipe for his invention with Jorgenson and charged him to find means to employ the substance under war conditions and keep accurate note of the particulars and outcome. My understanding is that in return for this perilous undertaking Jorgenson was advanced some monies and has been promised an additional portion of any future profits. Jorgenson is a few years younger than his Old Country cousin—that is, a few years older than myself—and evidently holds his relative in high regard. Yet neither Swede appears to have grasped the savagery displayed in the current war, and hence how much of a personal risk Jorgenson has volunteered for in attempting to intercede in the conflict in this way. On the other hand, to have the occasion to demonstrate such a device must be more exciting for our homesteader than to practice farming in a remote locale, with but meager hope of adequate reward for his considerable labors.

“In any case, Jorgenson requested of me that he be permitted to record the morning's work in his notebook kept for the purpose. This document was produced from his bedroll attached to his saddle. Once the noon-time meal was concluded, Jorgenson carefully sketched and inscribed, in what he affirmed was Swedish, the results of our activities.

“I was bursting with further questions, but also felt the pressure of time and so endeavored to relieve my curiosity in fits and starts during the afternoon. I had acquired a fear—rational or not—that the noise and smoke that accompanied our operations on the rail line might well attract more attention than a wandering demolitionist touting a new invention, that Confederate rangers or a cavalry patrol might come calling to investigate what the commotion was about. My goal was to apply Jorgenson's materiel to our ends, and then withdraw toward Morrisburg with dispatch.

“I divided the detachment into two parts. One, under the command of the sergeant, was to bring up the wagons and prepare the larger trestle for demolition in the conventional manner. With the likelihood of near-total destruction of at least one of the trestles due to the Swede's invention, I concluded we had little need to eradicate the railway bridges as we had planned en route back to Morrisburg. So I believed myself justified in applying all our remaining powder to the nearest trestle. The second part of

the men, under my command, were to assist Jorgensen in placing his cylinders to bring down as much as possible of the further trestle. I maintained the pickets posted on our height of land, and in the woods to the east, due to my aforesaid sense that we were vulnerable to discovery—an apprehension I could not shake.”

“The trestles were soon aswarm with troopers, while shouted orders and banter floated among and between those working on the tiers of cribbing just below the level of the rails and just over the canyon floor. A pair of hawks floated on the warm afternoon winds above the industrious scene.

“I managed to ascertain from Jorgenson additional information concerning the substance that filled his cylinders. His cousin Alfred, the inventor, has named the material Dynamic Powder, although its origin is rather different than gunpowder’s. My comprehension must be weighed against Jorgenson’s rudimentary English, and my lack of specialized knowledge of chemistry. I do have some understanding of the chemistry of glass from my profession, however. As I interpret Jorgenson’s account, his cousin’s Dynamic Powder derives from glycerol obtained from animal fats, which is combined with a mix of sulfuric and nitric acids. This product is then absorbed into pulped wood. A percussive force is required to detonate the resultant substance. Primer caps, adapted from the percussion caps in common use in firearms, were developed for this purpose. When ignited, the explosive substance within the cylinders expands in a manner his cousin has aptly called ‘dynamic’, although ‘dramatic’ would be an equally accurate term of description.

“The cousin, according to Jorgenson, is experimenting in Sweden with a purely liquid form of the material which promises even more spectacular results. But to date, Jorgenson reports, this fluid is too unstable for employment under field conditions.

“We blew the trestles late in the afternoon. Because of my concerns regarding our discovery by roving Confederate forces, I would have preferred to fire the charges early in the morning immediately before our departure. But the day clouding over gave some likelihood of rain before dawn. Rather than risk damp powder and a failure to successfully conclude our assigned duty, I gave orders to light the fuses.

“The noise was astounding. The cylinders of Dynamic Powder once again proved their mettle. My ears rang for up to fifteen minutes once the last of the falling debris had settled from the sky. For comparison’s sake, I had arranged that the smaller trestle would be exploded first, and then a few minutes later the trestle the sergeant had

prepared in the conventional way. Although the second blast consumed the entire quantity of powder we had left, both the sound and the results seemed puny compared to that of the first.

“The smaller of the trestles was left wrecked beyond thought of repair, a splintery mass of charred and torn wood heaped where the foundations for the cribbing had stood. The larger trestle was effectively ruined, but I estimate that two and half times the powder we had applied would have been required to create the same mayhem as wreaked on the other trestle by Cousin Alfred’s invention.

“All my men were safe, and exhilarated by the scope of destruction we had achieved. Preparations for the evening meal were begun in an excellent humor. I spoke to the troop, congratulating them on their devotion to duty so far on this expedition, and about my resolution to commence our return to Morrisburg at first light. The latter statement generated further cause for celebratory feeling among the men. But I cautioned them that we would be maintaining pickets throughout the night, since our presence in the area the past few days was unlikely to have been overlooked by the enemy, should any of their number be about. This announcement failed to darken the men's spirits. I seemed alone in my anxiety. Nevertheless, we had loosed off a clamorous din that afternoon that I was sure was audible across the continent in both Washington and Richmond. And we had raised a flag of smoke that I was equally certain made our whereabouts glaringly obvious to every Rebel in Kirby Smith’s army at Knoxville, leagues closer to us.

“After supper the men not on guard duty were lazing about by the cookfire, enjoying the late evening light of June. I was seated in front of my tent speaking with the sergeant concerning the watches of the night and some details about our route and deployment during the next day’s travel. All at once, shouts and some frenzied motion originated where I had earlier observed Jorgenson diligently scribbling in his notebook. He had been corroborating some details of the destruction of the smaller trestle with a couple of troopers who had been his main assistants in placing his cylinders. The hubbub grew until it enveloped the entire camp.

“What best to do with Jorgenson had been much on my mind. His cousin’s invention obviously was a weapon that should be kept from Confederate hands. The Ordnance Bureau, if not the War Department itself, would undoubtedly want to examine this new explosive. Jorgenson assured me he had not brought his cousin’s formula with

him, and so I had insisted we not explode every cylinder he carried but retain a few for scientific examination by our side. I had no hint of the man's inclinations: Union or Rebel. We were operating, after all, in a border state that was home to vociferous sympathizers on both sides, and whose government had attempted to remain neutral during many months before finally declaring for the Union.

"My aim was to discuss with Jorgenson his return to Morrisburg with us. I apprised the sergeant that, should the Swede prove reluctant to accompany us with his samples of Dynamic Powder, I felt the exigencies of war must outweigh any of Jorgenson's rights under civil law. If we failed to obtain his consent, I planned to arrest him and convey him with us in chains, if necessary.

"My conversation with Mitchell on this topic was barely underway when the corporal marched the subject of our discussion toward us at gunpoint. Accompanying the pair was a trooper clutching Jorgenson's notebook, followed by the rest of the men. Once I silenced the volleys of accusations and threats being voiced by every throat, I sorted out the situation to be as follows.

"Jorgenson, having completed his recording of our day's successes, had left his notebook where he had been seated and gone into the woods to relieve himself. One of the troopers who had participated in Jorgenson's compilation of events had idly picked up the document and leafed through it. Although having no familiarity with Swedish, he had come upon what appeared to be an account of the use of Dynamic Powder to demolish the courthouse at Box Crossing. The private, who could read a little, identified words in English naming the structure, and knew well that the destruction of this building was the work of the Rebel force operating hereabouts in May. This evidence of Jorgenson's treachery was loudly proclaimed, and the men again seized on the conviction that the Swede was a Confederate spy or guerilla.

"I emphatically reminded all present of the man's help to the Union cause this day in assisting us to reduce the railway trestles to firewood. I dismissed everyone but the main parties to the discovery. On questioning Jorgenson more privately, he freely acknowledged his participation in the ruin of the building in question. His motive, he claimed, was not to aid either side in a war in which he regarded himself to be a complete outsider. His purpose was simply scientific and commercial. He said fate and chance were the main determinants as to whether he had the opportunity to detonate his cylinders on behalf of the Rebellion or the Union.

“I admit to being taken aback by such a complete absence of moral sense. But the man stubbornly insisted he had done nothing wrong, since he believed himself entirely impartial as to the outcome of the war. He was convinced that his contribution to the aims of each side should stand him in the good graces of both warring parties. He repeated that his allegiance was to his cousin in whose employ he had enrolled himself, and to the testing of the cylinders which constituted the reason for his employment. Why, he repeatedly asked, if he was a Confederate agent would he offer to assist a Union detachment in nullifying a transport route potentially useful to the Rebels? Nothing I said could convince him he was in mortal error with regard to his stance.

“Finally I informed him that the recent revelation of his part in the enemy’s raid on Box Crossing had compromised him in my eyes. Still, in view of his significant help at the trestles, I would accept his parole attesting to his willingness to accompany us back to Morrisburg. There, the merit of his arguments could be resolved by higher authorities. If he failed to accede to my demand, I would be compelled to arrest him forthwith. After a few seconds’ thought, he gave me his word, on condition that his notebook be returned to him. This I could not agree to, whereupon he made a curious counter-offer. He asked for permission to copy the day’s report in the form of a letter to his cousin, which I would swear to post on our arrival. The contents of the rest of the notebook he had already sent to his employer, he said. His proposal, according to him, would thus fulfill both our needs: his for giving fair and due service to his cousin, and mine for retaining evidence of his ‘neutral’ —as he described his role— assistance to both combatants.

“These terms being acceptable to me, we shook hands on the bargain. I told him his decision to freely travel with us might well mitigate any adverse opinion of his former activities. The sergeant and corporal both expressed the sentiment that I was foolish to trust Jorgenson. But having found him a man open and honest in his responses to every query put to him—despite whether his answer might fly in the face of common opinion or even preservation of his own safety or liberty—I saw no reason to doubt his parole.

“Jorgenson completed his letter by dusk, and presented me with the sealed envelope addressed to his cousin. Our detachment was underway by about six in the morning, although considerably delayed at the start by the necessity of levering the wagons over the pile of rubble Jorgenson’s initial blast had caused. The Swede offered to

use his remaining cylinders to open an easier path for us. But because I was convinced Ordnance would wish samples of the Dynamic Powder, I wanted these last cylinders conserved.

“The obstacle of the rockfall overcome, we made good time toward Morrisburg, and paused for the night on the near bank of Still Woman Creek. As a precaution, I set pickets to watch while we slept. But in the morning, Jorgenson and one of the horses had vanished, and the guards had heard nothing. The Swede’s pack horse remained, but he had carefully removed the remaining samples of Dynamic Powder.

“Despite a sweep of the area, we found no tracks or other indications of the route Jorgenson followed in making good his escape. Upon reaching the Morrisburg encampment late that afternoon, I reported to Colonel Whitney. I suggested that a patrol under my leadership immediately attempt to overtake Jorgenson, and to locate and search his homestead in the Rutland Lake region, if indeed such a farm exists as he claimed. A patrol, which includes the corporal and a couple of troopers from my detachment who could identify Jorgenson, was dispatched but has not yet returned.

“His letter does provide the name and address of his cousin in Sweden—a maternal cousin, obviously, since the last name is different. Unless Jorgenson lied about the identity of this individual, my suggestion was to have our representative to the Swedish government pursue contact with the cousin. I believe that, despite Jorgenson having dishonored himself with regard to his promise to withdraw with us to Morrisburg, he spoke the truth about his cousin. I realize Jorgenson himself may be the inventor of Dynamic Powder, and the tale about the cousin merely flimflam. But an approach to the cousin in Sweden should settle the matter.

“I certainly acknowledge I erred in trusting Jorgenson’s word, and so may be wrong about my conclusions here. Regardless, Captain, I remain willing to assist you and your department to my utmost with your investigation into the events at the Bright Canyon trestles.

“Was I unclear about any matter, or do you have any questions?”

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