



What are the possibilities of the orifices that cause such an unusual reaction?

A. The orifices are openings in the gun barrels; the possibilities are the likelihood that bullets will be discharged from them.



What ejaculation has actually caused this reaction?

A. The order, "Hands up!" has caused the engineer to raise his hands.



What is the effect of the adverb "sportively" in this sentence?

A. It continues to lighten the drama and suspense of the moment by comparing the holdup to a game.



What does the simile comparing the passengers to "low-grade ore" tell us?

A. The train robbers bypass the passengers (the low-grade ore) who most likely do not possess items of significant value to "contribute." It will probably be more lucrative to get the easy pickings of the "high-grade" ore, the contents of the train safe that is transporting gold and currency.

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The Roads We Take

O. Henry

FOCUS: IRONY

Twenty miles west of Tucson the "Sunset Express" stopped at a tank to take on water. Beside the *aqueous* addition the engine of that famous flyer acquired some other things that were not good for it.

L A N G U A G E

R The word *aqueous* originates from the Latin word *aqua* — water. Many words in English are derived from this root. Examples include aqualung, aquamarine, aqueduct, aquarium, aquatic, aquaplane. The Spanish word *agua* comes from the same root.

T

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While the fireman was lowering the feeding hose, Bob Tidball, "Shark" Dodson, and a quarter-bred Creek Indian called John Big Dog climbed on the engine and showed the engineer three round *orifices* in pieces of *ordnance* that they carried. These orifices so impressed

the engineer with their possibilities that he raised both hands in a gesture such as accompanies the ejaculation, "Do tell!"

At the crisp command of Shark Dodson, who was leader of the attacking force, the engineer descended to the ground and uncoupled* the engine and tender.* Then John Big Dog, perched upon the coal, sportively held two guns upon the engine driver and the fireman; and suggested that they run the engine fifty yards away and there await further orders.

Shark Dodson and Bob Tidball, scorn- ing to put such low-grade ore as the pas- sengers through the mill, struck out for the rich pocket of the express car. They found the messenger* serene in the belief that the Sunset Express was taking on nothing more stimulating and dangerous than *aqua pura*.* While Bob was knocking this idea out of his head with the butt-end* of

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

uncoupled — detached; disconnected.

tender — a car attached to a steam locomotive for carrying a supply of fuel or water.

messenger — here, guard.

aqua pura — (Latin) pure water.

butt-end — hand grip.

1 The author foreshadows that a complication is about to occur; the train is heading for trouble. The use of understatement becomes obvious as soon as we realize what *some other things that were not good for it* are.

A CLOSER LOOK

O. Henry uses a metaphor based on gold mining. “Low-grade ore,” which contains very little gold, is processed in a mill. Gold is extracted from the ore with some difficulty. On the other hand, a “rich pocket” of gold, from which gold is readily removed, is sometimes found deep in the mine.

his six-shooter,* Shark Dodson was already dosing the express-car safe with dynamite. ²

The safe exploded to the tune of \$30,000, all gold and currency. The passengers thrust their heads casually out of the windows to look for the thundercloud. The conductor jerked at the bell rope, which sagged down loose and unresisting, at his tug. Shark Dodson and Bob Tidball, with their booty in a stout canvas bag, tumbled out of the express car and ran awkwardly in their high-heeled boots to the engine. The engineer, sullenly angry but wise, ran the engine, according to orders, rapidly away from the inert train. But before this was accomplished the express messenger, recovered from Bob Tidball’s persuader to neutrality, jumped out of his car with a Winchester rifle and took a trick in the game. Mr. John Big Dog, sitting on the coal tender, unwittingly made a wrong lead by giving an imitation of a target, and the messenger trumped him. With a ball* exactly between his shoulder blades the Creek chevalier* of industry rolled off to the ground, thus increasing the share of his comrades in the loot by one-sixth each. ⁴

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

- six-shooter** — a handgun that holds six bullets.
- ball** — here, rifle bullet.
- chevalier** — (French) knight; by implication, a gentleman.
- adieu** — (French) goodbye.
- chaparral** — dense grouping of shrubs.
- pommel** — the knoblike protuberance at the front and top of a saddle.
- cropped** — trimmed; here, ate off the tops of the grass blades.

Two miles from the tank the engineer was ordered to stop.

The robbers waved a defiant *adieu** and plunged down the steep slope into the thick woods that lined the track. Five minutes of crashing through a thicket of chaparral* brought them to open woods, where the three horses were tied to low-hanging branches. One was waiting for John Big Dog, who would never ride by night or day again. This animal the robbers *divested* of saddle and bridle and set free. They mounted the other two with the bag across one pommel,* and rode fast and with discretion through the forest and up a *primeval*, lonely gorge. Here the animal that bore Bob Tidball slipped on a mossy boulder and broke a foreleg. They shot him through the head at once and sat down to hold a council of flight. Made secure for the present by the tortuous trail they had traveled, the question of time was no longer so big. Many miles and hours lay between them and the *spyerst* posse that could follow. Shark Dodson’s horse, with trailing rope and dropped bridle, panted and cropped* thankfully of the grass along the stream in the gorge. Bob Tidball opened the sack, and drew out double handfuls of the neat packages

A CLOSER LOOK

At first glance, killing the injured horse may seem a heartless act, yet, because it is almost impossible to set a horse’s leg and immobilize an animal while the bone heals, a horse is almost always “put out of its misery” by **shooting** it.

Why do the robbers ride “with discretion”?

What do the passengers think they have heard?

In retrospect, what error did the train robbers make?

Why is the train inert?

What is Tidball’s “persuader to neutrality”?

How does O. Henry maintain a light ironic tone?

What do the passengers think they have heard?

A. The oblivious passengers think they have heard a clap of thunder, when really it was the dynamite exploding the safe on the express car.

Why is the train inert?

A. The robbers have forced the engineer to disconnect the train from the engine; thus, it cannot move.

What is Tidball’s “persuader to neutrality”?

A. The “persuader to neutrality” is the blow to the express messenger’s head with Tidball’s pistol butt. The tone is characteristically ironic and subtly humorous.

How does O. Henry maintain a light ironic tone?

A. O. Henry maintains a light ironic tone by using terms from a bridge game to describe the actions of the expressman and the robbers. His classification of Mr. John Big Dog as a leading force in industry is another example of tongue-in-cheek writing. In addition, by stating that the main result of the bullet between Big John’s shoulders is an increase in the others’ share of the loot, O. Henry glosses over the fact that a man has died; his death is unimportant to anyone in the story. Each of the remaining two bandits will now receive one half of Mr. John Big Dog’s share, or one half of $\frac{1}{2}$, equivalent to $\frac{1}{4}$ more each.

Why do the robbers ride “with discretion”?

A. They are discreet in order to avoid leaving a trail for trackers, and to avoid being heard or seen by possible pursuers.

In retrospect, what error did the train robbers make?

A. The robbers should not have freed the third horse, but rather should have taken it with them in case of such an accident.

- ² Ask students to explain the irony in the word *dosing*. The implication here is that by applying gunpowder to the safe, they are “curing” it.
- ³ The bell rope, which would alert a guard, is unresponsive because the robbers have cut it.
- ⁴ Metaphor: a “trick” is a reference to a move in bridge, a card game. The author implies that the messenger made a strategic move. This metaphor will be extended in the next sentence with the phrases, “made a wrong lead” and “the messenger trumped (defeated) him,” as well as further on in the story.