An Urgent Message

In California, Charlie had plans to make it big. It was June 1860, and Charlie had arrived in Sacramento two months earlier, after a long, difficult journey in a covered wagon from Missouri. He had left behind his mother and his little brother, Jim. His father had died a few years ago when Cherokee Indians attacked the frontier town he was helping to build. Charlie desperately wanted to make money quickly so his mom and brother could have an easier life. When he heard rumors that the gold mines in California promised a quick and easy fortune to anyone who got there fast enough, Charlie immediately boarded the next wagon train west.

Once he got to Sacramento and witnessed the throngs of greedy crowds set to pounce on the streams and rivers around the city, and sift for gold, Charlie realized there was simply too much competition for those precious little nuggets. He had come a few years too late—the gold was disappearing. If he was going to make a quick fortune, he would have to think of some other way. He studied the rugged miners, who carried flimsy little mesh pans to strain gold out from the riverbeds, and after a few days, an idea struck him. If he could devise a new and improved mining tool to sell to the hordes of prospectors, he could easily become a millionaire.

These people would buy anything if it could help them discover their prized metal. For the next two months Charlie lived off the meager savings he had brought with him from Missouri, and labored day in and day out in the bare little room he rented from an old widow. He was busy constructing his new invention. It was to be a giant wood-and-mesh dredge, which could gather up large amounts of soil from the riverbeds at once and sift through the rocks mechanically. It folded up when not in use, so it was also easy to carry around. If gold-miners used this device instead of the small handheld mesh pans, the whole process would be much less time-consuming, Charlie thought. Sure, there were other mining machines being invented, but none of them were easily portable like...
Charlie’s, nor were they affordable to the common man. Once he had given the machine its finishing touches, Charlie hired a covered wagon, and secretly loaded his dredge into it. He went to an out-of-the-way stream and tested it out. It really did separate the heavy rocks (gold would be one of these) from the lighter ones! Charlie now knew for sure that his invention would be a success.

He kept his dredge secret for the time being and wrote a letter to his pal Ted in Texas, who was planning to set out for California in two months and join Charlie in the quest for riches. Ted’s father was a wealthy rancher, and in his letter, Charlie asked Ted if he wanted to go into business together. They could open a shop to sell tools to the miners, but first they would need Ted’s dad to lend them money so they could rent a space for the shop. Charlie asked Ted if he could send part of the money along right away, so he could get started. As soon as he finished writing the letter, Charlie took it to a station in Sacramento with a sign that read “Pony Express.”

Inside, a slight, wiry young man, not much older than 16, took the letter and put it into a saddle pouch filled with a pile of others just like it. “Guaranteed 14-day delivery to Missouri,” the boy said. “And local mail service from there to Texas. That’ll be five dollars.” Charlie winced as he took the money out of his bag. His savings was dwindling fast.

“Take good care of that letter, now,” said Charlie. “It’s really important and needs to get there quick.” He was beginning to feel a little nervous about leaving his precious letter in the hands of a mere boy. If the message didn’t get to Ted in time, Charlie would run out of money and be forced to live on the streets. He needed Ted to let him know quickly whether he was willing to put up the money and go along with the plan.

“We’ll do our very best for you,” said the young horse rider. “I give you my word.”

Charlie looked the young man up and down. His honest, direct stare made him feel a bit more comfortable. He’d heard stories of how Pony Express riders had to vow on oath not to use bad words, gamble, or drink while they worked for the company. They always had to be in tip-top physical shape in case they encountered any vicious Indians along the way. The Indian tribes were furious that more and more of their land was being invaded, so they were striking back by attacking caravans and riders moving west. Several Pony Express riders had so far been killed en route. Charlie prayed that no disaster would strike the string of riders who would ferry his letter along.

Later that evening, the young rider, Johnny Gray, rode the first leg of the journey to Texas. The letters were secured firmly under his saddle, in a pouch called a mochila. He rode 100 miles at a fast gallop, and then passed the mochila along to another rider who took it through the
dangerous territory of the Sierra Nevada Mountains before passing it onto the next man. Each rider would stop several times along the way to change horses, because a single horse would not be able to keep up such a fast galloping speed (around 25 miles an hour) for the 1,900-mile journey to Texas. After a few more turnovers, the package finally reached St. Joseph, Missouri, and the local mailman delivered it to the cattle ranch where Ted lived. It arrived at his doorstep, as promised, just over two weeks after Charlie sent it.

Ted, a young man always up for adventure, felt his heart race with excitement when he read about Charlie’s invention and the possibility of starting a business with his friend. He believed that Charlie had indeed invented a useful tool—his friend had always been good with science and machines. Ted told his father all about the plan, and the old man liked Charlie’s idea too. He gave a hefty sum of money to Ted for the business, and Ted set out to California right away, a month and a half earlier than he had planned. He sent Charlie the news and a bit of extra cash, via the Pony Express, so Charlie would know as soon as possible that Ted was already on his way.

This time, though, there was trouble as Ted’s letter made its way back to California. When the Pony Express rider, Bill Cody, arrived with the letter at the Nevada station where he was supposed to hand off the mochila to the next rider, he found the station had been ransacked by the local Paiute Indian tribe. The stationmaster and the next rider were both killed—Bill found their bodies riddled with Indian arrows. Bill decided not to think of the devastation in front of him and just kept riding, driving his horse hard until he got to the next station. For a good part of the way fierce Indian warriors chased him, but luckily his powerful horse was fast enough to outrun them. The mochila continued on the Pony Express trail, and Ted’s letter reached the Sacramento office right on time.

Charlie had been waiting in nervous anticipation at the door of the Pony Express office when the letter arrived. He was down to his last few dollars and was surviving on only bread and cheap coffee. When the stationmaster handed him the envelope, he tore it open right away. As he scanned the message, a smile broke out onto his face and he pumped his fist in the air.

“Hooray,” he shouted, jumping up and down. “It’s all going to be ok!” He approached the Express rider who had just landed with the mail and heartily shook his hand. “Thanks so much,” he said. “You’ve just helped my business plans come to life!”

The rider just smiled and nodded. He chose not to tell Charlie that his letter could have been lost along the way had he ended up in a dispute with the Native Americans. What mattered was that in the end, Charlie’s letter had arrived on time. As far as the rider was concerned, it was a job well done, and there was nothing more to say about it.
1. What did Charlie invent?

   A  Charlie invented the system for the Pony Express.
   B  Charlie invented a dredge to help sift gold from rocks.
   C  Charlie invented a wagon for transporting gold.
   D  Charlie invented a machine that created gold.

2. What motivated Charlie to make his invention?

   A  He wanted an easier way to transport gold.
   B  He wanted a more efficient system for carrying mail.
   C  He wanted money to bring Ted to California.
   D  He wanted to make a fortune and there was too much competition mining for gold.

3. In the story, the author describes Charlie as very nervous to hand his letter to the Pony Express rider. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

   A  Charlie is beginning to go insane.
   B  The Pony Express rider was an irresponsible person.
   C  The Pony Express is not always reliable.
   D  The letter does not contain any important information.

4. Based on the story, what is the biggest threat to Pony Express riders?

   A  conflicts with Native Americans
   B  extreme weather conditions
   C  disease and hunger
   D  other Pony Express riders

5. What is the main idea of the story?

   A  Charlie needed to get a message to Ted in order to start his business.
   B  Ted’s father is very wealthy and likes to invest his money.
   C  The Pony Express allows for long distance communication.
   D  Charlie makes a fortune from collecting gold.
6. Read the following sentence: “If he could **devise** a new and improved mining tool to sell to the hordes of prospectors, he could easily become a millionaire.”

As used in the passage, what does the word “**devise**” mean?

- A remember
- B invent
- C repair
- D buy

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Charlie was nervous about sending a letter through the Pony Express ______ the riders often encounter attacks from Indian tribes.

- A nevertheless
- B but
- C particularly
- D because

8. Why did Charlie need to get a letter to his friend Ted?

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9. Was it easy for Charlie’s letter to be sent to Ted? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

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10. Explain whether Charlie was able to start making his business dream come true on his own. Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

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8. Why did Charlie need to get a letter to his friend Ted?

Suggested answer: He wanted to ask Ted if he wanted to go into business together and if he could send part of the money along right away.

9. Was it easy for Charlie’s letter to be sent to Ted? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

Suggested answer: It was very difficult to get Charlie’s letter from California to Ted in Missouri. Couriers had to ride long distances. They had to switch horses at several points because the animals got tired. They had to avoid attacks by Indian tribes angered that their land was being invaded and taken over by outsiders.

10. Explain whether Charlie was able to start making his business dream come true on his own. Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Charlie had a great idea on his own, but he needed others to turn the idea into reality. He needed support and money from his friend Ted and Ted’s father. He also needed the skilled and responsible riding of the Pony Express rider to transport his letter to Ted, and to bring back the answer, and the money, from Ted and his father.