

# The Spruce Ridge Trestle

The Story of an Opportunity

BY HOPKINS MOORHOUSE

Concluded from Last Week

"Wha' d' leave fer?" The man glared back sullenly. "Been workin' fer 'em five years, young feller—waitin' fer 'em t' use me right an' they ain't done it. Tha's why. Tumlinson's fired—ain't no bridge-a-building mazer—put you on this here job, bossin' me, eh?—Job's yours, boy. Quit—tha's what I done. See? Bah! Drunk! Ain't b'm drunk now—none your business where I got it, eh? I'm drunk now!" He lurched across the room, his face flushed, his eyes glittering strangely with smoldering fires. "Hear that, boy?" he thundered, bringing his big fist down on the rickety table with a thump that nearly knocked over the lantern. "I'm drunk!"

The laugh that rang in McCracken's ears made him shiver; it was scarcely human. Then the foreman's manner changed abruptly; he sat down on a bench and buried his head miserably in his great hairy arms, his huge shoulders heaving with dry sobs, while the younger man stared in silent amazement.

Presently Healy raised his head and he seemed to have sobered somewhat.

"I'm goin' to tell y' somethin'—somethin' I ain't never told nobody before. Mebbe ef I talk a bit it'll do me good, eh? I ain't talked 'nough durin' las' five years—on'y kep' thinkin', thinkin', thinkin'! Ever lie awake nights, boy—swamp country—air so still y' could feel it—moon shinin'—stars out—m'skitas hummin'—thinkin', thinkin' till yer head split. Young feller, y' don't know what the life is up in this cussed country—flies bitin', sun scorchin', swamp smellin', rain peltin' on dark nights jus' like this hepe one, blizzard blowin' ice clean thru y'r bones! I've walked the track summer an' winter—five years I did that—fightin', fightin' all the time, that's what—fightin' the weather, fightin' floods, fightin' bush fires, fightin' myself most of all. The rest wasn't nothin' to the way I've been fightin' myself! It was hell, I tell you, boy—Hell! That's what!"

He leaned forward, peering earnestly into the other's face.

"Me—I lived back there five years ago—worked in a factory. Met my little woman there—bettr'n they generally make 'em, she was—pure an' pretty, like flowers. Me—I never made no sensation in the street fer good looks; 'twas other way round with me—great big ox, phiz ugly enough to scare people. Look like big brute; must be big brute—that's what they said—all but her, an' she—Say, boy, she listened to me when I told her I—I loved her. She—she listened to me."

The man's voice broke thickly and he bowed his head again between his work-coarsened hands. McCracken shifted uneasily and stared on, speechless; only the sound of the rain obtruded.

"I drank hard in them days," the other continued presently. "She didn't know—didn't know I was a no-good—not till after we was married. We had a little house—vines all over the porch—flowers in front an' a little garden behind. I kep' straight fer a spell till one night—don't know how—don't know why—I went home when I wasn't fit to. Didn't say a word, she didn't—jus' looked like somebody hed stabbed her—eyes full o' hurt an' me—I tell y' boy, I couldn't stop—couldn't—G—d!" he broke out passionately. "Y' don't know—y're young—don't know what 'tis to hev that cravin'—don't know what 'tis to be wantin', wantin'—head on fire; blood poundin', poundin'; somethin' inside gnawin',

gnawin' till ye're crazy blind fightin' it off. Don't know nothin' 'bout it, you don't, an' y' can thank y'r God y' don't."

"I ain't excusin' myself, young feller—wasn't no excuse fer me with her believin' in me. Went on, not carin', an' laughin' when she cried, till one night she said the end had come—told me to git out an' never come back—said that, boy—to git out an' never come back. G—d! she meant it—seen it snappin' in her eyes—glowin' in her cheeks. Druv me out frum her—her an' the little one, clingin' to her mother's dress fer perfection. Think! boy, fer perfection! I was worse than a fool! She said I could come back in five years ef I'd kep' straight an' was workin' steady—five years, she said!"

"That's why I come 'way up here—to git rid o' the Thing as kep' follerin' me wherever I went—up here where there wasn't nothin' but bush—rocks—swamp—sky—wind and track. That's what. Up here where there was nothin' but blazin' days an' long lone some nights, when everythin's so quiet an' still y' can hear blood in y'r ears—throbbin' in y'r head—thinkin', thinkin'—I tell y'r boy, it's near druved me crazy—fer five years! Would hev on'y I worked—worked like fire all the

—sick of everythin'—sick of fightin' fires, fightin' floods, fightin' m'self! Oh, I know I'm drunk, kid! What's the use? First time in five years—drunk—glad of 't! Drunk, d'you hear!" He laughed uproariously. "Drunk!" he screeched hoarsely.

"Healy!" shouted McCracken. He sprang to his feet. "Cut that out!" He shook the man angrily by the shoulder. "Cut it out, I say—Don't make a fool of yourself! Get into that bunk there an' go to sleep! Get into—"

He caught the sound of footsteps outside, approaching on the run. The door flew open and he saw Sigerson standing on the threshold with a lantern in his hand.

"The logs!" cried the boss carpenter excitedly. "They're—"

"What!" McCracken grabbed for his ulster.

"River's risin' like two-sixty!"

"Here, this way!"

They ran out into the rain.

"Jerry Mason seen a log—come whackin' up—agin one o' the ice-breakers," panted Sigerson.

McCracken seized him by the arm.

"Every man—turn them out along the banks. 'Devil's Grin'—Giffon's blasting gang—Chase 'em up! Chase

Jam them! Jam them! It pounded in his ears as he ran; that was what they had to do and the "Devil's Grin" was the place to do it. A long white flash sizzled down the sky and McCracken gave a loud shout as he saw Fraser's men toiling up the bank. Then the scene went blankly out and the whole universe seemed to spit to crackling thunders.

The "Devil's Grin" was a huge square column of rock that angled out over the river-bed, a hundred yards from the trestle; the great crevice across its face had given it the name. A heavy charge of dynamite, properly placed, would blow great fragments of granite into the river and if the logs were loose and did not jam farther up, they would certainly jam here if the obstruction came in time.

The men rose nobly to the emergency.

Despite the great disadvantage of the darkness and the storm, they worked like Trojans.

Fraser's men were certainly jewels! A misstep and they would all have been hurled to Kingdom Come; but the deadly explosive they were handling might have been but giant sticks of harmless cement. Big Dunc Fraser himself clambered down the face of the great rock and clung there above the boiling river, one leg lapped over a tough young cedar; next came McCracken; then the others passing the dynamite down to them.

And still they were in time. A shout from Fraser announced that the charge was laid. Back to the level they scrambled, hand helping hand. The rain had pattered off into the blackness and there had fallen a sudden lull in which the rush of the flood rose into sound. But now the storm swept down again with renewed fury.

Breathlessly they waited for the lightning. It came in a long, vivid flare that revealed a chaos of logs, tumbling and lashing down stream. A hoarse yell of warning rose from a hundred throats. But Big Dunc Fraser's rifle was at his shoulder pointing straight for the yawning crevice, and simultaneous with the lightning-flash he fired. The thunder was lost in a terrific explosion that rocked the whole embankment.

Again the lightning burned. It played bluely upon a glistering mass of tossed timbers piled high in mid-stream, and the roar that went up was the mighty cheer of achievement.

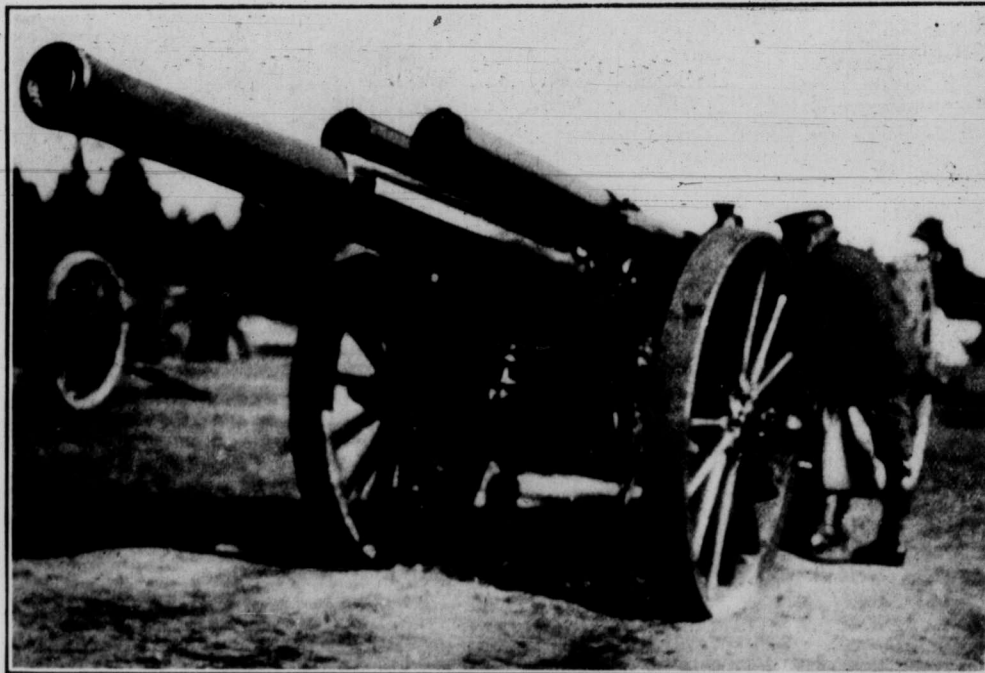
The morning had come—a gray, wet morning—before Healy roused from his drunken slumber. Red-eyed and dazed he sat up in McCracken's bunk and looked about him stupidly. The lantern still guttered on the table—a pale, miserable flicker, wan in the gathering daylight.

Heavy limbed and muttering profanity, the foreman got to his feet. His head reeling he stumbled to the table to blow out the stinking lantern and lying beside it found a note, addressed to himself. With fumbling fingers he smoothed it out on the table and spelled it thru laboriously:

I have just wired Grady in your name as follows: "Trestle open for traffic. No. 2, east-bound, crossed at 5 a.m., forty-eight hours late.—Healy."

You're in charge, Healy. If Grady wants to know where I am, tell him I'm tired of the job. Have gone west with the work-train and will not be back. Please tell Bruce to look after my trunk. I'll send for it later

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Powerful Battery From Canada

This is one of Canada's largest siege guns, now with the Montreal Siege Battery 'n France. The battery has a splendid record of efficiency in shooting and manoeuvring. The two tubes on top of the shot tube are designed to relieve the severe recoil on a weapon of this strength. They are filled with glycerine, which acts as a "cushion"

time. Men said I was a devil of a fellow—didn't like me none too much 'cause I druved 'em hard—knifed me with the boss, mebbe—I don't know—don't care—hed to work like that or go looney. Thought mebbe the Ole Man'd hear 'bout it an' do the square thing by me—wanted it bad, boy, I did; but it was fer her an' the lassie when the five years was up. God knows, I was tryin' hard t' quit bein' a no-good fer I'd learnt there wern't but two things that could happen to the likes o' me—one was a home an' the on'y two bein's on God's earth as give a rip what become o' me, an' the other was damnation. I don't know—said they was pleased, company did—give me bridge job—then they quit me!

"They quit me, young feller!" His voice rose passionately. "Quit me right there! I been bridge foreman over three years an' they promised they'd shove me up. They ain't done it! Two times they turned me down—it's three now! Tumlinson's fired—big job here—kid like you put in t' boss it—Tumlinson's job's yours. Yes, 'tis! I know 'em. Ain't got nothin' agin you, mind—sick of the whole outfit, that's what!

'em up! Tell Fraser to rush all the dynamite he can lay hands on up to the 'Devil's Grin' and for Heaven's sake, hustle, man! Hustle!"

The boss carpenter's lantern was already bobbing off in the dark, and McCracken stumbled up the rocky ascent. Surely it was impossible that those McKenzie & McLeod booms had given! He could not believe it. Even with a mile or more of tossing logs and waves lashing across the lake and breaking over them in a smother of foam—even so, he could not believe it.

He crawled close to the bank. The rain was coming down in sheets; the intermittent lightning threw an unearthly glare on frothing flood and tossing trees. McCracken caught a glimpse of men running, down by the bridge. Something black swept by in the white churn of the water below. He jumped to his feet and ran on.

They hadn't a minute to lose. The river had risen in a brief half hour to a tumbling swirl of water that would bring the whole avalanche of logs pounding down on the concrete foundation-work and away would go the whole fabric unless—