

# The Middle Span

## Trickery Concerning a Bridge Contract

By JUSTIN H. DIGBY

THE Golden Calf Mining Company had at last come to terms. President Alfred Cleve, of the Interstate Consolidated, read with satisfaction the letter from the G. C. Co. (as it was universally called), which brought long and tedious bickering to a close. It ran in part:

"... and referring to your tempting offer... we have reconsidered the advisability of erecting a smelter at the mine and will be glad to consider your proposition of shipping ore across the state, upon the condition that you are prepared to handle our output in the early spring—say April first."

All of which was eminently gratifying and advantageous to the Road, but which involved the immediate construction of a bridge across Stony Creek.

President Cleve was not the man to waste valuable moments; he 'phoned at once for his Chief Engineer.

"Morning, Newman," he said, tersely, as the young man entered. "This is a letter from the G. C. Co., announcing their intention to abandon the idea of a smelter, and ship ore via the Interstate if we can fill these conditions," he tapped the letter significantly, "by April first."

Lawrence Newman considered a moment.

"It will mean some tall hustling, sir," he replied. "This is now nearly the end of September; the excavations must be made and the concrete laid before the frost."

"Call for tenders, at once, then," advised the President. "Call for tenders to be in by the 29th."

Newman busied himself for the rest of the day getting out specifications, which he sent to a number of contractors, the most prominent among whom were George Gordon and Dave Kennedy and Company.

Gordon was a young man whose unflagging energy and conscientious fulfillment of his obligations had won him the esteem of many such men as Cleve. In discussing the proposition with him, the President had often expressed the hope that if the deal went through Gordon would get the contract, as it would be such an impetus to him in his career.

When he received the specifications he was fairly staggered by the time limit allowed for the completion of the work. He realized that bridging Stony Creek (which was, in reality, a turbulent, treacherous mountain stream) would be a day and night job, but the idea of hard and constant work held no terrors for him, so throwing aside the remainder of his correspondence he devoted his whole attention to this matter. Calling his assistant he told him of the proposition.

"So, Moncton," he said, in conclusion, "I want you to take some men, and go over the ground at once, for this tender must be in on Friday. Be sure to get me all of these particulars."

Moncton took the slip of paper his chief handed him and was soon on his way to the site of the proposed construction. As he and his men passed out of the main street, they met the rival contractor, Dave Kennedy, and his colleague, Barrett, just going to their office. For them it was plainly the "morning after."

Kennedy was a cunning business man. By fair means or foul he managed to get several large contracts and win for himself quite a reputation for handling them, although the actual work was done either by sub-contractors or by clever young men he seemed to have a knack for finding and training—until they learned too much to please their chief, at which point they were dismissed. Barrett, his partner, was the same type of man, with perhaps a shade more genius for detail.

"Where the devil can he be going with those men out East Street?" asked Kennedy, with a frown, as Moncton turned out of their path.

"Looking for mushrooms, maybe," sneered Barrett. "I know for a fact that Gordon is strapped for funds at present."

Finding the specifications at the office, however, Moncton's errand was patent to both men.

"The early bird, eh?" said Kennedy, contemptuously, handing Newman's communication to his partner.

Barrett bit his moustache and frowned.

"This proposition strikes us at the wrong time, now that Hudson has cleared out. He could have worked it up for us, but we have no one else just now, and as matters stand, Dave, it looks as though we were up against it. We can't send in a comprehensive tender by Friday."

"It's the devil's own luck," said the other. "We have waited so long for this to go through, and now— But I'll be d—d if Gordon shall beat me out!"

Barrett shrugged his shoulders; he knew that his partner had other than business reasons for wishing to get the better of Gordon and that in this line of competition he had made little progress.

Dave Kennedy lit a fresh cigarette and closed his small green eyes to mere slits.

"Do you think that Gordon could have his quotations prepared by—er—say Thursday morning?"

The manner in which the question was put caused



Drawn by W. S. Broadhead.

"You look especially charming to-day," muttered the visitor. "In fact, I never saw you look sweeter—in fact, I don't care a d—er—hang whether Gordon comes back or not."

Barrett to look keenly at his partner's face. There was no need for further explanation—these two knew one another excellently well.

"Ah—yes—Thursday! Very likely! Only—only—you see, Moncton sticks so d— close to him!"

"The noon hour?" suggested Kennedy.

"It is worth trying," answered the other, after a pause. "Leave it to me, Dave, and in the meantime, let's have a drink to the success of the deal!"

"WELL, it's something to have accomplished it, even we have not had our seven hours' sleep for a couple of nights," announced Gordon, stretching his lean, muscular figure to its full length. "Better go home to bed, Arthur," he urged, "I shan't need you any more to-day."

"I don't think I care about leaving, unless you are going too," replied the young fellow. "It is after noon, now, and we have worked up all our figures. Couldn't you take forty winks and let us both be back here at three o'clock, just to see that we have the sheets in perfect shape?"

"The proposition appeals to me," Gordon said, smiling. "I verily believe I was waiting to be urged! Miss Hunton," he called to his stenographer, "we are going to try to catch up for two nights' lost sleep, and will be back at three o'clock."

Shortly after the two men had left, Reginald Barrett swayed into the office. He seemed disappointed at not finding Gordon and assured Miss Hunton that there was nothing she could do—he particularly wanted to see the contractor.

"If you are going to be alone, I will wait until

he comes," said Barrett, thickly. "May I smoke?"

The girl nodded assent. With something akin to alarm she noted his unmistakable condition and tried to think of a way to be rid of him.

"You look especially charming to-day," muttered the visitor; "in fact, I never saw you looking sweeter—in fact, I don't care a d—er—hang whether Gordon comes back or not!"

He pushed his chair from the desk and bent over her, but she rose quickly and ran to the door before he could prevent it. As he lunged unsteadily toward her, the girl uttered a frightened cry and fled swiftly down the corridor. Just then a gust of wind blew the outer office door shut, the spring lock caught—and Barrett was alone!

Instantly his manner changed. He made the distance between the desk and Gordon's private office in one leap. His eye, losing its indefinite, wavering glance, swiftly took in the details of the room. There were numbers of telegrams from cement and steel companies, there were pages covered with columns of neat figures, there were several drawings. But toward all these the man gave only a passing glance; he put his hand seemingly by instinct upon an envelope addressed to Newman, which was unsealed, and spread out the papers it contained, jotting down some notes, hurriedly.

The handle of the outer door turned, but refused to unlock. Barrett still wrote.

"She has no key," he muttered with satisfaction.

The door was rattled impatiently. "Let me in!" called a peremptory voice.

"Come in," answered the man inside, with maudlin affability. His head was bent low over the paper and his fingers flew.

The command was repeated angrily, accompanied by a jingling of keys.

Sliding the papers back into their envelope, Dave Kennedy's partner moved to the door and opened it.

"W'AT you want?" he demanded of the man who knocked. His manner, aided by his reputation and Miss Hunton's story, forced the other to jump at conclusions.

"I want you to get out—in a hurry," was the intruder's retort, "or I'll soon make you!"

"All right—jush you pleash—come back again—give m'love t'the lady!" called Barrett, swaggering down the corridor.

One afternoon early in the following week Gordon and his young assistant sat smoking in their office; business was suspended for the afternoon and disappointment was writ large on the faces of the two men. The Stony Bridge contract had been awarded to Kennedy.

"I simply can't understand it," said Arthur Moncton, for the fifth time. "It isn't possible that he could have underbid us."

"Not only possible but a certainty," replied Gordon, slowly. "For that is the only way he could have got it. I hope I don't flatter the firm, Moncton, when I say that Cleve had nothing against G. Gordon and Co."

"Oh, right you are," was the young man's prompt answer. "I know if the Chief could have given it to you, he would; but how a closer bid was possible beats me—I don't care who put it in!"

There was silence for a few moments, except for the click of the typewriter in the adjoining room. For some reason best known to herself, Miss Hunton had never mentioned the visit from Barrett—the only thing which would have thrown light on the puzzle Gordon was trying to solve. Presently Moncton spoke again.

"Are you going to take the cement contract?" he asked.

He had touched a sore spot and he knew it. Not only was the whole contract denied him, but an added hurt had been given him in the proposal Kennedy had just made—that he undertake the cement work under the rival firm.

Gordon laughed without much mirth.

"I suppose we may as well have a shot at it," he said. "Using the cement that Hudson is making—the man they discharged, you know—"

"They didn't discharge him," interrupted the other, "he told me he had a row with them over the specifications for the Landor Cut, and not caring about their methods, he left."

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