

The Spruce Ridge Trestle

The Story of an Opportunity

BY HOPKINS MOORHOUSE

McCracken rolled over in bed and punched the pillows viciously in a misery of remorse and utter disgust. Sacramento! how his head ached! He was disgusted with all people and all things; disgusted with himself—primarily with himself, for hadn't he sworn the last time that there would be no more of it? And hadn't he—Jehosaphat! how his head ached!

He wondered what time it was; it must be early yet, for the dawn was just creeping in over the low hills to the east—creeping gray and cold into his room. And what a lovely mess his room was in!—a deck of cards, spilled onto the floor in all directions; ashes and the stubs of cigarettes and burnt-out cigar ends, littered everywhere; froth-flecked glasses on the bureau; some empty bottles on the washstand, and more of them in the waste basket! Thunder! how his head did ache! The sight nauseated him.

"Confound them!" he cried in sudden bitterness. "Who asked them to come up here anyway? Why can't they leave a fellow alone? Why can't—"

He turned his face to the wall with a groan.

It had happened before. And it would happen again; in his inner consciousness he knew that it would, and the knowledge galled him in a torment of self-abasement, the same that had daily been loosening his hold on himself and driving him nearer, always nearer, a callousness that was despair. He scarcely knew himself since he had drifted up here out of "God's country" back east. He had tried—Goodness knows, he had!—but he was losing faith in opportunities that never came, and there had been a haunting fear of late, a fear born of an over-anxiety to succeed. The agony of it! Utter nonsense, he had told himself time and again—utter nonsense pure and simple! It wasn't that he was afraid of work; why, he could do two days' work in one—or one day's work in two, as happened to be necessary! He was just as good as anybody else. Of course he was! Then he would get a brace on himself and even whistle at his work down there at the office.

But things weren't inclined to run altogether straight in this wicked little railroad town; the young men knew too much about raths-brau and jack-pots. It was all very well being good—until one found that the company was bad; after that a fellow might surely suit himself! When a fellow got the dumps—Pshaw! what was the use?

He laughed mirthlessly; then lay still, thinking.

He had never had any particular desire for any particular kind of work, McCracken hadn't. That was just the whole trouble first and last; he had never been able to make up his mind as to his life-work and, secure in the shelter of a comfortable home, he had straggled carelessly thru the lanky days of adolescence and wandered into college, picking up a miscellaneous education because his tastes were not specific enough for him to choose a definite course of preparation for a definite ambition, and because he was afraid. Yes, that was why—he was afraid of getting into something and discovering, when it was too late, that he didn't like the work of his choice; for McCracken had a theory that no man could achieve a true success unless his whole heart and soul were in his work. Yes, that was why.

And he had met a girl, a sweet jolly girl. He remembered how Laura looked that night of the convocation exercises. She had been here to see him get his degree—the bit of parchment that marked the culmination of his academic education and which he had thought gave him the right of admittance to the seats of the wise! What an unsophisticated fool he had been! And her beautiful eyes had glowed that night—glowed for him and because of her pride in him. And he remembered the walk home afterwards, and how

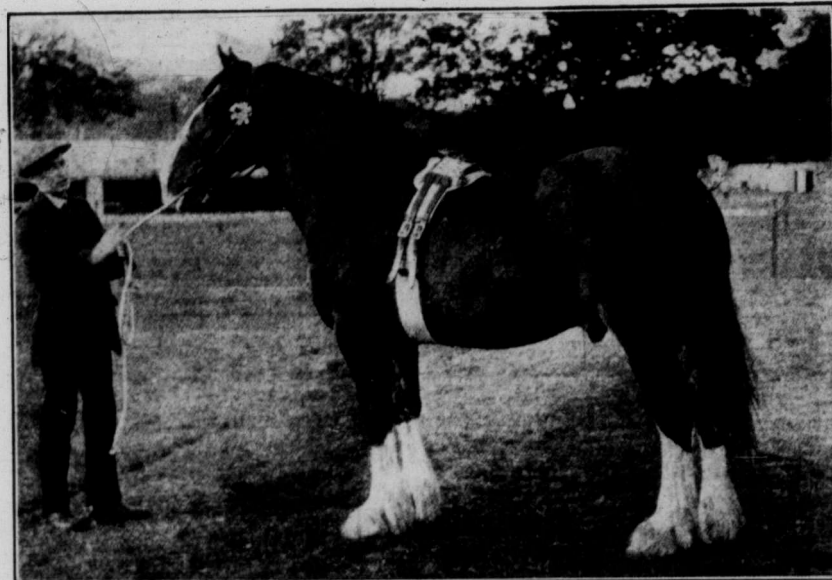
altogether adorable she looked, standing there in the moonlight at her father's gate. And when they had said good-night, how well he remembered the little tremble in her voice as she whispered; "Oh, Will, you looked just lovely in your gown!"

Yes, he had looked lovely in his gown! Then his father had died, his poor old hard-working dad, and the comfortable home had gone to pieces. There had been a few paltry dollars after everything was settled—just about enough to buy a railroad ticket. And he had bought the ticket because her father had decreed that here, in the whirl of things, men had to work, with no time to squat around and look lovely in college-gowns!

Her father was right, of course; he knew that now. So he had drifted out west onto the crude edge of civilization; into the rough country of rocks and forests and little lakes—and other things!

"Look here, Grady," the division-superintendent said, "we've got to have a bridge and building master who'll do things. Tumlinson's been letting his inspections slide till the whole division's on its way to a mix-up. Now we've got Tumlinson's resignation we want a man, not a numbskull, and we want him mighty badly. Question is, have you got one in the department?"

The division engineer thoughtfully



"Baron's Seal," champion Clydesdale male at the Highland Show. He was never beaten in his class.

scratched his chin and watched a fly crawl twice across the calendar above the superintendent's desk before he spoke. Then he mentioned McCracken.

The other shook his head. "Too many yellow fingers," he said significantly. "Cigarettes will—"

"Brain's gray tho," Grady interposed. "Don't smoke much at work either. Get's the dumps occasionally, I suppose."

"Dumps? What are they good for? Dumps! Why blame it, man!"

Grady twirled his hat on his thumb and smiled a little. He seldom thought of the early struggles now, and when he did he always smiled.

"Healy's about the only other man I know for the place, then," he said. "He's about as good a bridge foreman as there is on the division, but he ain't liked for one thing and—well, to tell the truth, Wade—I don't just know why I wouldn't like to let him in on a job like Tumlinson's, but I wouldn't. That's straight."

"Oh, well, use your own judgment," and the interview had ended there because the superintendent was in a hurry to catch the Flyer east.

All that had been yesterday, and this morning Grady had scarcely more than entered the office before a boy ran in from the dispatcher's quarters with a rush message that made the division engineer deliberately swear. Such

prosperity could never last without a break of some kind; he might have known that. The T. & B. L. had been making money hand over fist the past while, and of course it was up to the T. & B. L.'s hoodoo to be monkeying around somewhere.

The monkey-work was this:

Trestle burned, Spruce Ridge Section. Jarvis west. No. 2 stalled. Line tied up. Rush construction.

Right in the whirl of the Easter holiday traffic, and connections knocked into the middle of next week! What the Sam Hill were bridge-watchmen for anyway, and bridge-foremen, and bridge-and-building—Rats!

"McCracken!"

"Yes, sir?"

The young man poked his head in from the outer office. Grady jerked the message across the desk and two little red spots of excitement stole into the subordinate's sallow cheeks as he read it.

"Engine 94 pulls out of the yard in twenty minutes and I want you to come along. Bring your bridge-maps with you. Get a wiggle on!"

McCracken took the stairs at his boarding-house three steps at a time, threw the necessities of a week's absence into his grip, and ran all the way to the round-house.

The spruce ridge section of the T.

Grady's smiles into worry wrinkles. He called McCracken aside.

"Bad wash-out down the main line," he said. "I'm wanted. You'll have to run things here until I can get back. I'd better wire Morris to come up and help you—there's going to be some all-fired hard work here—Eh? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing, Mr. Grady, except—well, I'd rather you wouldn't send for Morris. I can handle things alone—with Healy's help."

Grady rubbed his chin and glanced over to where Healy was standing on a rock, overseeing the laying of the bottom caps. He was a good foreman, Healy was.

"Well, all right then. Only remember, Mac, keep things moving at all costs. You've got the masonry foundations intact, and that's a lucky time as yet to begin with. You ought to have the first tier up by midnight, if nothing goes wrong—and the company can't afford to have anything go wrong; every minute's money while things are balled up here. Hi! Sigerson!"

The boss-carpenter was passing near by with a plank on his shoulder. He came over to where they were standing.

"What about those logs you were speaking about—up in the lake?" Grady asked.

"Part of McKenzie & McLeod's drive, sir. They hev a landin' up there."

"Better take a look at them, Mac, when you get time. They'd play hoots and hollers with you if those booms should bust in any way. Not likely they will, of course, but you can't afford to take chances on anything. Where the dickens did Healy go? Oh, there he is!"

They joined the foreman. Five minutes more of rapid-fire talk, and Grady had climbed into the engine cab. A little later there was only a smudge of smoke hanging in the air over beyond the rock ridges and McCracken was alone with his trouble.

To those who had known Healy longest, his surliness had lost novelty; it was a part of Healy with which they had always been familiar. His heavy face had never carried anything else than its habitual sour look, even when Healy was bossing the biggest gang of Dagos and Swedes on the division in the middle of the hottest afternoon of the fly season; and that was about as near to joy as Healy might reasonably be expected to get—an assumption justified by every sullen line of the man's brute build.

It wasn't till sundown when fresh gangs turned out on the work that McCracken's trouble began to take shape. Then Sigerson came to him with the news that Healy had cashed his "C.G." with Dunc Fraser and had left camp without a word to anybody.

"But—but what'n blazes in that for?" demanded McCracken in amazement.

"He must be sore about somethin', sir—chucked his job I make it. He done that one time before that I know on—up at Snake Coulee it was, an' he—"

McCracken's jaws knotted thru the leanness of his cheeks. He said not a word, but went out amongst the men. This was something for which he was totally unprepared, and he suddenly realized that he had been relying not a little on the foreman's experience to see him thru, if he got stuck anywhere. And now, to be deserted in this cowardly manner! But his anger soon gave place to a grim determination, and he went to work with a spirit that carried abroad among the men and discounted his youth.

There was plenty to do. Before it got dark, he and Sigerson went up to the lake that was full of McKenzie & McLeod's logs. There were two outlets at the lower end—the main river, which flowed in at the head of the lake running out on the western side thru a wide gorge, and a smaller stream flowing down the valley where the

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