

# The First Big Fill

*How a Man of Determination Tackled a Big Proposition*

By ROBERT J. C. STEAD

IT commenced raining about four o'clock. Darkness came quickly; the stooks faded in a blanket of wet mist, and Warren's threshing crew closed down early. They were too far from town for a night's jollification, and after supper they sat about in the caboose, drying their wet clothes by the little coal stove.

Warren was cross with the fickle weather, which was eating a gaping hole in his earnings. "If this keeps up much longer it'll be a pork Christmas for us," he said. "Our run isn't half done, and the days gettin' shorter all the time."

His remark was received in silence. The men were much more philosophic about the weather.

"Speaking of Christmas," said Straw-Burner Bill, at length, "always reminds me of the year we made the big fill on the Transcontinental."

Bill was Warren's engineer. His career, like his surname, was hidden in considerable mystery, and Bill seemed content to have it so. Occasionally, in reminiscent mood, he would dip into his deep past, and delight his hearers with a story of construction days, when the first railways were being driven through Alberta. The symptoms of such a reminiscence were well understood, and the men settled quietly into their bunks to await Bill's time.

The engineer drew the pail on which he sat closer to the fire, and for some minutes remained humped up before the stove, his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, watching the flame play in the gas over the wet coal. At length he took his pipe from his mouth and leaned back against a bunk.

We had the steel laid to the head of a little gulley which dropped into a valley barring our path into the foothills proper. A number of trial surveys had been run, and all agreed that the only way to cross the valley was down one coulee and up another. This meant a detour of twenty-five miles and a climb of two hundred feet, going and coming, for all time to come. It was sure to be a costly hole, but even the chief engineer could devise no plan to overcome it.

I was running a little boiler with four drivers and a smoke-stack like an inverted umbrella, on construction duty. She was leaky and wheezy, with a twist in her frame that made her track to one side like a home-made bob-sleigh, and we never knew whether she would take the switch or the main line; but say, when you're reckoning up the pioneers of the West and the big fellows that have made this country what it is, don't overlook that old grease-waggon. Maybe she did her share, as I'll explain, if you care to listen.

It was early in November, like to freeze up any day, and the navvies were being sent in to get them off the company's hands before cold weather struck. We had run in a few switches at the end of the steel, and made a kind of supply station there. We'd a boarding car, and another rigged up with a ticker, for we had our wire in from the divisional point, eighty miles up. All the Canadians on the job were myself and Jimmie Black, the fireman, and the operator, Sam Burke. Then there was the civil engineer, who was making detailed plans of the drop into the valley. I'll call him Grey; any name will do, so it's not the right one.

One night, as black and wet as this, the three of us were playing cards in the operator's car when the door burst open and in plunged Grey, soused and dripping.

"How long will it take you to run me into headquarters, Bill?" says he, and although I'm no mind-reader I knew right off there was something afoot.

"Less'n the law allows," says I. "Jimmy, get the fog up."

Jimmy hustled out into the night, and Grey sat down in his wet clothes, staring at the fire.

"What's up, Grey?" says I, after a silence.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you, Bill," he said. "You and Burke, too, because I'm figuring a mighty lot on you fellows seeing me through. I've been down in the valley for a week, and I want to catch the President before he starts east. He may be gone by this time. The fact is, I've figured out this whole valley proposition—got it measured to a yard—he tapped a bundle of papers in his pocket—and if they'll only let me do it I'll fill that valley instead of going down into it."

"Fill it!" says I, thinking maybe he'd got a little

queer, being alone so much. "Why, man, there isn't a fill like that anywhere in Canada."

"There will be, before next summer, if I can get the old man to see it as I do," said Grey, his voice tense with enthusiasm. "I have it all figured out," he repeated. "I know it can be done, and I know what it will cost. If they'll give me the plant and two hundred navvies I'll put a fill across that valley before the frost is out in the spring."

"Can't grade in winter," put in Burke. "It'll freeze after this rain, sure. They've called in the men already."

"Sure, you can't grade, but you can fill," returned Grey, "and that's what I'm talking about. I want those navvies back here, as quick as I can get them. We've got to lay twenty miles of track, to carry us to the brink of the valley, and we've got to get our shovels to work there and start the fill before the frost gets too deep. Once we're started we're all right, because we can keep ahead of the frost. And it won't cost as much as you might think. We'll be using plant that would otherwise be idle, and we'll hold the gang together for next year. That's something, and besides, most of those poor beggars are without work for the winter, and it'll be a Godsend to them. The thing can be done all right, but the question is, can I make the President see it that way? They've had the best brains they could hire on this job, and they all said they'd have to go down. Will he listen to a hundred-dollar-a-month man when his five-thousand-dollar experts have said it can't be done?"

"The old man'll listen," says I, "to any person that knows what he's talking about. He didn't get where he is by turning down suggestions without consideration. There was a time he'd have thought himself rich on your wages, and he hasn't forgot all about that time, either. If you can prove your case you can carry him, but you'll have to prove it. How about cost?"

"Well, it'll cost more, directly, than going down, but the company will save it in the long run. It'll shorten their track twenty-five miles, and the day is coming when they will spend more money than I am asking to shorten it ten. Then, it'll save a run down-hill and a haul up. You know, Bill, what those down-hill runs do to your power plant and your alignment. Old Susie there shies worse than any broncho. And I know what they do to the steel and the road-bed. I figure that when this road is carrying twenty trains a day my fill will save it two hundred thousand dollars a year."

Just then the whistle blew, and Grey and I turned out. It was still a few minutes to midnight when he climbed down at the divisional point. I hoped he would be successful in his interview. I believed that if he got a chance he would make good, and, you know—well, men who could make good were in demand those days, as they are now.

IT was an hour after daybreak when Grey returned to the engine, and I knew at first glance he had won out.

"So the old man came into line?" I said.

"I have the orders," was his answer. "But they are conditional orders—that is, they may turn out to be my death warrant, so far as my career as an engineer is concerned."

I waited until he continued:

"After I had gone all over it with the President, showed him the amount of fill necessary and the number of yards that could be handled every twenty-four hours, proved the feasibility of the project and the advantages for future operation, I had him with me. He looked straight into me with those eyes of his—you know them, mild enough, but they can drill through steel—and said, 'Grey, you're little more than a boy. Our highest-priced experts have said this thing can't be done. If I bank on you, and you fail, what will my board say to me? Nevertheless, I'm going to do that very thing. Take whatever engines, equipment, and men you need; take anything, everything, but come through. You understand, *come through!*' And," said Grey, "I understood."

Now maybe things didn't hum while we laid that twenty miles of track. The ground was frozen, and the ties for the most part were laid on the bare prairie. We dropped them about four feet apart, spiked every second one, and put an occasional bolt in the fish-plates. But in fifteen days we had

the shovels at work, and the big fill was commenced. And it *was* a fill! When I gazed across that valley, now white with snow, and measured with my eye the great gorge before me, and then looked at the little heap of earth that had been dumped over one side of it, boys, I trembled for Grey. But Grey—he seemed a machine rather than a man. There was no limit to his endurance and energy. He put on day and night shifts, and personally took charge of both. He was getting thin and haggard, but at the same time there grew a great light in his eyes. It was the light of triumph. He was going to win!

Perhaps it was this confidence that led to his announcement that Christmas Day would be observed as a holiday. And a few days before Christmas he called me aside and said, "Bill, will you make a night run into headquarters for me, so as not to interrupt the work here?" You see, I was on the day shift. "Maybe you'll be surprised," says he, continuing, and blushing a little, boy-like, "but my wife is waiting at the divisional point for a chance down. She's the highest priced shipment ever came over the new track, and I want you at the throttle."

"Your wife!" I exclaimed. "Why, you never—"

"No, I said nothing about it," Grey answered. "I've had other things on my mind, down here. But always she has been behind it all; always I have seen her face through the darkness, like the sun through a breaking cloud. You don't suppose I'd bother with this game on my own account, do you? And I couldn't get home for Christmas, so out she came. Just like her."

Maybe you fellows don't understand, but a woman who would cross half a continent in those days to eat Christmas dinner with her husband was—well, she was a brick. I confess I was a little afraid of her at first, but she was just a bit of a girl, slender and pretty, and she asked so many foolish questions about the engine that I soon felt my masculine superiority.

BUT I should have told you. Just before we started on the trip back the stores department sent down a big oak whisky barrel and rolled it into the caboose, saying it was for Grey. I could hardly understand this, as Grey was death on booze in construction camps. That he would provide a Christmas blow-out for the navvies showed good spirit on his part, but, as I thought, bad judgment. However, it wasn't my business, and I said nothing about it.

The day before Christmas we quit early, and I run up to the sidings we had made earlier in the year, to spend the night with Burke. The other Anglo-Saxons went on in to headquarters. It began to snow that afternoon, and before we got in Susie was piled to the headlight. But Burke had a good fire in his car, and as the blizzard deepened two mounted policemen rode in to share our hospitality. They were Sergeant Graham and Constable Findlay, both of whom we knew well, as they had kept an eye on law and order along the camps for a year.

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Waiter: "Well, Sir, how did you find the beef?"  
Diner: "Oh! I happened to shift a potato, and—well, there it was."

—Harry Low, in the Bystander.