The Big Muskeg

By

VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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THE WIDOW

SYNOPSIS.—Looking over Big Muskeg, a seemingly impassable swamp in the path of the Mississibi railroad, Joe Bostock, builder of the road, and Wilton Carruthers, chief of engineers, are considering the difficulties. A rifle shot instantly kills Bostock and breaks Carruthers' arm. Carruthers tries to carry the body to a post of the Hudson's Bay company, where McDonald is the factor. McDonald's daughter, Molly, sees Carruthers struggling in the muskeg and drags him from the swamp, with his burden. Unconsciously, her father objects to her saving Carruthers. Weakened by his wound and exertions, Carruthers is disturbed by the appearance of Tom Bowyer, Bostock's business rival and personal enemy. Bowyer insults Molly, and Carruthers strikes him. Carruthers declares his love for Molly. She promises to be his wife. Carruthers has to reach the town of Clayton to attend a meeting at which Bostock's enemies plan to wrest control of the Mississibi from him. Molly goes with him. They are delayed by a storm. Attacked by his dogs, Carruthers' life is saved by Molly, who is forced to kill the animals. "The snow, the snow!" They set out on foot for Clayton, reaching it with Carruthers in an almost dying condition. He is in time to foil Bostock's enemies and keep control of the line for Mrs. Bostock. He finds enemies at work at Big Muskeg. Bowyer persecutes Molly with attentions.

CHAPTER VII

—8— Inside Information.

Wilton's first act on reaching the shack was to write a letter to Inspector Quain, informing him of the presence of Hackett and Tongway at the camp, and telling him of their liquor-vending activities. In the morning he sent for Andersen, who appeared disheveled, humble, and repentant.

"I tank you send me back to the cache—" the foreman began.

Wilton struck his fist on his desk. "No, Andersen. I'm not going to send you back to the cache," he answered. "You'll hold your job, and you'll keep the men under control and see that there's no more whisky peddling around here."

"By jink, Mr. Carruthers, you yoost bet I will!" cried the Swede. "I done all I could to drive them two fellers away from here. Last night I took one drink, thinking I'd get the men away quietly, and then—I guess I don't remember no more," he ended apologetically.

"If you see them around here again, or hear of them, you'll let me know at once," said Wilton. "That will, Andersen. Just try to live up to your job. I don't expect impossibilities. And tell the men I want to see them at ten o'clock."

At that hour he went out to inspect the laborers, who were lined up outside the cook-house. They were a dirty, disheveled lot, still showing the traces of the last night's dissipation.

Wilton looked at them grimly. "Well, men, we've met one another already," he said. "I'm your new boss. You've had a taste of me, and you've seen something of my methods. I expect my workers to make good, and I expect to make good myself. And if any man brings liquor into camp, or sets it, I object to my rights being invaded. So I wish to offer my resignation."

"By Jink, Mr. Carruthers, You Yoost Bet I Will!" Cried the Swede.

"All right," said Wilton shortly. Then, feeling that the other had a sort of justice in his attitude: "It is rather tough to expect you to be police work," he acknowledged. "But I don't think there will be any more of it."

Digby looked at him in frank astonishment. "Why, I like it!" he said. "I had the time of my life last night. It's simply a principle of the thing. But I'm afraid I didn't quite make my position clear."

"Not altogether," answered Wilton. "However, I'm sending some special mail down the moon, and you can go in with it—sleigh."

Digby's defection was a serious blow, for it would be necessary to make arrangements for a man to take his place. However, Wilton decided to make no steps to that end immediately. He inspected the camp, saw that a good job was being made of the cleaning up, and went to look at Kitty's house.

This was built substantially of logs, and had already been half completed. It consisted of four rooms and an outkitchen, and stood at the edge of the new road near the ridge, about five hundred yards from the nearest bunk-house.

That afternoon he made his first examination of the Muskeg. He took soundings in several places, but the peat seemed bottomless. Nowhere could he reach rock bottom, except within a few feet of the shore.

The underlying bed of peat was everywhere. He went two or three miles up and down the stream without discovering any way of bridging the Muskeg.

He was too busy now to see Molly more than an hour daily, but he always went to the portage for a short visit after supper.

The factor, who had learned to expect his coming at the same hour each day, will drew upstairs before he arrived. Once or twice, when they came face to face, he turned his head away in sullen anger.

As a prospective father-in-law, McDonald seemed about as hopeless a proposition as could be conceived, but the time to consider his own and Molly's future would not come until the line was on its feet. Big Muskeg was the giant in the way. Often Wilton, starting down at its sullen depths from the top of the ridge, would feel it as a personal enemy, defying him to overcome it.

One evening Wilton was sitting in his shack, utterly disconsolate. He had sounded nearly every possible place without result, and even Molly had failed to cheer him. He saw no alternative before him except to return to Clayton and confess himself beaten.

Andersen tapped at the door and said that a man wanted to see him. Wilton rose up and, to his surprise, admitted Lee Chambers.

The engineer was roughly dressed and wretched-looking. He told Wilton that he had tramped in from Oak Junction, thirty miles southwestward, the present terminal point of the New Northern.

"I thought maybe you would give me a job," he said. "I've left Mr. Bowyer for good. We had some trouble. He wanted me to make a crooked report, and I would not do it. I'm through with him and his dirty schemes."

Wilton gave him a chair and looked him over coldly. He did not like Chambers, and he suspected that he was lying, and that Bowyer had sent him to him for his own purposes.

Digby's disappearance had left him in a hole, but that hardly justified his taking on Lee Chambers, though he was one of the ablest of his profession in Manitoba.

"Well, Mr. Chambers," he said, "I'm carrying on my work here on the lines established by Mr. Bostock. Joe Bostock had two maxims. The first was: 'Never lay off a man if you can help it.' The second was: 'Never take on a man who's left you.' And to be quite frank—I feel about the same way. You left the Mississibi, which had treated you well, and we have reason to believe you gave useful information to Mr. Bowyer."

"I swear I didn't!" shouted Chambers, springing to his feet. "Prove that, Mr. Carruthers!"

"I can't prove it," Wilton admitted. "I am giving you my personal feeling about yourself, in confidence."

"Well, it's a mighty poor sort of confidence," sputtered the engineer. "See here, Mr. Carruthers. I didn't come here to beg you for a job. I want one, and I can get one on any other line in Manitoba. But I want to even things out a little with Tom Bowyer first. He's played me a dirty trick, and I don't take things lying down. I know what your problem is. I know you can't cross Big Muskeg. Suppose I show you, eh? How'd you feel about it then?"

Wilton's cool glance never wavered. "I'm willing to hear more on the subject, Mr. Chambers," he said.

"Right! Before you'd even started to clear the bush I was up here sounding every yard of Big Muskeg clear along both shores. And there's rock bottom within two miles of here. Does that interest you, Mr. Carruthers?"

"It does," said Wilton frankly.

"If I show you—"

"I need an assistant, and you can have the position as long as you want it."

Lee Chambers grinned. "That's good enough for me," he said. "I'll hold it right along. There won't be any other road would have much use for me after Tom Bowyer finds out what I've done to him."

Wilton gave Chambers a bed in his shack. The next morning they started out to sound the muskeg. A little more than a mile north of the portage, where the river dwindled to a mere trickle between two lakes in summer, was an unlimiting bed of peat, covered with rotten slush; it was one of the few spots where Wilton had not sounded.

"You'll get bottom here," said Chambers. He swept his arm upward. "You see, I've figured it out like this: Those ridges are limestone. But the foundation's granite. You've noticed that, of course. The granite was there first. The limestone was forced up later through the clefts by subterranean action. It filled up the holes and hollows and spread up above the granite till these bluffs were formed. But the granite hasn't shifted. Here's where the granite bed extends across the muskeg. The mud filled up the cleft and spread across the foundation. But the foundation's there. Try her out!"

Wilton got bottom after two or three attempts. As Chambers had said, here was the foundation for the permanent way—not the best conceivable, and one that would require considerable ballasting, but undeniably the only route possible.

The next day preparations were begun for cutting the new road from the camp. The weeks passed swiftly. With mid-April came the breaking up of the ice. The ground hardened, and the first team of horses struggled into camp, drawing its freight.

The end of April saw Kitty's house completed and the furniture installed, and the first day of May brought Kitty.

She had telephoned Wilton to expect her, and she came in a rig, with a cart-load of trunks and packages behind. Within an hour she was ensconced snugly in the new cottage, with a camp cook detailed to look after her needs. In her widow's black she looked prettier than ever, and absurdly young even to be married.

Wilton had supper with her, and all the while they sat together at the table his heart was almost too full to speech. He was dreaming of the future with Molly, a future in which Kitty shared. He pictured her happily married—for Joe would have wished that, and Wilton's loyalty to the dead man had nothing mawkish or sentimental in it.

In Her Widow's Black She Looked Prettier Than Ever.

Kitty rapped him on the arm, and he looked up to see her face in a charming smile, and mirth dancing in her blue eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Will?" she asked.

"Kitty," he said, evading her question, "I think you are the prettiest woman in the world."

"Why, Wilton?"

"To come up here and put up with these hardships, just because of Joe."

She blushed faintly and lowered her eyes. "It was you who let me come, Will," she said.

"But you wanted to come because Joe would have liked it, Kitty. It's like you to hide your real feeling."

She laughed and made a little face at him. "But after supper she grew serious as he spoke of the work and his success, about which he had written her.

Wilton asked her if she would walk over to the portage to see Molly.

"Tonight?" she asked doubtfully.

"Not if you're tired, Kitty."

"I thought you might be content to sit here and chat."

"I should be, Kitty. But I told her I was coming. And I said I had a surprise for her. Can't you imagine how pleased she'll be to see you?"

"Why, of course I'll come with you, Will," she answered.

And they strolled down side by side, and made their way to the trading store. They went in, and, at the sound of their entrance, Molly came running downstairs, stopped short at the bottom and stared at Kitty as if she had seen a ghost. She put her hand to her heart with a sudden gesture of fear.

"Molly, this is the surprise I promised you," said Wilton. "What's the matter, dear? Did we startle you?"

Molly shook her head and came quickly forward, swallowing as if something was choking her. The women kissed each other. Then Wilton was aware that both were watching him.

All through the lively chat that followed he was conscious of that. He put the idea out of his mind with an effort, for he did not like subtleties of feeling. He could not understand. Yet there was a chilliness under the girls' chatter and laughter.

Presently Kitty said she was tired and must get back. Molly promised to come to see her as soon as possible.

Wilton and Kitty hardly spoke on the way home. When they left her at her door she turned to him and asked abruptly:

"Will, you are still as deeply in love with Molly as ever, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, Kitty," he answered.

"Then I am glad for your sake and hers," answered Kitty, and went quickly into the house.

Wilton walked back to his shack, a little puzzled. He had arranged to have Kitty the progress of the work on the following morning; but when he called for her he found her in the midst of her unpacking, and she put it off until the afternoon. Wilton laughed, chided her and went to his work.

She kept him waiting till three o'clock, when they started. He felt the pride of the artist as he led Kitty from one place to another. Locomotives were snorting, and lines of ballast trucks occupied the narrow-gage that had been laid down to the water's edge.

In the ballast pit, from which the screech of steam was heard from morn till night, the great, unwieldy steam-shovel scraped its huge steel teeth into the face of the cut with the scrunch of an ogre's feast, and, turning, disgorged its plunder into the empty trucks alongside.

Kitty shuddered and pressed Wilton's arm. "It's like—it's like some living monster, Will," she said. "Let's go on."

He led her toward the muskeg. But on the way he stopped suddenly beside the summit of the ridge.

"Kitty," he said, in a low voice, "I don't know if I ought to tell you—perhaps you'd like to know. This is where Joe—"

Her grasp upon his arm tightened convulsively. "No, no, Will!" she said hurriedly, "I don't want to see it. I can't bear to think of it."

They followed the line of ballast trucks along the narrow gage down to the swamp's edge. Construction upon the foundations was well under way. Tons of debris had been poured into the muskeg, and had simply spread themselves over the bottom, finding their level like water. Soundings taken had showed the bedrock hardly raised from its level twenty feet beneath the surface.

Wilton and Lee Chambers had therefore begun the construction of trestle-work. Teams hauled bundles of logs, bound with a chain, to the scene of operations. The uprights for the lower tier were driven into the ground, and the horizontal members and diagonals were nailed up, completing a crazy, sinking structure just strong enough to take a pair of metals at the top.

As they reached the edge of this structure the whistle blew. The workmen knocked off and came slowly past them toward the camp. Wilton and Kitty stood alone at the edge of the embankment, where the flimsy structure of the trestle began.

Kitty looked at Wilton breathlessly. "It's wonderful, Will!" she said. "It makes me feel so out of place and useless."

Wilton looked at her in surprise. "Why, how can you feel that way, Kitty?" he asked reproachfully. "You have been loyal to the core to Joe!"

"Don't say that!" she cried fiercely, and, turning swiftly from him, began to make her passage across the temporary sleepers. Twelve feet beneath them the sluggish stream forced its narrow channel through the muskeg. Wilton called to Kitty.

"You'd better come back," he shouted. "It isn't very secure, and you might lose your footing."

"Ye go too far, Mr. Bowyer!" he quavered. "Ye canna insult my girl in my own house!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

FIND TWO PHASES OF FATIGUE

Really Dangerous One Is Where the Subject Is Not Really Conscious of Being Tired.

Experiments carried out to test the mental effects of loss of sleep have revealed the remarkable fact that there are two distinct phases of fatigue.

The first is one of stimulus, under which work is done rather better than under normal conditions. Then follows a phase of much longer duration in which the body makes good its losses—a period characterized by general loss of accuracy, power of concentration and retentiveness. There is, however, no sense of fatigue during this phase—quite the reverse.

What is called carelessness is often due to this second stage of fatigue. When a man knows he is fatigued, he naturally takes excessive precautions, but when the second stage comes along, he does not feel tired, and consequently carelessness steps in.

Some of the famous workers of the world seem to be able to work abnormally long hours and live abnormally long lives. Possibly their bodies supply naturally a fatigue anti-toxin.

There is a fortune awaiting the scientist who discovers an anti-toxin to cure carelessness!—London Tit-Bits.

Figures in Wood.

Figures in wood have various sources. These may be grouped in those due to structure, those caused by color variation or pigmentation, and to combination of the two, says the American Foresty Magazine. These again may be classified as normal and abnormal or pathologic. By normal is meant the natural condition of the wood of a sound tree. In the abnormal or pathologic are to be found the peculiar distortions and colorations resulting from disease, the attacks of insects and activities of various agencies not a part of the regular life processes of the trees.

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Your Physician will tell you that Baby's medicine must be prepared with even greater care than Baby's food.

A Baby's stomach when in good health is too often disarranged by improper food. Could you for a moment, then, think of giving to your *ailing* child anything but a medicine especially prepared for Infants and Children? Don't be deceived.

Make a mental note of this:—It is important, Mothers, that you should remember that to function well, the digestive organs of your Baby must receive special care. No Baby is so abnormal that the desired results may be had from the use of medicines primarily prepared for grown-ups.

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W. N. U., DETROIT, NO. 37—1922.

The Cap that never fits

"NO harm can come to *me* from coffee or tea," is what so many people say. Yet those same people are often quick to note the signs of coffee harm in others.

How familiar the danger signals are—upset digestion, sleepless nights and irritability—all warnings of the nervous breakdown that lurks just a little way ahead. How easy and how delightful the escape—by drinking delicious Instant Postum instead of the beverages that contain the irritant caffeine.

Instant Postum is the tempting cereal drink made from roasted wheat. It is prepared instantly in the cup by the addition of boiling water. Its snappy flavor is not unlike that of coffee.

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Cutting Down Time of Appreticeship.

The Industrial association of San Francisco, Cal., has started a school of apprentices with some novel features. The boys have been divided into three classes and one class moves along behind the other. The first two weeks will be spent in school after which they will be put to work as assistant helpers for four weeks after which they will return to school and so on during the term of their apprenticeship. In this manner of alternating the school and shop experience it is anticipated that from 12 to 18 months will be saved and the boys will be full-fledged plumbers in two and a half or three years instead of four. The apprentices will be paid for the time they are at work, but not for the time at school.

Just Normal for Him.

A "nervous breakdown" often means insanity, but when a Russian soviet is already insane, has a "nervous breakdown" what is his condition?—Louisville Courier-Journal.

No Extremity.

"Well, do you want a meal badly enough to work for it?"

"I'm just hungry, mum, not desperate."—Life.

Gold Production in Russia.

The Russian trade delegation reports that Siberia produced during the first four months of the present year over 16 poods (361 pound per pood) of gold according to the Engineering and Mining Journal-Press of New York. This quantity is five times greater than the total output for 1921. Gold is worth approximately $10,800 per pood so that the total value is $172,800 or at an annual rate of only a little more than $500,000. This compares with a production of $22,000,000 in 1916 since which time the output has fallen steadily until this slight revival. The gold syndicate has succeeded in restarting the gold mines at Ellisavetinsk, Alexandrovsk, Ivanovsk and Youzhnoalginsk, which will insure an output of not less than three poods monthly.

Couldn't Steal His Thunder.

Little Michael had been on a visit to his grandmother, who had not been very well.

His father had come to take him home and Michael, as he was leaving, felt that he must be polite.

"So he looked up at his grandmother and said:

"Goodby, granny. I am so sorry you have been ill!"

"And I'm sorry, too!" his father put in.

Michael felt that this lessened the merit of his remark. So he continued:

"But my sorry is much bigger than his sorry, granny!"

No Doubt.

Wife—John, I wish you would stop saying, "Gad!" I don't like it.

Hub—I'll make a bargain with you, my dear; I'll stop my Gadding if you'll stop yours.—Boston Transcript.

The Arabs of southern Egypt traded with India 1000 B. C.

Design Poppet-Valve Gear.

In an effort to overcome the faults common to the standard types of link-motion valve gears used on locomotives, an Italian engineer has designed a new gear that, in trials, has shown marked economy of coal and water for the power developed, says an illustrated article in Popular Mechanics Magazine. In the new system poppet valves are used to avoid the faults of both the flat slide valve and the piston valve. Advantages claimed are that no strangulation of the steam occurs and more effective use of the power of expansion of the steam is possible.

Half the Battle.

"Now put up a bold front on the golf links."

"I—er—"

"There's a lot of people out who don't know anything about the game."—Kansas City Journal.

Speed is the highway toll taker.