

THE BIG MUSKEG

By
VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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WHEN NATURE FROWNS.

Nature is not a genial old dame, nature writers and poets to the contrary notwithstanding. Go at her with a club and she will give freely. But she always watches for a chance to get even. Big of her and she is cruel as the grave. She pardons no mistakes, and always she resents man's intrusion into her wild places.

Muskeg is North American Indian for a marsh, swamp, tussocky bog. It's generally a bad place for travel. This Big Muskeg was crossed here and there by trails, but was never stable, contained a river of ooze and had unsounded depths. Nature had apparently stuck it right there to stop the Missisquoi Extension from going farther.

So around the Big Muskeg revolves a thrilling story of Canadian railroad building—a fight against the hostile forces of nature. Extremely interesting are the side lights on the life of the North. Best of all there's a fascinating story of the loves and passions of the strong men and women who are conquering the wilderness.

Victor Rousseau knows life from experience. He has been a student in England, a fighter in South Africa, a newspaper man in the United States. He is the author of many novels and his public is large.

CHAPTER I.

A Bolt From The Blue.

Eighteen below; fair weather for December in New Manitoba, where the forest, though it chills the soil till midsummer, yet shuts out the razor-edge of the winds that make the prairies, farther south, an icy inferno.

Here the bush, which had seemed to stretch out limply, thinned into bedraggled patches among the up-cropping rocks. A little farther and it began once more; the break was like a great, curving arm thrust into the heart of it, as if some giant fingers had plucked up the trees in handfuls and scooped the foundation from the frozen soil, and then had been withdrawn, leaving the imprints of the great finger-tips.

These finger-tips were huge sink-holes, sometimes filled with water, so that they formed clear lakes; more often sodden sponges of decayed vegetable matter, oozy, treacherous and unstable. The finger-lines were the circular ridges marking the subsidence of the mud. The thumb was Big Muskeg, which the two men who stood on the top of the humpbacked ridge could see extended beneath them.

Big Muskeg, at this point less than half a mile across, was everywhere of unsounded depth. It curved and wound, a river of ooze, now broadening into chains of lakes, now narrowing into gullies; here and there crossed by trails, but never stable, nowhere offering firm foundation for the permanent way of the Missisquoi railroad.

The Missisquoi was a branch line, feeding the new road that was pushing northward toward the ports-to-be on Hudson bay. It linked with it at Clayton, whence it was being extended eastward into a virgin wilderness. Even in the days when half a dozen companies were pegging out ways for lines that were to divert the wheat north, Joe Bostock's line had been the joke of legislatures and financiers. Those other lines that were being built into Clayton passed through the wheat-lands; Joe's line ran east out of Clayton into a wilderness. Joe Bostock had secured his capital, but he had no competitors.

And slowly Missisquoi, with its small shareholders and limited means, had gone ahead. The first location parties had cleared a road to Big Muskeg. The rails had been laid half-way. But that was all, save for the partly constructed shacks and buildings for the workmen there, and the sheds for the construction material that had not yet been freighted in.

Joe, standing with legs straddling the top of the ridge, turned to Wilton Carruthers, the chief engineer of the company, with eyebrows arched and humorous inquiry on his weather-beaten old face. There was no need for speech at that moment, because the mind of each man dwelt on the identical problem.

The two men had come east by dog-sleigh, accompanied by two half-breeds, Jean Passepartout and Papillon, the one in charge of the dogs, the other carrying the transit-compass. They had camped seven miles back on the preceding evening, and had set out at daybreak to survey the swamplands from the ridge. For the problem which had suddenly risen up to confront them clamored for solution before construction could be carried forward, and on its solution depended the future of the Missisquoi.

With the physical eye neither Joe nor Carruthers could hope to accomplish anything. Wilton was seeking inspiration, though he did not know it. Theoretically he was endeavoring to discern some place where a foundation might be coaxed above the unstable, quaking surface with treedling and crib-work, a crossing that combined the least possible deviation of route with no more than four-fifths of one

per cent of grade and four degrees of curve.

Actually and unconsciously he was seeking to interpret the natural convulsion which had, in time immeasurably remote, cloven the ridge of the land and set the swamp seeping into the fissure.

If he could read the meaning of that convulsion, understand the mind and mood of the great Architect, he could see, as if clairvoyantly, just where the Muskeg lay thinnest on the roots of the hills, where ballast would appear the soonest above the sucking swamp. But he could read nothing.

Joe Bostock wrinkled his eyes against the sunlight. "That's what I was thinking, Wilton," he said. "But it's got to be done. Somebody'll build it some day if the Missisquoi doesn't."

That was the nearest speech to despair that Joe, invincible, exuberant optimist that he was, had ever made. Weeks, months of resurvey must ensue, with work halted, and the Missisquoi's precarious capital diminishing to vanishing point, while the story of the great blunder percolated through the lobbies of the provincial legislature, filled with bland, jeering, ill-conditioned men to whom one day's tramp such as their laborers performed would mean apoplexy.

Their faces haunted Wilton. He remembered half a dozen whom he had approached when the Missisquoi scheme was first bruited abroad. There was, in particular, Tom Bowyer, of the New Northern line, his many interests entrenched behind the bulwarks of political influence. Joe Bostock had suggested an amalgamation in the belief that Tom Bowyer could wreck the bill in the legislature. But Tom had laughed in Joe's face, and had not even opposed the measure.

"Go ahead with your muskrat line, Joe!" he had said. "I won't hinder you."

The surveyors who made the preliminary reconnaissance had shirked their work and lied. Wilton suspected that most of them had been in Bow-



Joe Bostock Laid His Hands on the Other Man's Shoulders.

yer's pay. Bowyer and Bostock were old rivals. They had reported Big Muskeg to be an insignificant swamp with a firm underbed at the portage. It could be crossed, of course, in the end, since nature always yielded to man. But the Missisquoi must either swing a huge loop around it, or set itself the task of filling those unsounded depths with thousands of tons of rock.

"D—n you!" said Wilton, shaking his fist toward the valley. "We'll beat you yet. We've made a bad blunder, Joe. Crooked work, without doubt—though I can't imagine why Bowyer's gang should take the trouble to hurt us unless, of course, they guess—"

Joe Bostock shook his head. "No, they haven't guessed that, Wilton," he answered. "I'll stake my hat on that. There ain't nobody except me and you and Kitty knows. It's just bad luck, Wilton—"

Joe could never sense treachery nor bring himself to believe in its possibility; and if that weakness had kept him, in the main, a poor man, it had bound his friends to him with unbreakable bonds.

"At the best it's gross negligence," said Wilton. "Those surveyors scamped their work. I accepted their reports. I couldn't go out with the transit and aneroid and follow them all up to check their results. But I might have sounded Big Muskeg. I didn't." His voice choked. "Joe, if you have any sense, you'll fire me first," he said.

Joe Bostock laid his hands on the other man's shoulders and the humorously smiled him on his face. "Well, I guess not, Wilton," he said. "You ain't to blame. You've done all that mortal man could do. The Missisquoi

couldn't have been built at all without you. Fire you? Why, Kitty'd have my life if I dared suggest such a thing."

Wilton frowned involuntarily at the reference to the pretty young wife whom Joe Bostock had married in Winnipeg the year before. Joe's first marriage had been unhappy; it had been long ago, and Wilton knew there had been a separation, though Joe was always reticent about that.

Kitty was five and thirty years younger than Joe, and she had intervened into a fast friendship of more than a decade between Joe and Wilton. It made a difference, as it always does, though Joe had sworn it should not, and Kitty thought the world of Wilton.

Wilton could never understand his secret feeling about Kitty. She was devoted to Joe. Perhaps that was what lay beneath his latent antagonism toward her. He was jealous of her. He was jealous of a woman's love for Joe.

"I guess not!" said Joe Bostock again, pressing his hand hard down on Wilton's shoulder.

And, in that instant, Wilton heard the crack of a rifle, and felt a violent blow on the upper part of the left arm, which knocked him to the ground. As he fell, Joe Bostock pitched forward upon him.

Twice Joe's lips quivered, as if he was trying to speak. Then the lower jaw dropped and the eyes rolled upward. A grayish pallor crept over the face.

Wilton saw that Joe's mackinaw had a tiny tear in it, over the breast. A trickle of blood seeped through the cloth. He wrenched the garment open with his right hand, pulled up the sweater, and tore the shirt apart. The heart, fluttering like a wounded bird, stopped under his hand. Joe sighed once, but he never stirred again. The bullet had passed clean through Joe Bostock's heart from the back. And, as he tried to raise Joe's body, Wilton realized that the same bullet had broken his left arm, which hung limp from the shoulder.

He sprang to his feet, a mad wrath giving back to him his ebbing strength. He glared about him, but it was impossible to ascertain from where the shot had come. He could not even locate the direction within a hundred degrees, for Joe had been in the act of turning. Nobody was in sight, and the woods were silent.

His bellying call of fury that went echoing through the trees elicited no answer. He tore strips from his handkerchief, holding it between his teeth, and, with his left hand on his knee, knotted them about a stick and improvised a tourniquet. The blood was spurting down his sleeve in jets, the pain was intense, and it was impossible to take off the mackinaw and hope to replace his arms in it; but he twisted with all his force until the diminishing flow showed that he had compressed the artery. Thrusting the longer end of the stick beneath his armpit, he passed the other through the buttonhole of the garment, and, stooping, managed to get Joe's body upon his shoulder and to hold it with his right arm.

His impulse was to carry Joe's body back to the camp, but he knew that it would be impossible to make the distance. Yet to leave it would mean the certainty of mutilation by bears or timber-wolves unless he could build a cairn of stones. And of that he was equally incapable. He set Joe's body down, and, in the first full realization of his loss and his predicament, he shouted curses to the sky.

That murder had been intended he did not believe; no doubt the shot had been a bullet fired at some nearer mark, perhaps a hare, and by one of the transit-bearers, following them up, had fired the shot, and, seeing the fatality, had fled.

But the thought that this might be the explanation was only a fleeting one. Joe was dead, and his body must be cared for, just as if he were alive—taken back to the camp and thence out of the woods. There was no possibility of leaving Joe's body there. Yet it seemed to him that he could not hope to reach the camp. And now another idea came to him.

It was seven miles back to the camp, but only five to the portage over the frozen swamp. Upon the other side of the portage was a trail that came out of the prairie southward and wound into the unknown north. Along this Indians brought their winnable catches to the trading-store of McDonald, the factor of the Hudson's Bay company.

Traveling was hard along the shore of the great Muskeg, but it would mean two miles less, and it was just possible to make the store. McDonald was a queer, taciturn, sometimes venomous old man, and had evinced a strong dislike of Wilton on the occasion of their last meeting. Yet McDonald would shelter him and receive Joe's body. And then there was Molly, his daughter.

Wilton, having made his choice, acted on it at once. With a great effort he raised Joe's stiffening form upon

his shoulder; and doggedly he began his awful journey, his right arm grasping the dead man, his helpless left hugging the tourniquet-stick against his side.

He stumbled over the rough ground until he reached the cleared road through the trees. Here the going was easier, but the burden numbed his right hand and shoulder, the throbbing pain in his left seemed to beat time to his footsteps, and the ache of the cramping muscles increased the agony of his wound and began to spread down his body.

A wind sprang up, driving gusts of whirling snow into his eyes. A deadly lethargy was creeping over him, and presently, turning his head to shield his eyes from the beating blasts, he saw a trickle of crimson on the road behind him.

The tourniquet had loosened. He was bleeding his life away. The blood was gushing down his fingers. Wilton set Joe's body down and succeeded in tightening the compress. And it was only after an almost superhuman struggle that he could get Joe over his shoulder. He knew that if he was forced to set the body down again he could never lift it.

With knees bent, tripping over the roots of the trees, and reeling through a swimming world, he staggered on and on and on. And neither his anger nor the thought of Kitty could have kept his resolution through that nightmare of pain. It was all Joe now, the memory of Joe, his love for him, and his resolve that his friend's remains should not be torn by the timber-wolves.

Joe had befriended him years before, when he had drifted, penniless, into Winnipeg. Joe's faith had been his own, and the secret of the Missisquoi theirs.

So the miles reeled off behind him, while the wind increased and the snow fell thicker along the way. At last the trees opened, and the bleak shore of Big Muskeg lay before him, a desert of ice and snow, with the bluffs opposite, and beyond them the trees once more.

At once the fierce swirl of the gale caught him, whistling like sirens, boring into his face like white-hot probes. The ice that fringed his lashes blinded him and pulled them from the lids when he tried to open his eyes. He reeled on, clutching Joe's body, and heard his own voice go from him in shouts of despair. They rolled across the snow, and the echoes came in faint, mimicking answer from the distant cliffs.

Wilton retained sufficient consciousness of his surroundings to make his way along the shore toward the portage. He might have shortened his route to McDonald's store a little by risking a direct crossing; but the surface of a muskeg is always dangerous, even in midwinter, when the apparently solid ice conceals sink-holes of slush, which, mixed with peat and ooze, does not congeal firmly, and entraps the unwary traveler, a quick-mud from which escape is next to impossible.

"And somehow, breaking the rotten ice in front of her body, the girl succeeded in getting Wilton to the shore."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

SHUT OUT WATER AND DUST

Nature Has Provided for the Hermetic Closing of Nostrils of Seal and Camel.

Most of us when we go in for diving have the very unpleasant experience of getting our nostrils full of water. Nature did not design man to be a diving animal, otherwise she would have been as clever with his nose as she has been with seal's, London Tit-Bits says.

The seal is, without doubt, the cleverest diver in the animal world, and his nose is a very ingenious contrivance indeed. Each nostril is provided with muscles which close it hermetically at the owner's will. And the shape of the nose is such that when the nostrils are closed not a drop of water can enter.

With seals the closing of the nostrils at the moment of diving has become an automatic process. This is wonderful enough, but we can see a still more remarkable application of the same principle in an animal as far removed from the seal as chalk is from cheese.

The seal is a water animal. The other owner of trapdoor nostrils is the camel, an inhabitant of the driest parts of the world, the waterless sandy deserts. Now, why should the camel require such an apparatus? He is not troubled with water, but he is troubled with dust; not the dust that we see in this country, but the fierce, blinding duststorms of the desert.

These are so violent that tiny particles are driven into the works of even the most finely made watch, which becomes at once clogged and useless. If the camel had not nostrils which were perfectly dust-tight he could never endure the dreadful sand and dust storms.

Home Town Helps

MAKE HOME A BEAUTY SPOT

Matter Is More One of Careful Thought Than Mere Expenditure of Actual Cash.

The "brightening up" process ought to start with the lot line. Invest in some fertilizer for the lawn—you'll be surprised at the good it will do. Then, over in one corner may be a spot where a spirea, or a climbing rose could work wonders in transformation. Perhaps the sidewalk entrances may need repainting, or the porches have to be painted, and surely every two or three years a house needs a coat or two of good paint, remembering the slogan that when you "save the surface, you save all." Then the garage and the flower garden come in for their share of new things. Perhaps there's a cracked window pane somewhere that needs replacing, or a cupboard to build.

Inside the home, most folks clear away the dirt and the grime and the smoke of winter hours with a vigorous application of the scrub brush, plus the services of a good decorator. A few dollars invested in matters like these aids the inmates of any dwelling, no matter how modest or pretentious, to get a new grip on life.

But just a word of caution before you do anything. Consider well what should be done, make your plans, then go to dealers you can trust and make your purchases, keeping in mind the fact that those who advertise their wares, who are unafraid to speak of the merits of their merchandise publicly, through newspaper columns, are the ones to turn to both for advice and for the actual investment of the dollars you have planned to spend for the little things that help make a house a home.

After dark the Careless Cit throws the paper off the bread out the kitchen window of his apartment to his neighbor's lawn, to save himself ten steps to the incinerator, and when he sees small boys throwing a milk bottle or a dead electric bulb on the pavement, spraying glass in the path of vulnerable tires, Careless Cit laughs and says boys will be boys.

Home doesn't begin at the front door and end at the back. It goes from the curb to the alley fence. It takes in the clothesline and the green shutter and every bough of the apple-tree. Poets may rave of the old oaken, moss-covered bucket, but they don't drink out of it. The inconveniences of the summer hotel are all right when you're on a vacation.

The time of home regeneration is here, however, and it doesn't end until the blackness cast up by the radiator is cleaned from the wall and the indoor nicks of winter have disappeared under the application of elbow-grease.

HERE IS SPIRIT THAT WINS

"Boost" is the Word That Means Everything to the Individual and the Community.

You are invited to join the Community Boosters, and—Boost your county, boost your friend, Boost the church that you attend; Boost the place where you are dwelling.

Boost the goods that you are selling. Boost the people round about you; They can get along without you—But success will quicker find them If they know that you're behind them. Boost for every forward movement, Boost for every new improvement; Boost the man for whom you labor, Boost the stranger and the neighbor; Cease to be a chronic knocker, Cease to be a progress-blocker, If you'd make your community better Boost it to the final letter.

—Nebraska City Weekly News.

The City Beautiful.

We can't have too many pretty towns, or too many pretty homes in town and country. Progress along this line is being made annually and with increasing interest among progressive town builders and home owners. There is no use for shabbiness. Shabbiness connotes indolence and indifference. A house or a town which indicates careless occupants, citizens concerned only for primitive necessities, is not one to attract the sort of people that energetic people want to know. Poverty is no excuse for shabbiness. The humblest dwelling does not need to be shabby. Shabbiness is carelessness, not flimsiness. Many a flimsy little cottage or cabin exhibits a quality that is far superior to shabbiness. It is the careless, untenanted, dilapidated, apathetic look to a man's home, a man's town, or a man's clothing that gives it shabbiness. One needn't be shabby in overalls any more than in a tailor-made suit.—Dallas (Tex.) News.

Lion's Meal of Porcupine Fatal.

The victim of its own rapacity, a dead mountain lion is on exhibition in Stevensville, Mont. Two local hunters "bagged" the beast with so little trouble that they were puzzled, until an examination of the lion's mouth showed it had attempted to feast upon a porcupine. Aggravating darts had become imbedded in the membrane, preventing the animal from partaking of food. Spikes of the "quill pig" had been known to kill beasts in a similar manner. The lion on exhibition is of unusual size.

GAINS 8 POUNDS IN TWO WEEKS' TIME

Dyspepsia Entirely Overcome and She Eats, Sleeps and Feels Better Than in Years, Says Boston Resident.

"I have actually gained eight pounds in two weeks' time and am now eating better, sleeping better and feeling better than I have in three or four years," said Mrs. Celesta Fell, 32 Prince street, Boston, Mass., recently, in telling of the great benefits she has derived from the use of Taniaic.

"My stomach was in such a bad fix before I took Taniaic that I did not dare eat much of anything, for if I did I would have so much pain and distress from indigestion that I felt like I was going to die. I was so run down and weak from lack of nourishment that I could not do my housework."

"I was so nervous I couldn't keep still during the day nor sleep at night. I can see now if it had not been for Taniaic I would have had to give up entirely. I am now feeling strong and healthy and all the credit belongs to Taniaic."

Taniaic is sold by all good druggists.

Boy's Cause for Regret.

Her Young Man—Edward, will you be sorry when I marry your sister? Edward (aged five)—Yes, I'll be sorry for you.—London Answers.

Dr. Peery's "Dead Shot" not only expels Worms and Tapeworm, but cleans out the system in which they breed and tones up the digestion. One dose sufficient. If it fails, we will refund your money. 713 Pearl St., New York City.—Advertisement.

Better Still.

Turner—"Theory raises a man's hopes." Brookes—"But practice raises his wages."—London Answers.

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