

Webster Henry Kitchell, Merwin Samuel

Calumet 'K'



Henry Webster

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CHAPTER I

The contract for the two million bushel grain elevator, Calumet K, had been let to MacBride & Company, of Minneapolis, in January, but the superstructure was not begun until late in May, and at the end of October it was still far from completion. Ill luck had attended Peterson, the constructor, especially since August. MacBride, the head of the firm, disliked unlucky men, and at the end of three months his patience gave out, and he telegraphed Charlie Bannon to leave the job he was completing at Duluth and report at once at the home office.

Rumors of the way things were going at Calumet under the hands of his younger co-laborer had reached Bannon, and he was not greatly surprised when MacBride told him to go to Chicago Sunday night and supersede Peterson.

At ten o'clock Monday morning, Bannon, looking out through the dusty window of the trolley car, caught sight of the elevator, the naked cribbing of its huge bins looming high above the huddled shanties and lumber piles about it. A few minutes later he was walking along a rickety plank sidewalk which seemed to lead in a general direction toward the elevator. The sidewalks at Calumet are at the theoretical grade of the district, that is, about five feet above the actual level of the ground. In winter and spring they are necessary causeways above seas of mud, but in dry weather every one abandons them, to walk straight to his destination over the uninterrupted flats. Bannon set down his hand bag to button his ulster, for the wind was driving clouds of smoke and stinging dust and an occasional grimy snowflake out of the northwest. Then he sprang down from the sidewalk and made his way through the intervening bogs and, heedless of the shouts of the brakemen, over a freight train which was creaking its endless length across his path, to the elevator site.

The elevator lay back from the river about sixty yards and parallel to it. Between was the main line of the C. & S. C., four clear tracks unbroken by switch or siding. On the wharf, along with a big pile of timber, was the beginning of a small spouting house, to be connected with the main elevator by a belt gallery above the C. & S. C. tracks. A hundred yards to the westward, up the river, the Belt Line tracks crossed the river and the C. & S. C. right of way at an oblique angle, and sent two side tracks lengthwise through the middle of the elevator and a third along the south side, that is, the side away from the river.

Bannon glanced over the lay of the land, looked more particularly at the long ranges of timber to be used for framing the cupola, and then asked a passing workman the way to the office. He frowned at the wretched shanty, evidently an abandoned Belt Line section house, which Peterson used for headquarters. Then, setting down his bag just outside the door, he went in.

"Where's the boss?" he asked.

The occupant of the office, a clerk, looked up impatiently, and spoke in a tone reserved to discourage seekers for work.

"He ain't here. Out on the job somewhere."

"Palatial office you've got," Bannon commented. "It would help those windows to have'em ploughed." He brought his bag into the office and kicked it under a desk, then began turning over a stack of blue prints that lay, weighted down with a coupling pin, on the table.

"I guess I can find Peterson for you if you want to see him," said the clerk.

"Don't worry about my finding him," came from Bannon, deep in his study of the plans. A moment later he went out.

A gang of laborers was engaged in moving the timbers back from the railroad siding. Superintending the work was a squat little man – Bannon could not see until near by that he was not a boy – big-headed, big-handed, big-footed. He stood there in his shirt-sleeves, his back to Bannon, swearing good-humoredly at the men. When he turned toward him Bannon saw that he had that morning played an unconscious joke upon his bright red hair by putting on a crimson necktie.

Bannon asked for Peterson.

"He's up on the framing of the spouting house, over on the wharf there."

"What are you carrying that stuff around for?" asked Bannon.

"Moving it back to make room by the siding. We're expecting a big bill of cribbing. You're Mr. Bannon, ain't you?" Bannon nodded. "Peterson had a telegram from the office saying to expect you."

"You're still expecting that cribbing, eh?"

"Harder than ever. That's most all we've been doing for ten days. There's Peterson, now; up there with the sledge."

Bannon looked in time to see the boss spring out on a timber that was still balancing and swaying upon the hoisting rope. It was a good forty feet above the dock. Clinging to the rope with one hand, with the other Peterson drove his sledge against the side of the timber which swung almost to its exact position in the framing.

"Slack away!" he called to the engineers, and he cast off the rope sling. Then cautiously he stepped out to the end of the timber. It tottered, but the lithe figure moved on to within striking distance. He swung the twenty-four pound sledge in a circle against the butt of the timber. Every muscle in his body from the ankles up had helped to deal the blow, and the big stick bucked. The boss sprang erect, flinging his arms wide and using the sledge to recover his balance. He struck hard once more and again lightly. Then he hammered the timber down on the iron dowel pins. "All right," he shouted to the engineer; "send up the next one."

A few minutes later Bannon climbed out on the framing beside him.

"Hello, Charlie!" said the boss, "I've been looking for you. They wired me you was coming."

"Well, I'm here," said Bannon, "though I 'most met my death climbing up just now. Where do you keep your ladders?"

"What do I want of a ladder? I've no use for a man who can't get up on the timbers. If a man needs a ladder, he'd better stay abed."

"That's where I get fired first thing," said Bannon.

"Why, you come up all right, with your overcoat on, too."

"I had to wear it or scratch up the timbers with my bones. I lost thirty-two pounds up at Duluth."

Another big timber came swinging up to them at the end of the hoisting rope. Peterson sprang out upon it. "I'm going down before I get brushed off," said Bannon.

"I'll be back at the office as soon as I get this corbel laid."

"No hurry. I want to look over the drawings. Go easy there," he called to the engineer at the hoist; "I'm coming down on the elevator." Peterson had already cast off the rope, but Bannon jumped for it and thrust his foot into the hook, and the engineer, not knowing who he was, let him down none too gently.

On his way to the office he spoke to two carpenters at work on a stick of timber. "You'd better leave that, I guess, and get some four-inch cribbing and some inch stuff and make some ladders; I guess there's enough lying 'round for that. About four'll do."

It was no wonder that the Calumet K job had proved too much for Peterson. It was difficult from the beginning. There was not enough ground space to work in comfortably, and the proper bestowal of the millions of feet of lumber until time for it to be used in the construction was no mean problem. The elevator was to be a typical "Chicago" house, built to receive grain from cars and to deliver it either to cars or to ships. As has been said, it stood back from the river, and grain for ships was to be carried on belt conveyors running in an inclosed bridge above the railroad tracks to

the small spouting house on the wharf. It had originally been designed to have a capacity for twelve hundred thousand bushels, but the grain men who were building it, Page & Company, had decided after it was fairly started that it must be larger; so, in the midst of his work, Peterson had received instructions and drawings for a million bushel annex. He had done excellent work – work satisfactory even to MacBride & Company – on a smaller scale, and so he had been given the opportunity, the responsibility, the hundreds of employees, the liberal authority, to make what he could of it all.

There could be no doubt that he had made a tangle; that the big job as a whole was not under his hand, but was just running itself as best it could. Bannon, who, since the days when he was chief of the wrecking gang on a division of the Grand Trunk, had made a business of rising to emergencies, was obviously the man for the situation. He was worn thin as an old knife-blade, he was just at the end of a piece of work that would have entitled any other man to a vacation; but MacBride made no apologies when he assigned him the new task – "Go down and stop this fiddling around and get the house built. See that it's handling grain before you come away. If you can't do it, I'll come down and do it myself."

Bannon shook his head dubiously. "Well, I'm not sure – " he began. But MacBride laughed, whereupon Bannon grinned in spite of himself. "All right," he said.

It was no laughing matter, though, here on the job this Monday morning, and, once alone in the little section house, he shook his head again gravely. He liked Peterson too well, for one thing, to supersede him without a qualm. But there was nothing else for it, and he took off his overcoat, laid aside the coupling pin, and attacked the stack of blue prints.

He worked rapidly, turning now and then from the plans for a reference to the building book or the specifications, whistling softly, except when he stopped to growl, from force of habit, at the office, or, with more reasonable disapproval, at the man who made the drawings for the annex. "Regular damn bird cage," he called it.

It was half an hour before Peterson came in. He was wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, and drawing long breaths with the mere enjoyment of living. "I feel good," he said. "That's where I'd like to work all day. You ought to go up and sledge them timbers for a while. That'd warm you through, I bet."

"You ought to make your timekeeper give you one of those brass checks there and pay you eighteen cents an hour for that work. That's what I'd do."

Peterson laughed. It took more than a hint to reach him. "I have to do it. Those laborers are no good. Honest, I can lift as much as any three men on the job."

"That's all right if those same three don't stop to swap lies while you're lifting."

"Well, I guess they don't come any of that on me," said Peterson, laughing again. "How long are you going to stay with us?"

The office, then, had not told him. Bannon was for a moment at a loss what to say. Luckily there was an interruption. The red-headed young man he had spoken to an hour before came in, tossed a tally board on the desk, and said that another carload of timber had come in.

"Mr. Bannon," said Peterson, "shake hands with Mr. Max Vogel, our lumber checker." That formality attended to, he turned to Bannon and repeated his question. By that time the other had his answer ready.

"Oh, it all depends on the office," he said. "They're bound to keep me busy at something. I'll just stay until they tell me to go somewhere else. They ain't happy except when they've just put me in a hole and told me to climb out. Generally before I'm out they pick me up and chuck me down another one. Old MacBride wouldn't think the Company was prosperous if I wasn't working nights and Sundays."

"You won't be doing that down here."

"I don't know about that. Why, when I first went to work for 'em, they hired me by the day. My time cards for the first years figured up four hundred and thirty-six days." Peterson laughed. "Oh,

that's straight," said Bannon. "Next time you're at the office, ask Brown about it. Since then they've paid me a salary. They seem to think they'd have to go out of business if I ever took a vacation. I've been with 'em twelve years and they've never given me one yet. They made a bluff at it once. I was down at Newport News, been doing a job for the C. & O., and Fred Brown was down that way on business. He – "

"What does Brown look like?" interrupted Peterson. "I never saw him."

"You didn't! Oh, he's a good-looking young chap. Dresses kind of sporty. He's a great jollier. You have to know him a while to find out that he means business. Well, he came 'round and saw I was feeling pretty tired, so he asked me to knock off for a week and go fishing with him. I did, and it was the hardest work I ever tackled."

"Did you get any fish?"

"Fish? Whales! You'd no sooner throw your line over than another one'd grab it – great, big, heavy fish, and they never gave us a minute's rest. I worked like a horse for about half a day and then I gave up. Told Brown I'd take a duplex car-puller along next time I tackled that kind of a job, and I went back to the elevator."

"I'd like to see Brown. I get letters from him right along, of course. He's been jolly me about that cribbing for the last two weeks. I can't make it grow, and I've written him right along that we was expecting it, but that don't seem to satisfy him."

"I suppose not," said Bannon. "They're mostly out for results up at the office. Let's see the bill for it." Vogel handed him a thin typewritten sheet and Bannon looked it over thoughtfully. "Big lot of stuff, ain't it? Have you tried to get any of it here in Chicago?"

"Course not. It's all ordered and cut out up to Ledyard."

"Cut out? Then why don't they send it?"

"They can't get the cars."

"That'll do to tell. 'Can't get the cars!' What sort of a railroad have they got up there?"

"Max, here, can tell you about that, I guess," said Peterson.

"It's the G. & M.," said the lumber checker. "That's enough for any one who's lived in Michigan. It ain't much good."

"How long have they kept 'em waiting for the cars?"

"How long is it, Max?" asked Peterson.

"Let's see. It was two weeks ago come Tuesday."

"Sure?"

"Yes. We got the letter the same day the red-headed man came here. His hair was good and red." Max laughed broadly at the recollection. "He came into the office just as we was reading it."

"Oh, yes. My friend, the walking delegate."

"What's that?" Bannon snapped the words out so sharply that Peterson looked at him in slow surprise.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "A darn little rat of a red-headed walking delegate came out here – had a printed card with Business Agent on it – and poked his long nose into other people's business for a while, and asked the men questions, and at last he came to me. I told him that we treated our men all right and didn't need no help from him, and if I ever caught him out here again I'd carry him up to the top of the jim pole and leave him there. He went fast enough."

"I wish he'd knocked you down first, to even things up," said Bannon.

"Him! Oh, I could have handled him with three fingers."

"I'm going out for a look around," said Bannon, abruptly.

He left Peterson still smiling good-humoredly over the incident.

It was not so much to look over the job as to get where he could work out his wrath that Bannon left the office. There was no use in trying to explain to Peterson what he had done, for even if he could be made to understand, he could undo nothing. Bannon had known a good many walking delegates,

and he had found them, so far, square. But it would be a large-minded man who could overlook what Peterson had done. However, there was no help for it. All that remained was to wait till the business agent should make the next move.

So Bannon put the whole incident out of his mind, and until noon inspected the job in earnest. By the time the whistle blew, every one of the hundreds of men on the job, save Peterson himself, knew that there was a new boss. There was no formal assumption of authority; Bannon's supremacy was established simply by the obvious fact that he was the man who knew how. Systematizing the confusion in one corner, showing another gang how to save handling a big stick twice, finally putting a runway across the drillage of the annex, and doing a hundred little things between times, he made himself master.

The afternoon he spent in the little office, and by four o'clock had seen everything there was in it, plans, specifications, building book, bill file, and even the pay roll, the cash account, and the correspondence. The clerk, who was also timekeeper, exhibited the latter rather grudgingly.

"What's all this stuff?" Bannon asked, holding up a stack of unfiled letters.

"Letters we ain't answered yet."

"Well, we'll answer them now," and Bannon commenced dictating his reply to the one on top of the stack.

"Hold on," said the clerk, "I ain't a stenographer."

"So?" said Bannon. He scribbled a brief memorandum on each sheet. "There's enough to go by," he said. "Answer 'em according to instructions."

"I won't have time to do it till to-morrow some time."

"I'd do it to-night, if I were you," said Bannon, significantly. Then he began writing letters himself.

Peterson and Vogel came into the office a few minutes later.

"Writing a letter to your girl?" said Peterson, jocularly.

"We ought to have a stenographer out here, Pete."

"Stenographer! I didn't know you was such a dude. You'll be wanting a solid silver electric bell connecting with the sody fountain next."

"That's straight," said Bannon. "We ought to have a stenographer for a fact."

He said nothing until he had finished and sealed the two letters he was writing. They were as follows: —

Dear Mr. Brown: It's a mess and no mistake. I'm glad Mr. MacBride didn't come to see it. He'd have fits. The whole job is tied up in a hard knot. Peterson is wearing out chair bottoms waiting for the cribbing from Ledyard. I expect we will have a strike before long. I mean it.

The main house is most up to the distributing floor. The spouting house is framed. The annex is up as far as the bottom, waiting for cribbing. Yours,
Bannon.

P.S. I hope this letter makes you sweat to pay you for last Saturday night. I am about dead. Can't get any sleep. And I lost thirty-two pounds up to Duluth. I expect to die down here.

C. B.

P.S. I guess we'd better set fire to the whole damn thing and collect the insurance and skip.

C.

The other was shorter.

MacBride & Company, Minneapolis:

Gentlemen: I came on the Calumet job to-day. Found it held up by failure of cribbing from Ledyard. Will have at least enough to work with by end of the week. We will get the house done according to specifications.

Yours truly,

MacBride & Company.

Charles Bannon.

CHAPTER II

The five o'clock whistle had sounded, and Peterson sat on the bench inside the office door, while Bannon washed his hands in the tin basin. The twilight was already settling; within the shanty, whose dirty, small-paned windows served only to indicate the lesser darkness without, a wall lamp, set in a dull reflector, threw shadows into the corners.

"You're coming up with me, ain't you?" said Peterson. "I don't believe you'll get much to eat. Supper's just the pickings from dinner."

"Well, the dinner was all right. But I wish you had a bigger bed. I ain't slept for two nights."

"What was the matter?"

"I was on the sleeper last night; and I didn't get in from the Duluth job till seven o'clock Saturday night, and Brown was after me before I'd got my supper. Those fellows at the office wouldn't let a man sleep at all if they could help it. Here I'd been working like a nigger 'most five months on the Duluth house – and the last three weeks running night shifts and Sundays; didn't stop to eat, half the time – and what does Brown do but – 'Well,' he says, 'how're you feeling, Charlie?' 'Middling,' said I. 'Are you up to a little job to-morrow?' 'What's that?' I said. 'Seems to me if I've got to go down to the Calumet job Sunday night I might have an hour or so at home.' 'Well, Charlie,' he says, 'I'm mighty sorry, but you see we've been putting in a big rope drive on a water-power plant over at Stillwater. We got the job on the high bid,' he says, 'and we agreed to have it running on Monday morning. It'll play the devil with us if we can't make good.' 'What's the matter?' said I. 'Well,' he says, 'Murphy's had the job and has balled himself up.'"

By this time the two men had their coats on, and were outside the building.

"Let's see," said Bannon, "we go this way, don't we?"

"Yes."

There was still the light, flying flakes of snow, and the biting wind that came sweeping down from the northwest. The two men crossed the siding, and, picking their way between the freight cars on the Belt Line tracks, followed the path that wound across the stretch of dusty meadow.

"Go ahead," said Peterson; "you was telling about Murphy."

"Well, that was the situation. I could see that Brown was up on his hind legs about it, but it made me tired, all the same. Of course the job had to be done, but I wasn't letting him have any satisfaction. I told him he ought to give it to somebody else, and he handed me a lot of stuff about my experience. Finally I said: 'You come around in the morning, Mr. Brown. I ain't had any sleep to speak of for three weeks. I lost thirty-two pounds,' I said, 'and I ain't going to be bothered to-night.' Well, sir, he kind of shook his head, but he went away, and I got to thinking about it. Long about half-past seven I went down and got a time-table. There was a train to Stillwater at eight-forty-two."

"That night?"

"Sure. I went over to the shops with an express wagon and got a thousand feet of rope – had it in two coils so I could handle it – and just made the train. It was a mean night. There was some rain when I started, but you ought to have seen it when I got to Stillwater – it was coming down in layers, and mud that sucked your feet down halfway to your knees. There wasn't a wagon anywhere around the station, and the agent wouldn't lift a finger. It was blind dark. I walked off the end of the platform, and went plump into a mudhole. I waded up as far as the street crossing, where there was an electric light, and ran across a big lumber yard, and hung around until I found the night watchman. He was pretty near as mean as the station agent, but he finally let me have a wheelbarrow for half a dollar, and told me how to get to the job."

"He called it fifty rods, but it was a clean mile if it was a step, and most of the way down the track. I wheeled her back to the station, got the rope, and started out. Did you ever try to shove two five hundred foot coils over a mile of crossties? Well, that's what I did. I scraped off as much mud

as I could, so I could lift my feet, and bumped over those ties till I thought the teeth were going to be jarred clean out of me. After I got off the track there was a stretch of mud that left the road by the station up on dry land.

"There was a fool of a night watchman at the power plant – I reckon he thought I was going to steal the turbines, but he finally let me in, and I set him to starting up the power while I cleaned up Murphy's job and put in the new rope."

"All by yourself?" asked Peterson.

"Sure thing. Then I got her going and she worked smooth as grease. When we shut down and I came up to wash my hands, it was five minutes of three. I said, 'Is there a train back to Minneapolis before very long?' 'Yes,' says the watchman, 'the fast freight goes through a little after three.' 'How much after?' I said. 'Oh,' he says, 'I couldn't say exactly. Five or eight minutes, I guess.' I asked when the next train went, and he said there wasn't a regular passenger till six-fifty-five. Well, sir, maybe you think I was going to wait four hours in that hole! I went out of that building to beat the limited – never thought of the wheelbarrow till I was halfway to the station. And there was some of the liveliest stepping you ever saw. Couldn't see a thing except the light on the rails from the arc lamp up by the station. I got about halfway there – running along between the rails – and banged into a switch – knocked me seven ways for Sunday. Lost my hat picking myself up, and couldn't stop to find it."

Peterson turned in toward one of a long row of square frame houses.

"Here we are," he said. As they went up the stairs he asked: "Did you make the train?"

"Caught the caboose just as she was swinging out. They dumped me out in the freight yards, and I didn't get home till 'most five o'clock. I went right to bed, and along about eight o'clock Brown came in and woke me up. He was feeling pretty nervous. 'Say, Charlie,' he said, 'ain't it time for you to be starting?' 'Where to?' said I. 'Over to Stillwater,' he said. 'There ain't any getting out of it. That drive's got to be running to-morrow.' 'That's all right,' said I, 'but I'd like to know if I can't have one day's rest between jobs – Sunday, too. And I lost thirty-two pounds.' Well, sir, he didn't know whether to get hot or not. I guess he thought himself they were kind of rubbing it in. 'Look here,' he said, 'are you going to Stillwater, or ain't you?' 'No,' said I, 'I ain't. Not for a hundred rope drives.' Well, he just got up and took his hat and started out. 'Mr. Brown,' I said, when he was opening the door, 'I lost my hat down at Stillwater last night. I reckon the office ought to stand for it.' He turned around and looked queer, and then he grinned. 'So you went over?' he said. 'I reckon I did,' said I. 'What kind of a hat did you lose?' he asked, and he grinned again. 'I guess it was a silk one, wasn't it?' 'Yes,' said I, 'a silk hat – something about eight dollars.'"

"Did he mean he'd give you a silk hat?" asked Peterson.

"Couldn't say."

They were sitting in the ten-by-twelve room that Peterson rented for a dollar a week. Bannon had the one chair, and was sitting tipped back against the washstand. Peterson sat on the bed. Bannon had thrown his overcoat over the foot of the bed, and had dropped his bag on the floor by the window.

"Ain't it time to eat, Pete?" he said.

"Yes, there's the bell."

The significance of Bannon's arrival, and the fact that he was planning to stay, was slow in coming to Peterson. After supper, when they had returned to the room, his manner showed constraint. Finally he said: —

"Is there any fuss up at the office?"

"What about?"

"Why – do they want to rush the job or something?"

"Well, we haven't got such a lot of time. You see, it's November already."

"What's the hurry all of a sudden? They didn't say nothing to me."

"I guess you haven't been crowding it very hard, have you?"

Peterson flushed.

"I've been working harder than I ever did before," he said. "If it wasn't for the cribbing being held up like this, I'd 'a' had the cupola half done before now. I've been playing in hard luck."

Bannon was silent for a moment, then he said: —

"How long do you suppose it would take to get the cribbing down from Ledyard?"

"Not very long if it was rushed, I should think — a couple of days, or maybe three. And they'll rush it all right when they can get the cars. You see, it's only ten or eleven hours up there, passenger schedule; and they could run it right in on the job over the Belt Line."

"It's the Belt Line that crosses the bridge, is it?"

"Yes."

Bannon spread his legs apart and drummed on the front of his chair.

"What's the other line?" he asked — "the four track line?"

"That's the C. & S. C. We don't have nothing to do with them."

They were both silent for a time. The flush had not left Peterson's face. His eyes were roving over the carpet, lifting now and then to Bannon's face with a quick glance.

"Guess I'll shave," said Bannon. "Do you get hot water here?"

"Why, I don't know," replied Peterson. "I generally use cold water. The folks here ain't very obliging. Kind o' poor, you know."

Bannon was rummaging in his grip for his shaving kit.

"You never saw a razor like that, Pete," he said. "Just heft it once."

"Light, ain't it," said Peterson, taking it in his hand.

"You bet it's light. And look here" — he reached for it and drew it back and forth over the palm of his hand — "that's the only stropping I ever give it."

"Don't you have to hone it?"

"No, sir; it's never been touched to a stone or leather. You just get up and try it once. Those whiskers of yours won't look any the worse for a chopping."

Peterson laughed, and lathered his face, while Bannon put an edge on the razor, testing it with a hair.

"Say, that's about the best yet," said Peterson, after the first stroke.

"You're right it is."

Bannon looked on for a few minutes, then he took a railroad "Pathfinder" from his grip and rapidly turned the pages. Peterson saw it in the mirror, and asked, between strokes: —

"What are you going to do?"

"Looking up trains."

While Peterson was splashing in the washbowl, Bannon took his turn at the mirror.

"How's the Duluth job getting on?" asked Peterson, when Bannon had finished, and was wiping his razor.

"All right — 'most done. Just a little millwright work left, and some cleaning up."

"There ain't any marine leg on the house, is there?"

"No."

"How big a house is it?"

"Eight hundred thousand bushels."

"That so? Ain't half as big as this one, is it?"

"Guess not. Built for the same people, though, Page & Company."

"They must be going in pretty heavy."

"They are. There's a good deal of talk about it. Some of the boys up at the office say there's going to be fun with December wheat before they get through with it. It's been going up pretty steadily since the end of September — it was seventy-four and three-eighths Saturday in Minneapolis. It ain't got up quite so high down here yet, but the boys say there's going to be a lot of money in it for somebody."

"Be a kind of a good thing to get in on, eh?" said Peterson, cautiously.

"Maybe, for those that like to put money in wheat. I've got no money for that sort of thing myself."

"Yes, of course," was Peterson's quick reply. "A fellow doesn't want to run them kind o' chances. I don't believe in it myself."

"The fact's this, – and this is just between you and me, mind you; I don't know anything about it, it's only what I think, – somebody's buying a lot of December wheat, or the price wouldn't keep going up. And I've got a notion that, whoever he is, it's Page & Company that's selling it to him. That's just putting two and two together, you see. It's the real grain that the Pages handle, and if they sell to a man it means that they're going to make a mighty good try at unloading it on him and making him pay for it. That's all I know about it. I see the Pages selling – or what looks mighty like it – and I see them beginning to look around and talk on the quiet about crowding things a little on their new houses, and it just strikes me that there's likely to be a devil of a lot of wheat coming into Chicago before the year runs out; and if that's so, why, there's got to be a place to put it when it gets here."

"Do they have to have an elevator to put it in?" asked Peterson. "Can't they deliver it in the cars? I don't know much about that side of the business."

"I should say not. The Board of Trade won't recognize grain as delivered until it has been inspected and stored in a registered house."

"When would the house have to be ready?"

"Well, if I'm right, if they're going to put December wheat in this house, they'll have to have it in before the last day of December."

"We couldn't do that," said Peterson, "if the cribbing was here."

Bannon, who had stretched out on the bed, swung his feet around and sat up. The situation was not easy, but he had been sent to Calumet to get the work done in time, and he meant to do it.

"Now, about this cribbing, Pete," he said; "we've got to have it before we can touch the annex?"

"I guess that's about it," Peterson replied.

"I've been figuring a little on this bill. I take it there's something over two million feet altogether. Is that right?"

"It's something like that. Couldn't say exactly. Max takes care of the lumber."

Bannon's brows came together.

"You ought to know a little more about this yourself, Pete. You're the man that's building the house."

"I guess I've been pushing it along as well as any one could," said Peterson, sullenly.

"That's all right. I ain't hitting at you. I'm talking business, that's all. Now, if Vogel's right, this cribbing ought to have been here fourteen days ago – fourteen days to-morrow."

Peterson nodded.

"That's just two weeks of lost time. How've you been planning to make that up?"

"Why – why – I reckon I can put things together soon's I get the cribbing."

"Look here, Pete. The office has contracted to get this house done by a certain date. They've got to pay \$750 for every day that we run over that date. There's no getting out of that, cribbing or no cribbing. When they're seeing ten or twenty thousand dollars slipping out of their hands, do you think they're going to thank you for telling 'em that the G. & M. railroad couldn't get cars? They don't care what's the matter – all they want of you is to do the work on time."

"Now, look here, Charlie – "

"Hold on, Pete. Don't get mad. It's facts, that's all. Here's these two weeks gone. You see that, all right enough. Now, the way this work's laid out, a man's got to make every day count right from the start if he wants to land on his feet when the house is done. Maybe you think somebody up in the sky is going to hand you down a present of two extra weeks so the lost time won't count. That would be all right, only it ain't very likely to happen."

"Well," said Peterson, "what are you getting at? What do you want me to do? Perhaps you think it's easy."

"No, I don't. But I'll tell you what to do. In the first place you want to quit this getting out on the job and doing a laborer's work. The office is paying out good money to the men that should do that. You know how to lay a corbel, but just now you couldn't tell me how much cribbing was coming. You're paid to direct this whole job and to know all about it, not to lay corbels. If you put in half a day swinging a sledge out there on the spouting house, how're you going to know that the lumber bills tally, and the carpenters ain't making mistakes, and that the timber's piled right. Here to-day you had a dozen men throwing away their time moving a lot of timber that ought to have been put in the right place when it first came in."

Peterson was silent.

"Now to-morrow, Pete, as soon as you've got the work moving along, you'd better go over to the electric light company and see about having the whole ground wired for arc lamps, so we can be ready to put on a night shift the minute the cribbing comes in. You want to crowd 'em, too. They ought to have it ready in two days."

Bannon sat for a moment, then he arose and looked at his watch.

"I'm going to leave you, Pete," he said, as he put on his collar.

"Where're you going?"

"I've got to get up to the city to make the ten o'clock train. I'm going up to Ledyard to get the cribbing. Be back in a couple of days."

He threw his shaving kit into his grip, put on his overcoat, said good-night, and went out.

CHAPTER III

Next morning at eight o'clock Charlie Bannon walked into the office of C. H. Dennis, the manager of the Ledyard Salt and Lumber Company.

"I'm Bannon," he said, "of MacBride & Company. Come up to see why you don't get out our bill of cribbing."

"Told you by letter," retorted Dennis. "We can't get the cars."

"I know you did. That's a good thing to say in a letter. I wanted to find out how much of it really was cut."

"It's all cut and stacked by the siding, taking up half the yard. Want to see it?"

Bannon smiled and nodded. "Here's a good cigar for you," he said, "and you're a good fellow, but I think I'd like to see the cribbing."

"Oh, that's all right," laughed Dennis. "I'd have said the same thing if it wasn't cut. Come out this way."

Bannon followed him out into the yard. "There it is," said the manager.

There was no need of pointing it out. It made a pile more than three hundred feet long. It was nothing but rough hemlock, two inches thick, and from two to ten inches wide, intended to be spiked together flatwise for the walls of the bins, but its bulk was impressive. Bannon measured it with his eye and whistled. "I wish that had been down on our job ten days ago," he said, presently. "I'd be taking a vacation now if it had."

"Well, it was ready then. You can tell by the color."

"What's the matter with the G. & M. anyway? They don't seem to be hauling very much. I noticed that last night when I came up. I'm no good at sleeping on the train."

"Search me," said Dennis. "They've tied us up for these two weeks. I've kicked for cars, and the old man – that's Sloan – he's kicked, but here we are yet – can't move hand or foot."

"Who's Sloan?"

"Oh, he's the whole thing. Owns the First National Bank and the trolley line and the Ledyard Salt and Lumber Company and most of the downtown real estate."

"Where can I find him? Is he in town?"

"I guess so. He's got an office across the river. Just ask anybody where the Sloan Building is."

"Likely to be there as early as this?" asked Bannon, looking at his watch.

"Sure, if he's in town."

Bannon slipped his watch into his pocket. "Much obliged," he said. "Glad to have met you. Good morning;" and, turning, he walked rapidly away down the plank wagon road.

In Sloan's office he stated his errand as briefly as on the former occasion, adding only that he had already seen Dennis.

"I guess he told you all there is to tell," said the magnate. "We can't make the G. & M. give us cars. I've told Dennis to stir 'em up as hard as he could. I guess we'll have to wait."

"I can't wait."

"What else can you do? It's every bit as bad for us as it is for you, and you can rest assured that we'll do all we can." As if the cadence of his last sentence were not sufficiently recognizable as a formula of dismissal, he picked up a letter that lay on his desk and began reading it.

"This isn't an ordinary kick," said Bannon, sharply. "It isn't just a case of us having to pay a big delay forfeit. There's a reason why our job's got to be done on time. I want to know the reason why the G. & M. won't give you cars. It ain't because they haven't got them."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because there's three big strings of empties within twenty miles of here this minute. I saw them when I came up this morning."

For a minute Sloan said nothing, only traced designs on the blotter with his pencil. Bannon saw that there was no longer any question of arousing his interest. At last he spoke: —

"I've suspected that there was something in the wind, but I've been too busy with other things to tend to it, so I turned it over to Dennis. Perhaps he's done as well as I could. I don't know much about G. & M. these days. For a long time they were at me to take a big block of treasury stock, but the road seemed to me in bad shape, so I wouldn't go in. Lately they've reorganized — have got a lot of new money in there — I don't know whose, but they've let me alone. There's been no row, you understand. That ain't the reason they've tied us up, but I haven't known much about what was going on inside."

"Would they be likely to tell you if you asked? I mean if you took it to headquarters?"

"I couldn't get any more out of them than you could — that is, not by asking."

"I guess I'll go look 'em up myself. Where can I find anybody that knows anything?"

"The division offices are at Blake City. That's only about twenty miles. You could save time by talking over the 'phone."

"Not me," said Bannon. "In a case like this I couldn't express myself properly unless I saw the fellow I was talking to."

Sloan laughed. "I guess you're right. But I'll call up the division superintendent and tell him you're coming. Then you'll be sure of finding him."

Bannon shook his head. "I'd find him with his little speech all learned. No, I'll take my chances on his being there. When's the train?"

"Nine-forty-six."

"That gives me fifteen minutes. Can I make it?"

"Not afoot, and you ain't likely to catch a car. I'll drive you down. I've got the fastest mare in Pottawatomie County."

The fact that the G. & M. had been rescued from its poverty and was about to be "developed" was made manifest in Blake City by the modern building which the railroad was erecting on the main street. Eventually the division officials were to be installed in office suites of mahogany veneer, with ground glass doors lettered in gold leaf. For the present, as from the beginning, they occupied an upper floor of a freight warehouse. Bannon came in about eleven o'clock, looked briefly about, and seeing that one corner was partitioned off into a private office, he ducked under the hand rail intended to pen up ordinary visitors, and made for it. A telegraph operator just outside the door asked what his business was, but he answered merely that it was with the superintendent, and went in.

He expected rather rough work. The superintendent of a railroad, or of a division, has to do with the employees, never with the customers, and his professional manner is not likely to be distinguished by suavity. So he unconsciously squared his shoulders when he said, "I'm Bannon, of MacBride & Company."

The superintendent dismissed his stenographer, swept with his arm a clear space on the desk, and then drummed on it with his fingers, but he did not look up immediately. When he did, it was with an expression of grave concern.

"Mr. Bannon," he said, "I'm mighty sorry. I'll do anything I can for you. You can smoke ten cent cigars on me from now till Christmas, and light them with passes. Anything —"

"If you feel like that," said Bannon, "we can fix things all comfortable in three minutes. All I want is cars."

The superintendent shook his head. "There's where you stump me," he said. "I haven't got 'em."

"Mr. Superintendent, that's what they told me in Chicago, and that's what they told me at Ledyard. I didn't come up here to Blake City to be told the same thing and then go back home."

"Well, I don't know what else I can tell you. That's just the size of it. I hope we'll be able to fix you in a few days, but we can't promise anything."

Bannon frowned, and after an expectant pause, the superintendent went on talking vaguely about the immense rush of traffic. Finally he asked, "Why do you think we'd hold you up if we had the cars?"

"That's what I came here to find out. I think you're mistaken about not having them."

The superintendent laughed. "You can't expect to know more about that than I do. You doubtless understand your business, but this is my business. If you can tell me where the cars are, you can have them."

"Well, as you say, that's your business. But I can tell you. There's a big string of empties – I counted fourteen – on the siding at Victory."

The superintendent looked out of the window and again drummed on the desk. When he spoke again, his manner was more what one would expect from a division superintendent. "You don't know anything about it. When we want advice how to run our road we'll ask you for it. Victory isn't in my division anyway."

"Then wire the general manager. He ought to know something about it."

"Wire him yourself, if you like. I can't bother about it. I'm sorry I can't do anything, but I haven't got time."

"I haven't begun sending telegrams yet. And I haven't very much more time to fool away. I'd like to have you find out if the Ledyard Salt and Lumber Company can have those cars that are on the siding at Victory."

"All right," said the superintendent, rising. At the door he turned back to ask, "When was it you saw them?"

Bannon decided to chance it. "Yesterday morning," he said.

The superintendent returned presently, and, turning to his desk, resumed his work. A few minutes later the telegraph operator came in and told him that the cars at Victory had been loaded with iron truss work the night before, and had gone off down the State.

"Just too late, wasn't I?" said Bannon. "That's hard luck." He went to the window and, staring out into the yards, began tapping idly with his pencil on the glass. The office door was open, and when he paused he heard the telegraph instrument just without, clicking out a message.

"Anything else I can do for you?" asked the superintendent. His good humor was returning at the sight of his visitor's perplexity.

"I wish you'd just wire the general manager once more and ask him if he can't possibly let us have those cars."

"All right," said the other, cheerfully. He nodded to the operator. "For the Ledyard Salt and Lumber Company," he said.

Bannon dropped into a chair, stretched himself, and yawned. "I'm sleepy," he said; "haven't had any sleep in three weeks. Lost thirty-two pounds. If you fellows had only got that cribbing down on time, I'd be having a vacation –"

Another yawn interrupted him. The telegraph receiver had begun giving out the general manager's answer.

Tell-Ledyard-we-hope-to-have-cars-in-a-few-days-

The superintendent looked at Bannon, expecting him to finish his sentence, but he only yawned again.

obey-previous-instructions. – Do-not-give-Ledyard-cars-in-any-case-

Bannon's eyes were half closed, but the superintendent thought he was turning a little toward the open doorway.

"Do you feel cold?" he asked. "I'll shut the door."

He rose quickly and started toward it, but Bannon was there before him. He hesitated, his hand on the knob.

"Why don't you shut it?" snapped the superintendent.

"I think I'll – I think I'll send a telegram."

"Here's a blank, in here. Come in." But Bannon had slipped out and was standing beside the operator's table. From the doorway the superintendent saw him biting his pencil and frowning over a bit of paper. The general manager's message was still coming in.

We-don't-help-put-up-any-grain-elevator-in-Chicago-these-days.

As the last click sounded, Bannon handed his message to the operator. "Send it collect," he said. With that he strode away, over the hand rail, this time, and down the stairs. The operator carried the message to the superintendent.

"It seems to be for you," he said.

The superintendent read —

Div. Supt. G. & M., Blake City. Tell manager it takes better man than him
to tie us up.

MacBride & Company.

Bannon had nearly an hour to wait for the next train back to Ledyard, but it was not time wasted, for as he paced the smoky waiting room, he arrived at a fairly accurate estimate of the meaning of the general manager's message.

It was simply a confirmation of the cautious prediction he had made to Peterson the night before. Why should any one want to hinder the construction of an elevator in Chicago "these days" except to prevent its use for the formal delivery of grain which the buyer did not wish delivered? And why had Page & Company suddenly ordered a million bushel annex? Why had they suddenly become anxious that the elevator should be ready to receive grain before January first, unless they wished to deliver a vast amount of December wheat? Before Bannon's train came in he understood it all. A clique of speculators had decided to corner wheat, an enterprise nearly enough impossible in any case, but stark madness unless they had many millions at command. It was a long chance, of course, but after all not wonderful that some one in their number was a power in the reorganized G. & M.

Already the immense amount of wheat in Chicago was testing the capacity of the registered warehouses, and plainly, if the Calumet K should be delayed long enough, it might prevent Page & Company from carrying out their contract to deliver two million bushels of the grain, even though it were actually in the cars in Chicago.

Bannon knew much of Page & Company; that dotted all over the vast wheat tracts of Minnesota and Montana were their little receiving elevators where they bought grain of the farmers; that miles of wheat-laden freight cars were already lumbering eastward along the railroad lines of the North. He had a touch of imagination, and something of the enormous momentum of that Northern wheat took possession of him. It would come to Chicago, and he must be ready for it. It would be absurd to be balked by the refusal of a little single-track road up in Michigan to carry a pile of planks.

He paused before the grated window of the ticket and telegraph office and asked for a map. He studied it attentively for a while; then he sent a telegram: —

MacBride & Company, *Minneapolis*: G. & M. R. R. wants to tie us up. Will
not furnish cars to carry our cribbing. Can't get it elsewhere inside of three weeks.
Find out if Page will O. K. any bill of extras I send in for bringing it down. If so, can
they have one or more steam barges at Manistogee within forty-eight hours? Wire
Ledyard Hotel. C. H. Bannon.

It was an hour's ride back to Ledyard. He went to the hotel and persuaded the head waiter to give him something to eat, although it was long after the dinner hour. As he left the dining room, the clerk handed him two telegrams. One read: —

Get cribbing down. Page pays the freight. Brown.

The other: —

Steam barge Demosthenes leaves Milwaukee to-night for Manistogee. Page
& Co.

CHAPTER IV

As Bannon was paying for his dinner, he asked the clerk what sort of a place Manistogee was. The clerk replied that he had never been there, but that he understood it was quite a lively town.

"Good road over there?"

"Pretty fair."

"That means you can get through if you're lucky."

The clerk smiled. "It won't be so bad to-day. You see we've been getting a good deal of rain. That packs down the sand. You ought to get there all right. Were you thinking of driving over?"

"That's the only way to go, is it? Well, I'll see. Maybe a little later. How far is it?"

"The farmers call it eighteen miles."

Bannon nodded his thanks and went back to Sloan's office.

"Well, it didn't take you long," said the magnate. "Find out what was the matter with 'em?"

He enjoyed his well-earned reputation for choler, and as Bannon told him what he had discovered that morning, the old man paced the room in a regular beat, pausing every time he came to a certain tempting bit of blank wall to deal it a thump with his big fist. When the whole situation was made clear to him, he stopped walking and cursed the whole G. & M. system, from the ties up. "I'll make 'em smart for that," he said. "They haul those planks whether they want to or not. You hear me say it. There's a law that covers a case like that. I'll prosecute 'em. They'll see whether J. B. Sloan is a safe kind of man to monkey with. Why, man," he added, turning sharply to Bannon, "why don't you get mad? You don't seem to care – no more than the angel Gabriel."

"I don't care a damn for the G. & M. I want the cribbing."

"Don't you worry. I'll have the law on those fellows –"

"And I'd get the stuff about five years from now, when I was likely enough dead."

"What's the best way to get it, according to your idea?"

"Take it over to Manistogee in wagons and then down by barges."

Sloan snorted. "You'd stand a chance to get some of it by Fourth of July that way."

"Do you want to bet on that proposition?"

Sloan made no reply. He had allowed his wrath to boil for a few minutes merely as a luxury. Now he was thinking seriously of the scheme. "It sounds like moonshine," he said at last, "but I don't know as it is. How are you going to get your barges?"

"I've got one already. It leaves Milwaukee to-night."

Sloan looked him over. "I wish you were out of a job," he said. Then abruptly he went on: "Where are your wagons coming from? You haven't got them all lined up in the yard now, have you? It'll take a lot of them."

"I know it. Well, we'll get all there are in Ledyard. There's a beginning. And the farmers round here ain't so very fond of the G. & M., are they? Don't they think the railroad discriminates against them – and ain't they right about it? I never saw a farmer yet that wouldn't grab a chance to get even with a railroad."

"That's about right, in this part of the country, anyway."

"You get up a regular circus poster saying what you think of the G. & M., and call on the farmers to hitch up and drive to your lumber yard. We'll stick that up at every crossroads between here and Manistogee."

Sloan was scribbling on a memorandum pad before Bannon had finished speaking. He made a false start or two, but presently got something that seemed to please him. He rang for his office boy, and told him to take it to the *Eagle* office.

"It's got to be done in an hour," said Bannon. "That's when the procession moves," he added; as Sloan looked at him questioningly.

The other nodded. "In an hour," he said to the office boy. "What are you going to do in an hour?" he asked, as the boy went out.

"Why, it'll be four o'clock then, and we ought to start for Manistogee as early as we can."

"We! Well, I should think not!" said Sloan.

"You're going to drive me over with that fast mare of yours, aren't you?"

Sloan laughed. "Look at it rain out there."

"Best thing in the world for a sand road," said Bannon. "And we'll wash, I guess. Both been wet before."

"But it's twenty-five miles over there – twenty-five to thirty."

Bannon looked at his watch. "We ought to get there by ten o'clock, I should think."

"Ten o'clock! What do you think she is – a sawhorse! She never took more than two hours to Manistogee in her life."

The corners of Bannon's mouth twitched expressively. Sloan laughed again. "I guess it's up to me this time," he said.

Before they started Sloan telephoned to the *Eagle* office to tell them to print a full-sized reproduction of his poster on the front page of the Ledyard *Evening Eagle*.

"Crowd their news a little, won't it?" Bannon asked.

Sloan shook his head. "That helps 'em out in great shape."

The *Eagle* did not keep them waiting. The moment Sloan pulled up his impatient mare before the office door, the editor ran out, bare-headed, in the rain, with the posters.

"They're pretty wet yet," he said.

"That's all right. I only want a handful. Send the others to my office. They know what to do with 'em."

"I was glad to print them," the editor went on deferentially. "You have expressed our opinion of the G. & M. exactly."

"Guess I did," said Sloan as they drove away. "The reorganized G. & M. decided they didn't want to carry him around the country on a pass."

Bannon pulled out one of the sheets and opened it on his knee. He whistled as he read the first sentence, and swore appreciatively over the next. When he had finished, he buttoned the waterproof apron and rubbed his wet hands over his knees. "It's grand," he said. "I never saw anything like it."

Sloan spoke to the mare. He had held her back as they jolted over the worn pavement of cedar blocks, but now they had reached the city limits and were starting out upon the rain-beaten sand. She was a tall, clean-limbed sorrel, a Kentucky-bred Morgan, and as she settled into her stride, Bannon watched her admiringly. Her wet flanks had the dull sheen of bronze.

"Don't tell me," said Sloan, "that Michigan roads are no good for driving. You never had anything finer than this in your life." They sped along as on velvet, noiselessly save when their wheels sliced through standing pools of water. "She can keep this up till further notice, I suppose," said Bannon. Sloan nodded.

Soon they reached the first crossroad. There was a general store at one corner, and, opposite, a blacksmith's shop. Sloan pulled up and Bannon sprang out with a hammer, a mouthful of tacks, and three or four of the posters. He put them up on the sheltered side of conspicuous trees, left one with the storekeeper, and another with the smith. Then they drove on.

They made no pretence at conversation. Bannon seemed asleep save that he was always ready with his hammer and his posters whenever Sloan halted the mare. The west wind freshened as the evening came on and dashed fine, sleety rain into their faces. Bannon huddled his wet coat closer about him. Sloan put the reins between his knees and pulled on a pair of heavy gloves.

It had been dark for half an hour – Bannon could hardly distinguish the moving figure of the mare – when Sloan spoke to her and drew her to a walk. Bannon reached for his hammer. "No

crossroad here," said Sloan. "Bridge out of repair. We've got to fetch a circle here up to where she can wade it."

"Hold on," said Bannon sharply. "Let me get out."

"Don't be scared. We'll make it all right."

"We! Yes, but will fifteen hundred feet of lumber make it? I want to take a look."

He splashed forward in the dark, but soon returned. "It's nothing that can't be fixed in two hours. Where's the nearest farmhouse?"

"Fifty rods up the road to your right."

Again Bannon disappeared. Presently Sloan heard the deep challenge of a big dog. He backed the buggy around up against the wind so that he could have shelter while he waited. Then he pulled a spare blanket from under the seat and threw it over the mare. At the end of twenty minutes, he saw a lantern bobbing toward him.

The big farmer who accompanied Bannon held the lantern high and looked over the mare. "It's her all right," he said. Then he turned so that the light shone full in Sloan's face. "Good evening, Mr. Sloan," he said. "You'll excuse me, but is what this gentleman tells me all straight?"

"Guess it is," Sloan smiled. "I'd bank on him myself."

The farmer nodded with satisfaction. "All right then, Mr. What's-your-name. I'll have it done for you."

Sloan asked no questions until they had forded the stream and were back on the road. Then he inquired, "What's he going to do?"

"Mend the bridge. I told him it had to be done to-night. Said he couldn't. Hadn't any lumber. Couldn't think of it I told him to pull down the lee side of his house if necessary; said you'd give him the lumber to build an annex on it."

"What!"

"Oh, it's all right. Send the bill to MacBride. I knew your name would go down and mine wouldn't."

The delay had proved costly, and it was half-past seven before they reached the Manistogee hotel.

"Now," said Bannon, "we'll have time to rub down the mare and feed her before I'm ready to go back."

Sloan stared at him for a moment in unfeigned amazement. Then slowly he shook his head. "All right, I'm no quitter. But I will say that I'm glad you ain't coming to Ledyard to live."

Bannon left the supper table before Sloan had finished, and was gone nearly an hour. "It's all fixed up," he said when he returned. "I've cinched the wharf."

They started back as they had come, in silence, Bannon crowding as low as possible in his ulster, dozing. But he roused when the mare, of her own accord, left the road at the detour for the ford.

"You don't need to do that," he said. "The bridge is fixed." So they drove straight across, the mare feeling her way cautiously over the new-laid planks.

The clouds were thinning, so that there was a little light, and Bannon leaned forward and looked about.

"How did you get hold of the message from the general manager?" asked Sloan abruptly.

"Heard it. I can read Morse signals like print. Used to work for the Grand Trunk."

"What doing?"

"Boss of a wrecking gang." Bannon paused. Presently he went on.

"Yes, there was two years when I slept with my boots on. Didn't know a quiet minute. Never could tell what I was going to get up against. I never saw two wrecks that were anything alike. There was a junction about fifty miles down the road where they used to have collisions regular; but they were all different. I couldn't figure out what I was going to do till I was on the ground, and then I didn't have time to. My only order was, 'Clear the road – and be damn quick about it. 'What I said

went. I've set fire to fifty thousand dollars' worth of mixed freight just to get it out of the way – and they never kicked. That ain't the kind of life for me, though. No, nor this ain't, either. I want to be quiet. I've never had a chance yet, and I've been looking for it ever since I was twelve years old. I'd like to get a little farm and live on it all by myself. I'd raise garden truck, cabbages, and such, and I'd take piano lessons."

"Is that why you quit the Grand Trunk? So that you could take piano lessons?" Sloan laughed as he asked the question, but Bannon replied seriously: —

"Why, not exactly. There was a little friction between me and the master mechanic, so I resigned. I didn't exactly resign, either," he added a moment later. "I wired the superintendent to go to hell. It came to the same thing."

"I worked for a railroad once myself," said Sloan. "Was a hostler in the round-house at Syracuse, New York. I never worked up any higher than that. I had ambitions to be promoted to the presidency, but it didn't seem very likely, so I gave it up and came West."

"You made a good thing of it. You seem to own most all Pottawatomie County."

"Pretty much."

"I wish you would tell me how to do it. I have worked like an all-the-year-round blast furnace ever since I could creep, and never slighted a job yet, but here I am – can't call my soul my own. I have saved fifteen thousand dollars, but that ain't enough to stop with. I don't see why I don't own a county too."

"There's some luck about it. And then I don't believe you look very sharp for opportunities. I suppose you are too busy. You've got a chance this minute to turn your fifteen thousand to fifty; maybe lot more."

"I'm afraid I'm too thick-headed to see it."

"Why, what you found out this morning was the straightest kind of a straight tip on the wheat market for the next two months. A big elevator like yours will be almost decisive. The thing's right in your own hands. If Page & Company can't make that delivery, why, fellows who buy wheat now are going to make money."

"I see," said Bannon, quickly. "All I'd have to do would be to buy all the wheat I could get trusted for and then hold back the job a little. And while I was at it, I might just as well make a clean job and walk off with the pay roll." He laughed. "I'd look pretty, wouldn't I, going to old MacBride with my tail between my legs, telling him that the job was too much for me and I couldn't get it done on time. He'd look me over and say: 'Bannon, you're a liar. You've never had to lay down yet, and you don't now. Go back and get that job done before New Year's or I'll shoot you.'"

"You don't want to get rich, that's the trouble with you," said Sloan, and he said it almost enviously.

Bannon rode to Manistogee on the first wagon. The barge was there, so the work of loading the cribbing into her began at once. There were numerous interruptions at first, but later in the day the stream of wagons became almost continuous. Farmers living on other than the Manistogee roads came into Ledyard and hurried back to tell their neighbors of the chance to get ahead of the railroad for once. Dennis, who was in charge at the yard, had hard work to keep up with the supply of empty wagons.

Sloan disappeared early in the morning, but at five o'clock Bannon had a telephone message from him. "I'm here at Blake City," he said, "raising hell. The general manager gets here at nine o'clock to-night to talk with me. They're feeling nervous about your getting that message. I think you'd better come up here and talk to him."

So a little after nine that night the three men, Sloan, Bannon, and the manager, sat down to talk it over. And the fact that in the first place an attempt to boycott could be proved, and in the second that Page & Company were getting what they wanted anyway – while they talked a long procession

of cribbing was creaking along by lantern light to Manistogee – finally convinced the manager that the time had come to yield as gracefully as possible.

"He means it this time," said Sloan, when he and Bannon were left alone at the Blake City hotel to talk things over.

"Yes, I think he does. If he don't, I'll come up here again and have a short session with him."

CHAPTER V

It was nearly five o'clock when Bannon appeared at the elevator on Thursday. He at once sought Peterson.

"Well, what luck did you have?" he asked. "Did you get my message?"

"Your message? Oh, sure. You said the cribbing was coming down by boat. I don't see how, though. Ledyard ain't on the lake."

"Well, it's coming just the same, two hundred thousand feet of it. What have you done about it?"

"Oh, we'll be ready for it, soon's it gets here."

They were standing at the north side of the elevator near the paling fence which bounded the C. & S. C. right of way. Bannon looked across the tracks to the wharf; the pile of timber was still there.

"Did you have any trouble with the railroad when you took your stuff across for the spouting house?" he asked.

"Not much of any. The section boss came around and talked a little, but we only opened the fence in one place, and that seemed to suit him."

Bannon was looking about, calculating with his eye the space that was available for the incoming lumber.

"How'd you manage that business, anyway?" asked Peterson.

"What business?"

"The cribbing. How'd you get it to the lake?"

"Oh, that was easy. I just carried it off."

"Yes, you did!"

"Look here, Pete, that timber hasn't got any business out there on the wharf. We've got to have that room for the cribbing."

"That's all right. The steamer won't get in much before to-morrow night, will it?"

"We aren't doing any banking on that. I've got a notion that the Pages aren't sending out any six-mile-an-hour scow to do their quick work. That timber's got to come over here to-night. May as well put it where the carpenters can get right at it. We'll be on the cupola before long, anyhow."

"But it's five o'clock already. There's the whistle."

Bannon waited while the long blast sounded through the crisp air. Then he said: —

"Offer the men double pay, and tell them that any man can go home that wants to, right now, but if they say they'll stay, they've got to see it through."

Already the laborers were hurrying toward the tool house in a long, irregular line. Peterson started toward the office, to give the word to the men before they could hand in their time checks.

"Mr. Bannon."

The foreman turned; Vogel was approaching.

"I wanted to see about that cribbing bill. How much of it's coming down by boat?"

"Two hundred thousand. You'd better help Peterson get that timber out of the way. We're holding the men."

"Yes, I've been waiting for directions about that. We can put a big gang on it, and snake it across in no time."

"You'll have to open up the fence in half a dozen places, and put on every man you've got. There's no use in making an all-night job of it."

"I'm afraid we'll have trouble with the railroad."

"No, we won't. If they kick, you send them to me. Are your arc lights in?"

"Yes, all but one or two. They were going to finish it to-day, but they ain't very spry about it."

"Tell you what you do, Max; you call them up and tell them we want a man to come out here and stay for a while. I may want to move the lights around a little. And, anyhow, they may as well clean up their job and have it done with."

He was starting back after the returning laborers when Max said: —

"Mr. Bannon."

"Hello?"

"I heard you speaking about a stenographer the other day."

"Yes – what about it? Haven't you got one yet?"

"No, but I know of one that could do the work first-rate."

"I want a good one – he's got to keep time besides doing the office work."

"Yes, I thought of that. I don't suppose she –"

"She? We can't have any shes on this job."

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Bannon; she's an A1 stenographer and bookkeeper; and as for keeping the time, why, I'm out on the job all day anyhow, and I reckon I could take care of it without cutting into my work."

Bannon looked quizzically down at him.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said slowly. "Just look around at this gang of men – you know the likes of them as well as I do – and then talk to me about bringing a girl on the job." He his head. "I reckon it's some one you're interested in."

"Yes," said Max, "it's my sister."

Max evidently did not intend to be turned off. As he stood awaiting a reply – his broad, flat features, his long arms and bow legs with their huge hands and feet, his fringe of brick-red hair cropping out behind his cap, each contributing to the general appearance of utter homeliness – a faint smile came over Bannon's face. The half-formed thought was in his mind, "If she looks anything like that, I guess she's safe." He was silent for a moment, then he said abruptly: —

"When can she start?"

"Right away."

"All right. We'll try it for a day or so and see how it goes. Tell that boy in the office that he can charge his time up to Saturday night, but he needn't stay around any longer."

Max hurried away. Group after group of laborers, peavies or cant-hooks on shoulders, were moving slowly past him toward the wharf. It was already nearly dark, and the arc lights on the elevator structure, and on the spouting house, beyond the tracks, were flaring. He started toward the wharf, walking behind a score of the laborers.

From the east, over the flats and marshes through which the narrow, sluggish river wanders to Lake Michigan, came the hoarse whistle of a steamer. Bannon turned and looked. His view was blocked by some freight cars that were standing on the C. & S. C tracks at some distance to the east. He ran across the tracks and out on the wharf, climbing on the timber pile, where Peterson and his gang were rolling down the big sticks with cant-hooks. Not a quarter of a mile away was a big steamer, ploughing slowly up the river; the cough of her engines and the swash of the churning water at her bow and stern could be plainly heard. Peterson stopped work for a moment, and joined him.

"Well," Bannon said, "we're in for it now. I never thought they'd make such time as this."

"She can lay up here all night till morning, I guess."

Bannon was thinking hard.

"No," he finally said, "she can't. There ain't any use of wasting all day to-morrow unloading that cribbing and getting it across."

Peterson, too, was thinking; and his eye-brows were coming together in a puzzled scowl.

"Oh," he said, "you mean to do it to-night?"

"Yes, sir. We don't get any sleep till every piece of that cribbing is over at the annex, ready for business in the morning. Your sills are laid – there's nothing in the way of starting those bins right up. This ain't an all-night job if we hustle it."

The steamer was a big lake barge, with high bow and stern, and a long, low, cargo deck amidships that was piled squarely and high with yellow two-inch plank. Her crew had clearly been impressed with the need of hurry, for long before she could be worked into the wharf they had rigged the two hoists and got the donkey engines into running order. The captain stood by the rail on the bridge, smoking a cigar, his hand on the bell-pull.

"Where do you want it?" he called to Bannon.

"Right here, where I'm standing. You can swing your bow in just below the bridge there."

The captain pulled the bell, and the snub-nosed craft, stirring up a whirl of mud from the bottom of the river, was brought alongside the wharf.

"Where are you going to put it?" the captain called.

"Here. We'll clean this up as fast as we can. I want that cribbing all unloaded to-night, sure."

"That suits me," said the captain. "I don't want to be held up here – ought to pull out the first thing in the morning."

"All right, you can do it." Bannon turned to Peterson and Vogel (who had just reached the wharf). "You want to rush this, boys. I'll go over and see to the piling."

He hurried away, pausing at the office long enough to find the man sent by the electric light company, and to set him at work. The arc lamps had been placed, for the most part, where they would best illuminate the annex and the cupola of the elevator, and there was none too much light on the tracks, where the men were stumbling along, hindered rather than helped by the bright light before them. On the wharf it was less dark, for the lights of the steamer were aided by two on the spouting house. Before seven o'clock Bannon had succeeded in getting two more lights up on poles, one on each side of the track.

It was just at seven that the timbers suddenly stopped coming in. Bannon looked around impatiently. The six men that had brought in the last stick were disappearing around the corner of the great, shadowy structure that shut off Bannon's view of the wharf. He waited for a moment, but no more gangs appeared, and then he ran around the elevator over the path the men had already trampled. Within the circle of light between him and the C. & S. C. tracks stood scattered groups of the laborers, and others wandered about with their hooks over their shoulders. There was a larger, less distinct crowd out on the tracks. Bannon ran through an opening in the fence, and pushed into the largest group. Here Peterson and Vogel were talking to a stupid-looking man with a sandy mustache.

"What does this mean, Pete?" he said shortly. "We can't be held up this way. Get your men back on the work."

"No, he won't," said the third man. "You can't go on with this work."

Bannon sharply looked the man over. There was in his manner a dogged authority.

"Who are you?" Bannon asked. "Who do you represent?"

"I represent the C. & S. C. railroad, and I tell you this work stops right here."

"Why?"

The man waved his arm toward the fence.

"You can't do that sort of business."

"What sort?"

"You look at that fence and then talk to me about what sort."

"What's the matter with the fence?"

"What's the matter with it! There ain't more'n a rod of it left, that's what."

Bannon's scowl relaxed.

"Oh," he said, "I see. You're the section boss, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"That's all right then. Come over here and I'll show you how we've got things fixed."

He walked across the track, followed by the section boss and Pete, and pointed out the displaced sections of the fence, each of which had been carefully placed at one side.

"We'll have it all up all right before morning," he said.

The man was running his fingers up under his cap.

"I don't know anything about that," he replied sullenly. "I've got my orders. We didn't make any kick when you opened up in one place, but we can't stand for all this."

He was not speaking firmly, and Bannon, watching him closely, jumped at the conclusion that his orders were not very definite. Probably his superintendent had instructed him to keep a close eye on the work, and perhaps to grant no privileges. Bannon wished he knew more about the understanding between the railroad and MacBride & Company. He felt sure, however, that an understanding did exist or he would not have been told to go ahead.

"That's all right," he said, with an air of easy authority. "We've got to be working over your tracks for the next two months. It's as much to our interest as it is to yours to be careful, and I guess we can pull together. We've got an agreement with your general manager, and that's what goes." He turned away, but paused and added, "I'll see that you don't have any reason to complain."

The section boss looked about with an uncertain air at the crowd of waiting men.

"Don't go too fast there – " he began.

"Look here," said Bannon, abruptly. "We'll sit right down here and send a message to the general manager. That's the quickest way to settle it – tell him that we're carrying out timber across the tracks and you've stopped us."

It was a bluff, but Bannon knew his man.

"Now, how about this?" was the reply. "How long will it take you?"

"Till some time before daylight." Bannon was feeling for his pencil.

"You see that the fence goes back, will you? We ain't taking any chances, you understand."

Bannon nodded.

"All right, Max," he shouted. "Get to work there. And look here, Max," in a stern voice, "I expect you to see that the road is not blocked or delayed in any way. That's your business now, mind." He turned to the boss as the men hurried past to the wharf. "I used to be a railroad man myself – chief wrecker on the Grand Trunk – and I guess we won't have any trouble understanding each other."

Again the six long lines of men were creeping from the brightly lighted wharf across the shadowy tracks and around the end of the elevator. Bannon had held the electric light man within call, and now set him at work moving two other arc lamps to a position where they made the ground about the growing piles of timber nearly as light as day. Through the night air he could hear the thumping of the planks on the wharf. Faintly over this sound came the shouting of men and the tramp and shuffle of feet. And at intervals a train would rumble in the distance, slowly coming nearer, until with a roar that swallowed all the other noises it was past. The arc lamps glowed and buzzed over the heads of the sweating, grunting men, as they came along the path, gang after gang, lifting an end of a heavy stick to the level of the steadily rising pile, and sliding it home.

Bannon knew from long experience how to pile the different sizes so that each would be ready at the hands of the carpenters when the morning whistle should blow. He was all about the work, giving a hand here, an order there, always good-humored, though brusque, and always inspiring the men with the sight of his own activity.

Toward the middle of the evening Vogel came up from the wharf with a question. As he was about to return, Bannon, who had been turning over in his mind the incident of the section boss, said: —

"Wait a minute, Max. What about this railroad business – have they bothered you much before now?"

"Not very much, only in little ways. I guess it's just this section boss that does it on his own hook. He's a sort of a fool, you know, and he's got it into his head that we're trying to do him some way."

Bannon put his hands into his pockets, and studied the checkered pattern in the ground shadow of the nearest arc lamp. Then he slowly shook his head.

"No," he said, "that ain't it. He's too big a fool to do much on his own hook. He's acting on orders of some sort, and that's just what I don't understand. As a general thing a railroad's mighty white to an elevator. Come to think of it, they said something about it up at the office," – he was apparently speaking to himself, and Max quietly waited, – "Brown said something about the C. & S. C. having got in the way a little down here, but I didn't think much about it at the time."

"What could they do?" Max asked.

"A lot, if they wanted to. But that ain't what's bothering me. They haven't any connection with the G. & M., have they?"

"No" – Max shook his head – "no, not that I know of."

"Well, it's funny, that's all. The man behind those orders that the section boss talks about is the general manager; and it's my notion that we're likely to hear from him again. I'll tell you what it is. Somebody – I don't know who, but somebody – is mighty eager to keep this house from being finished by the first of January. After this I wish you'd keep your eyes open for this section boss. Have you had any trouble with the men?"

"No, only that clerk that we laid off to-day, he 'lowed he was going to make trouble. I didn't say anything about it, because they always talk like that."

"Yes, I know. What's his name?"

"Briggs."

"I guess he can't hurt us any."

Bannon turned back to his work; and Vogel disappeared in the shadows along the path.

Nine o'clock came, and the timber was still coming in. The men were growing tired and surly from the merciless strain of carrying the long, heavy sticks. The night was raw and chill. Bannon felt it as he stood directing the work, and he kept his hands in his pockets, and wished he had worn his overcoat; but the laborers, barearmed and bare-headed, clad only in overalls or in thin trousers and cotton shirts, were shaking sweat from their eyes, and stealing moments between trips to stand where the keen lake breeze could cool them. Another half-hour or so should see the last stick on the piles, and Bannon had about decided to go over to the office when he saw Vogel moving among the men, marking their time in his book.

"Here, Max," he called, adding, when Vogel had reached his side: "Just keep an eye on this, will you? I'll be at the office. Keep things going just as they are."

There was a light in the office. Bannon stepped into the doorway, and, with a suppressed word of impatience, stood looking at the scene within. The desk that Peterson had supplied for the use of his clerk was breast-high from the floor, built against the wall, with a high stool before it. The wall lamp had been taken down; now it stood with its reflector on the top of the desk, which was covered with books and papers. A girl was sitting on the stool, bending over a ledger and rapidly footing up columns. Bannon could not see her face, for a young fellow stood leaning over the railing by the desk, his back to the door. He had just said something, and now he was laughing in a conscious manner.

Bannon quietly stepped to one side. The girl looked up for a moment and brushed her hair back from her face. The fellow spoke again in a low tone, but beyond a slight compressing of her lips she did not seem to hear him. Without a word, Bannon came forward, took him by the arm, and led him out of the door. Still holding his arm, he took a step back, and (they stood in the outer circle of the electric light) looked him over.

"Let's see," he said, "you're the man that was clerking here."

There was no reply.

"And your name's – what?"

"Briggs."

"Well, Mr. Briggs, did you get a message from me?"

"I don't know what you mean," said the young man, his eyes on the ground. "Max, he come around, but I wanted to wait and see you. He's a mean cuss – "

"You see me now, don't you?"

"Yes." The reply was indistinct.

"You keep out of the office after this. If I catch you in there again, I won't stop to talk. Now, clear out."

Briggs walked a little way, then turned.

"Maybe you think you can lay me off without notice – but you'll wish – "

Bannon turned back to the office, giving no heed to Briggs' last words: "I've got you fixed already." He was thinking of the girl there on the stool. She did not look like the girl he had expected to see. To be sure her hair was red, but it was not of the red that outcropped from Max's big head; it was of a dark, rich color, and it had caught the light from the lamp with such a shine as there is in new red gold. When he entered, she was again footing columns. She was slender, and her hand, where it supported her forehead was white. Again Bannon stood motionless, slowly shaking his head. Then he came forward. She heard his step and looked up, as if to answer a question, letting her eyes rest on his face. He hesitated, and she quietly asked: —

"What is it, please?"

"Miss Vogel?"

"Yes."

"I'm Mr. Bannon. There wasn't any need of your working to-night. I'm just keeping the men on so we can get in this cribbing. When did you come?"

"My brother telephoned to me. I wanted to look things over before starting in to-morrow."

"How do you find it?"

She hesitated, glancing over the jumble of papers on the desk.

"It hasn't been kept up very well," she presently said. "But it won't be hard, I think, to straighten it out."

Bannon leaned on the rail and glanced at the paper on which she had been setting down totals.

"I guess you'd better go home, Miss Vogel. It's after nine o'clock."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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