

# The Big Muskeg

by VICTOR ROUSSEAU

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## SYNOPSIS

**CHAPTER I.**—Looking over Big Muskeg, a seemingly impassable swamp in the path of the Missatibi railroad, Joe Bostock, builder of the line, and Wilton Carruthers, chief of engineers, are considering the difficulties. A rifle shot instantly kills Bostock and breaks Carruthers' arm. Handcapped as he is, Carruthers determines to carry the body to a station of the Hudson's Bay company, where one McDonald is the factor.

**CHAPTER II.**—McDonald's daughter, Molly, sees Carruthers struggling in the muskeg and drags him from the swamp with his burden. Unaccountably, her father objects to her saving Carruthers.

**CHAPTER III.**—Weakened by his wound and exertions, Carruthers is disturbed by the appearance of Tom Bowyer, Bostock's business rival and personal enemy. Bowyer insults Molly, and Carruthers strikes him. After Bowyer leaves, Carruthers declares his love for Molly. She promises to be his wife.

**CHAPTER IV.**—Carruthers has to reach the town of Clayton to attend a meeting at which Bostock's enemies plan to wrest control of the Missatibi from him. Molly determines to go with him.

**CHAPTER V.**—Attacked by his dogs, Carruthers' life is saved by Molly, who is forced to kill the animals. They set out on foot for Clayton, reaching it with Carruthers in an almost dying condition. He is in time to foil Bostock's enemies and keep control of the line for Mrs. Bostock.

**CHAPTER VI.**—Carruthers learns that Bostock has hypothesized five hundred shares of the Missatibi, jeopardizing his control of the line.

**CHAPTER VII.**—Lee Chambers, expert engineer, hitherto associated with Bowyer, asks Carruthers for work, saying he has broken with Bowyer. Carruthers takes him on. Kitty Bostock, Joe's widow, deeply in love with Carruthers, though he does not realize it, comes to live at the Big Muskeg. Circumstances force her to avow her love. Carruthers tells her of Molly and gently repulses her. The weight of the ballast would undoubtedly have broken them. The break would not have been immediately apparent, but the trestling would in such case be practically imposed upon the surface of the swamp, without support. The ballast would have spread over the muskeg, causing the entire structure to subside.

"Who did it?" asked Wilton, speaking slowly and carefully.

Jules, who was still watching him, suddenly turned and, with lightning movements, drew a caricature of Lee Chambers on the woodwork of the wall.

Wilton looked at it and drew in his breath. Then he nodded. Jules nodded in return, smiled, and left the room. Wilton reflected deeply.

If Chambers was a spy of Bowyer's, why had he shown him the bedrock at all? On the other hand, assuming that Wilton must eventually discover it himself, Bowyer might have sent Chambers to make a virtue of a necessity and to secure a position at the camp, where he could be of service to him.

In any case, Wilton could afford to take no further chances with him. It would serve no purpose to accuse him of having tampered with the trestling. He would give him a post somewhere where he could do no harm, and thus get rid of him.

Fighting down the burning rage in his heart, he went down the road toward the shack which the engineer occupied. This was a reconstructed shed. There was only one room in it, but Chambers had asked to have this rather than share the quarters of the other engineers.

The men were back in the bunk-houses, but the door of the shed was padlocked. Thinking that Chambers might be in the camp, he made his way toward the other quarters. But presently he heard some one calling him and, turning, saw Andersen running after him.

"Were you looking for Mr. Chambers, sir?" asked the foreman.

"Yes. Where is he?"

"Why, he went back to Clayton this noon, Mr. Carruthers! He said he was going in for you."

Wilton's suspicions suddenly flamed up. "The key!" he shouted, pulling at the padlock.

"I guess he took it with him," said Andersen.

"Have the staples pulled out at once!"

Wilton waited, fuming, until Andersen reappeared with the tool. The foreman wrenched out the staples and Wilton burst open the door. As he had expected, the shack was completely empty of all Chambers' belongings.

The two men looked at each other. Slow understanding came into Andersen's face.

"He was a bad yun," said the Swede. "I guessed you knew your business, Mr. Carruthers, when you took on Tom

Bowyer's right-hand man. It wasn't for me to say nothing."

"Keep your mouth shut still, Andersen," said Wilton, slapping him on the shoulder. "We'll just start working again. And keep your eyes open. Some time we'll get him, and I'll telephone Inspector Quain to pick him up if ever he sees him in Clayton."

## CHAPTER IX

### The Face at the Window.

It was five days since Wilton had been to the portage. He had not meant to see Molly in his dependency, but now the discovery of Chambers' treachery came with an invigorating shock and aroused his fighting instinct against Bowyer.

He took the road across the Muskeg. Wilton saw the girl upstairs, at the factor's side. A book was on her knees and a lighted lamp behind her. She was not talking to him, however, but staring out of the window, and yet she did not see Wilton as he came to the door.

At his knock she came downstairs more slowly than usual. When she opened the door to him he saw that she was trembling. Her cheek was icy cold beneath his kiss.

"Come in, Will—I have something to say to you," she said.

He put his arm about her, and they went into the store together. He could feel that she was trembling all the while.

"What is it, Molly?" he asked, looking into her face and seeing tears in her eyes. "What is it, dear?"

"I'm afraid that we've both made a mistake, Will," she answered.

Wilton laughed. Once or twice Molly had questioned his love for her, but he had never had any difficulty in convincing her, in the usual lover's way.

"Molly, dear, I know I have neglected you," he said penitently. "But you know that until the work's finished I can't ask you anything. And I've been rushing it through, feeling that then I should have the right to."

"It's not the work, Will," she said, slowly. "I want you to release me."

The laughter died on his lips. He put his hands upon her shoulders and turned her toward him. She raised her face; her lips were quivering, and the tears had fallen, leaving her eyes hard and bright.

"You mean that, Molly?" asked Wilton gravely.

"Every word, Will."

"Why?"

"I have ceased to care for you."

She was keeping control of herself with a strong effort, and she shook more violently. She had nerved herself to offer an explanation, but now, face to face with him, she could not tell him that she had been moved by pity for him, and self-deceived. It was impossible for her to lie to Wilton.

"Molly"—she saw that his face was set hard as on that night of the riot—"I don't play with love. I love you and trust you. If you mean that, tell me again, and that will be enough for me."

"I meant it! Oh, can't you understand that I have changed?" she cried desperately. "I can never care for you, Wilton!"

He released her and turned away. "Good-night, Molly," he said.

Yet he went slowly out of the door, and because the shock had come with stunning force, he was amazed that she did not call him back. He could not make himself understood that all his dreams and hopes of five minutes before were broken. Not until he had reached the portage. Then he stopped and looked back. The door of the store was closed. The light still burned in the factor's room and he saw Molly cross toward him and fling herself on her knees beside him.

He clenched his fists; but somehow the violence that relieved his feelings usually seemed to have no place here. He couldn't understand. He went home slowly across the portage.

The factor looked up when Molly entered, and was astonished to see the tears upon her face. When she knelt down he put his hand clumsily upon her hair.

"What has happened, lass?" he asked. "Was it Will Carruthers ye quarreled with?"

"He will never come here again," said Molly.

A dull fire burned in the factor's eyes. He seemed to be struggling be-



"Good-Night, Molly," He Said, between two impulses: One was to comfort his daughter; the other, his gratification.

"Ah well, lass, ye'll find another," he said.

But he abased his head before her indignant glance. At that moment the girl felt that her father and she were farther apart than they had ever been.

When Wilton reached his shack he took off his coat and flung himself down on his bed. He would not speculate on Molly's motives. He would not think of her at all. He would neither condemn her nor pity himself.

He forced his mind back to his task. The trestle—he would lay down a corduroy—he would drive the men all the summer, if need be, for Joe's sake. Poor Joe! The presence of the dead man seemed to fill the camp just as of old. Joe was the guiding spirit of this work. He had loved Joe more truly than it seemed possible to love any woman.

He completed the few routine duties of the office and went to bed. He had dozed off to sleep when something made him start up in bed and listen intently. He thought he had heard a slight sound in the office.

It was so slight that even his trained ears sent the message to his brain doubtfully. But it came again. Some one had very softly clicked back the catch of one of the windows.

He had the sense of a listener beneath it, and, all alert, Wilton crept noiselessly to his feet and stood listening in the darkness. Now there was no doubt. The window was being pushed very softly open. It was the window between the safe and his bedroom door. In the moonlight Wilton could see that it was opening by inches.

His own door was slightly ajar, and, inch by inch, he pushed it open, too. He saw a pair of hands, white, not work-roughened, placed against the bottom of the window-frame. A face appeared and was thrust cautiously inside the room in reconnaissance. Wilton recognized Lee Chambers.

Satisfied, apparently, that Wilton was asleep in the next room, Chambers began to climb over the sill. Wilton waited till he was balanced there, and then, leaping forward, he drove his fist with all his force into his face. He felt the bone of the nose smash under his hand.

With a muffled cry Lee Chambers flung up his hands, slipped backward and fell. As Wilton ran to the window the ex-engineer leaped up and raced toward the trees. The thought of his treachery came into Wilton's mind and turned his sardonic humor into rage. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out the loaded revolver which he kept there. But by the time he was at the window again Chambers was gone.

Three months later an engine pushed two ballast trucks from the west to

the east shore of Big Muskeg. The swamp was spanned. The corduroy had been laid upon the sink-holes, and had borne the ballasting. The trestling ran from bank to bank and carried the metals firmly, but the foundation was only as yet laid half-way, and the final proof had yet to be made.

However, Wilton had no doubts of the result. He had tried out the danger-spots. The trestle would contain the ballast. His work had been accomplished.

After the subsidence he had paid a flying visit to Clayton. He had not seen Kitty, and Kitty had not returned to the camp, but he had had a stormy meeting with the directors and, as he had foreseen, had been given his chance to try once more. There was, indeed, nothing else to be done. Bowyer had made the most of the disaster; but it was to Bowyer's interest that Wilton should try again and fail. That would put the Missatibi promptly into liquidation.

Now Wilton had succeeded. Big Muskeg was conquered, and on the east shore the vanguard of the line was driving the cleared way forward and pegging out the way for the metals. Soon grading would begin. Wilton's camp would shrink, and the engines would be moved ahead, and—he would have time to think.

He dreaded that. He had not seen Molly or the factor since that night of the subsidence. He knew that Bowyer had paid more than one visit to the store, but he shrugged his shoulders and put it out of his mind.

The workmen, after their months of arduous labor, had begun to grow slack. There was restiveness in the camp. Once or twice Wilton had seen signs of liquor. He detected it in the slowing up of work; he had smelled it in the bunkhouses—the penetrating odor of cheap alcohol, with its suggestion of gasoline.

Andersen, forestalling him, came to him about the time of this discovery.

"They're getting that rotgut again, Mr. Carruthers," he said. "I don't know where. I'm keeping my eyes peeled, but I ain't said nothing."

"The best policy," said Wilton. "The men have worked hard. When this job's finished we'll let them slack up for a day or two. Then we'll get down to business on this proposition. But if you find out anything let me know at once."

A few days later came the spanning of the swamp. On the same afternoon a summons came from the court, together with a letter from Quain. The police had at last picked up Papillon and l'aspartout, and had recovered the rifle and transit compass. Wilton was wanted in Clayton to give evidence against the men.

The call was opportune. Wilton had already determined to put into execution a plan that he had formed. It was now October, and little more than two months remained before the loan would be called. That would give Bowyer the control of the Missatibi. Driven by the ironical realization that he was working for Bowyer, Wilton had resolved to go to Clayton as soon as the trestling was completed, and try to raise the money to pay Phayre, who, he knew, would not renew the note.

Big Muskeg was spanned. And, on the strength of that, Wilton believed the time had come to give Joe's secret to the world. He would publish far and wide the secret of the wheat lands. He would establish sufficient confidence in the line to make the raising of a loan a possibility.

(Continued next week.)



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