



He did two men's work; his hands blistered and peeled. But he stuck it out

Bonus for Brawn

By ROBERT W. COCHRAN

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The spreading chestnut tree blossomed out in nice yellow gold-bricks, then curled up and died. But the smith, a happy man is he . . .

I WAS sorry, that day when Big Joe Bush stepped off the noon train, that my grandfather had not lived to see his return. I recognized him, in spite of the fact that he was older and bigger in a flabby sort of way.

Even the ten years that had passed since he had driven away in his own car with Coral beside him hadn't been able to make much else of him than he had always been—Big Joe Bush the blacksmith.

I spoke to him, half expecting to see Coral appear from behind the wrinkled coat that covered his beefy shoulders; and

he said, "Hello, Tommy." He acted as if he couldn't forget that I was the grandson of a man who had made fun of him.

I threw the mail bag into the car and got behind the wheel. He was still standing on the station platform. I felt sorry for him; he seemed almost frightened. The train chugged slowly forward, and when the sound of it had died I asked, "Going uptown, Mr. Bush?"

"Thanks, Tommy." He put an imitation leather suitcase that didn't look as if it had been used much in the back seat and got in beside me.

It seemed funny to have Big Joe Bush riding uptown with me. "How's Coral?" I asked, as we took the long, steep hill above the station.

"Coral? Oh, she's fine, Tommy. Getting married soon. Quite a young lady, Coral

is." He was proud of his daughter. I didn't blame him either; she had been a swell kid when I had carried her books to the company school on the hill.

"Things are pretty dead around here," I said.

He seemed to sink lower in the seat beside me. "No work?" he asked, looking straight ahead through the windshield.

"Almost none," I said. "They send a yard engine in from the Junction once a week and take it in one trip."

"How about the shops?" I tried not to see how eagerly he waited for me to answer.

"No shops," I said. "We get our power from K. U. Repair and maintenance shops are down at Huddlestone."

He didn't say anything else. I drove past the long battery of ovens, crumbling with decay, and started through the town. I knew what he was thinking; he was remembering Crescent as it had been during the war. But the war was twelve years behind us.

I let him out at the company office and went on another hundred yards and carried the half-empty mail sack into the post office.

Effie Gates said, "I see you had a passenger. Who was it?"

"Didn't you recognize him?" Effie Gates had been postmistress ever since I could remember; she knew everybody.

"It wasn't him?" she said. "It wasn't Big Joe Bush?"

I nodded, and she said, "Well . . ." and looked for a place to sit down. "I never thought he'd come back to this dump. Was he friendly?" She remembered, too, that my grandfather had made fun of Big Joe.

"He was friendly enough," I said, and followed Effie's glance out through the murky window. Joe Bush had come from the company office and was standing on the sidewalk looking like some kind of a big dog that has lost its owner.

"You don't suppose," she said, "that he wants a job?"

"Big Joe?" I laughed, because I thought

she meant it for a joke. "Why, he's rich. He has two cars and a chauffeur, and a house in Richmond with seventeen rooms."

"I wonder," Effie said slowly; and I remembered my grandfather's slurring remark that Big Joe had a strong back and a weak brain.

THAT had been a long time before; and my grandfather had died and Big Joe had sold patent rights to an invention he had been working on for two hundred thousand dollars cash.

It seemed to prove my grandfather wrong; and I remember thinking at the time that it was just as well he wasn't there to see Big Joe's triumphal exit from the town in his new car, with Coral sitting beside him dressed in pink silk, with a big pink hat that completely hid her face.

"I don't believe it," I said to Effie, and left her to sort the mail as I went out to where the big man still stood.

"You're right, Tommy," Big Joe said. "Things are pretty dead." He wet his lips and straightened his shoulders. "I'm looking for a job, Tommy." He didn't look at me when he said it.

"You're kidding, Mr. Bush," I said; but I felt a queer prickling on the back of my neck, as if I had suddenly seen something very unpleasant, maybe a dead person.

"I wish I was," he said. "I'm clean, Tommy. I don't know nothing in the world but blacksmithing, and I've got to get a little stake in a hurry.

"I know what you're thinking," he went on. "You're remembering what your grandfather said about me. He's right. He was right then, but I couldn't see it. Strong back and weak brain. Golly, I wish the old man was here now. I'd like to tell him that he was right."

"That's too bad." I really meant it. Joe Bush was the only rich man Crescent had ever produced.

"I ain't old, Tommy. Forty-eight's not old. All I need's a little stake to keep—well, to keep me going, and I'll be back where I was."

"You try any place else?" I said.

"I've tried every place. You don't think I'd come back here only on a last hope, do you?"

"What'd they say?" I nodded in the direction of the office.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not blaming them. They can't make work if it isn't here, and I'm a stranger to them, too."

"Come on over to the house," I said. "Mom runs a sort of boarding house; that and what I get for carrying the mail and clerking in the store lets us get by. I passed the Civil Service, but I've got to wait for an appointment."

"Well . . ." He hesitated, and his big, broad face looked like the face of a Saint Bernard dog.

"Come on," I said, picking up his bag. "You don't have to have money to stay at our house."

"That's decent of you, Tommy. I wish I'd listened to your grandfather." The old wooden sidewalk creaked under his heavy footsteps.

"Trout is still the general manager. You might write him; he'll remember you."

"I talked to him last week," Big Joe said. "He would do something if he could; but shucks, they can't lay off a steady man just to find a place for me."

My mother seemed to get the drift without my saying anything in front of Big Joe. Women always seem to be a jump ahead when it comes to figuring things out.

"How's Coral?" she said. "I hope you're going to stay a while; there's only forty families in the town. My, that's a handsome bag you've got."

I could have told her that it felt as if there wasn't anything in it, but I didn't. The woman in her would probably find that out soon enough.

I think the other thirty-nine families dropped in on us that night to see Big Joe. It pleased him no end. "Golly," he kept saying, "you folks haven't any idea how good it is to be back with friends." I judged from that and other things he let fall in the following days that he hadn't

been any too happy up there in the big house in Richmond.

I never asked him about his money, but he told us one night when my mother and I sat with him in the gathering darkness on the front porch.

"Strong back," he said, and laughed. It was good to hear him laugh; he had been so serious the first few days. "I thought I had the world in my lap. I sent Coral to one of those expensive schools. She was a good kid; she didn't want to go, but I wanted her to know the right people."

"I guess she knows them now. But I saw it was going to take more than I had to keep her knowing them, so I bought some stock through a Richmond firm. You folks see the papers; you know what happened to the stock market last year."

"And Coral," I said. "Does she know?"

"Golly, no. She's engaged to marry a big shot in Baltimore, when she comes back from Scotland. She's visiting in Scotland now."

"And she doesn't know. She still thinks you have plenty of money."

"She ain't going to know," Big Joe said. "She thinks I'm on a nine months' cruise. I sold the house, even my clothes, everything. It made enough to get her through till fall. She's to be married this fall."

My mother said, "She won't like that. You're not playing fair with her."

"I guess she'll like it," he said. "I guess she'll have to like it. Once she's married, it won't make no difference about me. The man she's going to marry has plenty of money. I know what I'm doing."

My mother didn't say anything; but she might as well have spoken, for I know what she was thinking. She was remembering that thing her father had said of Joe, "Strong back and weak brain."

I DON'T know whether it was because the superintendent was sorry for Big Joe or whether he actually needed a man; but the second week he was there, Big Joe got an order to report for work. It wasn't work like he had been used to; it wasn't the kind of work he had ever done before.

I don't suppose he realized what it would be to go down in the mines. Ten years is a long time for a man to be idle. If the other miners hadn't liked him so much they would have been down on him for the way he worked.

Strong back, that was it. He did two men's work, and he came into the house at night so tired he could hardly stay awake at the supper table. His hands blistered and peeled, leaving bare, raw flesh before they began to toughen. But he stuck it out, begged for more cars so that he could earn more money.

Then he began tinkering at the work bench in the cellar when he came home evenings. He lost weight, he lost plenty of weight, but he had it to lose, and after he had been there a few weeks his clothes hung on him like a tent on a camel.

He wasn't a coal miner, he was a smith; and being a smith means more than just taking a piece of hot iron out of the forge and pounding it. He had proved once before that he could do things with a piece of metal. He had proved it to the tune of two hundred thousand dollars when he had invented that can opener gadget.

But Effie Gates expressed the sentiment of most of us when she said, "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place." He never wrote any letters, never received any either. But he salted away that pay envelope each pay-day and put in every minute he wasn't working or sleeping at the bench in the cellar.

It was only about two weeks before the Fourth of July and we were all making plans to go down to Huddleston for the big celebration. We didn't have a team, hadn't had in two or three years, but we went down just the same and watched the teams from the other towns compete for the prizes.

There were all kinds of contests—rope pulling, hammer throwing, weight lifting—but there weren't more than twenty men in town who could have been any help in a thing like that and the other towns would have beaten us hands down, so we had dropped out entirely. Things were

different this year; Big Joe Bush was back.

A lot of people remembered Big Joe from other years. I remembered him when my grandfather had taken me to Huddleston as a boy. He had been young enough then to go in for wrestling and had won that along with the other things that took downright strength.

He wasn't keen on going this year; he was forty-eight years old, he reminded those who asked him. But they insisted, and the superintendent came over and talked to him, so in the end he agreed.

Well, we won just about everything that Big Joe had a hand in, and he enjoyed it more than anyone. I don't think it was only the cash prizes either; I think he got a big kick out of seeing he was a better man than he had thought he was, or that a great many of his friends had thought he was either.

There were newspaper reporters and at least one photographer, though no one thought anything of it at the time. I guess it was a couple of days later that Effie Gates showed me a copy of the Lynchburg paper, and there was Big Joe Bush on the first inside page, and a big write-up about how he had made so much money and lost it all in the market crash.

I could see now perhaps this was going to upset Joe's plans if it got to certain parties in Baltimore. Effie didn't know, of course, about Coral's marriage due for the fall, so I didn't say anything to her; but I got a copy of the paper and when Big Joe came in that night I showed it to him.

I had never seen Big Joe mad until then. He was mad at himself, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. "Strong back!" he said. "If I'd had a lick of sense I'd of known better than to go down there just to show off and win twenty dollars."

My mother and I tried to tell him that perhaps nothing would come of it, but he wouldn't see the bright side. "You don't know these high-flying snobs," he said. "If they thought Coral's old man was a

coal miner they'd drop her so quick she'd never know what happened."

"Then let them drop her," my mother said. "People like that aren't worth knowing anyway."

He studied over this a while, but he wasn't convinced. "They're the big shots," he said. "They can do a lot more for her than I can."

THE wedding was set for September. Big Joe expected to go up to Baltimore for it and then do a final disappearance stunt. As he planned it all out at different times, I began to believe that my grandfather had been right. It didn't seem possible that anyone except a man with a weak mind would expect to get by with such a fantastic hoax.

Whether he would have been able to get away with it or not we never knew, for one day in August when I stood in front of the mail car on the noon train I saw a girl get off the coach ahead. No one had to tell me who she was, and for just a minute I envied that man in Baltimore; then I was too busy feeling sorry for Joe to think of anything else.

She walked over to the platform and the train heaved forward. I flipped the mail sack into the car and went over to her. "You remember me?" I said.

"Of course not, Tommy." Her hair was low in one of those new-fangled bobs, and she jerked it back with a quick shake of her head. The hat she wore this time didn't hide her face. I guess I stared pretty hard at her, for she began to blush. "Is Dad here?" she asked.

"I suppose you saw the paper," I said, wondering if stalling for time would let me think of anything to say.

"Right," she said. "Where's Dad?"

I motioned to the car. "You can't delay the Government mail," I said. "Let's talk as we go."

She had a bag—not as new-looking as Big Joe's, but it felt a lot heavier when I picked it up. "I thought you were in Scotland," I said.

"Were' is right. I came back in time

for Dad's debut." She didn't seem much concerned about it.

I said, "Well, you've got to give the old boy credit for trying."

"Is he all right, Tommy? He isn't—I mean, he isn't despondent?"

"He will be," I said, "when he sees you. What does the man in Baltimore think about all this?"

"I suppose Dad's given you the whole story."

"Most of it," I said, "and I can piece in here and there. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"He doesn't know, or he didn't know yesterday."

"Joe'll be glad to know that," I said. "If he doesn't know now, he's not liable to find it out. So the wedding can come off as planned."

She didn't say anything to that, and I stopped in front of the post office. I could see Effie Gates' nose pressed against the window, and I carried the limp bag inside to keep her from breaking the glass.

"That—" she said. "That—"

I said, "Yes, that's Coral Bush," and went back to the car.

... My mother said, "Coral, honey, you're prettier than you were ten years ago, and I didn't think that was possible."

Coral said, "Where is everybody? The town looks dead."

I told her what had happened to the town, while Mom got a lunch together.

"Will he be glad to see me—Dad, I mean?"

I said, "You bet he will," but I wasn't too sure. "I don't suppose you'll know him," I said. "He's lost thirty pounds and—well, you know how it is when you work in the mines; your skin gets white and the coal dust makes rims around your eyes and fingernails."

"I remember," she said. "Couldn't they find anything for him outside? He never was a miner."

"It was that or nothing." I had almost forgotten the hours he had spent at the bench in the cellar. "Listen, Coral, he's working on an invention, some sort of

hydraulic automobile jack . . . Well, don't let him down. He expects to make another fortune out of this thing."

"You mean it's no good."

"I don't know," I said, "but it's only natural, having had the breaks once, he would try to repeat. He made up some kind of outline and blueprints and sent it to the firm that handled his other patent. If it had been anything, he would have heard before this."

"Thanks, Tommy." Her eyes glistened as she said it, then she looked away. Mom brought in the lunch and Coral sat down. "I hope he won't mind," she said; "I've missed him terribly."

HE MINDED all right, but when Coral told him that she was the only one who knew, he seemed to be satisfied. And he was as glad to see her as a baby girl with a first doll.

She was going to stay two weeks, she said; "Maybe longer," she added. It was then that I got the idea that this wedding Big Joe had planned was perhaps more his idea than it was hers.

She was supposed to be visiting a friend in Crescent. Every day or two she got a letter from this chap in Baltimore, and she wrote herself about two or three times the first week.

The townspeople, many of them who had known her when she was a kid, thought that she was high-hat. Big Joe's money, they said, had ruined her. I didn't think so. I took her in once to the movies at Huddlestone, and several evenings we coaxed the old car over the rough mountain roads. "How does this compare with Scotland?" I asked her once.

"Oh, it doesn't," she said. "No comparison."

I was beginning to think I would be glad when the two weeks were up. It's impossible to see a girl like that day after day and not fall for her, even though she is engaged to marry someone else.

I tried to talk to Big Joe about it once.

"Tommy," he said, "I like you fine; I'd even rather have you for a son-in-law

than that stuffed shirt up in Baltimore. But this is one time Big Joe is doing something he doesn't want to do. Strong back and weak brain doesn't go this time. Coral marries that man up there because he can take her away from the hell of coal and dirt and sweat, and getting water from a pump on the back porch, and wading through snow in wintertime to get to an outhouse."

"Maybe," I said, "she doesn't want to get away from all that. She doesn't seem to me like a girl who would marry a man just because he had a fat bank account."

He glared at me for a minute and I thought he was even capable of hitting me. A man wouldn't want more than one blow from a fist like his. "Shut up," he said. "You're just like your grandfather; you think all my brains are in my back. Well, maybe they are, but this is going through as planned."

Even Effie Gates caught on to how I was feeling about Coral and began to get in little remarks about it. I could stand kidding from Effie—she was fifteen years older than I—but at the end of the second week, when Coral still said nothing about going back, I decided to put my cards on the table.

I made a date to take her to a dance at Huddlestone Saturday night, but on the noon train Big Joe got the long-expected letter from the Washington firm he had written to about patenting his automobile jack.

Saturday was a half-day, and he was home when I took the letter over to him. I would have liked to wait until after Coral went back to give it to him, but that meant an indefinite delay, so I called him down cellar and handed him the letter; then I went on back upstairs. When a man has counted on anything as much as Big Joe had on that patent, it wasn't going to be nice to see him turned down cold.

He stayed down in that cellar a long time. I had to get back to the store and left at last with him still there. That evening he was quiet as a clam, and I

didn't feel like prying into his business.

I took Coral to the dance, and on the way home I pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the motor.

"Tommy," she said, "you think of the most romantic things. Hadn't we better get along?"

"Yes," I said, "in about five minutes. Are you or aren't you in love with this Chester Straub?"

There was enough of a moon to see that she hadn't liked that a little bit. "I don't know," she said, "that that comes under your jurisdiction."

"**M**AYBE not," I said, "but this does"; and I had my arms around her. For a minute she struggled, then with something like a sigh she lay still and I gave her the kisses I had been wanting to give her since she had stepped off that train.

"If you're through," she said at last in a weak little voice, "perhaps you'll let me get out and walk home."

"Damn it," I said, "are you an icicle or what? I love you, Coral. I've been in love with you since I was big enough to take your hand and lead you to Sunday school."

"You never did any such thing, and you know it. I had to drag you every step of the way. Your own grandfather would tell you so if he were here."

"All right," I said, "you dragged me, and even then I loved you. Are you going to marry some milk-fed, hand-raised prize rooster just because he happens to have money?"

"You— You—" She tugged herself free from my arms and hid her face in her hands. She was already crying before I got the motor started. She reached out and turned it off. "I've listened to you. Now you hear a thing or two, you conceited little—little ribbon clerk."

"I'm not marrying because I'm in love or because I want to or because I care whether I wear silk underwear or rayon. I'm marrying because it's the only thing in the world I've ever been able to do for Big Joe."

Carol's voice became accusing. "Do you think I want him to spend the rest of his days grubbing away in a black hole in the ground?"

"Chester Straub's father died two years ago and left him five hundred thousand dollars. That's my price; that's why I'm marrying him. If you've got that much I'll marry you. If it will do you any good, I'll tell you I'd even rather marry you. Now please, Tommy, take me home."

I started the motor again, but I wasn't through yet. "I can put a spoke in that wheel," I said. "Big Joe won't stand for anything like this. I'll go to him and tell him just what you've told me."

"You wouldn't dare," she said. And then perhaps because she thought I would dare, she said, "Anyway, if you did, it still wouldn't do any good. I'd still go through with it. It was because of me Big Joe lost his money. I'm going to do what I can to repay him."

"It isn't fair, Coral." I tried to find her hand and she jerked it away. "It's too much of a sacrifice."

"Listen, Tommy, I've spent two summers in Europe. If I told you some of the marriages I've seen over there you wouldn't believe me. Old men and young girls still in their teens. Boys in their twenties married to women old enough to be their mothers. You're provincial, Tommy, and you can't hold my hand, so you may as well stop groping for it."

I took her home; what else was there to do? Then I went to my own room and went to bed. I heard the clock strike two as I got up and began to put my clothes on.

It's twenty-two miles to Huddlestons, and I was in the telegraph office there at ten minutes to three. That's driving. If you've ever taken a car over those Virginia mountain roads, you'll agree. I hadn't seen Effie Gates scanning the letters that went from and to Coral Bush for two weeks without knowing Chester Straub's address in Baltimore.

Nothing happened Sunday, nothing except Big Joe trying to pin Coral down to naming a definite time when she was

going back to Richmond to get ready for her wedding.

Her personal things were in an apartment there. She gave in finally and said that she would go on Tuesday.

BIG JOE left for the mines the next morning at seven, as usual. I went to the store at eight, but I kept one eye on the Huddlestons road, and about ten o'clock I saw this expensive car come slowly along.

He saw the sign *Post Office* and went across to confront Effie Gates. I was on the store porch when he came out, and I got a good look at him. He drove off without saying a word to me and stopped down in front of the house.

I hollered at Tracy, who manages the store, that I was going to run home for a minute, and left before he could say anything.

It was Chester Straub all right. Coral gave me a hard look as she introduced him.

He said to Mom, "I've come to take Coral back with me. We don't have to wait until September to be married. We can be married sooner—tomorrow, today."

Coral's face turned white and I watched her sway against the door casing. "I couldn't possibly get ready," she said. "Why, you've no idea, Chet, how many things I have to do."

He brushed these things all aside with a flirt of his hand. I used my head for the second time and went to the phone in the hall and put through a call to the mines. I asked the foreman, when I got him, to send Big Joe home immediately, that it was urgent.

Coral was beside me when I replaced the receiver. "Why did you do that?" she asked; and before I could answer, the whole truth came to her. "Why, you—you meddling—" She never finished the sentence, but ran into her room.

I heard my mother talking with the visitor, so I went out to the front porch and sat down to wait for Big Joe. After a few minutes I heard Coral's door open.

Big Joe came, grimy, unwashed, out of breath. He saw me on the porch and the big Saint Bernard face was taut as that of a hungry wolf. "Is it Coral?" he asked. "Is she all right?"

"Inside," I said, and pointed to the car. "The boy friend's here from Baltimore."

"Oh!" he said with relief, and I thought something like a smile went over his blackened features. "Come on inside," he said. "This ain't private."

I didn't want to go inside, but I went anyway. "Hello, Chet," Big Joe said. I watched the Adam's apple come up and down in Chester Straub's long neck.

He wet his lips and said almost in a whisper, "I thought you were cruising somewhere. Coral said—"

Coral interrupted, "He was. He came back. He's doing some highly technical experimental work here in the mines. It's supposed to be very secretive."

Big Joe cleared his throat, and Coral went on hastily, "I'm ready whenever you are, Chet. Joe, you really shouldn't leave your work like this."

Big Joe looked at me and then at the man from Baltimore.

"Aw, Chet, that's not exactly right, the way Coral puts it. You see, I took a little flyer in stocks last fall, and after I got everything straightened out there was about seven or eight thousand dollars left. Not very much, huh?"

The Adam's apple almost stayed up this time. "Then," Straub said, "you mean you're doing this because you have to."

"Put it this way, son," Big Joe said. "I'm one of those guys with a strong back and weak brain. Tommy's grandfather here gave me that handle a long time ago. So you see when I lost my little stack I had to start over. It took me several months to get to this point, but there didn't seem to be anything else I could do."

I SAW Straub's hand make a slow advance towards his hat. He really wasn't such a bad sort; his Adam's apple did

gymnastics for a full thirty seconds before he got the words out.

"I think there's been a mistake," he said. "You see, I lost my money in Wall Street, too. I—I—" He turned to Coral. "I'll still marry you, Coral, if—if—"

"She's marrying me," I said.

Coral looked at the floor. Big Joe was gazing with complete absorption out the open window. Mom was tying knots in her apron. I don't know what I was doing. I got the idea that someone had to see him to the door, so I went.

Coral said when I went back into the room, "Did this just happen or was it planned?"

I said, "If you want the truth, I drove back to Huddlestone Saturday night and sent him a wire."

"He told me he got a wire," Coral said, "but what—?"

"It was premature," I said, "but I told him the engagement was broken and signed your name."

Coral went across to Big Joe and smeared the coal grime on his face worse than it was. "Don't you care, Joe darling. I'm not going to have you slaving in an old mine the rest of your life. I'll get a job myself. I'll sell magazines or silk stockings."

"Honey," Joe said.

Mom was making little gaping sounds at the coal dust that was rubbing off on Coral's dress, but Joe didn't take his arm from around her waist. "Honey," he said

again, "you can marry anyone you damn please. I got an offer of a quarter of a million dollars for my hydraulic jack. An out-right sale, no waiting on royalties or nothing."

"Strong back, weak brain," I could hear my grandfather's voice saying again. But this time he had certainly been wrong. Even Miss Effie was wrong; lightning does strike twice. Big Joe pulled himself to his feet and half pushed Coral in my direction.

"I got eleven empties waiting for me up there in the heading," he said. "Guess I'll get up and load 'em."

This time I was certain I heard a cackle of mirth from the armchair where my grandfather used to sit. "Strong back and weak brain." Joe must have heard it too, for he turned at the door and looked back.

"The old man was right," he said. "I ain't fit for nothing but to work. I ain't felt as good in ten years as I do now." He slapped his hands, and a little puff of coal dust hung in the air after the screen door had slammed behind him.

Mom went into the kitchen and made a lot of unnecessary noise banging around pots and pans. Coral said, "Tommy, I wouldn't marry you if you had a million."

"Well, I haven't," I said; and with my arms around her waist raised her feet from the floor. It was probably Mom pumping water on the back porch, but it sounded like a cracked voice saying, "Strong back—strong back."

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