

The Gamblers of Gravel Mountain

By MORLEY ROBERTS

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"We give you a mighty good price for it," said the great boss of the railroad as he leaned back in his chair and looked out through the window of his frame-built office. A snowy cliff of peaks was in the center of the picture, heavy blue sky was balanced by shadows in gullies far below, the snow ran down the rock, then went piling fringed the shoulder of a mountain, dipping into dark forest, with the roaring river at its foot.

"But you own up fair and square that this is taking a risk," said Holdrege, the contractor from Utah. "It's no common kind of job-cut work in and take dollars out."

"We lay the cards on the table, Mr. Holdrege," said the boss.

The lord of railroads threw a packet down before him, and rising, went to the stove. Except about noon the air was chill at the altitude of the summit when the month was May.

"There's nothing underhand here," said Ross. "What our engineers say you know. One's word is 'Why, certainly, and another's, 'It can't be done,' and the third is a Scotchman, and has what he calls 'his doan.' But if you and your brother risk it, and make it, we pay heavy. If you muck it, our share goes and you'll lose your labor. It's a gamble."

He turned to the stove with a burnt pine stick, which he withdrew, blazing.

"Nature always holds four aces," said the younger Holdrege.

"No," said Ross, "but she keeps her run ready for all of us when we win. Even a plain piece of rock work at \$1 a yard, or \$2 may spell catastrophe and sudden death."

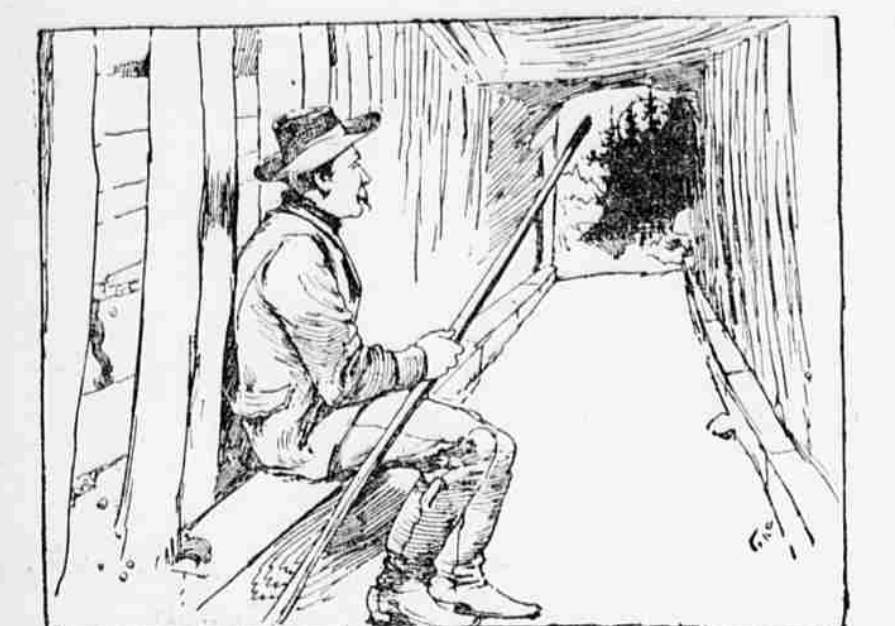
The Holdrege brothers looked at each other for a long minute and then at the table. This was a strangely quiet gambling house, far among the hills.

"And the dealer waited."

"I'll straddle the blind," said Holdrege. And his brother nodded.

But as they cut their names on paper they felt that on that plain bit of pine lay ten years' work and ten years' money, to be returned with mighty interest or swept off by Ross and those behind him.

"I'm glad you have the grit to take this



AS HE SAT THERE HE HEARD A THOUSAND VOICES INAUDIBLE IN THE DAY.

on," said the dealer. "I'd have given considerable money to see you have a selling level chance offered. If you put in through you make three times as much in half the time as the man who has the fittest job between the Summit and the Cascades."

He laughed jovially.

"And if we don't, Mr. Ross," said the younger Holdrege, "we'll establish a claim on you for a long stretch in the Columbia valley, where two men can start afresh with short shovels."

But when they were outside they shook hands.

"It can be done," said Keeley Holdrege, the elder.

"I reckon," assented Bill.

Yet without realizing it other things wrote that night to their wives in their native state to go easy with the money and save what they could.

"We've got hold of the biggest thing here," they said, "but it's the riskiest. It's make a spoon or spoil a horn. But we'll make a spoon, never fear."

They deemed as they slept in their tent by the foaming waters of the Kicking-Horse river that they were rich, that they were poor, that the world was theirs and that was lost. And overhead was the great Gravel mountain through which they had undertaken to put a tunnel.

The big men of the east were in a hurry to meet the big men of the west.

By the end of May the valley was a hive of men, and every hour came the sound of great rocks east toward the city, and flat cars ran. Explosions shattered the air and beat the white river whiter yet with the wreck of mountains. In the forests Wisconsin men from Michigan and Wisconsin heaved piles of ties, and many working on contract for the Holdrege brothers squared huge balks with broad axes. The sounds of saws and shambles and hammers and the noise of the ancient dynamite and the sounds of cataract and snowslide were the din shriek of the far locomotive, now dominant on the colored summit, and in the great gravel hill the Holdrege brothers were working, preparing a natural slope among the disintegrated wash of a thousand years. For in solid rock the Holdrege brothers were working, steep angle he will; in hardened earth or schist or clay is another fitting slope, but for all loose material only the natural slope will hold. The angle at which gravel runs is the angle at which it will stay. That is its natural slope.

In June the tunnel began, and with the tunnel the difficulties were unburied. For in the gravel was a bed of blue clay that cut itself with a spade or a shovel. It was as strongly impervious to water as the granite. Not a grain of sand grinded on a knife passed through it; a man could stand on a fresh cut slab and hardly leave a mark.

When they came to it the men called to the foreman and sent for Keeley. The sight and feel of it gladdened his heart.

"If it runs through this will save half the labor," he said. For to timber up the gravel seemed more and more terrible to him.

His foreman looked doubtful, but kept his head when Holdrege went away.

In the morning when Keeley came out of his tent and set his foot upon a blue slab he sank in it deeply. He looked for water and saw none; but the men's long noses were drenched with blue.

"Have you struck a spring?" he asked.

"It's hard when it comes out," said the foreman gloomily, "but every hour out sinks it. Look!"

He held a lump and squeezed it. It came through his strong fingers like putty. Water dripped from it.

"How will it stand timbering?" asked Holdrege.

"It stands it so far," said the foreman.

And day by day as they cut their easy tunnel the blue clay softened, and he luscious and melted; a high pile flattened; in it soaked the moisture of the mountain air.

In their tent at night the brothers talked obstinately.

"We'll put it through. It'll be only a matter of timbering," they said. But as they lay in their beds they knew it might be more than that.

Then they struck concrete and cement, a rising bed of it, under the clay. A pick would not touch it; they had to send for dynamite. Now a quarter of the time was lost by the use of dynamite. It was difficult to keep up the ventilation.

"It's an ill wind that brings no luck,"

"Meester Holdrege?" he said, as he tumbled off his perch.

"That's so," said Keeley, "and you are Mr. Gordon. Will you walk through now or after supper?"

"I'm hungry and in a wicked bad temper the noo," said Gordon, "so I'll go through right away and give you a hungry man's opinion. And then I'll take my food and a drink and have a smoke, and give you a full man's best judgment, for with both I don't often go wrong. Mr. Holdrege, and all ye know me, my digestion and my temper ye can't trust his word."

He sat down on a heavy balk, which was the step for three uprights, when he came to the fastenings of the stumps on it was the dinner hour, and the men were stowing rough beef and rougher pie in a big tent. The sound of their laughter and talk came to the ears of the two men.

For five minutes Gordon said nothing. The air was full of strange sounds—a cracking, weeping, whimpering went on for some time, and his ear against one upright and listened.

"Give me the lamp," he said, presently. And he looked at the fire he had been sitting on. When he saw the uprights on it, the balk was composed two inches. On each side splintered fibers stood up. A little damp seeped from the green wood. He stood back and looked at the wood.

"Give a straight edge if ye have one," said he. And Keeley found him a two-by-four scantling lying among the balks not yet set.

"Is she straight?" asked Gordon, pointing to the upright.

"I think so," said Keeley, almost sullenly.

But Gordon cut the scantling's two-inch side against the huge balk and it only touched it closely on one place—just in the middle. On the other side of the balk the two ends of the scantling touched, but the middle was an inch away.

"She just bucking, man," said Gordon. "But to be sure I've tried some main. With three out of five the result was the same."

"She talks a deal too much," said Gordon. "Ye've laid too much on the wood. I always said I had my doots, but now I've nae doots—deevill a doot!"

"Well?" said Keeley.

"Show me a man, man—slow but sure. When ye bear timber crack a wee bit, it's naething, for ye'd crack w' heat or w' cold, but it's this talk, talk, talk all the time they have to say, for I see all they see and hear all they hear, and I've nae doots in the early morn' than any other time. Courage comes out of feeding and a moderate use of spirits, and above all, not too much tobacco. And I've nae faith, full than hungry, whether it's in materials or in providence. And that's a strong good argument against asceticism and a silly sworn o' God's good creatures."

He showed no scorn of them till it was obvious he could eat no more.

"Hurry the place, I'm some till supper time," he said presently. "And after one smoke I'll play the wise physician again and put my finger on the pulse of the place, and tell you what's what in two shakes o' a lamb's tail. And I don't mind saying straight that my experience is as big as that of a carload of the common run o' engineers."

He went through the tunnel again, and the brothers listened. Once or twice he stopped and spoke to a laborer as well as the foreman.

"Ye wonder," he said to Bill Holdrege, "that I'd speak to these men and hear what they have to say, for I see all they see and hear all they hear, and I've nae doots in the early morn' than any other time. Courage comes out of feeding and a moderate use of spirits, and above all, not too much tobacco. And I've nae faith, full than hungry, whether it's in materials or in providence. And that's a strong good argument against asceticism and a silly sworn o' God's good creatures."

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"BARRING THE PIPE, I'M DONE TILL SUPPER TIME."

bought. But suitable hardware there was none. With 2,000 nails, and to set that hill on oak pillars was to buy \$10 with a golden eagle. As a makeshift, new pine and fir fell on that mountain slope, and the trees of daylight were daily buried in the pit.

They found the western end, which was clay bottomed, hardest to deal with, and there they doubled back and struck first, and drove some hardwood wedges in, and under each they blocked the inward, thrusting mud with heavy green planks, measuring 4x10, that came from a saw mill humming near the summit. But at here the uprights showed no sign of buckling at first was the deadliest sign of all. For where the cement bottom was it was necessary to put in square blocks betwixt and between, and even then the groaning was more horrid, new strains were established. Even those who stayed foremost to hear the timber talk. It spoke so loudly of the heavy world above them—the sinking world in the bright air.

Among these who worked with the lumber came down to look at the work. He walked through from end to end, and when he was once more in daylight he used the same expression that came to every one's lips.

"Talks a good deal," he said.

Keeley nodded and tried to look cheerful.

"She's settled down, I reckon."

"I reckon not," said Ross, "but she's settling. Shall I send you down, Gordon?"

"Gordon was the Scotch engineer who had done it."

"For I think you'd better double timber it," said Ross. "He knew what that meant, and he was a bit sorry for those who had betted their pile against that pile of gravel."

"Send Gordon," said Keeley, and a touch of old Scotch lye came from Logan's mouth.

ing both ends to the side frame, they left it. By the early dawn the middle of the straight-edge was one and a half inches sunk in mud. The foreman said this was the end of it. But Keeley sent for more stuff, and leveling the floor again, he set in a solid bottom fourteen inches thick, and beat it down with sledge. Along the sides he set timber longways and on them three more struts against the roof. And he saw the roof was level.

"We've done all we can," said the contractors. "If it holds now we shall have made nothing. And if it doesn't hold—"

For in the contract the finished tunnel was to stand a month before acceptance.

They went to their tents and played poker to pass the time. But, though they were now idle and their men discharged, the hill was busy.

The next day cards were a wastefulness. They paced the groaning hole from dawn to eve. Men going east or west, who had heard of the mud tunnel, looked in, and the strange noises scared some of them. On Sunday half the men from the contractors next above them came to view it. The end of the track was now but five miles away and some of the track layers came, too. They offered bets against its standing. Ross came down and shook his head as he rode back.

"I give it a week," he said.

But in less than a week Keeley Holdrege came up to him.

"You'll have to make a cut of it, after all," he said.

"Can you take on the job?" asked Ross.

"We're going over to the lakes, sir," en-

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hill, and when the dust was dissipated the tunnel was seen no more.

It might have been my imagination, but as the brothers turned away it seemed to me that a great weight was off their minds. I met old Gordon a mile up the road and stopped him.

"The mud tunnel's down," Mr. Gordon, I said. And he whistled.

"Did ye see the Holdrege, man?" he asked.

"And what did they say?"

"O, just 'D—n'!" said I. "And they've gone away whistling. They were good men to work for."

"Ye ought to know," cried Gordon, grinning, "for ye know they fired ye."

But if I did get the sack as the mud tunnel it was only for having too much to say. And I bore the Holdrege no malice.

One of These Childish Questions.

Chicago Post: "Papa!"

"Yes, my boy?"

"I want to ask you a question."

"Proceed, my son."

He spoke with all the confidence of a man who realized that he was dealing with an inexperienced lad.

"Didn't somebody once say, 'Sweet are the uses of adversity'?"

"Somebody did."

"Was he a man who had soured on prosperity?"

The man no longer spoke with confidence. In fact, it was with difficulty that he spoke at all, and when he did he didn't say any thing that was worth repeating.