

The Story of Hunch Badeau.

BY SAMUEL MERWIN.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Hunch Badeau is a young man of Lake Michigan freight schooner, and Bruce Conditine is his first mate and friend. Conditine falls in love with a Manhattan girl, Hunch keeps counting straight and brings him back through a storm. Hunch saves the girl himself. Several months later Conditine introduces Hunch to a girl named Bertie. Hunch falls in love with Hunch and he seems to reciprocate. Conditine continues his dripping love. He sees how his schoolmate and Hunch saved the girl. Conditine's foreman in a lumber camp and Conditine's foreman work in the same place. Conditine registers his love. Hunch goes to see her and gives her help.

CHAPTER XI.

Bruce came down to the station in the evening and was standing on the platform when Hunch stepped off the train. They walked up together and were half way to the room before Bruce said:

"Say, Hunch, how about it?"

"It's bad. She didn't have enough to eat or keep her warm. She's going to live at Joe Cartier's place and take her meals there. It's a good deal cheaper than the other. I told her you was coming down Sunday."

"What if you say to her, Hunch? What?"

Saturday night, after they had been sitting by the stove for a long time in silence, Bruce was nervous.

"Say, Hunch," he said, "would you go down if you was me?"

"Where?"

"You know—down to Mame's tomorrow night. Would I not? What you talking about?"

"I don't know. What do you suppose she'd say?"

"I guess you know what she ought to say. Do you think she'll be mad?"

"Oh, you shut up!"

Bruce went to bed early, but Hunch heard him tossing until late. In the morning he was moody.

"Hunch," he said, after breakfast, "what time does the train go down?"

"About half an hour."

"Say, I suppose I might as well take it as the noon train."

"That's your business—'tain't mine."

"Well, I guess I will, say, Hunch, I'll tell you—suppose you come along."

"Guess not."

"I don't mean nothing, Hunch, but you've been talking to her and you know how to find out quiet her. I never could, somehow."

"Where's his hat, Miss Conditine?"

Bruce stood up.

"What's that? What you saying to my wife? That's my wife, Hunch Badeau. She's a lady. You can't talk to my wife."

Mame stood at the foot of the bed watching the two men nervously.

"Bruce," said Hunch, "shut up and come along."

"Don't you think you'd better go, dear?" said Mame, timidly.

"Who's that? I'm on to you two. You can't fool me, you can't. You're pretty smart. Hunch Badeau, sneaking down to see my wife."

Hunch gripped Bruce's arm and jerked him out of the room. They were at the top of the stairs when Mame came to the door.

"Here's his hat," she said. "You'd better take it, I guess."

"Thanks," said Hunch without looking at her, and he hurried Bruce down the stairs.

CHAPTER XII.

The next morning Bruce was still in bed when Hunch went to work. McGuire did not appear with the other men and at noon his brass clock still hung on its wall in the timelocker's hands. Shortly after lunch Bruce and McGuire, both a little the worse for drinking, appeared and went to work with the gang. Hunch had gone up to the mill and did not see them until his return. When he came near they were jawing over their work, chuckling together over some incident of the morning.

"What you two doing here?" Hunch asked.

Bruce started and moved away from McGuire.

"Speak up!"

McGuire muttered, "Guess we know what we're doing."

"Look here," said Hunch, "you go to the office and get your time."

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"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" GROWLED BRUCE.

"Look here, Bruce, I ain't going today or any day. I ain't going at all. Understand? You needn't tell her I said that, though."

"Guess I'd better be starting—eh, Hunch?"

"Guess you had."

"Come on down to the depot. You ain't got nothing to do."

At the station Hunch said:

"Get any money?"

"No, I ain't got much."

"Here's a little. No drinking, now."

"On my honor, Hunch, I won't drink a drop. Do you think a man would drink when he's going down to see his own wife, Hunch? Do you think—"

"You better get aboard."

"Goodly, Hunch, I'll get back tonight."

In the evening Hunch met the Manistogee train. Bruce did not get off. Hunch looked for him on Monday morning, but had no word from him. At noon he was called to Mr. Jackson's office.

"Badeau," said his employer, "when that Conditine gets back to work you send him to me for his time."

Hunch hesitated.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Jackson. He went down yesterday to see his wife. They kid did a little while ago and like 's not she's sick."

"Think so?"

"My work is pretty light today. I thought I could get off for the afternoon train and sort of look him up. I can get back tonight, you know. You see, if he gets laid off it'll come kind of hard on his wife."

"All right, go ahead. But, say, Badeau, held on a minute. We're not running a charity hospital, you know. We can't give that man much rope."

Hunch said, "Yes, sir," and went out. He reached Manistogee at supper time and picked up a hasty meal at the hotel. Then he hurried over to Joe Cartier's house. Cartier let him in.

"Hello, Joe," said Hunch. "Bruce here."

Cartier hesitated.

"Yes, I guess he's upstairs."

"Well, say, Hunch, come in the parlor a minute. I want to talk to you."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, you know Bruce came down yesterday morning and long about noon I guess they quarreled a little. Me and my wife, we didn't listen, but we couldn't help hearing Bruce talk. And then Bruce went out—"

"Oh," said Hunch, "drunk?"

"No, no had as I've seen him, but he come in kind of ugly, and he's got some up there—brought it back with him. Seems kind of too bad. I didn't feel quite 's if I could do anything. You see 't ain't really none of my business."

Hunch went upstairs and knocked at the door. There was a stir inside and he could hear Bruce grumbling and Mame whispering. When Mame opened the door a few inches, when she looked at Hunch the color left her face and she leaned against the door.

"It's all right," said Hunch, "I come for him."

"Oh!" faltered Mame.

"Who's there?" called Bruce. "Who you whispering to?"

Mame hesitated and looked at Hunch. He gently brushed her aside, saying, "Let me come in."

"Who's it?" said Bruce. He was lying on the bed, his clothing mussed, his face red. Hunch stood by the bed and looked down at him.

"What you doing here?" growled Bruce. "What right you got coming in a man's house?"

Hunch looked at his watch.

"Come on," he said, "we've got to get back. Go on out of here, will you?"

Hunch took his arm and pulled him up. Bruce sat on the edge of the bed.

"Come on, Bruce, get moving."

"Go 'way."

Hunch turned to Mame.

she say? Anything special? Tell me about it."

"Guess there ain't nothing to tell."

"Seems to me it's kind of funny if a man can't find out nothing about his own wife. You was down there and you see her all day, I don't see why I ain't got a right to know about it."

"Oh, shut up! You ain't got a right to nothing from the way you've treated her."

"Look here, Hunch Badeau, you're going to tell me."

"How long you been saying what I got to do and what I ain't got to do?"

"That's all right, but—"

Bruce stopped and took Hunch's arm.

"Take your hand off me."

Bruce's hand dropped.

"Now don't get ugly, Hunch. I just wanted to know about her. I ain't been her for a good while."

"Well, do you think that's my fault? I'll tell you about her. She's fixed up where she's got enough to eat and drink and she's got people to talk to her and chirp her up and she's waiting for you to come down next Sunday. If you're man enough to keep straight and go down there and do the square thing you won't find me in my way for any. If you ain't, you can go to hell for all I care."

Bruce was silent and they climbed to the room and went to bed.

A day or two later Mr. Jackson sent for Hunch.

"Badeau," he said, "how about this man Conditine?"

"How do you mean?"

"What kind of work is he doing?"

"All right as far 's I can see."

"He's a friend of yours, ain't he?"

"Yes, he used to work for me when I had the schooner."

"I'll tell you, Badeau, I've had some complaints about him. You know I don't want any man that can't do the work."

"I think he's doing pretty good, sir."

"Well, I'll count on you to keep an eye on him. If you catch him loafing don't waste any time or his."

Hunch went over the conversation in the evening with Bruce. He frisked Bruce and he made promises which he kept for the rest of the week.

They did not talk about Mame until

McGuire lowered his canthook.

"What—what you say?"

"Go on. Don't talk to me."

McGuire dropped his canthook and started away.

"Come back here, McGuire. Pick that up."

McGuire muttered.

"What's that you're saying?"

"I ain't saying nothing."

Hunch started toward him, but checked himself.

"Pick up that canthook, McGuire."

McGuire obeyed and walked slowly away. Hunch turned to Bruce, who stood looking on with his mouth open.

"What are you gawping there for, Conditine. Go 'long."

"Where?"

"Do and get your time. We're through with you."

Bruce stood still, looking stupidly at Hunch.

"What?" he said finally, "you ain't—"

"Get off the job. Understand? You're laid off. We don't want you."

Bruce slowly lifted his canthook from his shoulder. He stared at Hunch until Hunch turned away, then he walked over to where McGuire was standing and walked away with him.

Late in the afternoon they came back and hung around watching the gang at work. They had been drinking again and McGuire had a bottle in his pocket, which he pulled out frequently. They were talking loud and laughing.

Their actions drew the attention of the men and annoyed Hunch, though he said nothing for a long time. Finally Bruce and McGuire began calling at the men, greeting bolder in their remarks. At last McGuire called: "You fellows muck like working for that d-d fool, and Hunch walked toward them.

"You'll have to move away from here," he said. "We can't have you disturbing the work."

"No, say," McGuire replied. "You can't touch us. We ain't on your job."

"Star that, McGuire! Get out, quick, or I'll throw you out!"

McGuire laughed. Hunch went to him and pulled him to his feet.

"Let 'em go," said McGuire. "Take your hands off of me!"

Hunch began dragging him away. McGuire hunched back, protesting and threatening. Bruce walked slowly after them, shaking his head and talking to himself. McGuire tried his feet. Hunch saw him wrench that nearly threw him and McGuire struck at him. Bruce watched the struggle, the old drunken, cunning light in his eyes. Then he ran forward and jumped on Hunch's back, pounding him about the face and back. Hunch staggered, but he covered and caught McGuire with his knuckles squarely on the side of the jaw. McGuire staggered back. Bruce had both arms around Hunch's neck and was trying to choke him. Hunch gripped Bruce's wrists and slowly pulled them forward until their hold was loosened. Then he turned quickly, took hold of Bruce's shoulders and threw him against a pile of cut timber. Bruce struck hard and seemed to have lost his footing. He fell on his back and he had nothing to say. Some of the men were running toward them. One was calling:

"I see it, Hunch! It wasn't your fault! I see it!"

Hunch stood panting as the men gathered around.

"Better see if he's hurt," he said.

They rolled Bruce over. His face was covered with blood. One of the men brought some water from the river in his hat and washed it off.

McGuire stood at one side, rubbing his cheek. Hunch ordered him away and he went without a word. The other men were crowding around Bruce. One of them looked up and said:

"I guess he's done for, Hunch."

CHAPTER XIII.

It was a cold day in Manistogee. The snow lay in high banks on both sides of the street tracks, with paths cut through at the crossings and in front of the larger stores; underfoot it cracked and crunched. Men walked briskly, keeping their hands in their pockets or holding them over ears and noses and pausing at the drug store on the corner to look at the red thermometer.

It was close to noon and a number of men were coming down a flight of stairs which reached the sidewalk a few doors beyond the drug store. The last one was Hunch Badeau, with his ulster collar turned up, his cap pulled over his ears and his fur mittens on. When they reached the street two of the other men turned and shook hands with him, but he had nothing to say, and a moment later he was walking alone, slowly, up the bridge approach. The examination was over and he was free. His case had not reached a trial, for he had killed Conditine plainly in self-defense.

A long row of schooners, steamers and tugs lay alongside the docks on both sides of the narrow river. On most of the schooners a length of stovepipe came out of a cabin window and a few wisps of smoke, winding lazily out, to be snatched away by the wind, showed that many a sailor was lying dormant during the winter months. Hunch lingered on the bridge. He had once spent a winter in Chicago on a big schooner, locked up snugly in the North branch, near Goose Island, eating and sleeping, smoking and swapping yarns and helping to drink up somebody's summer profits. That was a long while ago; it seemed to Hunch a dim part of some past life before he had ever

met a woman other than the rough girls of the Chicago levee and the North Louisiana stockades.

Mr. Jackson had told Hunch that he need not go back to work that day, so he climbed to his room and sat on the chair by the window. Bruce's things were lying about the room, his razor on the bureau, his Sunday clothes over a chair in the closet, his shoes under the foot of the bed. Hunch got up and began to get them together, without knowing exactly why he was doing it. He packed what he could in the patent leather valise and made up the rest into bundles, borrowing paper and string from the landlady. Then he sat down again, but before long, too restless to stay alone, he put on his coat and walked out to the mill. Mr. Jackson was standing near the waste dump with a memorandum book in his hand.

"Well, Badeau, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, guess I might 's well get to work."

"Just as you like."

The men looked surprised when he joined them. He was nervous, and he worked both himself and them at a pace that wore them out in a few hours. But at 6 o'clock, when the whistle blew, and he put on his coat and went to the boarding house, he felt refreshed.

On Sunday, after several days of heartening over the best way to get Bruce's things to Mame, Hunch gathered up the bundles and the valise, and took the noon train to Manistogee. He sat for two hours in the station before he could make up his mind to take them to Joe Cartier's house. When he finally knocked at the door Joe's wife opened it.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Badeau. Come in, won't you?"

"No, I can't," said Hunch. "Hold on, Joe, I will, too, just a minute. Where's Joe?"

"Here he is," replied Joe himself, coming through the hall in his shirt sleeves.

"Come in and sit down."

Hunch stepped in and dropped the bundles in the corner.

"Can I speak to you a minute, Joe?"

"Sure thing. Walk in the front room. Martha, I could swear Hunch ain't had his dinner. Fetch out some of the chicken and potatoes. It ain't so hot as 'Tues, Hunch, but it's good, plain stuff, good enough for us, ain't it, Martha?"

"No, you don't, Mr. Cartier. I can't stay, honest. I had some grub anyhow."

But Joe's wife hurried out to the kitchen, leaving Joe and Hunch in the front room.

"Take up your coat, man," said Joe.

"What you getting so bashful about all of a sudden?"

Hunch buttoned his coat nervously.

"He's waiting here yet, Joe?"

"Who's that you mean, Hunch? Bruce's wife? She's going to her father's tomorrow."

"How's that happen?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Hunch—you won't say nothing about it, of course, but when Bruce—when he died, you know—and I knowed that girl didn't have a cent, anywhere, and worse than that if you count his debts, I just thought kind of that the old man didn't know quite how things stood or he wouldn't be so ugly. You see, ain't you?"

Hunch nodded.

"And of course I couldn't say nothing to her, you know, 'cause she'd think that I'd meant something about the rent—she's a touchy little thing, you know—no I says to

Martha, 'Martha, you just take your work—Joe's was Martha. I says, you you take your work and go up to Mr. Hank's and set down and have a good old jaw with the old lady. She'll let you talk to her,' I says, 'cause she used to be your Sunday school teacher and she's always took a shine to you. And you just lay out the whole thing and tell her that if she ain't wanting to lose the respect of one grocer in this town she'd better just leave go of one of them missionary societies of hers and watch out a little for her own daughter.' Martha she felt kind of delicate about going, but she went down, just the same, and tackled the old lady and when she come back her eyes was like she'd been crying, so I knowed 'twas all right and I didn't say nothing. And, sure enough, that night old Hankers himself came around and stood up stiff in the door and says: 'Is my daughter here, Cartier?' He always calls me Joe, you know, and I calls him George, but that ain't no matter. I says, yes and he goes upstairs and then Martha and I we just keeps out of the way in the kitchen so's he could go out without running into any of us. But 'long about 9:30 he comes out and knocks on the kitchen door and says: 'My daughter's coming to my house, Joe.' And I says, 'When?' and he says 'Monday' and 'Let me know what the board'll amount to.' And 9:30 see, Hunch, I was kind of foolish myself, so I just says, 'All right, George,' and then he goes out. So the girl's going to keep alive anyhow, and that's something."

Hunch rose and slowly buttoned his ulster.

"You give her them things, won't you, Joe? I dunno as I'd say anything about my bringing 'em down."

(To Be Continued.)

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