

The Free Press' Short Story

FREE FROM RUST

ERNEST L. THURSTON

JERRY PATTERSON walked by the clanking pile driver, dodged a forty-foot post that a derrick was swinging into position and crossed, with inner trembling a narrow plank that formed the sole passage over the dark waters of Elmo Creek. The pleasant, tangy scent of sunheated timber filled his nostrils, save when he passed a concrete mixer and caught the dank, flat odor of wet cement. The racket of construction machinery, the smells, the gangs of workmen, the half-finished new highway crossing, over streams and swamps, stretched his blood strangely. His head came up and his brown eyes glowed.

Near a group of men dominated by a tall, rangy, sandy-haired individual with rough-brown, weathered features, he waited. The man was Charles Hodgkins, chief engineer of the new highway project. He appeared a dynamo of energy as he talked, gesticulated and issued orders. When, abruptly, he broke from the group and swung towards Jerry, the keen glance from his cold blue eyes seemed to the young fellow to X-ray his very thoughts.

"Well?" he snapped, in the tone of a man to whom minutes are precious because of so much to be done. Jerry smiled in a friendly way that brought a twinkle into his eyes and quirked the corners of a firm mouth. "I suppose," he said, "there's no opening for another young engineer on your staff? I was graduated from Kent Engineering College last February. I've had four summers of field practice. I want to get into harness, sir. My father, James K. Patterson, was a civil engineer, and I guess it's in my blood. I can show—"

"I knew your father," interrupted the chief. "A man who got things done; who never spared himself. As for a job—what would you say when I tell you a half-dozen men, some with considerable experience, had applied to me just within the last two days?" "I see, sir," said Jerry, his smile fading. "Sorry to have troubled you."

"Won't you look over the work, while you're here," invited the chief, an odd, quizzical look in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir, but I'll be going," answered Jerry. His tall figure slightly drooping, Jerry turned away and again traversed the plank over the water. He tramped by one noisy machine after another, without heeding, and climbed into his little old runabout.

"Well, Old Man," he said to that ancient rattletrap, as he set out for town, "that's that."

Jerry had thoroughly enjoyed his engineering training and experience. Now, he had told himself over and over, he was determined to become a field engineer on construction work. As he was needed at home, owing to his father's paralysis resulting from an accident, he had limited his efforts to secure a position to projects within easy commuting range for his automobile. Although openings in other lines had been offered, field positions had seemed to be filled. As a result Jerry had drifted along, seeking and allowing himself to be increasingly depressed with each failure.

On the edge of town, Margaret English waved to him from the porch of her home and came running down to the curb. She was slender and dark, with cherry brown eyes and a friendly manner.

"Cheer up, Jerry," she laughed. "It really is a lovely world in spite of that gloom on your face. And take me out Northrup Road to the Lanes farm, will you? The father's away, the mother's sick, and I'm going out to show the small daughter how to prepare the patient's food."

"The idea of you doing little pleasurable things like that," spluttered Jerry as he swung open his car door, "you with your splendid college training in the preparation of foods. Why waste?"

"You are my car," the other night and liked it," laughed Margaret teasingly.

"Sure," chuckled Jerry. "I had rosy visions for forty-eight hours after eating it. But oh, you know what I mean, Margaret. You want some big delectable position with a hospital or great physician. Too bad you couldn't take that city position that was offered you right after you graduated. Too bad your mother's illness kept you home. It seems—"

"Away, sissons and branches," laughed Margaret. "Some day the road position will open. But Jerry, I have three little helpings here and there. I'm so glad I can. And you. She shot him a swift birdlike glance. Jerry saw you, clasping up that oak that blew down back of your house. What kept you as so bright and free from rust?"

"I got your point lady," laughed Jerry. "Use of course. But—"

"Always the but," laughed Margaret. "Which one, this?" "He finished. "Use dulls an as."

"Doesn't do so much damage as long"

of worth-while knowledge. I'll promise to keep from under foot and—"

"All right," snapped Hodgkins, turning away. "Go ahead."

A tilt disturbed by the man's curtness, Jerry moved to the far end of the construction area and spent the morning watching one process after another. Now and then, when he could do so without interfering with the men's duties, he asked questions on points that troubled him.

Thereafter he reported frequently and spent long hours on the job. The force appeared rather puzzled as to just what his position was. He gathered, from a chance remark, that he was taken for some sort of state inspector. Daily his questions became keener, and his delving into his books more thorough. Once he even dared to ask the chief a question that puzzled him greatly.

The chief answered him clearly and to the point, and then turned abruptly and walked away.

Only once, in weeks did Jerry really help in the work. That instance occurred when he was watching the pile driver at the final span of the creek crossing. An enormous timber had been raised high in the air and swung around the working platform, when its fastening slipped. Down crashed the great pile, hitting the edge of the platform and whirling around towards the gang of workers.

One man attempted to block it, and was tossed to one side like a straw. Jerry leaped forward, grasped a crowbar, stuck it upright in the flooring in the path of the whirling log, and leaped overboard to avoid the spinning timber that threatened every man near by. The great log crashed against the metal bar, half over-rode it and then settled back, stopped in its tracks.

"Quick thought and quick action, young man," said Chief Hodgkins, who had been near enough to note the occurrence. Jerry felt well repaid by that; yet it but fanned the flame of desire. He had thought, weeks before, that he wanted a staff position. Now he realized that he wanted to be in engineering, anywhere.

He devoted more time to observation and to study, yet not all his time. Margaret had seen to that, with one suggestion after another as to where a helping hand was needed.

A few evenings later Margaret called up to tell him of another need and then to add, "The most wonderful thing has come to me, Jerry. I'm to be chairman of the County Hospital."

"Not a bit more than you deserve, Margaret," exclaimed Jerry, heartily, despite the longing it stirred within him for his own job.

Perhaps Margaret guessed. She went on "You know that hole that developed on the highway project?"

"I do but how do you?" demanded Jerry.

"Mrs. Lane. You see, they needed gravel in a hurry, tons of it, and near at hand. The Lanes have a gravel pit. Engineers came up and looked it over and when they found your bridge would hold their gravel trucks they contracted for the gravel. Good work, Jerry."

That was like Margaret, Jerry thought, to cheer a fellow up.

Several days later, following a two-day inshore gale, Jerry went down to the creek crossing to see how the engineers were protecting the construction against the extra high tiding tide, for Elmo Creek was a tidal stream, close to the bay. He

found men bracing temporary structures, and protecting with brush mattresses cement work that might easily be undermined by the inrush of waters as the tide reached its height. Finally he crossed the falsework on which the main channel span was to be built. Beyond he found several men under a sub-foreman, getting out bags and small timber for use at other points in the work.

"Look there!" shrieked a workman, pointing towards the bay entrance.

Jerry stared and gasped. One barge of a string that had anchored offshore, had broken loose and was coming up the creek channel.

"The falsework!" yelled the foreman. Jerry realized that the empty boat, riding high, would crash right through the temporary framework across the channel. He saw a commotion down the line. From a group the chief broke loose and ran toward him; but the boat was coming faster, towering high.

"Get back!" shrieked Jerry to the dazed men near him.

Crash! Crackle — crackle — crash! Straight through the falsework the barge plowed. Tumblers hurtled through the air and shot across the spot where the men had been standing. The barge swept on upstream for a hundred yards, then reversed and wedged across the channel, backing up the water still higher and forming ugly swirls.

Jerry and the returning workmen saw something else. The barge had carried away the cement seating of the approach to the channel span. Already water was seeping in, beginning its work of undermining.

Jerry looked about. The little group of men on his side were clearly leaderless, for the sub-foreman was making no move, simply staring. Across the wide gap of churning waters help could not come nor would orders carry. Jerry saw that Hodgkins had swung about and that his long legs were bearing him swiftly towards an automobile. To get around by the road would take the man the better part of an hour.

Jerry wondered what he should do. In a way the matter was absolutely none of his business, but it was an emergency. He might not do the best thing, but he was the only one who could direct something. He swung about.

"Get busy you!" he snapped. "Hurry as you've never hurried before. You two fill bags with that sand and gravel. The rest of you hustle some of that timber over here. We'll make a framework to slip over that break, and pack in the filled bags. Quick! Every instant counts."

The men springing to work at his command. Wood spikes, tools, appeared as if by magic. He had no time to measure accurately. His eyes, indeed, his voice snapped commands, his hands helped in the labor. As soon as the first section of framework was ready, he went down over the side, dug his toes into crevices in the broken cement work, and with water tagging almost to his shoulders, helped place it.

Moments like hours passed in struggle. Shivering, soaked to the skin, Jerry worked on. The last section was the worst, for the tide pulled more fiercely there, and it was harder for him to secure proper footing. Once or twice he barely escaped being swept away. All at once another figure dropped beside him, and the framework slipped into place.

"Hully work, fellows," gasped Jerry, climbing out. "You did nobly. I'll tell

your chief how—" He stopped, staring, for Chief Hodgkins, dripping wet, stood beside him.

"Your father's son, Jerry," he said quietly.

"I— I'd no business to interfere, sir," faltered Jerry, "only—only—I sort of felt I had to save it."

"Exactly," laughed the chief. "Now take my car over there and go around and pick up yours; then get home and get dry. I'll make it right with you for this work."

"I don't want that," objected Jerry. "I don't want to work under you. No matter about a staff position. Any position—just as workman or foreman—just a trial."

"There has been one for you—for some time," laughed Chief Hodgkins. "Had you pressed when you first saw me, you might have had a trial, but you made a negative approach, as if you expected nothing. You got it. Now you're showing yourself a determined man. There's another reason, too." He paused, smiling.

"When" went on the chief engineer, "a man, as a kindness, mends a farm bridge in a way to hold up an eight-ton truck, he attracts attention. The practicing of that bridge showed headwork. Report to me the first of the week."

"I can get dry over in the tool house," laughed Jerry. "Why not let me stay and see this job through?"

Jerry stopped at the first public pay station on his way home that night to telephone Margaret the good news.

"I'm where I don't gather rust," he ended.

"I expect you'll positively dazzle me, next time I see you," laughed Margaret, happily. "Make it soon."

BOTH ARTISTS

"Both our sons are studying in Paris. Mine is going in for art, what is yours doing?"

"He wants to be a writer."

"Yes, quite a lot. He writes for money every week."

"I'm. Then we're pretty much in the same boat. My son, as I said, is going in for art and regularly draws me."

ON THE LARGE SIZE

Nurs said Baby won't go to sleep. Shall I sing something to her?

Mother: No, nurse try persuasive methods first.

IN SEARCH OF BREVITY

Then there was the too-conscientious sub-editor who altered Tompkins' line. Half a league, half a league, half a league upward into "A league and a half upward."

SCOTT'S SCRAP BOOK By R. J. SCOTT. Illustration of a man and a chick. Text: "CHECK IT, FELLOWS! A CHICKEN!" "PRACTICALLY NO BIRDS EXCEPT CHICKENS WILL EAT FUZZY CATERPILLARS—WHETHER A COTTONY FEEL OR A STRONGLY UNPLEASANT TASTE IS RESPONSIBLE IS UNKNOWN BY HUMANS."

SALLY'S SALLIES. Illustration of a man and a woman. Text: "I SAVED TWENTY MINUTES COMING HOME TONIGHT." "WISH WE COULD PUT THEM IN THE BANK." "BOTH ARTISTS" section with dialogue.



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