

Thomas Charles Bridges



The River Riders

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An Exciting Lumberjack Story



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIX](#)

[CHAPTER XX](#)

[CHAPTER XXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV](#)

[CHAPTER XXV](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI](#)

[CHAPTER XXVII](#)

[CHAPTER XXVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIX](#)

[CHAPTER XXX](#)

[CHAPTER XXXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIV](#)

[CHAPTER XXXV](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVI](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVII](#)

[CHAPTER XXXVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXXIX](#)

[CHAPTER XL](#)

[CHAPTER XLI](#)

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

THE MYSTERY MEN

"You needn't expect an easy time out there, for you won't get it." The words spoken by his father three weeks earlier came back to young Keith Hedley as he stood on the deck of the rough little river-boat, and gazed at the desolation on either side of him.

Winter had shut down early over the great wilderness of the North-West, and the first snow lay thick on the banks and covered the dark trees with a white mantle. Ice was forming under the river banks, and great sheets of it broke away under the wash of the panting, churning stern wheel, and clattered like broken glass in the wake.

Not a human habitation or any living thing was visible in the snow-clad depths of the forest. The still air was bitter with frost and a dull red sun was dropping behind the distant hills.

"Mighty cold, eh?" came a voice, and Keith turned to see a man beside him. A long, slack-jointed fellow, who wore a rough rabbit-skin coat over his dark flannel shirt, and trousers that were tucked into butcher boots. He had a thin, hooked nose, like the beak of a bird of prey, and bright, pale blue eyes set close on either side of it, but what most struck Keith was the bleached pallor of his skin. Keith did not quite like the look of him, but the man spoke civilly, and Keith was lonely enough to be glad of any companionship.

"Yes, it's pretty keen," he admitted.

"I reckon you're bound for Jasper?" continued the tall man.

Keith was not yet aware that questions of this sort are bad form in the North-West. "No, I'm going to Calvert's Camp," he answered civilly.

The other looked at him oddly, and Keith felt a little puzzled. "Then you'll hev to get off at Brant Bridge," said the man.

"Yes," said Keith. "That's the next stop but one, isn't it?"

"No, it's the next ever," the tall man told him.

"Are you sure?" asked Keith.

The tall man turned. "Mold!" he called, and another man came up. This was a thick-shouldered, bull-headed person with blunt features and little dark eyes deep set in his big head.

"What's your trouble?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"This here gent is going to Calvert's," said Fargus. "He's a-getting off at Brant's Bridge. I reckon that's the next place the steamer stops?"

"That's so," said Mold. "And I guess we're pretty nigh there. So if you got any duds to pack, Mister, you better look slippy."

"My stuff is all ready," Keith told him, and just then the steamer whistled.

"She's right there," said Fargus. "Don't you waste no time, Mister. They don't wait long, specially when the river's a-freezing up like she is now."

Again Keith had a queer feeling of puzzlement, but there was no time to think. "Much obliged to you," he said, and bag in hand hurried forward.

The steamer slowed in to the end of a rough jetty, a rope was made fast and a gangway thrust out. A deck hand helped Keith with his portmanteau and next minute he was all alone on the wharf watching the steamer churn away round the bend.

A horrible feeling of loneliness came over him, but he shook it off, and walked up to the landward end of the jetty. There was no one about, but a little way off was a shack from the chimney of which smoke curled.

Keith knocked and a big bearded man came to the door, and scowled at the visitor. "Sorry to trouble you," said Keith, "but can you tell me if there is anyone here to meet me from Calvert's?"

"What 'ud they want to come here for?" grunted the man. "If you'd wanted to be met, why didn't ye go on to Brant Bridge?"

"Isn't this Brant Bridge?" asked Keith in dismay.

"No. This here is Jasper. Brant Bridge is four mile further on."

Keith's heart sank. "Then how am I to get there?" he asked.

"You got legs, haven't you? It's only about eight mile."

"I can walk all right," returned Keith, resenting the sneer, "but what about my luggage?"

"You can leave it here, if you've a mind to, and send fer it to-morrow."

The man's bite was not so bad as his bark. He helped Keith to carry his portmanteau into the shack, and gave him directions as to finding his way, and presently Keith, feeling a little more cheerful, was tramping along a narrow track

through the frozen forest. It was rapidly getting dark, but the night was clear and the moon was rising. So Keith had no fear of not being able to find his way. The one thing that bothered him was why those two men on the boat had insisted on his getting off at the wrong place.

Though Keith was only sixteen he was no fool, and he was pretty sure that Messrs. Fergus and Mold had done this thing on purpose. Of course, it might have been just a silly trick, such as some men delight in playing on a tenderfoot. But the more he thought it over, the less likely it seemed that this was the case, and the more probable that they had some purpose in view. But what that purpose could be he was quite unable to guess.

Night shut down, the cold increased, and even through his warm jacket Keith felt the sting of the frost. The dry snow creaked under his feet. In the forest the silence was intense. So intense that presently he distinctly heard the steamer whistling for Brant Bridge four miles away. "And that's where they'll be waiting for me," he said half aloud, and once more felt angry at the trick that had been played on him. "If I ever meet those two chaps again I'll jolly well tell them what I think of them," he growled.

The track began to rise. It grew very steep and rough.

Then quite suddenly the intense silence was broken by a sharp snapping sound followed by a gasping cry.

Keith did not hesitate but dashed forward. The trees broke away and he found himself on the edge of a deep gorge, which was spanned by a rough foot-bridge. This bridge was nothing but a single pine trunk flattened on its upper surface, and a rudely made rail.

Half-way across, clinging to the trunk with his gloved hands, and with his body swinging like a pendulum over the abyss, was a boy of about Keith's own age.

Keith saw at once just what had happened; the boy's foot had slipped on the frozen snow which coated the log, he had caught at the rail to save himself, but it was so rotten that it had broken under his weight.

The wonder was that he had not gone straight down into the depths of the dark cleft, but somehow he had managed to catch the trunk in falling, and so had saved himself. But Keith could see that the unlucky fellow was perfectly helpless, for his hands had no sort of grip on the icy surface of the log, and it could only be a matter of moments before they slipped and then—ugh! it made Keith shiver to think of the awful drop below.

But this was no time for thinking, and with one shout of "Hold on! I'm coming," Keith dashed out along the log.

In cold blood he could never have done it, but in the excitement of the moment he hardly thought of the danger. Next moment he was astride the log close beside the other, and had caught him by the collar of his thick leather coat. "I'll pull, you climb," he ordered, and the other wasted no time in obeying.

For a moment it was just a chance whether both went down together, but Keith hung on like a bulldog, and the other kept his head and gradually dragged himself up.

For a moment the boy lay across the log, panting. Then he pulled himself together. "We better crawl out of this," he remarked. "Your head's all right, I reckon."

"For the present it is," smiled Keith, "but I'd hate to have to stay and look down into this dyke."

"Then come right along," said the other briefly, and rising to his feet ran lightly across to the far side. Keith followed, and the two stood together on firm ground. The moon was full on the stranger's face, and Keith glancing at him with interest saw that he was lightly built but wiry, with a thin brown face and very clear brown eyes.

"You're British, I reckon," said the boy.

"I suppose it sticks out all over me," grinned Keith. "Yes, I'm English. Keith Hedley's my name."

"Mine's Brock—Tony Brock, but I guess it would have been 'Mud' if you hadn't come along just when you did. Mighty odd, too, for it isn't once a month anyone does come along this track after nightfall."

"As a matter of fact, it was an odd chance brought me along this way," replied Keith, then broke off. "Hadn't we better be shifting along? It's a bit nippy."

"Cold as Jericho," agreed Tony. "I'm bound for Calvert's. That any good to you?"

"Exactly where I'm going," said Keith. "I shall be very glad of company."

Tony Brock eyed him with interest. "You got a job there?"

"Yes," replied Keith, and that was all. He was not going to tell anyone that he was Crab Calvert's nephew.

Tony still paused. "You come by the steamer?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"Then what made you get off at Jasper?"

Keith told him and was surprised at the keen interest with which Tony listened. "It seemed a rotten sort of joke," Keith ended.

"Joke! Not much joke about that, I reckon," returned Tony sharply. "By the way you describe 'em, I'd say those fellows were hard characters, and that they'd laid out to rob you."

Keith laughed. "I've only got about ten dollars on me and an old silver watch. Not much bait for all that trouble. Besides, they went on in the steamer."

A frown knitted Tony's brown forehead. "That don't matter. They could land at Brant's and catch you easy before ever you got to Calvert's."

"But what's the big idea?" urged Keith.

Tony shook his head. "They've got something against you. I'll lay on that." He flung up his hand. "Listen!" he whispered quickly.

Keith's straining ears caught a slight rustling sound from somewhere down the hill below. Tony caught him by the arm. "That's them," he said in a low voice. "I'll bet on it. Say, we'll get out of this pronto."

"On to Calvert's?" questioned Keith.

"Not on your life. Those hoboes are reckoning to cut into the track a quarter mile or so further on, where the bushes are thick. No, sir, it's up the hill for us."

Keith shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like," he answered.

CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

THE FLUME

By the way Tony Brock went up that hill it didn't seem as if his narrow escape on the bridge had done him any harm. The rise was about one in three, and it was all rocks and bush. Since the rocks were mostly covered with ice the going was simply horrid, and Keith, though as fit as most, soon found himself painfully short of breath.

Also being unaccustomed to climbing snow-clad mountain sides on a winter night he kept on slipping and stumbling.

Tony Brock turned. "Say, can't you come a bit quieter? Anyone could hear you a mile off."

"Sorry," panted Keith. "I'll try."

Tony held up his hand for silence. Keith, watching his face in the moonlight, saw it harden. "They're right after us," he said in a low voice. "See here, Hedley, those folk are sure bad men. They mean mischief, and we got to dodge 'em some way."

"Well, it's me they're after," said Keith. "No reason why I should drag you into this business."

Tony swung on him sharply. "See here, Hedley, you're green to this country, but I tell you right now that white men stick together when trouble's brewing."

Keith smiled. "All right, Brock. I'm not saying I'm not grateful."

"Then don't say it," snapped Tony. "Save your breath for the rest of the climb. It's some hill, I tell you."

Some hill it was, and cold as was the night Keith was wet with perspiration when at last they reached more level ground. Here Tony stopped again, and flinging himself down

laid his ear to the ground. "They're still coming," he said presently. "Gee, I wish I had a gun. You heeled, partner?"

"I've nothing but a jack-knife," replied Keith. "Can't we beat them to the camp?"

"If it was all woods we might. But we're on the edge of a big clearing, and we can't cross it without being seen."

"You mean they'll shoot?"

"Sure thing," Tony answered briefly.

"Any place we could hide?" asked Keith.

"What's the use? They'd track us in the snow."

"I hadn't thought of that," Keith said blankly. "It seems we're up against it."

Tony started, and a sudden gleam of excitement lit his dark eyes. "Say, I wonder if it's still there," he said half aloud.

"If what is there?" repeated Keith.

"The flume. At least that's there, I know, but the scow. Come on. It's a chance if we can reach it."

Keith had not the foggiest notion what Tony was talking about, but he had heaps of confidence in his new friend, and he followed him as he moved on.

A few steps brought them out of the wood on to the edge of an immense clearing where the open ground sloped away covered with the melancholy-looking stumps of felled trees. From somewhere close at hand Keith heard the sound of running water.

Tony made to the left and all of a sudden the two were standing on the edge of a narrow channel filled almost to the brim with rushing black water. The channel was about eight feet wide and evidently artificial. It reminded Keith of

one of those leats which they cut to get water power for the mines down in Cornwall, only this was bigger, deeper and much straighter.

"She's running all right," said Tony. "If we can find the scow we ought to fool them." He started rapidly along the flume. Keith following saw that though the water was still running strongly the sides were already coated with ice.

A shed-like building loomed up in the moonlight, and Tony quickened his pace. "Here's where the scow was kept," he said quickly. "If only she's still there!"

He tried the door, and exclaimed in dismay. "She's locked. Quick, find a rock, Hedley."

Rocks were easily found, but not so easily lifted out of the hard frozen snow. At last Keith managed to wrench one out and lifting it in both hands dealt the door a smashing blow. But the timber was stout and it took two more blows to burst the lock.

"Gee, but we've made noise enough to wake the dead," grumbled Tony, and the words were hardly out of his mouth before there came a shout from up above.

"Stop right there," came a voice, which Keith recognized only too plainly. "Stop right there or I'll drill ye both."

"It's Fargus," he told Tony. "What shall we do?"

"Get the scow into the water," snapped back Tony, as he seized one end of a narrow punt-like boat.

Keith caught the other. It was heavy, but excitement gave him strength and between them they sent the clumsy craft shooting out over the snow. "Launch her careful," warned Tony. "The water's running mighty strong."

"They got the scow." It was Mold's raucous voice. "Shoot, Fargus! Stop 'em!"

"Crack!" came the voice of a heavy pistol. "Crack! Crack!"

The echoes crashed thunderously through the quiet night, and the bullets sang an ugly song just over the heads of the two boys. But Tony was clever enough to keep the shed between him and their enemies, and anyhow moonlight is deceptive. The scow splashed into the swift, black water and Tony held her with all his strength.

"Get in," he gasped, and Keith flung himself in. "Crack! Crack!" Both Mold and Fargus were shooting and running as they fired.

"Let her go!" cried Tony, and as Keith relaxed his grip on the ice-clad bank the scow shot away so suddenly that he lost his balance and pitched all in a heap in the bottom of the queer craft. An accident which saved his life, for a bullet better aimed than the rest struck the ground not a yard from the edge of the flume, and its splintered fragments screamed viciously just over Keith's head.

"Close call!" he remarked, as he picked himself up. Then with a gasp, "Goodness, how we're travelling!"

The slope of the flume had become much steeper, and the scow carried on the surface of the bubbling, foaming current was shooting downwards at breathless speed. Tony in the stern wielded a steering oar. His lips were tight set and his eyes fixed on the flume in front. Mold and Fargus were still shooting, but neither of the boys paid any attention to them, and each instant their figures dwindled in the distance.

The flume left the ground and ran in a sort of wooden trough lifted on trestles high above the treeless slope. The slope became, if anything, steeper, and the speed of the current still greater.

"The Devil's Slide!" said Tony between tight lips. "Hold on!" They swept round a curve where the flume, high on its trestles, clung dizzily to the mountain side, and as they swung Keith caught a glimpse of Mold and Fergus running hard down the hill-side, cutting across the curve.

Suddenly the scow seemed to up-end and then to drop away from under him. The bitter air cut like knives; the surroundings became a mere blur, and he felt as though he were falling down a precipice. He glanced at Tony's set face and wondered what would happen if he made any mistake.

Suddenly there was a sharp jar, the scow seemed to rise clean out of the water, and for an awful second Keith thought she was going to shoot clean over the edge of the flume. A long splinter of wood flashed up and ripped clean through the skirt of Keith's coat, which was blown out like a balloon by the speed of their passage. Then the scow settled down again and flew like the wind down the long, straight, foam-flecked water-slide.

The pace began to slacken and Keith drew a long breath of deepest relief.

"All right now," said Tony. "But, gee, I got a scare."

"Nearly over the edge, weren't you?"

"I sure thought she was gone," responded Tony, "but I reckon we're all right now."

"Those fellows are still chasing us," said Keith.

Tony glanced back to the two figures which showed like toys in the moonlight against the vast white hillside. "Guess they won't trouble us any. Not unless they got horses. We got a mile start and we're still travelling three times as quick as them."

"Where does this flume take us?" asked Keith.

"It runs clear down to the river, but there's a place we can land before we get there." He pointed. "There it is! Now you be ready to catch hold the minute I do."

The scow shot towards a sort of platform and Tony made a grab. Keith did the same. There was a jerk that nearly wrenched his arms from their sockets, but between them they stopped the scow.

"Get right out," snapped Tony.

"What about the scow?" asked Keith.

"She'll have to go. We can't wait to haul her out."

They scrambled on to the platform and the empty scow shot onwards, and vanished like a flash around the next bend.

A rough ladder led from the platform to the ground. The boys shinned down it in a hurry. "Now which way?" questioned Keith.

"Dead south. We haven't got more than two miles to go."

"Those fellows are still following," said Keith.

"They're mighty set on catching you. Say, I'd like to know what they've got against you."

"So would I," agreed Keith. "It's the funniest business I ever saw or heard of."

"I wouldn't worry," said Tony. "With any luck, we'll be in camp long before they can catch up with us. Once we're

across the bridge I don't reckon they'll risk coming further."

Tony seemed tireless, and kept up such a pace that Keith had his work cut out to follow. At last they were across the clearing, and as they entered the woods Keith glanced back. Mold and Fargus were still in sight and coming as hard as they could run.

"Don't worry. We're right on the bridge," said Tony. "There it is!"

He stopped short. "Helloa, there's someone on it. Looks like he's waiting for us."

"Who is it?" asked Keith.

"Hulke Hanson," replied Tony in a low voice. "Say, I reckon this means more trouble."

CHAPTER III

[Table of Contents](#)

THE BULLY OF THE CAMP

Hulke Hanson was well named. He was a great hulk of a man with a heavy, brutal face and small, narrow eyes. As the boys came near he stepped out into the middle of the narrow bridge. "What's your hurry, Brock? What are ye running away from?"

"If you wait there long enough you'll know," retorted Tony.

"I don't want none of your cheek," growled Hanson threateningly, and turned his attention to Keith. "Where did ye pick up this here specimen, Brock?" he enquired sarcastically.

Keith's blood was boiling at the tone in which the man had spoken to Tony. He answered for himself. "My name is Hedley. I'm from England. Is there any information with which I can oblige you?"

If Keith had thought for five minutes there was nothing he could have said more calculated to enrage Hanson. Sarcasm was his own weapon, and to have a youngster like this use it on him made him see red. "British, be you? Then I reckon to teach you not to give any of your gall to an American," he exclaimed as he strode forward.

"Look out, Hedley!" hissed Tony. "He'll half kill you if he gets his hands on you."

Keith had already made up his mind on this point, and he had no intention whatever of being manhandled by this hulking brute. Remembering the old adage, "Thrice blest is he who gets his blow in first," he lowered his head and charged Hanson.

It was, of course, the very last thing that Hanson had expected. Before he well knew what was happening Keith's head met him just about the region of his third waistcoat button, and the force of the blow doubled him up. His feet slipped on the icy snow and down he went with a crash that made the solid timber of the bridge quiver. Keith stood over him. "Perhaps that'll teach you to be a little more polite to the next Britisher you meet," he said.

Tony caught Keith by the arm. "Run, you fool!" he snapped. "He'll be up in a moment, and we can't tackle him and those other two together."

Keith realized that Tony was right, and leaving Hulke on his back, still gasping for breath, the two were off as hard as

they could split down the open trail leading to the camp. Tony kept the pace up until they arrived in sight of a huge structure built of sixty-foot logs, roofed with shingles and hung with icicles to the eaves. Other buildings surrounded it, giving the place almost the appearance of a village. Smoke curled from a chimney and a rich odour of cooking hung in the cold still air.

"Here's the camp," said Tony, slackening his pace.

"And I'm jolly glad to see it," said Keith.

"You've a right to be," said Tony, glancing at the other with a flash of admiration in his brown eyes. "I don't know anyone else would have got by Hulke Hanson like you did."

"Who is he?" asked Keith, with some curiosity.

"The bully of the camp," replied Tony. "And see here, Hedley, because you got the better of him once, don't you go thinking you've finished with him. Hanson will never forgive that to you; he'll never forget it, and he'll never rest till he's got square."

"Sounds cheerful," observed Keith, "but we won't worry about him till we have to. Tell me now, where can I find Mr. Calvert?"

Tony laughed. "You don't have to find him. He'll find you right enough when he's ready for you. Come right into the bunk-house, and we'll see if Shorty can find us some supper."

It was only natural that Keith should feel a trifle nervous as he followed Tony into the lamp-lit interior of the great place. Scores of men clad in blue jerseys and thick trousers and long boots sat about at tables, playing cards or yarning, while some lay on their backs in their bunks. The place was

warmed by two enormous stoves, and the air was thick with tobacco smoke.

"Helloa, Tony!" said one or two, but otherwise no one paid any attention to the new arrivals, who made their way right through the long room to the cook-house at the back. Here several men were busy washing up the supper dishes, and as Tony approached one turned. He was a little man, no more than five feet three or four, and his tremendously broad shoulders and chest made him look even shorter than he really was. His round face was red, his eyes were china blue, and his hair the colour of tow.

"Say, kid," he said reproachfully. "You're mighty late."

"I know I am, Shorty," replied Tony, "but this new chum and I have been having quite a time of it. Got chased by two hoboos, and had to come down the flume in a scow to get away from them."

Shorty's blue eyes widened. "The mischief you say! And you rode down the flume? Say, spin us the yarn, kid!"

"Give us something to eat first. We're both clemmed as wolves."

"Supper's over an hour ago," said Shorty, "but I reckon there's some bacon and beans left, and I'll hot ye a pot o' coffee."

"You're white, Shorty," declared Tony. "Get your coat off, Hedley, and hang it up."

The beans were on the table almost before Keith had hung up his overcoat, and with the hot boiled bacon and the scalding coffee made a capital meal. Leaving the washing up to his underlings, Shorty himself looked after the two