It’s the Big Job That Counts

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Mckinsey looked up from his cluttered desk when Sanders came in.

“Morning, Sanders, you’re looking better this morning. Have a chair; I’ll be through in a minute.”

“Thanks.” It must be a big job, being superintendent of a big lumber camp, Sanders thought as he waited. He watched McKinsey scowling over reports, his brows heavy, almost concealing his kindly blue Irish eyes. A tuft of coarse curly hair stuck out where his chin was buried in the open collar of his shirt.

What a lineman McKinsey would have made ten or fifteen years ago. Lineman—Sanders remembered his last game back at college. He’d played tackle on the varsity team until he had to give up football and take on more work. It seemed a long time since he’d left school. Quit, maybe, was a better word, he thought with a pang.

He had gone along rather well the first two years; then his money gave out. He hadn’t minded waiting tables and shoveling snow and coal for expense money, but when he had to give up football—that had hurt. That was last fall. He’d kept up his grades—until this spring. The biology department had held him in high esteem. Old Pop Lonsberry had said he was a born naturalist. Yeah—well—maybe Pop had never had to shovel snow and haul ashes, and miss a few meals sometimes. Well, that was all over now.

Sanders looked at McKinsey sitting there, self-assured and competent. He hoped McKinsey would soon be through. He would like to talk to him again and maybe even get some work.

Work—it seemed that was all he had ever done since starting school. He remembered working nights at the bakery while some other fellow was taking Evelyn to a movie or a dance.
That was the last straw, the night Evelyn gave him back his pin just because he had been too tired to take her to a dance on his night off. Then Lonsberry had told him his last biology report was unsatisfactory, after all his work in getting data.

He'd told Lonsberry and a few other people to go to hell, and left town. Now here he was, six hundred miles north of the old college, in the office of a lumber camp.

His gaze wandered from McKinsey's desk to the big fireplace hung with guns. A moose head stood guard over the mantel. On the mantel was a photo of a young woman; McKinsey's wife, no doubt. It reminded him of Evelyn. He wished he could forget the way she had looked at him when he told her that he was through with her and his career and the whole cockeyed situation.

"Just a few more minutes and I will be through." McKinsey piled some papers into a drawer and started rummaging in a box marked "for future reference." Sanders wondered about him. He had good manners, used good English, and seemed far above the coarse, hard-bitten lumberjacks around the camp. McKinsey had been kind to him last night when he had come straggling into camp. He would never forget how good supper had tasted in the big mess hall, and how comfortable the bunk had felt. He must have walked thirty miles that day. That was Monday. Four days ago he'd left Campustown—it seemed four years—bumming rides and walking without caring where it got him.

"WELL, Sanders," McKinsey was talking now, "you seemed pretty tired last night. We don't ask a lot of questions here. If a man wants work we take him on if there is a job. You are looking for work?"

"I—I really haven't thought a lot about it. I have to eat, though. Perhaps, if you have something temporary—I'll probably be drifting along again in a few days." This place seemed as good as any to spend a little time.

"We don't have anything permanent at present. But you could help here in the office mornings, and I'll see if I can find something for afternoons. College man, aren't you?"

"Yes—that is—I was."

December, 1938
“I see—well, there isn’t a lot here for a college man unless you know forest mensuration or surveying.”

“I was in biology, zoology, you know, and all that. Not very practical, I’m afraid.”

“Interesting work, biology. I had some in Montreal. Nice future, too, with the present program of conservation and game management. I suppose you plan to continue study this fall?”

“Well, I don’t, that is—uh, say—is there anything I might do this morning? I feel pretty good after the ham and eggs for breakfast.”

McKinsey looked at him, but asked no prying questions.

“You can go with me out to Silver Creek. I sent a crew of men out there to blast open a beaver dam that is going to interfere with the next run of logs. Got to see that they do the job right.”

“Blow up a beaver dam? Why—”

“Yes, I know it’s a devil of a thing to do, but it has to be done. They’ve got the creek running all over the woods, and that will spoil it for use as a sluice.”

Sanders followed McKinsey out to the big shed where the trucks and light pickups were kept. He didn’t feel like talking. Blow up a beaver dam! He’d always wanted to see a real beaver colony, building dams to raise the water level and forming a pond so they could gnaw off branches of trees and float them down to their houses for food.

McKinsey drove the forest trail in silence. Sanders was thrilled by the beauty of the big trees and long shafts of sunlight slanting through the morning mist. They passed a crew of men felling trees, and stopped while a big tractor hauled a heavy load of logs across the trail ahead of them.

The road took a long turn to the right and began to descend a steep grade. At the bottom was a small lake—water backed up by the beaver dam, Sanders supposed. McKinsey brought the pickup to a jerking halt and stepped out. Sanders walked along the shore beside him. At intervals along the water’s edge were stumps of trees showing small chisel marks made by the beavers’ teeth when they had gnawed down the trees.
Sanders hurried to keep up with McKinsey's long strides. They reached the dam after a moment. It was about sixty feet long and had raised the level of the water five feet. Several men were packing dynamite into holes on a section of the dam. No beavers were in sight.

McKinsey approached the foreman of the crew. "About got it set?" he asked.

"Ya, yust about. Py golly, ve blow her up, hey, boss?"

A lot that big Swede cared about blowing a few beavers to Kingdom Come. He wished he could do something to prevent the shameful destruction of life. Funny—he thought he didn't give a tinker's dam about wild life when he left school. But now, seeing a real beaver dam built by the kind of creatures he loved—Sanders looked at McKinsey, but the big superintendent avoided his glance. His jaw muscles were knotted, and the huge shoulders seemed to sag.

"Check the fuses again. Svensen and I will hook up the wiring."

Sanders felt like punching the big Swede's jaw when he saw the gleam in his eye. The big bruiser seemed to enjoy the prospect of blowing up the dam.

He helped McKinsey connect the wires to the fuses and the detonator box, hoping that McKinsey wouldn't ask him to push down the plunger that would set off the dynamite. No, he wouldn't. McKinsey understood how he felt.

"All right, Svensen, push her down. Let's get it over with."

McKinsey issued the order through clenched teeth.

Svensen leaned over the detonator, his tobacco-stained teeth gleaming through his rusty whiskers. With a vicious shove he pushed the plunger down hard. A moment of silence—then a thundering roar nearly shook Sanders from his feet. Mud, logs, and water were thrown high into the air. Tons of water poured through the breach and flooded the stream bed below with a dark, swirling mass. Waterfowl flew screaming up the valley. Sometimes Sanders saw a flash of brown in the sunlight as the body of a beaver twisted and turned in the swirling water. On a dislodged log he saw two tiny brown objects cling pitifully for a moment and disappear in the flood.

December, 1938
When he turned from the scene, sickened, he saw that McKinsey was already half way back to the pickup. He ran to catch up with him and both men drove back to camp in silence.

After supper that night Sanders and McKinsey sat on a bench beside the office building smoking their pipes. Both men sat in silence, watching the blue smoke curl up over the low eaves of the roof.

Sanders was thinking of the incident of that morning. McKinsey had turned his head toward him a couple of times as if he were about to say something. Sanders hoped he wouldn't bring up the subject of college again. He wanted to forget about it.

“Well, Sanders,” McKinsey said, “what do you think of the lumbering business by now?”

“Not much; not if there is much to do—like this morning. Did you see those beaver kits hanging on that log?”

“Yes—ah, no, I don’t believe I did. Were there some?”

“Yeah. Poor little devils. They looked pretty scared.”

“Sanders, I’d have given a lot not to have done that job this morning. But there are a lot of things we have to do—unpleasant things. They are only means to an end. It is the big thing—the big job—that counts.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“I have a pretty good job here, and I have to do things I would rather not do to keep it. I had to do things I disliked to get it.”

“I suppose that is true with a lot of work.”

“Well, Sanders, no matter what the job is, it takes determination, pluck, courage—the will to go on. But you have found that out by now.”

“I think I have. I don’t know. It seems to me that sometimes—well—I’m pretty tired, Mr. McKinsey. I think I’ll turn in now. Goodnight.”

Sanders went to bed wondering if McKinsey had been preaching to him or just talking. He’d run into too many “things you don’t like to do” at school. He’d had a big job—his career. And there was Evelyn. They had planned to be married as soon as he graduated. Then things had become too
tough, and he had quit. Tough—they didn't seem so tough now that he was far away from the college. But that was over. He had to look ahead, not back. He'd stay here a while and then drift on. He could find work he'd like and start all over again. He wondered what Evelyn was doing at that moment. He hoped, with a tight feeling in his throat, that she would be thinking of him, yet it would be better if she would forget... 

His thoughts turned back to the boarding house at school. The fellows would be turning in about this time—listening to traffic and street noises outside, and distant blasts from a switch engine in the railroad yards. A screech owl was squalling, answered by another. He wormed deeper into the warm blanket, snug and comfortable. A slow rain started drumming on the bunkhouse roof. Strange he couldn't sleep. He wanted to forget the thing that had happened that morning. He recalled again the Swede's tobacco-stained grin, and the thunder of the exploding dynamite. It was raining harder now.

Wednesday afternoon Sanders finished the time sheets and payrolls and walked over to the door. He looked out over the camp, beginning to feel a warmth in his heart for the big buildings and the bustle of men and machinery. He looked at the tall, graceful trees and the blue sky, sniffing the pungent odor of the pines. What a place to spend a vacation—as a naturalist he would have spent a whole lifetime in places like this. Trees, streams, open fields—they were "out" now. Evelyn had liked being out of doors too. They'd had fun taking long hikes together. Hiking hadn't cost any money—

McKinsey looked up from a letter he was reading and asked, "All through, Sandy? You can knock off for the rest of the day. Take the pickup, if you want to, and drive around a bit."

"Thanks, Mack, that's nice of you." They had somehow started calling each other Mack and Sandy.

Sanders drove around the camp and out to where the logs were being worked. The crisp air made him feel vigorous. Good food, plenty of exercise and rest—he was a new man. He found himself wishing Evelyn were there in the pickup beside him,
enjoying the scenery and the smell of the pines. Evelyn—his
career. But yet, he’d left there, all fed up and through with
everything. Maybe he had made a mistake in quitting “the big
job that counts.”

He found himself driving along the road to the beaver dam.
Pulling up where the shore of the pond had been, he walked
down to the dam. A stream of water was running through the
breach made by the blast. Then he noticed freshly cut branches
and logs wedged into the breach. Fresh mud and leaves were
piled on the branches. The beavers had started to rebuild! He
stared in disbelief. He had supposed they would give up. What
was it Mack had said? “It takes determination, pluck, courage.”
Well, these beavers surely had plenty. And they were only
animals, but—

Then he remembered—if the beavers rebuilt their dam it
would have to be blown up again. If only there were some
way—

AFTER breakfast Sunday morning Mack came around to
where Sanders was sitting on the office steps.

“Hello, Sandy. You look a bit glum this morning. What’s
on your mind? Homesick?”

“No, I don’t know; just the Sunday blues, I guess.” So Mack
thought he was homesick.

“Nice and warm this morning. Warm enough for a swim.
Like to go?”

“Gosh, yes, I’d like to.”

“There’s a good place below that beaver dam. Deep hole.”

On the way to the dam Sanders wished that he had told
Mack about the beavers. Oh, well, he’d see their work anyway.

“Were you out here Wednesday, Sandy?” Mack asked.

“Yes, I didn’t tell you, but—the beavers have started to re­
build their dam. They must have the breach nearly filled
again.”

“Is that so? Well, I might have known it. They’re plucky
little beggars. Hate to have to blow ’em up again.”

The men walked out on the dam to where the dynamite had
done its work. The pond was filling again.

“Well, wouldn’t that frost you, Sandy? They’ve about got it
fixed again.”

Sketch
SANDY looked down at the empty stream bed below the dam without replying. He could do a report on the beaver's work if he were back in school. A technical report, data on the time required to fill the breach, the method of making the repair, material—he couldn't of course, put in anything about the beavers' pluck and courage and determination. Science wouldn't be interested in such abstractions. What was Mack saying?

"—I'll have to get a crew of men out here again Monday. It'll be tough on the little beggars, Sandy. But it's just one of those things—getting the big job done by doing the smaller ones that stand in the way..."

Sanders wasn't listening. He was looking up to the head of the pond where the water had been before the dam was blown up.

"Listen, Mack, I was wondering—you see up there by the head of the pond, by that dead tree?"

"Yes, that dead jackpine."

"Right where the creek comes into the pond. Now, look closer down this way. See how that depression follows along the edge of the pond?"

"Yeah —"

"Well, look; if you could take the dynamite you'd use to blow up the dam and use it instead to blow out a slice of that little ridge and let this creek run around the pond —"

He was breathing hard now, waiting for Mack to reply.

"I think I see what you mean, Sandy, but how —"

"Well, put a water gate in there. Then when you want to run logs through you could open the gate and let the water run around the pond. Close it again when the logs are through, and let the beavers have their pond."

IT SEEMED an eternity before Mack finally answered, "Sandy, I think—yes, by Jupiter, I think it will work. Why didn't I ever think of that?"

"I got the idea when I was out here Wednesday. It sort of got me when I saw those beavers had started working again."

"Yes, it can be done. You know, Sandy, I think I can use you around here. We want men with ideas. How'd you like to stay on here at, say, one-fifty a month to begin with?"

December, 1938
“Swell, Mack, thanks—but—not steady, that is. I’ll be leaving in September. I’m—going back to school.”

Mack was looking at him now, and the look in his eyes made Sandy go on.

“I didn’t tell you, Mack, and you didn’t ask; I quit school before I came here because things got a little too tough for me. I just didn’t have —”

“I’m glad you decided to go back, Sandy. You didn’t seem the quitter type. What made you change your mind?”

“I don’t know—food, plenty of rest and the woods and all that, and,” Sandy’s eyes followed Mack’s to the breach in the beaver dam, “well, I think I learned something out here—pluck, you know.”

Mack was squeezing his hand now and smiling. “Are you sure of yourself now?”

“Yeah, sure, I’m sure! Let’s go back to camp now. I’ve got to write some letters.”

“So you’re writing her all about it, are you?”

“Yes. Wish you could see her, Mack. She’s grand.”

Love Is Not a Tender Fawn

George Bickford

Arch. E. '39

Love is not a tender fawn
Who stands with muscles tensely drawn
For quick escape.

Love is a moose who hears the sound
Of angry barking from the hound
And lowers antlers to the ground.
And then dies hard.