

Mr. Empire Builder

A Short Story by S.P. Belov

Fifty years ago, one man changed my life and forged a new concept and understanding of my adopted country, the United States of America. After four years of fighting against the evil forces of Communism from 1918 to 1922 in Siberia, I was a young Lieutenant of the Horse-Artillery, in the White Russian Army, who was lucky to survive. On December 23, 1923, I landed in San Francisco with five dollars in my pocket and knowledge of five English words, two of them unprintable. My new life in America was really rough. I was trying to live on ten cents a day and in 1923 that was hard.

The jobs available for immigrants were pick-and-shovel jobs, the lowest of the low in the existing job market, and even those were scarce. In the Fall of 1924, after several temporary jobs, I was hired to work on a dam at Lake Tahoe, Cisco Camp, high in the Sierra Nevadas. I journeyed there accompanied by my friend, the highly decorated captain Dobkewitch. We had to live in tents and communication with the rest of the world was difficult.

We were assigned to a rock-splitting gang. A miniature narrow-gauge railroad, a few miles long, carried the rocks to the construction sites. Many rocks blasted from the mountain were far too big to fit on the flat cars of the tiny railroad. Our job was to reduce them to a loadable size. We were given one hundred pound hammers. This was hard work for a man my size, five feet seven and a half inches tall weighing one hundred and thirty five pounds.

With these heavy hammers, we reduced big chunks of rock to their loadable size using sheer force, chipping off a little at a time. The rest of the gang were Swedes, twice my size and weight, who used sheer force easily. With their eyes closed, they pounded the rocks as chips flew to the heavens.

I imitated their method of pounding, but after a couple of hours I knew it was to no avail. I would not last for two hours at that rate, let alone through all the days ahead. I leaned on the long handle of my hammer looking gloomily at one extra-nasty rock. My future looked gloomy as this rock looked to me, yet I needed the job badly.

Suddenly the memory of a geology lecture in Omsk flashed into my mind. The professor said something about rock formations. Rocks are in layers. By hitting hard rhythmically and steadily, they can be split into layered segments. I told Dobkewitch about the lecture and for lack of a better idea he agreed to try this method.

We inspected that nasty rock specimen in front of us. We studied it thoroughly noting the directions of the layers, then proceeded to pound the rock rhythmically from both ends one, two, one two. Lo, the miracle of science! The big formidable rock, so unassailable just a few minutes before, meekly and obediently broke into halves. We looked at each other in triumph and with

new spirit and energy, attacked the halves and soon reduced the rock to proper chunks for loading. After a few days we became professionals at rock-splitting.

On September 6th, 1924 was a beautiful warm and sunny afternoon. We were busy inspecting our next victim and were so absorbed that we did not notice a group of men approaching the quarry. Being behind the rock, I could not have seen them anyway. Suddenly, a quiet but authoritative voice brought me back from my geological contemplations.

“Why aren’t you working?”

I straightened myself and saw an impressive man with a delegation from the camp standing behind him in respectful silence. The man who had addressed me wore a beautiful pearl grey Stetson at a rakish, but elegant angle, tailored open shirt, grey coat and riding breeches and high laced boots. He was tallish, but not tall, strong but not bulky. He had a strong face, the face of authority. He looked at me with steady grey eyes, neither frosty nor hostile, just appraising.

His question was so sudden and I was so startled that I did not have time to switch from my “officer and a gentleman” status to my “lowly pick and shovel man” persona. Automatically I answered: “Before I used my muscles, now I use my brains.”

He swept his Stetson backward with his hand and taking a couple of steps forward stood with legs apart and arms akimbo. There was no hostility in his eyes but rather surprised amusement. “The hell you do. Prove it!”

We had already studied the big rock so were able to put on a good show. The rock split obediently into halves. Naturally our technique was nothing new to him. He knew all about rocks and much more, otherwise he would not have been the supervisor for the entire construction project. But the group behind him gasped audibly and looked at us with surprise. The supervisor straightened his Stetson. His countenance registered amusement. His next question was unexpected and absolutely unpredictable: “How many languages do you speak?”

“Four.” I rather impertinently claimed English as one of them. There was no intentional disrespect in not calling him “Sir.” I just completely forgot that I should “Sir” him.

The man turned to the Superintendent of the camp, who stood a little apart from the small silent group.

“You’re having some trouble with the section gang, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir. The gang knew the camp may be closed soon and they and their boss quit to look for other jobs.”

“When did that happen?”

“Last night, Sir.”

“Have you organized a new one?”

“Not yet, Sir.”

He turned back to me “Do you know anything about section gang work?”

“Three months in section work, Southern Pacific Railroad, Sausalito, San Anselmo, sir.” This time I remembered to add “sir.”

“Can you organize and run this railroad?” He pointed to the immobilized railroad.

“I will try, Sir.”

With a few steps he was in front of me extending his hand. It was not a flabby, condescending gesture. It was a strong, friendly handshake, man to man, equal to an equal.

“I am sure you will. Good luck to you.” For the last time our eyes met in friendship as equals. Then he was off with the rest of the group trotting meekly behind him.

With those few words he solved the problem that the camp directors had been helplessly nursing all day. Back in my country this incident could not have happened. I would have been kicked out of the camp for gross insubordination. Certainly no “big boss” would have offered his hand to a “pick and shovel man” and given him a foreman’s job.

To me it was much more than a handshake. The experience gave me faith in myself and in my newly adopted country. I came to understand that in America we all have equal opportunity. That handshake carried me through the College of Chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley. It was a handshake that transformed a lowly pick-and-shovel man into a Consulting Chemical Engineer. When I faced difficulties later on, I would close my eyes and feel his strong friendly grip and that memory gave me new strength. Later, I learned the man’s name and who he was but I gave him a name of my own “Mr. Empire builder.” In my mind he was one of the characters who made America the most powerful and richest country in the world.

What about the railroad? Our camp was a veritable League of Nations made up of new immigrants from all over the world. With my four languages, I could pick out men who had good railroad experience in their native countries. Captain Dobkewitch was my assistant. We worked out time tables and did some necessary repairs on the tracks. With the flagmen in their respective places, with the switchmen at their switches and the couplermen ready, we had our tiny railroad running smoothly in a couple of hours. The railroad ran and the work continued until the camp was closed for the winter.

