

ZINC WORKS CRANEMAN TO WED

Thomas Bell

They left Braddock at ten. Mary coughed as they stood in the quiet street, waiting for Johnny to unlock the Chevvy. At this end of town there was no air that wasn't impregnated with smoke; it made space, the darkness, an almost palpable thing, harsh in the throat, blurring the street lamps. Dust from the blast furnaces grated underfoot. The girls got into the back; Dave sat in front with Johnny. "Take 51", Ann said to her husband. "I hate that 48, it's all curves."

"Who's drivin' this car?" Johnny said.

"You heard me."

They went along Braddock Avenue, past the light at 13th, past the mill. The red neon sign on top of the machine shop, Carnegie-Illinois Steel Company, Edgar Thomson Works, floated in a haze of smoke and steam. Farther on a Bessemer Converter, vomiting flame, threw a light against the bleak, eroded hills that exposed every rock and gully.

Ann said, "Give me Donora any time. Zinc works and all."

"What's the matter with Braddock?" Johnny asked. "Braddock's a good town. I was born and raised in Braddock. So was Dave."

"Every time I come here it looks dirtier. I'll bet it's one of the dirtiest towns in the United States."

"You don't know what you're talking about. Plenty people wouldn't live any place but Braddock."

"They can have it."

They passed under the high concrete arch of the new bridge, crossed Turtle windows were greenish with "daylight" lamps.

"Westinghouse seems to be workin' good," Dave said.

"I hear they're puttin' in a new shop for mass production or something."

"Yeah. They call it little Ford."

"It's liable to do away with a lot of jobs."

"Show me something nowadays that don't."

After a while Johnny said, "So you don't like Braddock. I take notice you had to come to Braddock when you wanted to see a fashion show."

“Get any ideas?” Dave asked “They were showing mostly extreme things,” Mary said. “I was surprised they showed so much. Hostess gowns, Sunday night dresses, cocktail dresses, stuff like that.”

“Well,” Johnny said, “they don't put on a fashion show to show you house dresses.”

“I know, but they certainly can't expect to sell any in Braddock. A woman whose husband works in the mill isn't going to spend her money on hostess gowns.”

“They don't expect to sell any;” Johnny said. “They just wanted to put on a show to advertise the store.”

“Listen to him;” Ann said in Slovak, “how smart he's getting.”

“Did they have a bride?” Dave asked.

“At the very end. I didn't care much for her dress. I want something simple.”

“It didn't bother me,” Mary said. “I used to be worse. I'd go to Pittsburgh and come home sick. Staying home you forget how many nice things there are until you go into one of those big stores.”

“I like to look at them but it doesn't bother me.”

“Wait till you've been married a while and find out you never can have them. You still have half a hope you'll get them some day.”

Mary didn't reply.

They went down the hill into McKeesport, through McKeesport, through Glassport. There was a glow of floodlights on top of the hill on the other side of the river where a new plate mill was being built. Then they were out of town and rolling along the quiet river road. The air was clearer here. The river reflected the lights of the Clairton by-products plant. They passed a sternwheeler and barges that sat motionless on the water, waiting, pointing a still pencil of light up the valley.

“You thought of trying for a job in the new mill?”

“I've thought of it,” Dave said. “I guess you have to know somebody, though.”

“It don't hurt. They say it'll be the only mill in the country on top of a hill. It is a hell of a place to put a mill when you come to think of it.”

“I guess they know what they're doing.”

Mary said, “Just so you get out of the zinc works I don't care where you work.”

“Oh. Startin' to boss him already. What's the matter with the zinc works?”

“I notice you quit the first chance you got.”

“I didn't quit because my wife ordered me, did I sweetheart?”

“I'll sweetheart you.”

“Why you want him out of the zinc works?” Johnny asked. “Runnin' that ore bridge is supposed to be a pretty good job.”

“I ain't on the ore bridge any more,” Dave said. “I only had that while Johnny Fisher was sick. I'm on that monorail that runs along the river.”

“In all that smoke;” Mary said.

“It has arsenic in it;” Ann said.

“Arsenic, sulphur, God knows what;” Mary said. “Look at the way it's killed everything on the hills, and they're on the other side of the river. Not even grass can grow.”

“I wonder if that farmer ever got anything.”

“I don't know. You hear he did and you hear he didn't.”

“They sure ruined his farm.”

“It's not doing Dave any good;” Mary said. “He's lost ten pounds this year. It's all I can do to get a word out of him.”

“It makes you sort of numb,” Dave said.

“No wonder them Spaniards drink so much. Pretty soon nobody but Spaniards will be workin' there!”

“They ain't Spaniards,” Ann said. “They're Mexicans.”

“All right, Mexicans. But they speak Spanish!”

“It makes him shiver, too,” Mary said. “He used to have to wear a sweater on the hottest day, couldn't get warm. When was it you came home that time and got under the blankets with a hot water bottle? I know it was summer. And when he finally sweated, his sweat made the sheet blue. Actually left a blue stain.”

“I never heard of anything like that,” Ann said.

“Do you think he'd tell me? Only way I found out was Mrs. Duran told me. She noticed the stains when she made his bed. Did I give it to him. I wanted him to quit then and there.”

“There you go,” Johnny said. “Boy, I never saw anything like it. Soon's they're sure of a man they start bassin' him. Why don't you let the poor guy alone? He's only got a month left of bein' his own boss. Why don't you let him enjoy it?”

“You shut up,” Ann said. “Mind your own business.”

They went down into Elizabeth, turned left and went up the short cut through the hills, away from the river, through the dark countryside.

“Oh, Mary's right,” Dave said after a while. “Best thing I could do is get out of there altogether. It ain't only the smoke. What I do, see, is after they've taken all the metal out of the furnaces they shove what's left into buckets. It's like slag, you might say, only instead of being liquid it's dust. Red hot. Then I pick it up and dump it into railroad cars. The heat and the dust are bad enough but when it rains it's worse. The buckets stand in the yard and get water in them.”

“But they're full of dust when you get them.”

“Yeah. Damp on the bottom and red hot on top.”

“I don't see how that could be.”

“Come down some day after it's been raining and watch. When I drop the bottom of the bucket the damp stuff sticks to the sides, and when the red hot stuff slides past that you get some real interesting effects.”

Dave lit a cigarette.

“Couple weeks ago I came in and I said to myself, this is going to be a second 4th of July. It'd rained all night. The first bucket I took over looked all right. I had one hand on my dump lever and one on the crane, the idea being to be dumping and moving away from it at the same time. But it went boom just the same and I got a shower of hot dust that damn near baked me standing up. You know how those monorails are, the cab's right over the bucket, practically.”

“Well,” Johnny said, “you're still livin'.”

“Yeah. Then the millwright came and inspected all around and when he took a look at the cab supports he found the rivets almost sheared through. Only about a quarter-inch left.”

“That was nice. Did they fix it?”

“When they got around to it. For while there every time the crane bumped over a joint in the rail I expected the damn cab to keep right on goin' down, and me with it. Wouldn't be the first time that's happened. Those monorails've made more cripples.”

“Wasn't Andy what's-his-name in an accident like that?”

“You mean Andy Bielak. Yeah. He was on one of the monorails down the other end of the mill by the roasting furnaces. First they dry out the ore and then they roast it red hot to burn out the sulphur or something. Then Andy takes it to the sintering plant. You know where Scott Street goes down through the mill? Well, he was on his way to the sintering plant with a full bucket and just as he gets about the middle of the street his crane drops.”

“I heard about that. The whole crane just dropped right off the rail.”

“That's right. There was a girder below him, I don't know what it's there for, you have to carry your bucket high to pass it. Well, the crane was moving when it let go and the momentum I guess worked it so the bucket cable caught on this girder with the bucket on one side and the cab on the other. It just hung there for a second and then the bucket started to spill and then the cable let go and everything hit the street. Andy still don't know how he got out of the cab. He must've started climbing out of it while it was still falling.”

“It must be a hell of a feeling.”

“He says he saw that red hot ore coming at him but how he didn't get buried under it he still don't know. He just got his arms and back burned. He was in the hospital a while but he's back on the job now.”

“Same job?”

“Yeah.”

“He's got more guts than I'd have.”

“It ain't guts especially. He used to be a chipper and he got the idea he'd like to run a crane, nothing to do but ride around all day. So they transferred him to the zinc works and how he's stuck with it. He thought he'd get a crane in the steel mill or the wire mill.”

“Why don't you ask for a transfer?”

“I been down to the office a dozen times. Once they got you down as a zinc works man you stay zinc works. Only thing I can do is to get out of town altogether. I'm figuring on trying Pittsburgh Steel, either Monesson or Allenport.”

“You'll need a car to get back and forth. Unless you move.”

“There's guys from Donora workin' in Allenport that have cars. Ray Shedlock's runnin' a crane in the tube mill up there; I could ride with him for a quarter a day.”

“That ore bridge looks like a pretty good job,” Johnny said reflectively.

“Oh, if I could get that job steady I'd marry it. There's some smoke from the driers but nothing like up at this end. You fill your hoppers and you're through for a while. In winter the ore freezes and you have to wait for the labor gang to break it up for you, it's a picnic. Takes longer in the driers, too. Oh, I couldn't ask for a better job. But there ain't a chance.”

“You get out of the zinc works altogether,” Mary said. “That's all I ask.”

“I'm tryin',”

“I mean it. I won't pack your lunch.”

“You want to get married, don't you?” Johnny said. “You can't get married if he ain't got a job. And the zinc works is steady; they go right along workin' full time when the steel mills are down to three days a week. If you want to get married --”

“You shut your big mouth,” Ann said.

They turned off 51 and went down Ella Hollow and came out on the river road again, turned left. Ahead of them, across the river, was the zinc works, and beyond it, behind the row of monumental stacks, taller than anything in a steel mill, the lights of the town. The furnaces were hot so there wasn't much smoke; freshly charged, they poured out acrid, bluish-gray smoke that filled the valley from hill to hill, sometimes made auto headlights necessary in the streets and set the river boat pilots to cursing God.

“I'll tell you what gets me,” Dave said. “I can stand the dust and the smoke and the wet days, but what gets me is when something goes wrong and I have to walk that rail. The damn crane never breaks down near a ladder. So I have to get out and walk that rail. It ain't a foot wide and it's easy thirty feet above ground. I'm no iron worker and I'm telling you my knees are shakin' when I reach the ground.”

“I'll have to come down and watch you sometime,” Johnny said. “It ought to be good.”

“Then I have to walk it again with the electrician or the millwright, and if he decides he needs something who goes for it? Me. I come back with my hands full, which just makes it that much better. If it's cold weather there's just enough frost on the rail to make the goin' good. And sometimes I think those goddam engineers wait on purpose till I'm on the rail to come along under me throwing up smoke and sparks.”

Johnny laughed.

They were opposite the zinc works now, the tall cement stacks, the row of furnaces with their sides crawling with thousands of small, tongue-like flames, blue, green and yellow. It was prettier to look at than work with.

In the back seat Mary looked at the furnaces and listened to the men talking; and in the back of her head she was thinking, not really feeling but just thinking as a person thinks about something before he begins to feel it, begins getting hopeless or angry; she was thinking, Next month I'm going to marry him. I'm going to be his wife and see him go out in the morning. During the day I'll think of him in that crane, working; and late in the afternoon, with the house smelling of supper, I'll stand behind the curtains in the front room, watching the street, waiting for him to come around the corner.