# Charley: Child Of Fate

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CHARLEY was getting on in years when I met him. We took the same plane to Whitehorse where we were to work on the construction of a refinery, and there we were both assigned to the same crew of electricians.

Charley had been a lineman for Standard Oil in his younger days, and the time he had spent in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia had left deep creases in his face; yet his bold blue eyes gave the lie to the age the creases suggested. He was a medium-sized man who still had lightness to his walk in spite of his fifty-five years of living. His keen sense of humor, enlivened by his quick wit, made him a welcome member of the crew from the very first day. Though he was not assigned the more risky scaffolding work, he was indeed a construction man of the first school. His dexterity at splicing a cable or cutting in a panel commanded the respect of all; at circuit work he was unsurpassable.

If you are at all familiar with construction work, you know that there is always a certain amount of danger around a big job. Let a person work in presence of danger long enough and he will become accustomed to it, but it will have changed him. Generally, the change is not an unpleasant one. Charley, for instance, could take the brunt of a joke and laugh as heartily as the prankster. He did more living in one day than most people do in a week. Always the first out of bed, he would kindle the fire, dress (yes, he kindled the fire first), make up his cot, wash, and then wait around to laugh away our early morning taciturnity.

I never saw Charley flustered or even surprised, and there were often occurrences that caught most of us unaware. One morning, as an illustration, Charley jumped out of bed and prepared to light the fire. He had a novel way of coaxing a fire to life. He would sprinkle kerosene over the wood and drop in a match; "This," he said, "saves a heap of time." What he didn't know, on this particular morning, was that under the ashes were live coals. He tossed in the wood, poured on a good quart of kerosene, dropped in the match, and landed across the room along with a section or two of stove pipe. Said Charley to our startled faces: "Who the h_____ sneezed?"

There was something else about Charley which I again attribute to his hazardous life: his utter lack of thrift. He did send his wife most of his wages, but what he kept for himself might just as well have been sent to a fund for blind moles. We had no place to spend our money, but Charley found it easy to get rid of his at gambling. He would bet on anything — either way. It was in his gambling that I first noticed his fascination for the laws of chance. I believe it was an obsession with him which had been brought on by a life of dangerous work. There were always little things that Charley did or didn't do that strengthened this impression.

In all his years of construction work, Charley must have seen a hundred men die violently, but he never once mentioned an accident. If one of the other electricians started a conversation about some grisly accident, Charley would either change the subject or remember something he had to do elsewhere. He would not speak of death; but, on the job, he was constantly alert and on guard against any possible

mishap.

For a while, Charley and I worked together on the relay rack in the powerhouse. This rack of large, oil-insulated relays carries the high voltage from the generators to the transmission lines. When the rack is "hot," its cables carry a forty-one hundred volt pressure. If the construction of a powerhouse is complete, this rack is inclosed in a steel cage and danger signs are fixed first on the door to the room and then on the cage itself. Forty-one hundred volts is about as nice to handle as a keg of dynamite with a fast burning eighth-of-an-inch fuse, only much quicker and not at all so obvious.

Our job was to tie in an emergency generator to this rack. We quite naturally worked with the rack "cold" (no voltage), but the main generators were in operation, and a switch was all that separated us from the high voltage. We worked all morning hooking in cables, and, when we left for dinner, we were nearly finished. After the meal, Charley and I returned to our work anxious to complete the job. I was just reaching for a cable when Charley said, "Catch!" and tossed me his cutters. I had to move away from the rack to catch them. Then he asked, "Do you hear anything you shouldn't, Ed?" I listened. A low humming sound, barely discernible, came from the relay transformers. The rack was "HOT!!" Someone had thrown the connecting switch while we had been eating. Charley's keen ear, quick thinking, and his acute sense of danger had paid off. I was weak at the thought of what would have happened had I grabbed the cable instead of Charley's cutters. I tried to stammer my gratitude, but he stopped me short. "I don't want to hear a word about it. We were lucky this time. Let it go at that."

About a week later, Charley won eight thousand dollars on an ice pool. The men were quite excited about it, but it meant no more to Charley than twenty bucks he might win in a poker game. We practically forced him to send the money home. His idea about the thing was quite different from ours. "That's the way it goes," he said. "I work a year to make five or six thousand, and then the ice breaks at 11:26 and I win eight thousand. That's the way life is — anything can happen."

When the refinery was finished, Charley was the first one to catch a plane home. He shook hands all around, and wished us luck. Something he said in those last few minutes before he left is still as fresh in my memory as when he said it: "This has been my last job, men. No more work for me. Just gonna take it easy from now on." And he was right. Charley was killed when his plane crashed into the Canadian Rockies. But "that's the way it goes—anything can happen."