

WEB OF STEEL

By
CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY and CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY, Jr.
Author and Clergyman Civil Engineer

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CHAPTER XXI.

The Testimony of the Dead.

Just as Helen Illingworth and Winters reached the lower level at the foot of the mesa, they were joined by Rodney. "What has happened?" cried the engineer. Winters answered as the three hurried along without stopping: "Meade blew up the hogback."

"Was that he?" "Yes." "I thought there was something familiar about him, but I did not dare—" "I recognized him instantly," said Helen Illingworth. "That atones for the International," continued Rodney. "What does?" asked his friend. "The dam is safe; the water has stopped rising. I believe it's beginning to fall a little. I saw someone jump on the palisade and wave his hand, and then I saw them all gather around, dently cheering."

"I should think the water would be over," said Winters; "it's pouring out of a hole in the hogback as big as a church." "It was a fine thing in Meade. Let's cry and tell him so," answered Rodney. "I'm afraid it's too late," said Winters. "Oh, don't say that," cried the girl. "Why, what happened?"

The second blast was slow in going," said Winters; "he went back to it at it, and got knocked over. It looked pretty bad from the top of the mesa." Rodney would not have been human had he not felt a leap in his breast at the possibility, but he was too loyal a friend and too genuinely fond of Meade for more than a passing emotion, for which he was more than ashamed. "Let us press on," he urged. In a few moments they stopped by three men. Meade was still unconscious. The big Irishman sat on the grass with the engineer's head on his knee. The deft-fingered little Italian was trying to wash the blood away from the unconscious man's forehead with a sodden, ragged piece of cloth. Meade was unconscious, he was breathing heavily. There was a catch in his breath. His breath came at irregular intervals and was labored as if painful.

A huge rock had struck him in the chest. The two men had torn open his shirt and undershirt. The engineer's chest was bruised and bloody. His ribs had been broken, and probably serious internal injuries had resulted. Every breath was an agony, and that the exquisite pain not arouse him to consciousness was evidence of the terrible nature of the injury. A smaller, sharper rock cut him across the forehead and he just missed his right eye, and he found out afterward that he had been struck by several other pieces of rock. His body was covered with bruises. But there was nothing, not even in the cut on the forehead, to cause any alarm had it not been for the

crushed chest. Winters and Rodney were both men of action, accustomed to quick thinking and prompt decision in emergencies; while Helen Illingworth could only stand with clenched hands staring in mental anguish at the man who had caused the disaster. The man was the engineer, and the engineer had immediately made preparations to save the wounded man to the car.

Murphy, in his belt a short woodman's axe. With it they cut down two young saplings, trimmed them and thrusting them through the sleeves of their raincoats they made a fairly practicable litter. Using the utmost care, they laid the unconscious man upon it and Winters and Murphy, the two biggest men, took the handles at either

end. Helen Illingworth, praying as she had never prayed before, sought to support the unconscious man's head. The Italian gathered up the tools and went ahead to open up the path. Rodney followed after. Their progress was slow of necessity. They had to handle Meade with great care. Winters and Rodney, after the brief inspection they had made, could not see a chance on earth for him. Neither could Helen Illingworth. They went along without conversation, naturally, except for an outburst of admiration from Winters. "I tell you," he said, "it was a magnificent thing for him to do. He risked his life a hundred times in that mad rush with the dynamite in his hands and the detonators in his pocket. Yet if he had only stayed back he would have been safe."

"It was his anxiety for the dam and the people that brought him down," said Helen Illingworth. "He can't die," she murmured. "God surely will not let him die. I love him so. And yet if he does and I have lost him, innocent or guilty, he has redeemed his fame." "He saved others," quoted Rodney under his breath, "himself he could not save."

It was a work of great difficulty to get the wounded engineer into the car, but they finally managed it. By the woman's direction they laid him on her bed in her own private stateroom. "One of us must go for a doctor at once," said Rodney, "and that will be my job."

"It's twenty miles to the town," said the conductor, who had helped to receive them. "If one of you could telegraph we could tap a wire." None of them could. "It's all down-grade and there's a good roadbed and I was some sprinter in my college days," said Rodney. "And there was never greater need of haste than now," said Winters. "I wish I had a horse here."

"Don't give up, Miss Illingworth," continued Rodney, as he started toward the door. "He's alive yet." Just then, opportunistly enough, rounding the last curve before the arch bridge, they saw the end of the other car rapidly approaching them. Had they not been so excited they could have heard the furious puffing of the engine as it drove the car at great speed up the heavy grade. "Wait," said the conductor, "we can send the engine down for the doctor. That'll be the colonel's car."

In a few minutes the car stopped on the siding. Out of it came Colonel Illingworth, Doctor Severance, Curtiss, and some of the officials of the Bridge company in town. They were all greatly excited. The colonel did not stop to put on his hat. He ran to the other car and climbed aboard. "The dam's going," he shouted. "The bridge and the town will be flooded. We got word an hour ago by a messenger galloping down. The telephone wires are down. I ran the car up here as the quickest way to get over to the reservoir and the dam. Some of you who know the way come with me."

By this time the observation room of the car was filled with men. "You need not worry about the dam," said Rodney. "What do you mean?" "A man blew up the hog-back, made a spill-way, the water rushed out through it into the ravine, you can see it below there, relieving the pressure on the dam at once. Since it has held up till now it will hold for good." "Thank God!" cried the colonel, sinking down into a chair and wiping the sweat of his brow. "The bridge will be safe then. By George," he gasped, "the Martlet company could hardly have stood another loss like that. Who's the man who blew it up?" "His name is Meade," said Rodney quietly. "Not—?" "Yes."

There was a long pause. Every man there knew of the failure of the International and in what estimation the old colonel held the name of Meade because of that. "Well, it was a fine thing," said the colonel; "it makes up for his blundering work on the bridge."

"Begin to bleed," said Shurtliff, who had stood by Meade and white and suffered ever since the engineer was brought to the car, "it was a fine thing for you to do, but not so yourself," cried Rodney.

"I'm afraid it's too late," said Winters. "Oh, don't say that," cried the girl. "Why, what happened?" The second blast was slow in going," said Winters; "he went back to it at it, and got knocked over. It looked pretty bad from the top of the mesa." Rodney would not have been human had he not felt a leap in his breast at the possibility, but he was too loyal a friend and too genuinely fond of Meade for more than a passing emotion, for which he was more than ashamed. "Let us press on," he urged. In a few moments they stopped by three men. Meade was still unconscious. The big Irishman sat on the grass with the engineer's head on his knee. The deft-fingered little Italian was trying to wash the blood away from the unconscious man's forehead with a sodden, ragged piece of cloth. Meade was unconscious, he was breathing heavily. There was a catch in his breath. His breath came at irregular intervals and was labored as if painful.

shaking and his body quivering; yet he was glad after all, more happy than he had thought he could be, in making the revelation, in vindicating the innocent, in giving that satisfaction to Helen Illingworth, tardy, even too late, though it might be. "Letters, sir. You will find there a blueprint of the design of the compression members," answered Shurtliff monotonously as if he had forced his mind to a certain action and it was working automatically. "With it is a letter from Bertram Meade to his father suggesting that the lacings were too light and calling attention to the empiric formula of Schmidt-Chemnitz in proof of his argument. On the back of that letter Mr. Bertram Meade, Sr., made an indorsement—you know his handwriting and can identify it—'Hold until bridge is finished and then give back to the boy. We'll show him that even Schmidt-Chemnitz doesn't know everything.'"

Colonel Illingworth turned the paper over. There was the indorsement. "Well, by heaven!" he began. "There's another paper in an envelope addressed to the editor of the New York Gazette. Will you read it aloud, sir?" Almost as if he had been hypnotized Colonel Illingworth took from the envelope the brief note. He read it: "I alone am responsible for the error in the design of the International bridge, which has resulted in this terrible disaster. I know that my son, in an effort to shield me, will assume the responsibility. As a matter of fact, he had previously pointed out what he believed to be structural weakness, but I refused to heed his representations and overbore his objections. The fault is entirely chargeable to me. There is no possible explanation for my blunder. The least I can do is to assume all the responsibility. The blame is mine. BERTRAM MEADE."

He laid it down with the other papers. "The demonstration is complete and absolute," he began spontaneously, amid a breathless silence. "The proofs are adequate. They would establish young Meade's innocence in any court in the land. Where is he? I have done him an injustice. I am ready to make amends," continued the colonel. "And while you are talking" said Helen Illingworth, who had been standing in the doorway too absorbed by the dramatic recital to interrupt it, "he's dying."

"Dying! Where?" "He was battered to pieces by the last dynamite explosion. We brought him here." "Where you there?" "We saw it from the top of the mesa. Oh, don't talk any longer." "Severance," said Illingworth, with prompt decision, "you haven't forgotten all your old medical skill. This is your job. One of you jump on the engine and bring a physician up and—"

"I'm going," said Rodney. "Who's the best doctor in town?" "Doctor Fraser. He's a young man, but very skillful," answered one of the local bridge men. "Bring our own Doctor Bailey up here from our hospital with him, and tell that engine driver to get down to the town and back just as quickly as he can go. Cheer up, Helen," said the colonel. "I know that a man is not going to rehabilitate himself by such an action and have the evidence of his innocence brought out at such a moment just to die." "Will you give me those papers, colonel?" said Rodney. "You'll want this written up and—"

"Take them," said the colonel. "Will you come along with me, Mr. Shurtliff? After I see the doctors I'll want your affidavit." "Yes, sir, anything," said Shurtliff. "It was fine of you," said Winters, "to try to shield your employer and the man you loved, but thank God, you spoke out before it was too late. I'm sorry I pulled that gun on you; you're a man, all right, even if you don't look it," he added to himself as Shurtliff bowed and followed Rodney. Winters stood at the door of the passageway leading to the stateroom while Helen Illingworth and Severance, who had been educated as a physician, and the old colonel, who knew a great deal about wounds and accidents from his war experience, entered the stateroom. A new spirit had come into the relations between father and daughter and both were glad. There was no question now about the future. There should be no opposition from Colonel Illingworth. Within an hour the papers would have the story of how one man had saved a great dam, the viaduct, the town, and its people, and they would have at the same time the story of who was responsible for the fall of the International bridge. They would have the story of the attempted self-sacrifice of the son to save the father. They would have the story of the old man's splendid and magnanimous avowal of responsibility before he died. The United States, the world, would ring with the dramatic tale.

It was as much to tell that story in his own way as to summon medical aid that Rodney had gone for the doctor. And so the father held the daughter clasped to his side while both bent over the still unconscious man, whom

Doctor Severance quickly and carefully and with wonderful skill, considering his long withdrawal from practice, examined. "What is it?" asked the colonel as the vice president looked up presently. "My daughter is engaged to be married to him—and he was rewarded by the thrill and quiver that shot through his daughter's being which he felt as he pressed her to his side—we can't let him die now." "He's in God's hands," answered Severance gravely. "He's been terribly pounded everywhere. His breastbone is shattered, some of his ribs are broken. I don't know."

"That awful cut on his forehead?" "That's nothing." "And the other bruises?" "They count but little, but the blow on the chest—he shook his gray head sadly, ominously. "Do you think anything has penetrated his lungs?" asked Helen Illingworth, as she pointed to her lover's lips, to a little bloody froth that came therefrom. The old man nodded. "Perhaps," he said. "Oh, he can't die, he can't, he can't!" wailed the woman, sinking down on her knees by the bed. "Not if any power on earth can keep him from it, my dear child," said the colonel tenderly, bending over her. "Send me the porter of the car," said Severance, "and take Miss Illingworth away. I want to get him undressed and—"

CHAPTER XXII.

At Last to the Stars. All the men except Curtiss and Winters had discreetly withdrawn from the car and had gone over to the mesa to look at the lake and the outlet. Indeed the water was roaring down beneath the steel arch bridge, filling for the first time in generations the channel of the Kicking Horse. Fortunately it could flow that way without danger to the town or the viaduct below. The colonel led his daughter to a chair and then turned to Winters. "You were there?" he began. "Tell me about it."

Graphically the big cattle rancher told the story of Meade's mad rush over the rocks with his two companions, of the desperate assault on the hog-back, of the success that had met their efforts to open the improvised spillway, and then the final disaster. The recital lost nothing in his graphic relation. "It was fine, it was magnificent," said the colonel, patting his daughter's shoulder. "Where are the two who went with him?" "They're outside there," said Winters. The old colonel went to the door of the car and called the two men into the car. "In the bank down in Coronado there's a thousand dollars of mine for each of you," he said promptly. "We didn't do it for money, sir," said the big Irishman, "although 'twill be welcome enough, but how is Mr. Roberts?"

"You mean that man who blew up the hog-back?" "Si, signore, a greata man he ees," said the little Italian. "I wish I could say he was all right, but there's a doctor with him and we have sent for the best physician in town. He's horribly hurt." "But please God, he may pull through, sir. The Holy Virgin an' the Saints preserve him," said the Irishman, making the sign of the cross. And in his own language little Funnere breathed a similar prayer and with his grimy, toll-stained hand he made the same gesture. "Murphy," shouted a voice from the pines on the side of the hill between the car and the mesa. "That'll be Mr. Vandeventer, the resident engineer," said Murphy. Colonel Illingworth turned to the door again. "Where's Roberts?" cried Vandeventer, stumbling down the hill. He was haggard and worn and weary to the point of exhaustion, but as soon as he had been assured of the safety of the dam—and before he left the water was visibly receding—he had started out to seek the engineer whom he had, in his mind in the excitement of the moment, accused of desertion. "He's here in my car, sir," said Colonel Illingworth.

"Certainly, My Dear Girl," said the Vice President. "And who are you, may I ask?" said Vandeventer, crossing the track and swinging himself upon the platform of the car. "I am Colonel Illingworth, president of the Martlet Bridge company." "But Roberts?" "His name is not Roberts. It's Meade." "What? The International man?" "Yes." "I knew he was an engineer. Well, he's made up for his failure there." "He did not fail there any more than he failed here," said the colonel. "Where is he?" "It's a long story." "It can wait," said Vandeventer brusquely. "I want to thank him for saving the dam and the lives of the men on it, and the town, and the railroad, and the bridge."

"I don't know whether you can thank him or not," said the colonel. "You don't mean—?" "He was terribly hurt by the last explosion and they brought him here." "Can I see him?" For answer Colonel Illingworth pointed to the door. "This is my daughter. Your name is Vandeventer, is it not? Helen, this is the engineer who is building the dam. He has come to ask after his man." "I've done everything I can for him," said Severance, coming out of the stateroom, followed by the porter, as Vandeventer shook hands with the girl. "He's still unconscious, but seems to breathe a little easier."

Into the little room the woman and the four men crowded. Vandeventer, accompanied by Murphy and Funnere, followed the colonel. Neither of the workmen would be left out. There lay the engineer, his face as white as the linen of the pillow or the bandage which had been deftly tied around his head. One hand, still grimy and mud-stained, lay on the sheet. Helen Illingworth knelt down and kissed it and laid her head on the bed. "He is to be my husband if he lives," she said simply. "A man and an engineer he is," whispered Vandeventer. "I misjudged you, Meade," said the colonel softly, speaking as if the unconscious man could hear. "I condemned you. I wish to heaven you could hear me make amends now." "Begob," whispered Murphy, "you'd ought to see him run wid the dynamite!" The voice of the Italian murmured words which they knew were prayers and though they came from humble lips they brought relief to all. They entered deeply into Helen Illingworth's heart and mingled with her own petitions, frantic, fervent, imperative, although she offered them to Almighty God as from a woman broken. Presently they all fled out of the room, leaving Helen Illingworth alone with what was left of life in the crushed body of the man she had never loved so much before. In the observation room Vandeventer told them of the fight for the dam and how they had reached their maximum power of resistance and more, and that the relief came in the very nick of time. Meanwhile the engine driver had burned up the track going and coming and in less than an hour he was back with two surgeons and a trained nurse. Was it their skill and care and watchfulness that finally brought Meade back to consciousness, or was it the passionate, consuming intensity of will and purpose of the woman who loved him, who could scarcely be driven from his side? Well, whatever the reason, after many days he passed from death into life and came back again. He was conscious of Helen's presence and lay quietly enveloped in her love before he could talk coherently or question. Indeed, with Rodney and Winters, and old Shurtliff, who swore to himself that he would never forgive himself if Meade did not recover, and the colonel, and Vandeventer, and all the men of the force, who used to stroll over after hours and just sit on the side of the track and stare at the car where the man who had saved them was fighting for his life as desperately as they had fought to save the dam, Meade was surrounded by such an atmosphere of admiration and devotion as might have stayed the hand of death itself. There came a day when the physician said he could talk a little. "I saw you," Helen whispered. "I was standing on the high hill watching, looking down upon you just before—"

"But I shall look up to you to all the rest of my life," said the man, as the woman knelt, as was her wont, by the side of the bed. She kissed his hand, thin, wasted, but white and clean now. "No, I to you," she murmured, as she pressed her lips to his fingers. "Look up a little higher, then," whispered Meade with some of the old humor. "You mean?" The voiceless movement of his lips told her the story. She raised herself and kissed them lightly. "I haven't dared to ask that before," said the man, closing his eyes. "It wasn't strong enough to stand that." "But you're going to get strong; you must. I'd like to kiss you forever," said the woman with plying tenderness and great joy. "It's heavenly now, but I shall have to go away again when I am able and—"

"We are never going to be parted again." "I cannot let you marry a discredited man, a failure." "Don't you know," said the woman, rising, "that the whole United States rings with your exploit, that the splendid saving of the dam has caught the fancy of the people as it deserves and you are a hero everywhere and to everybody?"

"But the International bridge and its failure?" "Unbeknown to the two the colonel had stood in the doorway. "We know the truth now, my boy," said the old man, coming into the room. "It was your father's fault, not yours." It was characteristic of Meade's temper and temperament that his white lips closed in a straight line at this. "Where's Shurtliff?" he asked, after a silent communing with himself. The old man had come in and out of the room like a ghost during his slow

recovery. Colonel Illingworth turned away and summoned the secretary. Rodney and Winters came, too. "Shurtliff," said Meade faintly but firmly, "tell them again who is responsible for the failure of the International." "Forgive me, Mr. Meade," said Shurtliff, "but it was your brave old father's fault."

"You see," said the colonel. "We knew it all the time," said Rodney. "But Mr. Shurtliff bravely gave us the final proof," said Winters. "Those papers?" said Meade. Shurtliff nodded. "And your father's own letter that he wrote the papers before his heart broke," said Rodney; "I'll read it to you presently."

"Why did you do it, Shurtliff?" "To right a great wrong, sir. I saw that we were mistaken to try to spare the dead at the expense of the living, to wreck your life and the future, and the happiness of Miss Illingworth. God bless her for her kindness to a lonely old man. And so when you were brought here dead I told them the truth and gave them the papers."

"Gentlemen," said Meade, making a last try, "it is useless to deny it now, but for the sake of my father's fame you won't let anyone know?" "Old man," said Rodney, "it was on the wires an hour afterward and the whole United States knows it now. Your father made the mistake; his letter admitted it bravely. The world honors him, it honors you."

"Rodney," said Meade, "I wish you hadn't done it." "It was for Miss Illingworth's happiness and yours that I did it," said Rodney. "And how much that cost me," he added, the confession being wrung from him, "no one can ever know." He turned and left the room. Winters followed him full of sympathy and comprehension. "Let me go out alone, old man," said Rodney. "I'll be back presently. This is the last I've got to make."

Winters watched him from the steps of the car as he disappeared in the pine trees en route to the mesa to fight it out under the open sky alone. The others left the room also, last of all Shurtliff. "You forgive me, Meade. I've been through hell itself," said the old man, "in these last six months." "Freely," said Meade. And Shurtliff went away with a lighter heart than he had borne for many a long day. The two lovers were alone again. "You see," said Helen, "there's nothing can keep us apart now."

"Nothing, thank God," whispered the man. "But I am sorry that it all came out this way. I'm sorry not only because of your suffering, but for other reasons—Rodney for one. He—it's too bad! It was not necessary for you to get yourself almost killed to win me, I mean, for wherever and whenever I found you, I was resolved to marry you, willy-nilly."

"And is it true that poor old Rod had grown to care?" he asked, putting by the academic discussion. The woman nodded. "I'm very sorry. I can't help it. We were always together, talking about you," she said. "And he couldn't help it, either," said Meade. "Somehow I believe he was the better man for you to have taken." But he looked at her wistfully and anxiously as he spoke. "I won't argue with you," said the girl, bending close to him. "I'll only say that I know I have the best man in all the world, but if he were the worst, I would rejoice to have him just the same."

(THE END.)
Attainments.
"How's your boy Josh getting on at school?" "I dunno," replied Farmer Cornossel. "But if he is really as smart as his conversation sounds, he's makin' some o' those professors hustle to keep us with him."



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