

WEB OF STEEL

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This Is a Thrilling Story
 of American Life as Strong,
 Courageous Men Live It

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BERTRAM MEADE CUTS OFF HIS OLD LIFE ENTIRELY AND GOES FORTH INTO STRANGE COUNTRY TO MAKE A NEW CAREER

Bertram Meade, Sr., plans a great international bridge for the Martlet Construction company. His son, Bertram Meade, Jr., resident engineer at the bridge site, and Helen Illingworth, daughter of Colonel Illingworth, president of the Martlet concern, are engaged to marry as soon as the work is finished. The young engineer had questioned his father's judgment on certain calculations and was laughed at for his fears. The bridge collapses and 150 workmen are killed. Meade, senior, drops dead after giving orders that his failure should be made public. The orders are not carried out. Young Meade takes the blame and releases Helen from her engagement.

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

"Shurtliff," said the young engineer, after the mound had been heaped up and covered with sods and strewn with flowers and the workmen had gone, "I have left everything I possess in your charge. You have a power of attorney to receive and pay out all moneys; to deposit, invest, and carry on my father's estate. The office is to be closed and the house is to be sold. My will, in which I leave everything to Miss Illingworth, is in your hands. You are empowered to draw from the revenue



"I Want to Stay Here a Little While by Myself."

of the estate your present salary so long as you live. If anything happens to me you will have the will probated and be governed accordingly."

"Mr. Meade," said the old man, and he somehow found himself transferring the affection which he had thought had been buried beneath the sod on that long mound before him, to the younger man. He had loved and served Meade all his life and he began to see that he could not stop now, nor could he lavish what he had to give merely on a remembrance. "Mr. Meade," he said, "where are you going and what do you intend to do?"

"I don't know where I shall go, or what I shall undertake eventually," said the man. "I'm going to leave everything behind now and try to get a little rest at first."

"And you will keep me advised of your whereabouts?"

"Perhaps—I don't know. One last injunction: you are not to tell anyone the truth."

"God forbid," said Shurtliff, "we have lied to preserve the honor and fame of him we loved who lies here."

"Don't render our perjuries of non-effect."

"I will not, sir. I haven't found that paper. I guess it was destroyed."

"I presume so. And now, good-by."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I want to stay here a little while by myself."

Shurtliff turned and walked away. When he reached the road, down which he must go, he stopped and faced about again. Meade was standing where he had been. The old man took off his hat in reverent farewell.

Meade was not left alone. Beyond the hillside where his father had been buried rose a clump of trees. Bushes grew at their feet. A woman—should man be buried without woman's tears?—had stood concealed there waiting. Helen Illingworth had wept over the dreariness, the mournfulness of it all. She had hoped that Meade might stay after the other went and now that he was alone she came to him. She laid her hand upon his arm. He turned and looked at her.

"I knew that you would be here," he said.

"Did you see me?"

"I felt your presence."

"Listen," said the woman. "You are seeking your life for your father's fame. A man has a right perhaps to do with his own life what he will, but when he loves a woman and when he has told her so and she has given him her heart, did it ever occur to you that when he wrecks his life he wrecks hers, and has he a right to wreck her life for anyone else?"

"Oh, my God," said Meade, "this is more than I can bear."

"I don't want to force you to do anything you don't want to do and you are not in any mood to discuss these things," she said in quick compassion. "Some day you will come back to me."

He stretched out his hands toward her over the grave.

"I don't know," he cried. "I dare not hope."

"With love like ours," she answered, "all things are possible."

"I can't bind you. You must be free," he said slowly, turning his head.

"You are breaking my heart, but I shall live and fight on for love and you."

"God bless you."

"You are going away?" she asked at last.

"I must break with everything. I must give you your chance of freedom."

"Very well," said the woman. "Now hear me. You can't go so far on this earth or hide yourself away so cunningly but that I can find you and maybe follow you. And I will. Now, I must go. I left my car down the road yonder. Will you go with me?"

The man shook his head and knelt down before her suddenly and caught her skirt in his grasp. His arms swept around her knees. She yielded one hand to the pressure of his lips and laid the other upon his head.

"Go now," he whispered, "for God's sake. If I look at you I must follow."

CHAPTER X.

The New Rodman.

There are no more beautiful valleys anywhere than those cut by the waters of primeval floods through the foothills of the great snow-covered Rocky mountains. The erosions and washings of untold centuries have flung out in front of the granite ramparts of succession of lower elevations like the bastions of a fortress. At first scarcely to be distinguished from the main range in height and ruggedness these ravines and escarpments gradually decrease in altitude and size until they turn into a series of more or less disconnected, softly rounded hills, like outlying earthworks, finally merging themselves by gradual slopes into the distant plains overlooked by the great peaks of the mountains.

The monotony of these pine-clad, wind-swept slopes is broken even in the low hills by out-thrustings of stone, sometimes the hard igneous rock, the granite of the mountains, more frequently the softer red sandstone of a period later, yet ineffably odd. These cliffs, buttes, hills and mesas have been weathered into strange and fantastic shapes which diversify the landscape and add charm to the country.

The narrow canons in which the snow-bed streams take their rise gradually widen as the water follows its tortuous course down the mountains through the subsiding ranges and out among the foothills to the sandy, arid, windy plains beyond. At the entrance of one of the loveliest of these broad and verdant valleys, a short distance above its confluence with a narrower, more rugged ravine through the hills, lay the thriving little town of Coronado.

Some twenty miles back from the town at a place where the valley was narrowed to a quarter of a mile, and separating it from the paralleling ravine, rose a huge sandstone rock called Spanish Mesa. Its top, some hundreds of feet higher than the tree-clad base of the hills, was mainly level. From its high elevation the country could be seen for many miles, mountains on one hand, plains on the other. It stood like an island in a sea of verdure. Little spurs and ridges ran from it. Toward the range it descended and contracted into a narrow saddle, vulgarly known as a "hog-back," where the granite of the mountains was hidden under a deep covering of grass-grown earth, which formed the only division between the valley and the gorge or ravine, before the land, widening, rose into the next hill.

The people came from miles away to see that interesting and curious mesa, much more striking in its appearance than Baldwin's knob, the last foothill below it. Transcontinental travelers even broke journey to visit it. The town prospered accordingly, especially as it was admirably situated as a place of departure for hunters, ex-

plorers, prospectors and adventurers, who sought what they craved in the wild hills. There were one or two good hotels for tourists, unusually extensive general stores of the better class, where hunting and prospecting parties could be outfitted, and the high-living, extravagant cattle ranchers could get what they demanded. Besides all these there were the modest homes of the lovers of the rough but exhilarating and health-giving life of the Rocky mountains. Of course there were numerous saloons and gambling halls, and the town was the haunt of cowboys, hunters, miners, Indians—the old frontier with a few touches of civilization added!

What was left of the river, which had made the valley—and during the infrequent periods of rain too brief to be known as the rainy season, it really lived up to the name of river—flowed merrily through the town, when it flowed at all, under the name of Picket Wire. When the railroad came the Picket Wire had been first studied in the hope of finding a practicable way over the mountains, but the ravine on the other side of the mesa had been found to offer a shorter and more practicable route. And, by the way, this ravine, taking its name from the little brook far down in its narrows, was known as the "Kicking Horse."

So the railroad ran up the ravine and the Picket Wire was left still virgin to the assaults of man. But the day came when it was despoiled of its hitherto long standing, untrampled innocence. Shouts of men, cracking of whips, tramping of horses, groaning of wheels, wordless but vocal protests of beasts of burden mingled with the ringing of axes, the detonations of dynamite. The whistle of engines and the roar of steam filled the valley. Under the direction of engineers, a huge mound of earth arose across its narrowest part, nearest a shoulder, or spur, of the mesa reaching westward. No more should the silver Picket Wire flow untroubled on its way to the sea. It was to be dammed.

All that the huge, hot inferno of baked plain, where sage brush and buffalo grass alone grow, needed to make it burgeon with wheat and corn was water. The little Picket Wire, which had meandered and sparkled and chattered on at its own sweet will was now to be held until it filled a great lakelike reservoir in the hills back of the new earth dam. Then through skillfully located irrigation ditches the water was to be given to the millions of hungry little wheatfields and cornfields, which would clamor for a drink. The fierce sun was no longer to wring its untroubled will in burning up the prairie.

With the promise of water on the plain beyond, Coronado sprang into newer and more vigorous life. In the language of the West it "boomed." The railroad had been a forlorn branch running up into the mountains and ending nowhere. Its first builders had been daunted by difficulties and lack of money, but as soon as the great dam was projected, which would open several hundred thousand acres for cultivation and serve as an inspiration in its practical results to other similar attempts, people came swarming into the country buying up the land, the price for acreage steadily mounting. The railroad accordingly found it worth while to take up the long-abandoned construction work of mounting the range and crossing it. Men suddenly observed that it was the short-



A Young Man Roughly Dressed.

est distance between two cardinal points, and one of the great transcontinental railroads bought it and began improving it to replace its original rather unsatisfactory line.

The long wooden trestle which crossed the broad, sandy depression in front of the town, the bed of the ancient river, through which the Picket Wire and further down its affluent, the Kicking Horse, flowed humbly and modestly, was being replaced by a great viaduct of steel. Far up the

gorge past the other side of the Spanish Mesa another higher trestle had already been replaced by a splendid steel arch. A siding had been built near the ravine, a path made to the foot of the mesa, and arrangements were being made to run a local train up from the town when all was completed to give the people an opportunity to ride up the gorge and see the great pile of rock, on which enterprise was already planning the desecration of an amusement park!

Up the valley of the Picket Wire one morning in early fall came a young man roughly dressed like the average cow-puncher from the ranches further north. He rode well, yet with a certain attention to detail and a niceness that betrayed him to the real rough-rider of the range, just as the clothes he wore, although they were the ordinary cattleman's outfit, were worn in a little different way that again betrayed him. One look into the face of the man, albeit his mustache and beard hid the revealing outlines of mouth and chin, sufficed to show that there was no ordinary cow-puncher. He rode boldly enough among the rocks of the trail and along the rough road, which had been made by the wheels of the wagons and hoofs of the horses. There was about him some of the quiet confidence begot of achievement, some of the power which knowledge brings and which success emphasizes, yet there were uncertainty and hesitation, too, as if all had not been plain sailing on his course.

To be the resident engineer charged with the construction of a great earth dam like that across the Picket Wire, requires knowledge of a great many things beside the technicalities of the profession, chief among them being a knowledge of men. As the newcomer threw his leg over the saddle-horn, stepped lightly to the ground, dropping the reins of his pony to the soil at the same time, Vandeventer, the engineer in question, looked at him with approval. Some subtle recognition of the man's quality came into his mind. Here was one who seemed distinctly worth while, one who stood out above the ordinary applicant for jobs who came in contact with Vandeventer, as the big mesa rose above the foothill. However, the chief kept these things to himself as he stood looking and waiting for the other man to begin:

"Are you the resident engineer?" asked the newcomer quietly, yet there was a certain nervous note in his voice, which the alert and observant engineer found himself wondering at, such a strain as might come when a man is about to enter upon a course of action, to take a strange or perilous step, such a little shiver in his speech as a naked man might feel in his body before he plunged into the icy waters of the wintry sea.

"I am."

"I'd like a job."

"We have no use for cow-punchers on this dam."

"I'm not exactly a cow-puncher, sir."

"What are you?"

"Look here," said the man, smiling a little, "I've been out in this country long enough to learn that all that it is necessary to know about a man is 'Will he make good?' Let us say that I am nothing and let it go at that."

"Out of nothing, nothing comes," laughed the engineer, genuinely amused.

Some men would have been angry, but Vandeventer rather enjoyed this. "I didn't say I was good for nothing," answered the other man, smiling in turn, though he was evidently serious enough in his application.

"Well, what can you do? Are you an engineer?"

"We'll pass over the last question, too, if you please. I think I could carry a rod if I had a chance and there was a vacancy."

"Umph," said Vandeventer, "you think you could?"

"Yes, sir. Give me a trial."

"All right, take that rod over there and go out on the edge of the dam where that stake shows, and I'll take a sight on it."

Now there are two ways—a hundred perhaps—of holding a rod; one right way and all the others wrong. A newcomer invariably grasps it tightly in his fist and jams it down, conceiving that the only way to get it plumb and hold it steady. The experienced man strives to balance it erect on its own base and holds it with the tips of his fingers on either side in an upright position, swaying it very slightly backward and forward. He does it unconsciously, too.

Vandeventer had been standing by a level already set up when the newcomer arrived and the rod was lying on the ground beside it. The latter picked it up without a word, walked rapidly to the stake, loosened the target, and balanced the rod upon the stake. As soon as Vandeventer observed that his new seeker after work held the rod in the right way, he did not trouble to take the sight. He threw his head backward and raised his hand, beckoningly.

"It so happens," he began, "that I can give you a job. The rodman next

in line of promotion has been given the level. One of the men went East last night. You can have the job, which is—"

"I don't care anything about the details," said the man quickly and gladly. "It's the work I want."

"Well, you'll get what the rest do," said Vandeventer. "Now, as you justly remarked, I have found that it is not polite out here to inquire too closely into a man's antecedents and I have learned to respect local customs, but we must have some name by which to identify you, make out your pay check, and—"

"Do you pay in checks?"

"No, but you have to sign a check."

"Well, call me Smith."

Vandeventer threw back his head and laughed. The other man turned a little red. The chief engineer observed the glint in his new friend's eye.

"I'm not exactly laughing at you," he explained, "but at the singular lack of inventiveness of the American. We have at least thirty Smiths out of two hundred men on our pay roll, and it is a bit confusing. Would you mind selecting some other name?"

"If it's all the same to you," announced the newcomer amusedly—the chief's laughter was infectious—"I'm agreeable to Jones, or Brown, or—"

"We have numbers of all of those, too."

"Really," said the man hesitatingly. "I haven't given the subject any thought."

"What about some of your family names?"

"That gives me an idea," said the newcomer, who decided to use his mother's name, "you can call me Roberts."

"And I suppose John for the prefix?"

"John will do as well as any, I am sure."

"We have about fifty Johns. Every Smith appears to have been born John."

"How did you arrange it?" asked the other with daring freedom, for a rodman does not enter conversation on terms of equality with the chief engineer.

"I got a little pocket dictionary down at the town with a list of names and I went through that list with the Smiths, dealing them out in order. Well, that will do for your name," he said, making a memorandum in the little book he pulled out of his flannel shirt pocket. He turned to a man who had come up to the level. "Smith," he said—"by the way this is Mr. Claude Smith, Mr. Roberts—here's your new rodman. You know your job, Roberts. Get to work."

And that is how Bertram Meade, a few months after the failure of the great bridge, once again entered the ranks of engineers, beginning, as was necessary and inevitable, very low down in the scale.

CHAPTER XI.

The Valley of Decision.

Much water had run under the bridges of the world and incidentally over the wreck of the International, since that bitter farewell between Bertram Meade and Helen Illingworth over the grave of the old engineer. Life had seemed to hold absolutely nothing for Meade as he knelt by that low mound and watched the woman walk slowly away with many a backward glance, with many a pause, obviously reluctant. He realized that the lifting of a hand would have called her back. How hard it was for him to remain quiet; and, finally, before she disappeared and before she took her last look at him, to turn his back resolutely as if to mark the termination of the situation.

Father, fame, reputation, love, taken away at one and the same moment! A weaker man might have sent life to follow. In the troubled days after the fall of the bridge, his father's death, the inquests, his testimony and evidence freely given, and that parting, something like despair had filled the young engineer's heart. Life held nothing it would not be better to end it than to live it. He envied his father his broken heart. Singularly enough, the thing that made life at least value was the thing that kept him from throwing it away—the woman.

Striving to analyze the complex emotions that centered about his losses he was forced to admit, although it seemed a sign of weakness, that love of woman was greater than love of fame, that in the balance one girl outweighed bridge and father. That the romance was ended was what made life insupportable. Yet the faint, vague possibility that it might be resumed if he could find some way to show his worthiness was what made him cling to it.

Of course he could have showed without much difficulty and beyond peradventure at the inquest over Abbott and the investigation into the cause of the failure of the bridge—unfortunate but too obvious—that the frightful and fatal error in the design was not his and that he had protested against the accepted plan, if only he had found the letter addressed to his father. But that he would never do

and the letter had not been discovered anyway. He did not even regret the bold falsehood he had uttered or the practical subornation of perjury of which he had been guilty in drawing out and accepting and emphasizing Shurtliff's testimony.

There had been no inquest over his father's death. The autopsy had showed clearly heart failure. He had not been compelled to go on the witness stand and under oath as to that. Although, if that had been demanded, he must needs have gone through with it. Indeed so prompt and public had been his avowals of responsibility that he had not been seriously questioned thereon. He had left nothing uncertain. There was nothing concealed.

He had inherited a competence from his father. It was indeed much more than he or anyone had expected. He had realized enough ready money from the sale of certain securities for his present needs. The remainder he placed in Shurtliff's care and a few days after the funeral, having settled everything possible, he took a train for the West.

The whole world was before him, and he was measurably familiar with many portions of it. He could have buried himself in out-of-the-way cor-



He Debated With Himself Whether It Would Not Be Better to End It Than to Live.

ners of far countries, in strange continents. These possibilities did not attract him. He wanted to get away from, out of touch with, the life he had led. He wished to go to some place where he could be practically alone, where he could have time to recover his poise, to think things out, to plan his future, to try to devise a means for rehabilitation, if it were possible. He could do that just as well, perhaps better, in America than in any place else. And there was another reason that held him to his native land. He would still tread the same soil, breathe the same air, with the woman. He did not desire to put seas between them.

He swore to himself that the freedom he had offered her, that he had indeed forced upon her unwilling and rejecting it, should be no empty thing so far as he was concerned. He would leave her absolutely untrammelled. He would not write to her or communicate with her in any way. He would not even seek her to hear about her and of course as she would not know whether he had gone or where he was she could not communicate with him. The silence that had fallen between them should not be broken even forever unless and until—Ah, yes, he could not see any way to complete that "unless and until" at first, but perhaps after a while he might.

He knew exactly where he would go. Dick Winters, another classmate and devoted friend at Cambridge, had gone out West shortly after graduation. He had a big cattle ranch miles from a railroad in a young southwestern state. Winters, like the other member of the youthful triumvirate, Rodney, was a bachelor. He could be absolutely depended upon. He had often begged Meade to visit him. The engineer would do it now. He knew Winters would respect his moods, that he would let him severely alone, that he could get on a horse and ride into the hills and do what he pleased, think out his thoughts undisturbed.

To Winters, therefore, he had gone. He had an idea that his future would be outside of engineering. Indeed he had put all thought of his chosen profession out of his mind and heart, at least so he fancied. Yet, spending an idle forenoon in Chicago waiting for the departure of the western train, he found himself irresistibly drawn to the great steel-framed structures, the skyscrapers rising gaunt and rigid above the other buildings of the city.

A man of Meade's ability will soon find a place for himself in any environment, and so it is with the young engineer. His new start in life is described in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Sweet, Young Thing.

In a local theater, one evening recently, a powerful spotlight revealed a house fly crawling over the powdery surface of a pretty girl's back. "Oh, lookie," whispered a little girl, in tones that could be heard all about her, "lookie at the fly!" "Hush, dear," the child's mother cautioned. There was a moment's silence, then the little girl again whispered hoarsely: "I spec the fly thinks he is on a marshmallow." Exchange.