

WEB OF STEEL

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY
Father and Son

Here Is a Powerful Story of Failure and Sacrifice and Love and Courage and Success

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THREE CRUSHING SORROWS BEAR DOWN UPON YOUNG BERTRAM MEADE—DEATH, LOSS OF REPUTATION AND LOSS OF FRIENDS

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 die. This installment describes a memorable scene in the elder Meade's office.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"I haven't lost any confidence, sir. We all make mistakes. I made one, you know, and you took me up."
"It's too late for anybody to take me up. Men can't make mistakes at my age. No more of that. We have still one thing to do, set the boy right before the world."

"But if I were your son, sir, said the secretary, "rather than see you ruined I would take the blame on myself. He can live it down."

"But he is not to blame. On the contrary, he was right, and I was wrong. Here, Shurtliff, is his own letter. You know it; you saw him give it to me. You heard the conversation, and I have written out a little account explaining it, stating that I made light of his protests, acknowledging that he was right and I was wrong, taking the whole blame upon myself. He will be back here tonight, I am sure. I intend to give it to him."

"Oh, don't do that, Mr. Meade." The telephone bell rang.
"The bridge!" clamored the insistent bell.

Staggering almost like a drunken man, Shurtliff left his place by the door, reached his thin hand out and lifted up the telephone, its bell vibrating, it seemed, with angry, venomous persistence through the quiet room.

"It's a telegram," he whispered. "Yes, this is Mr. Meade's private secretary. Go on," he answered into the mouthpiece of the telephone.

There was another moment of ghastly silence while he took the message. It was typical of Shurtliff's character that in spite of the horrible agitation that filled him, he put the instrument down carefully on the desk, methodically hanging up the receiver before he turned to face the other man. He spoke deprecatingly. No woman could exceed the tenderness he managed to infuse into his ordinarily dry, emotionless voice.

"The bridge is in the river, sir."
"Of course; any more."
"Abbott—and one hundred and fifty men with it."

"Oh, my God!" said the old man. He staggered forward. Shurtliff caught him and helped him down into the big chair before the desk. The news had been discounted in his mind, still some kind of hope had lingered there. Now it was over.

"We must wire Martlet," he gasped out.
"The telegraph office said the message was addressed to you and Martlet, so they have got the news, sir."

"It won't be too late for the last editions of the evening papers, either,"



"We Must Wire Martlet," He Gasped Out.

said the old man. "Shurtliff, I was going to give these documents to the boy when he got back, but I want them to appear simultaneously with the news of the failure of the bridge. Wait." He seized the pen and signed his name to the brief letter of exculpation.

The writing in the body of the document was weak and feeble, the signature strong and bold. He gathered the papers up loosely.

"Here," he said, "I want you to take them to a newspaper—the Gazette—that will be certain to issue an extra issue for the last edition."

I want this letter of his with mine to go side by side with the news. There must not be a moment of uncertainty about it."

"Mr. Meade, for God's sake—" "Don't stop to argue with me now. Take a taxi and get there as quickly as you can. You are carrying my honor, and my son's reputation. Go."

CHAPTER VIII.

For the Father.

Two and one-half hours later a group of anxious reporters, clustered at the door of the Uplift building, were galvanized into life by the arrival of a taxicab. Out of it leaped Bertram Meade. He was recognized instantly.

"You know about the bridge, Meade?" asked one, forcing his way through the crowd, which broke into a sudden clamor of questioning.

Meade nodded. He recognized the speaker, their hands met. This was a man of his own age named Rodney, who had been Meade's classmate at Cambridge, his devoted friend thereafter. Instead of active practice, he had chosen to become a writer on scientific subjects and was there as a representative of the Engineering News. There were sympathy and affection in his voice and look, and in the grasp of his hand.

"Have you seen my father, Rodney?" Meade asked, quickly moving to the elevator, followed by all the men.

"At the house they said he was not there, and here at the office we get no answer."

As Meade turned he saw his father's secretary coming slowly through the entrance. "Shurtliff," he called out, "My father?"

"I left him in the office two hours ago. He told me to—go away and—leave him alone. I have been wandering about the streets."

Outside in the street the newsboys were shrieking:

"Extry! Extry! All about the collapse of the International bridge. Two hundred engineers and workmen lost."

Shurtliff had one of the papers in his hand. Meade tore it from him.

"Who is Responsible?" stared at him in big red headlines.

"Gentlemen," said Meade, "I can answer that question"—he held up the paper so that all might see—"the fault—the blame—is mine."

"We'll have to see your father, Bert," said Rodney.

"He is in this building, we know, and he'll never leave it without running the gantlet of us all," cried another amid a chorus of approval.

Meade realized there was no escape. They all piled into the elevator with him and Shurtliff. They followed him up the corridor. He stopped before the door of the office.

"I forbid you to come in," he said. "This is my father's private—"

"Have no fear, Bert," said Rodney firmly. "We don't intend to break in. We understand how you feel. We will wait here until you say the word, and then all we shall want will be a statement from your father."

"Thank you, old man. Come, Shurtliff," said Meade, turning his key in the lock. The two men entered and carefully closed the door behind them.

The door was scarcely shut when Helen Illingworth left the elevator and came rapidly up the corridor. She had called at the office before and had no need to ask the way. The reporters gathered around the door moved to give her passage while they stared at her with deep if respectful curiosity.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," she began, "but I am very anxious to see the younger Bertram Meade."

"He has just gone into the office," answered Rodney respectfully.

The girl raised her hand to knock. "A moment, please; perhaps you had better understand the situation. The International bridge—"

The girl came to a sudden determination. She could not declare herself too soon or too publicly.

"My name is Illingworth," she said, and as the hats of the surprised reporters came off, she continued, "I am the daughter of the president of the Martlet Bridge company, which was erecting the International."

"Yes, Miss Illingworth," answered Rodney, "and did you come here to represent him?"

"I am Mr. Bertram Meade, Jr.'s, promised wife, and I am here because it is the place where I ought to be. When the man I love is in trouble, I must be with him."

She raised her hand again, but Rodney was too quick for her. He knocked lightly on the door, and then struck it heavily several times. The sound rang hollowly through the corridor, as it always does when the door of an empty room is beaten upon. There was no answer for a moment.

"Oh, I must get in," said the woman.

Rodney knocked again, and this time the door was opened. Shurtliff stood in the way. He had been white and shaken before, but now so anguished and shocked was his appearance that everybody stared. Shurtliff moistened his lips and tried to speak. He could not utter a word, but he did manage to point toward the private office.

"Perhaps I would better go first," said Rodney, as the secretary stepped back and gave them passage.

Helen Illingworth followed, and then the rest. Young Meade was standing erect by his father's chair. The great bulk of the old engineer was slouched down, his body bent over, his head on the desk, face downward. One great arm, his left, extended, shot straight across the desk. His fist was clenched, his right arm hung limp by his side. He was still.

There was something unmistakably terrible in his motionless aspect. They had no need to ask what had happened. A sharp exclamation from the woman was the only sound that broke the silence, as she stepped to her lover's side.

"You can't question my father now, gentlemen," said Meade; "he is dead."

In the outer office they heard Shurtliff brokenly calling the doctor on the telephone and asking him to notify the police.

"Did he—" began one, hesitatingly.

"He was too big a man to do himself any hurt, I know," answered Meade proudly, as he divined the question.

"The autopsy will tell. But I am sure that the failure of the bridge has broken his heart."

"And we can't fix the responsibility now," said Rodney, who for his friend's sake was glad of this consequence of the old man's death.

"Yes, you can," said the young man. He leaned forward and laid his right hand on his dead father's shoulder.

Helen Illingworth had possessed herself of his left hand. She lifted it and held it to her heart. The engineer seemed unconscious of the action, and still it was the greatest thing he had ever experienced. Meade spoke slowly and with the most weighty deliberation in an obvious endeavor to give his statement such clear definiteness that no one could mistake it.

"Here in the presence of my dead father," he began, "I solemnly declare that I alone am responsible for the design of the member that failed. My father was getting along in years. He left a great part of the work to me. He pointed out what he thought was a structural weakness in the trusses, but I overbore his objections. I alone am to blame. The Martlet Bridge company employed us both. They said they wanted the benefit of my father's long experience and my later training and research."

"Do you realize, Meade," said Rodney, as the pencils of the reporters flew across their pads, "that in assuming this responsibility which, your father being dead, cannot be—"

"I know it means the end of my career," said Meade, forcing himself to speak. "My father's reputation is dearer to me than anything on earth."

"Even than I?" whispered the woman.

"Oh, my God!" burst out the man, and then he checked himself and continued with the same monotonous deliberation as before, and with even more emphasis, "I can allow no other interest in life, however great, to prevent me from doing my full duty to my father."

He had been fully resolved to protect his old father's fame had the father survived the shock. The appeal of the dead man was even more powerful than if he had lived. Meade could not glance down at that crushed, broken, impotent figure and fail to respond. It was not so much love—never had he loved Helen Illingworth so much as then—as it was honor. The obligation must be met though his heart broke like his father's; even if it killed him, too.

And the woman! How if it killed her? He could not think of that. He could think of nothing but of that inert body and its demand.

"Have you no witnesses, no evidence to substantiate your extraordinary statement?" asked Rodney.

"I can substantiate it," said Shurtliff, coming into the room, having finished his telephoning. "The doctor and the police will be here immediately, but before they come—" and he drew himself up and faced the reporters boldly. "Gentlemen, I can testify that everything that Mr. Bertram Meade has said is true. I happened to be here when my dead friend and employer got the telegram announcing the failure of the bridge and, although he knew it was his son's fault, he bravely offered to assume the responsibility and he told me to go to the newspapers and

tell them that it was his fault and that his son had protested in vain against his design."

"Why didn't you do it?" asked one of the reporters.

"I couldn't, sir," faltered the old man. "It wasn't true. The son there was to blame."

He sank down in his seat and covered his face with his hands and broke into dry, horrible sobs. It was not easy for him either, this shifting of responsibility.

"You see," said young Meade, "I guess that settles the matter. Now you have nothing more to do here."

"Nothing," said Rodney at last, "not in this office at least. We must wait for the doctor, but we can do that outside."

One by one the men filed out, leaving the dead engineer with his son, the secretary, and the woman in the room.

"Bert," said the woman, laying her hand on his shoulder, "why or how I feel I cannot tell, but I know in my



"He Will Point Out Some Way—"

heart that you are doing this for your father's sake, that what you said was not true. Things you have said to me—"

"Did I ever say anything to you," began Meade in fierce alarm, while Shurtliff started to speak but checked himself, "to lead you to think that I suspected any weakness in the bridge?"

The woman was watching him keenly and listening to him with every sense on the alert. Nothing was escaping her and she detected in his voice a note of sharp alarm and anxiety as if he might have said something which could be used to discredit his assertion now.

"Perhaps not in words but in little things, suggestions," she answered quietly. "I can't put my hand on any of them, I can hardly recall anything, but the impression is there."

Meade smiled miserably at her and again her searching eyes detected relief in his.

"It is your affection that makes you say that," he said, "and as you admit there is really nothing. What I said just now is true."

It was much harder to speak the lie to this clear-eyed woman, who loved him, than to the reporters. He could scarcely complete his sentence, and in the end sought to look away.

"Bertram Meade," said the woman, putting both her hands upon his shoulder, "look me in the face and tell me that you have spoken the truth and that the blame is yours."

Meade tried his best to return her glance, but those blue eyes plunged through him like steel blades. He did not dream in their softness could be developed such fire. He was speechless. After a moment he looked away. He shut his lips firmly. He could not sustain her glance, but nothing could make him retract or unsay his words.

"I have said it," he managed to get out hoarsely.

"It's brave of you. It's splendid of you," she said. "I won't betray you. I don't have to."

"What do you mean?" asked the man.

But the woman had now turned to Shurtliff. In his turn she also seized him in her emotion and she shook him almost eagerly.

"You, you know that it is not true. Speak!"

But she had not the power over the older man that she had over the younger. The secretary forced himself to look at her. He cared nothing for Miss Illingworth, but he had a passion for the older Meade that matched hers for the younger.

"He has told the truth," he cried almost like a baited animal. "No one is going to ruin the reputation of the man I have served and to whom I have given my life without protest from me. It's his fault, his, his, his!" he cried, his voice rising with every repetition of the pronoun as he pointed at Meade.

Helen Illingworth turned to her lover again. She was quieter now.

"I know that neither of you is telling

the truth," she said. "Lying for a great cause, lying in splendid self-sacrifice. You are ruining yourself for your father's name and he is abetting. Why? It can't make any difference to him now. But it makes a great difference to me. Have you thought of that? I'm going to marry you anyway. Only tell me the truth, Bert. By our love I ask you. If you want me to keep your secret I'll do it. But if you won't tell me I'll get that evidence, I will find out the truth, and then I shall publish it to the whole world and then—"

"And you would marry me then?" asked Meade, swept away by this profound pleading.

"I will marry you now, instantly, at any time," answered the girl. "Indeed you need me. Gully or innocent, I am yours and you are mine."

"Listen," protested the engineer, "nothing will ever relieve me of the blame, of the shame, of the disgrace of this. But I am a man. I have youth still, and strength and inspiration. Until I can hold up my head among men I am nothing to you and you are free."

There was a finality in his tone which the woman recognized. She could as well break it down as batter a stone wall with her naked fist. She looked at him a long time.

"Very well," she said at last, "unless I shall be your wife I shall be the wife of no man. I shall wait confident in the hope that there is a just God, and that he will point out some way."

CHAPTER IX.

The Unaccepted Renunciation.

The doctor and the officers of the law entered the outer office. In spite of the brave words that had been spoken by the woman, the man could only see a long parting and an uncertain future. He realized it the more when old Colonel Illingworth entered the room in the wake of the others.

After he had recovered himself he had hurried to the station in time to catch the next train and had come to New York, realizing at once where his daughter must have gone.

"My father is dead," said Meade as the doctor and the officers of the law examined the body of the old man. The son had eyes for no one but the old colonel. "The failure of the bridge has broken his heart; my failure, I'd better say."

"I understand," said Illingworth. "He is fortunate. I would rather have died than have seen any son of mine forced to confess criminal incompetence like yours."

"Father," said the girl with a resolution and firmness singularly like his own. "I can't hear you speak this way, and I will not."

"Do you go with him or do you not?" thundered the colonel.

It was Meade who answered for her. "She goes with you. I love her and she loves me, but I won't drag her down in my ruin."

"I am glad to see honor and decency are in you still," said the colonel, "even if you are incompetent."

"If you say another word to him I will never go with you as long as I live," flashed out Helen Illingworth.

"I deserve all that he can say. Your duty is with him. Good-by," said Meade.

"And I shall see you again?"

"Of course. Now you must go with your father."

Helen Illingworth turned to the colonel.

"I shall go with you because he bids me, not because—"

"Whatever the reason," said the old soldier, "you go." He paused a moment, looking from the dead man to the living one. "Meade," he exclaimed at last, "I am sorry for your father, I am sorry for you. Good-by, and I never want to see you or hear of you again. Come, Helen."

The woman stretched out her hand toward her lover as her father took her by the arm. Meade looked at her a moment and then turned away deliberately as if to mark the final severance.

With bent head and beating heart, she followed her father out of the room. There he had to fight off the reporters. He denied that his daughter was going to marry young Meade. She strove to speak and he strove to force her to be quiet. In the end she had her way.

"At Mr. Meade's own request," she said finally, "our engagement has been broken off. Personally I consider myself as much bound as ever, but in deference to his wishes and to my father's—"

"Have you said enough?" roared the colonel, losing all control of himself at last. "No, I will not be questioned or interrupted another minute. Come."

He almost dragged the girl from the room.

Within the private office the physician said that everything pointed to a heart lesion, but only an autopsy would absolutely determine it. Meanwhile the law would have to take charge of the body temporarily. It was late at night before Bertram Meade and old Shurtliff were left alone. Carefully seeing that no one was present in the suite of offices Meade turned to Shurtliff.

"Get me that memorandum I wrote to my father. You know where he kept it."

"Yes, sir, separate from the other papers concerning the International, in the third compartment." He turned the big safe door slowly. The third compartment was empty. "It's gone," he said.

Meade went to the safe, a small one, and examined it carefully and fruitlessly. His letter was not there with the other papers, where it should have been if it were in existence. It was not anywhere.

"Father told me he was going to destroy it, but I rather thought he was keeping it to have some fun with me when the bridge was completed," he said at last.

"Yes, sir, that was his intention. In fact, I know he did not destroy it at first. He told me to file it with the plans. He must have destroyed it later. I haven't looked in this compartment for weeks."

"I'll never forget the lie you told to back me up, Shurtliff. I can see you loved him as much as I."

"No one will ever know the truth from me, sir. You saved your father's name and fame."

"I think we had better search the office now. I wouldn't have that paper come to life for the world," said Meade.

Shurtliff was the most orderly of men. The care of the old engineer's papers and other arrangements had devolved upon him. The search was soon completed.

"I guess he must have destroyed it," said the young man, "but to be sure I will examine his private papers at home. Good night. You will be going yourself?"

"In a few minutes, sir."

"Come to me in the morning after the autopsy and we will arrange for the funeral," said the younger man as he left the office.

Shurtliff waited until his footsteps died away in the hall. He waited until he heard the clang of the elevator gate. Even then he was not sure. He got up and in his catlike way opened the door of the office and peered down the hall. It was empty. He stood in the door waiting, while the night elevator made several trips up and down without pausing at that floor. He sat down at the dead man's desk. From his pocket he drew forth a packet of papers.

There were no legal proceedings, although there were many inquests at the bridge. The cause of the failure was clear. It was recognized by everyone, whose opinion was worth considering, that the disaster had resulted from a mistake which any engineer could have made. As a matter of fact there was no experience to guide the designers. There never had been such a bridge before. Certain elements of empiricism had to enter into their calculations. They had made the plan after their best judgment and it had failed. They could be blamed, even vilified as they were in the press, but that was the extent of their punishment.

The bitter weight of censure fell entirely upon Bertram Meade. His ruin as an engineer was immediate and absolute. He was the scapogot. No one had any good to say of him except Rodney, who fought valiantly for his friend and classmate, at least striving to mitigate the censure by pointing out the quick and ready acknowledgment of the error which might have been ascribed to the dead man without fear of contradiction.

An effort was made by competitors and stock speculators to ruin the Martlet Bridge company. By throwing into the gap their private fortunes to the last dollar and by herculean work on the part of their friends, the directors saved the Martlet company, although its losses were tremendous and almost insupportable, not only in money, but in prestige and reputation. Colonel Illingworth came out of the struggle older and grayer than ever. The terrific combat had left him almost broken for a time, and his daughter saw that it was not possible even to mention Bertram Meade to him, then.

The funeral of the great engineer had been strictly private. Only his conferees, men who stood high in scientific circles, certain people for whom he had made great and successful designs, a few others whose ties were personal, had been invited to the house for the services. The interment was in the little Connecticut town of Milford, in which the older Meade had been born, and from which he had gone forth as a boy to conquer the world.

The next installment tells of young Meade's big move, which leads to even more startling consequences than the recent happenings in his life.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Optimistic Thought.

A bad custom is better broken than kept.