

WEB OF STEEL

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

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

Copyright by Fleming H. Revell Co.

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

"He wouldn't be a common workman, would he?" asked the girl, more disappointed than she could express.

"Certainly not. He'd be keeping track of material, or running a transit, or acting as a gang foreman. Most of the workmen are foreigners, although the bridge erectors are Americans."

"You're sure that he's not here?"

"Absolutely."

"There's the dam," said Winters. "We'll try that in the morning."

"What good is it going to do us, Dick?" asked Rodney a little irritably. "Even if we do find him, we can't make him speak."

"I don't know," answered the woman slowly. "But if I could just see him once again, Mr. Rodney"—she spoke



"He Wouldn't Be a Common Workman, Would He?" Asked the Girl.

without hesitation or reserve, and both men felt deeply for her—"If I could just speak to him, if he would only—"

"I believe you can persuade him," said Winters.

"Yes, perhaps, but I want Shurtliff to speak first, then we can approach our friend himself with more confidence," said Rodney.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Brute Force or Finesse.

"What do you want me to say, Mr. Rodney?" asked Shurtliff, coming through the door, having caught Rodney's use of his name.

"Oh, Shurtliff—" began Rodney, somewhat embarrassed at having been overheard.

"What do you want me to speak about?" continued the old man suspiciously, not giving the younger man time to finish. "And what friend can you then approach, sir?"

"I'll tell you what I want," said Rodney.

He quickly came to a decision. Standing up and facing the old man, he staked everything on one bold throw. Grasping the situation, Helen Illingworth held her breath. Winters moved to take his own part in the game at the proper time.

"What is it, sir?" asked the secretary.

"Shut the door and come in," was the answer.

Rodney spoke sharply, and it was a sort of indication, characteristic of the difference in station between an independent young man and a subservient old man.

"Here I am, sir," answered Shurtliff, closing the door and standing before it.

He shot a quick glance at the young woman. He observed her tense position. He saw the emotions that filled her soul in her face and bearing. All his old suspicions rose like a flood. For a moment he no longer cared for her. He almost hated her. He looked from her to the dark-faced, determined Rodney, to big, powerful, quiet Winters. Was this a trap? Were they going to try to force him to speak? He was a brave man, old Shurtliff, but his heart beat a little faster as he faced them. He was quite master of himself, though, cool, watchful, determined; in their eyes rather admirable than otherwise.

"The time has come for you to tell us the truth," began Rodney emphatically. "You know that the whole blame and responsibility for the failure of the International bridge is loaded on the wrong man. You know that you permitted, and even made possible, the sacrifice of the reputation of the son for the sake of the fame of the father. You know that this girl here is breaking her heart, that Meade's life is ruined, and you're to blame. Now the time has come for you to speak. We know as well as you that young Meade is innocent. Here's our evidence."

He drew a handful of papers from his inside breast pocket and shook them in the face of the old man, who had shrunk back against the side of the door and stood staring, white-faced,

thin-lipped, close-mouthed, inexorably resolved still.

"Read them," continued Rodney. "I'll admit to you that the whole thing would not be worth the paper it's written on in a court of law, or even in a newspaper report, but it's convincing to us, and you can make it convincing to everybody. You've got to speak."

"Do you think, sir, that there's any power in your stretched-out arm, or in your rude voice or in your threatening gesture to make me speak?"

"By the Lord," exclaimed Winters, suddenly whipping out a Colt's .45 from the holster at his belt—he was dressed just as he had been when he rode away from the ranch—"out West we've got ways for persuading men to speak, and this is one of them."

Winters was a bigger man than Rodney. His life had been wild and rough, and his manner when he wanted was according. He would fain add physical compulsion under threat of death to Rodney's mental insistence.

"And do you think, sir, that I'm afraid of any lethal weapon you can produce or even use, any more than I am of Mr. Rodney's words?" The old man's eyes flashed, and his knees shook, but he had all the spirit of a soldier as he looked into Winters' stern face, full of threat and menace. His thin voice took on a certain quality of courage. It even rang a little. His courage was mainly moral, but there was some accompanying physical hardihood, that was undoubted. "You can beat me, you can even kill me, if you wish, but you can't make me say a word I don't want to say of my own free will," he cried out at last, his voice strangely rising.

"Gentlemen; gentlemen," said Helen Illingworth, rising and swiftly interposing between the secretary and the two angry men. She realized that the affair had gone far enough and that she must intervene. They had certainly failed lamentably, almost ludicrously. "You are wrong to threaten Mr. Shurtliff. He is old enough to be the father of either of you. Drop your arm, Mr. Rodney. Put up that pistol, Mr. Winters. Mr. Shurtliff," said the girl quickly, "as I am in a certain sense your hostess, and as you are in a certain sense my guest here, I apologize to you for the improper and impulsive conduct of these young men. They love Bertram Meade dearly, as I do. Let that be their excuse. Meanwhile, I will apologize to you here and now, I am sure."

There was a moment of silence. Rodney and Winters stared at each other, and both looked at the girl, confronting them so confidently in her superb and beautiful way. Winters smiled a little shamefacedly as he shoved his gun back into its holster. His had indeed been the greater offense.

"Mr. Winters, Mr. Rodney," said the girl insistently.

"Oh, I apologize. I suppose it was wrong to threaten him," said Rodney disgustedly.

"Hang it," said Winters, now utterly forgetful of conventions, "it wasn't the thing to do to draw a gun on a little old man, and I'm sorry I did it."

"And now that we've apologized you'll tell us the truth, won't you?" asked Rodney swiftly, with no appreciable change of manner.

"Yes, we beg it now, humbly," chimed in Winters, with anything but a humble air or voice.

"I won't have Mr. Shurtliff even appealed to now," said Miss Illingworth. "You have threatened him and you have apologized. Whether he forgives you or not is for him to decide, but he shall not be worried, or questioned, or insulted any more."

"Thank you, Miss Illingworth. I came for that book on the desk; your father wants it," said Shurtliff grimly, bowing slightly to her.

He stepped a little tremblingly—the scene had been unnerving—past the young men, picked up the book, bowed again formally and unmistakably to Miss Illingworth alone, and went out of the car. The honors of the encounter were certainly his.

"Well, Miss Illingworth," said Winters, "I don't know whether you made a mistake or not. I think I could have scared it out of him with this little persuader of mine—" He tapped the butt of the pistol.

"You couldn't have done it if you had killed him," said the woman, who had read the old secretary correctly. "He isn't what I call a daring man, but he has courage that would take him to the stake rather than make him give way, the courage of endurance rather than of action. When he speaks, if he ever does, it will be of his own free will."

"Or because you may persuade him," said Rodney. "By jove, when I think it over, it was the finest thing you ever did."

"Bert Meade's a lucky fellow," said Winters. "You're the kind of a girl that ought to marry out West, where we try to breed men that will match up."

Helen Illingworth laughed a little, although she felt no inclination to merriment.

"That's a fine compliment," she said. "Well, this has rather shaken me, and

I'm going to ask you gentlemen to excuse me."

"We'll see if he is working on the dam tomorrow."

"You will stay all night, Mr. Winters?"

"Your father invited me to take a bunk in his car, and, to be perfectly frank with you, I'd sleep out in the open rain rather than miss a chance of being in on the end of a game like this."

The girl bowed and left them.

"Dick," said Rodney slowly at last, as the two sat smoking together in the silence of complete understanding and good comradeship, which requires no expression in talk, "you're not the only man who thinks that girl would be a good wife to a man."

"Ah," said Winters, "sits the wind in that quarter, Rod?"

"Yes," answered the other, "but I'm fighting this thing through for Meade."

"Well, by George," said the big ranchman, "you're as good a man as Meade any day, fine fellow as he is. I wish I had some chance to get in this game and make myself worthy of the two of you, let alone the lady."

It was a rare confidence that Rodney had vouchsafed to his friend, and like every other Anglo-Saxon, having said his say, he did not wish to discuss it further.

"Do you know," he began, changing the subject abruptly, "I think things have turned out pretty well in spite of our foolishness a while ago. I believe if there's a spark of human gratitude in Shurtliff's heart, the girl's interposition when you and I were threatening him, and her refusal to allow him to be questioned later, will fan it into flame. And I have an idea that when he thinks it over he'll be about ready to tell."

"Are you sure he has anything to tell?"

"Certain."

"Well, I guess you're right. It sort of consoles me for having drawn my gun, without using it, too. And if he tells in the morning and we find Meade, everything will be lovely."

"For everybody but me," said Rodney.

"I'll tell you what, old man, when this thing's over, you're coming out to spend the rest of the winter with me on the ranch. It's the greatest place on earth for a man to buck up. There's no woman within fifty miles."

Rodney laughed a little grimly. "I'll go you," he said.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Battle From Above.

The rain had stopped by morning, to the great relief of Colonel Illingworth, Severance and Curtiss, and the satisfaction of Helen. There was little sun to dry the big, red sandstone mesa, its sides seamed into fantastic shapes, which rose grandly between the valley of the Pickett Wire and the ravine of the Kicking Horse, and which the young woman intended to cross in her walk toward the dam with Rodney and Winters. The sliding near the steel-arch bridge was close to the rock wall of the ravine, which here had been so scoured out of the rocky side of the mesa by torrents of other days that it could fairly be called a gorge. Consequently the bank of clouds above the horizon to the northwest was hid behind the big butte from the occupants of the two private cars. Although the day did not promise to be fair, they



"Out West We've Got Ways for Persuading Men to Speak."

had no idea of the further threat of storm pressed by the black masses to the northwest.

In sandy, porous soils, such as here prevailed, the rain is absorbed quickly. They could traverse the trails carpeted with the needles of centuries that ran through the dripping pines, without getting muddy, and with nothing more to fear than a wetting. Colonel Illingworth, Severance and Curtiss announced their intention of going back to the town to continue their consultations and observations concerning the

progress of work on the bridge. Shurtliff, who went about his business gravely reserved, frigidly cold and self-contained, had work to do at his desk. The woman and the two young men were for the dam.

After an early breakfast, therefore, the second car was uncoupled, and the engine backed it down around the mesa toward the viaduct twenty miles below. Rodney and Winters prepared to go with Miss Illingworth across the wooded island, with its cresting of stone, so to speak, that lay between the ravine and the valley. The conductor of the train, a local employee of the railroad, told them that the shortest way was directly over the mesa. The sandstone of which this huge mound was mainly composed had been broken and disintegrated on all sides by centuries of erosion and weathering, and there were practicable ascents and descents at both ends. The nearest ascent was at the side of the big tableland directly opposite which the car was placed.

The trails through the pines which covered the hill up to the very foot of the big butte were unfrequented and in bad repair, but practicable if the traveler was prepared for a wetting. The shortest and on the whole the easiest way to the dam would be to make their way to the foot of the mesa, climb it through the big ravine and cross it to the lower end, less than two miles away, where there was an easy descent to the dam.

"And if you get caught in the rain," said the conductor, "which ain't likely, for it's already rained more in the last twenty-four hours than in the last twenty-four years, it seems to me, there's a but, half stone and half timber, up on the mesa that campers sometimes make use of when they want to see the sun rise, which is a mighty fine sight from there. It was in pretty fair shape when I visited it last year, and you can find shelter there. It's at the highest point on the mesa. You can see a long way up the gulch there, and a longer way down and up the Pickett Wire valley. Above the dam it would show a level, fertile stretch between the hills, but it's all a lake now."

Shurtliff, of course, declined Miss Illingworth's invitation to accompany the party on plea of urgent duties and important papers to prepare. He had spoken no words to Rodney or Winters, and those gentlemen made no effort to engage him in conversation. They were, in truth, a little ashamed of their actions of the night before. They were exceedingly anxious as to whether their theories as to the possible effect of Miss Illingworth's action would be justified, so they carefully avoided the secretary, letting the heaven work if it would. To their disappointment, it gave no sign of life or action.

Of the four most interested in Meade, Winters was the only one who had slept soundly that night. Rodney was too much in love with the woman ever to sleep soundly again, he thought—certainly not until her future had been settled and her relations to Meade finally determined. Shurtliff's feelings were painful in the extreme. Torn between the old habit of affection for the dead, his new habit of affection for the woman, his oft-recurring compunction of conscience, his immediate resentment of the treatment of the two men, his acknowledgment of the splendid action of the woman, his suspicions, his uncertainty, as to how the younger Meade would take it if he told the truth, he slept not at all.

Into Helen Illingworth's mind also had come, although, to her credit be it said, not until she had retired and had thought over her action in the light of the hints given, that perhaps her generous interposition in behalf of Shurtliff might move his gratitude and that he might at last vouchsafe her the help which she felt more certain than ever he alone could give. She was glad when the thought came to her that she could look herself squarely in the face and declare to her conscience that it had not been back of her action, which had been purely spontaneous.

The possibility, although a faint one, that Meade might be working on the dam and that she might see him on the morrow would have sufficed to give her a wakeful night. Rodney was a more careful observer than Winters, but even the cattleman noticed that she looked worn and strained as he helped her out of the car for their tramp across the mesa to the dam.

"You know," he said, with rough-and-ready sympathy, "we haven't the least assurance that Meade is there. It's only a chance, and probably a long one."

"I shall never rest until it is decided absolutely one way or the other," said the woman.

"Well, I'm not much of a walker," said the cattleman. "I generally prefer to get over the ground astride of a broncho, but I guess I can keep up with the party for two miles, if that's the distance."

It was dark and damp and wet under the pines. Although the two men cleared the way for her, holding branches back and shaking the water off the drooping boughs, it was well

Helen was protected from the wet. She had tramped hills and mountains many a time, camp and forest were familiar to her. She wore a short-skirted dress, stout boots and leggings, and a yellow western slicker.

The exertion of the upward climb, stumbling over broken branches and uprooted logs and floundering through boggy places on the trail, brought a touch of color to her face, and though damp, the air sweet and fragrant, clean and pure, refreshed and pleased her greatly; the men, too. It was a hard pull, and she was out of breath when she reached the broken coulee, or ravine, which led to the top of the big red sandstone plateau.

"I'm terribly out of practice," she said to the two men, "but I don't believe I'm in any worse state than you are, Mr. Winters."

"I told you I wasn't any good on foot," said Winters, who was blowing like a grampus.

Rodney laughed at the two of them. "Look at me," he said. "I'm as fresh as when I began."

"Well, you're used to walking," returned Winters. "It's this plugging along this broken trail that has knocked us out. The rich, they ride on—bronchos, you know."

"When we get on top of the mesa we will find it easier going," said Rodney encouragingly.

"Let us start," said the girl, suddenly serious, as she thought what might be at the end of the journey.

"Before we go any farther," said Winters, staring up the ravine at the sky which showed about it, "just take a look at that."

He pointed to the black clouds rapidly rising, apparently against the wind, which swayed rather violently the tops of the tallest pines, although they were protected and in comparative quiet where they stood in the ravine.

"It looks as if there were more rain there," said Rodney.

"It's incredible," answered Winters, "after what we've had."

"But it certainly is coming down again, and if I'm any judge, it will be another cloudburst."

"Perhaps we'd better go back," suggested Winters to Miss Illingworth.

"Go back!" exclaimed the girl. "When I'm as near as this?"

"But it's only a possibility, you know."

"Possibility or not, it would take a deluge in my path to stop me. Come."

It was an entirely practicable climb, but rather a hard one on the wet, crumbling rocks. It did not take the three young people long to surmount the difficulties, however, and after a few minutes they stood on top of the mesa.

Near at hand was the hut of which the conductor had spoken. It stood upon a little rise above the general level, and from it one could see far in every direction. Between the hills and over the lower crest of Baldwin's knob they could even see dimly the far-off plains, a little sickly yellow light still lingering there before the advance of the storm.

The hut was made of stone and logs. They had not any more than reached it before the storm began. Claps of thunder, flashes of lightning under which the army on the dam were fighting, were heard and seen with tenfold clearness by the little group on the huge upland.

It was a sight to awe the very soul of humanity. Miles and miles down the mountain side and among the hills the whirling battalions of clouds rolled and tumbled and tossed and clashed like aerial armies. The lightning, while it was not in sheets, was practically continuous, flash succeeding flash in uncountable and blinding succession. Again they noticed the strange coruscating, bursting effect as bolt after bolt apparently struck some granite ledge and was then thrown back in splinters of fire. The heavy, awful roll of the thunder was continuous and terrific.

They stood staring through door and windows in silence, Meade and their quest forgot in the appalling tempest by all except the woman. It was she who recalled them.

"Let us hasten on," she said, and she had almost to scream to make herself heard in the wild tumult. "It's magnificent, wonderful, but—"

As a matter of fact, all the manifestations of nature at its grandest would not have sufficed to turn her head away from her lover's face if she could have seen him.

"You can't go now," said Winters decisively, "the rain's bad enough as it is, and that cloud will burst in a minute. Old Noah's flood won't be a circumstance to it."

"I'm protected from the rain," she answered.

Winters shook his head.

The weight of it would almost beat you down, Miss Illingworth."

"I haven't had any experience with it, but I think Winters is right," said Rodney.

"I'll go on alone, then," said the girl passionately, stepping out of the house, "if you gentlemen don't care to come."

The next moment, with a culminating scream like the shriek of all the lost souls of creation heard above the furious detonating roar of the thunder, the wind added its quota to the demonstration of natural force, and now the rain fairly dropped upon them in apparently solid sheets. Of course clouds do not burst. Such a thing is scientifically and meteorologically impossible, but anyone who has ever experienced the suddenness and fury and weight of a western deluge in a normally dry land will understand the term. The wind swept over the plateau, where it had free course like a hurricane; the rain came down in masses apparently. Until their eyes became accustomed to it, the falling water blotted out the landscape.

The woman was hurled against the side of the house by the sudden and violent assault of the hurricane. The two men half dragged, half carried her around to the lee side of the cabin. The roof of the hut had given way here and there, and within it was soon flooded. Where they stood, however, by chance happened to be the solid part of the overhang of the roof, and they were in some degree protected, that is, from the direct violence of the downpour. They were, of course, drenched in a few minutes in spite of their raincoats. With one man on either side of her to give her as much protection as possible, the woman leaned against the stone wall and stared through the rain down the valley, seeking to see the dam, perhaps a mile and a half away. Of course the maximum of the downpour could not last any more than the maximum of the gale, but the deluge was succeeded by a heavy, driving rain still swept on by a strong wind.

Below the mesa the lake was whipped into foam by the beat of the rain and rolled into waves by the assault of the wind. All three of them knew what this deluge portended. The downpour would raise the level of the lake so that it would overflow the dam, which would be swept away, the valley would be inundated by a flood like a tidal wave, the incomplete viaduct would be ruined, the town would be overwhelmed, the loss of life and property would be appalling.

"The spillway ought to take it," shouted Winters, knowing what was



Staring Down at the Dam Helen Illingworth Took the Glass From Rodney.

in the minds of the other two by what was in his own.

"It's not finished," roared Rodney. Winters threw up his hands.

"Will the dam hold it?" cried the woman, understanding.

"Until the water rises above it. Just as soon as it begins to wash over, it will go, and the quicker for these waves," answered Rodney at the top of his voice.

"And the bridge and the town," screamed the woman.

"They, too?"

"And father?"

"He'll be all right; they've had warning. The engineers on the dam must know the danger now. They're working like mad."

He had brought a small six-power fieldglass with him and he was straining his eyes through it. The violence of rain and wind had sensibly abated, although it was still coming down in torrents. With his knowledge of what would probably be attempted, Rodney was able to see through his glass something of what was being done, even at that distance.

"They're building palisades on top of the dam, and backing it with an earth mound. See, they are dropping sandbags over," he stated, handing the glass to the other man.

"By heaven," shouted Winters, "they're making a magnificent fight."

In his excitement he left the shelter of the hut and stalked through the rain toward the edge of the mesa, where he could have a better and nearer view. In spite of Rodney's remonstrances, even though backed by his outstretched arm, the woman followed. Presently all three, indifferent to the beat of the rain and the assault of the wind, stood watching the battle on the dam. It was abating still more, fortunately, or else they could scarcely have sustained the attack of that wind and rain, nor could they have seen at all, even with that glass.

Staring down at the dam after a moment, Helen Illingworth took the glass from Rodney. She focused it rapidly and looked steadily through it. She knew what she was seeking as she stood steadying herself with splendid nerve and resolution and swept the length of the dam back and forth.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)