

WEB OF STEEL

By CYRUS TOWNSEND BRADY FATHER AND SON

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

"I don't see him. He's not there," she said at last, handing the glass back to its owner.

"If he were there, you'd see him all right," said Winters enthusiastically, "because he'd be in the thick of the fight."

"I doubt if you can recognize anyone, even through the glass, at such a distance," said Rodney, after he had focused it and taken a look himself. "Yet if he were there, he certainly would be in the thick of it. He's that kind. You look, Dick."

"I can't see him," said Winters in turn. "But what a fight they are making to save that dam."

"Will it hold?" asked the woman. "Impossible," said Rodney.

"I give it one hour," said Winters, handing over the glass.

"Not more than that," assented the other, after another look. "See for yourself, Miss Illingworth."

From where they stood, high up on the roof of the world, they were spectators of a great battle, witnesses of a terrible contest, in which herculean effort, desperate courage, human will, all exerted to the limit, finally degenerated into blind, mechanical habit of continuous and frenzied endeavor.

The spirit of reckless continuance had got into them and moved them to the impossible. As men in a battle charge go on even with wounds enough to kill them in ordinary circumstances, as soldiers at Winchester, though shot in the heart, actually struggled after Sheridan until they fell, or even as a common horse may so be imbued with blind intensity of determination that he gallops on until he drops dead, so these men gave their all in unmatchable persistence.

"They'd better get off that dam," said Rodney. "When it once falls it'll go with a rush and then it'll be too late."

"Look at them. They're not going to get off," said Winters. "They're going down with it. Fools, God bless 'em!" he shouted, throwing up his arms in exultation over manhood and courage and determination.

"Perhaps you had better go back, Miss Illingworth," said Rodney, thinking of the horror she might witness at any moment.

"I wouldn't be elsewhere for the world," said the brave girl, white but with firm lips—she was made of the same stuff as the fighting men, it seemed—even if he were there, fighting that great battle, I should wait to see the end."

"We're not the only people in this wilderness. Look yonder!" cried Winters.

He pointed down through the ceaseless rain toward the lower edge of the mesa. There, far below him, were three sodden figures. The water in the lake had flooded the slope of the hill, and on that side it was lapping the base of the cliff. The trail had, of course, been covered, and there was no way of progress except by taking advantage of the broken rock at the foot of the cliff, which here and there still stood above the water. It was a place where men could only pass by carefully choosing their way and calculating the distance of the next point toward which to leap. These three were moving like madmen, splashing through the water, hurling themselves from rock to rock, falling against the wall, clutching a tree or shrub, slipping into the lake, saving themselves from drowning apparently only by the caprice of complacent fortune, which they were trying to the utmost limit.

One man carried a miner's pick, a spade and a surveyor's range pole, the other another spade and two long stakes which looked like the separate legs of a tripod. The bareheaded man, who had thrown his rubber coat down in the reddish-yellow water, carried a good-sized oilskin bag. He was the most hurried of the three. He ran some distance in front of the others. They noticed how carefully he sought to protect the bag. When he slipped or seemed about to fall, he always thrust it frantically away from the rock with outstretched arm.

What the three men would be at of course no one knew. It was obvious that they were in a desperate hurry and that the thing in the bag must be carefully carried. Naturally the watchers connected the men with the dam builders. They were dressed as the men engaged in such labor would be dressed. The pick, the spades and the pole and stakes bore out that conclusion.

"What's in the bag?" asked the woman.

"He carries it as though it might be gold or diamonds," said Winters. Rodney shook his head. Suddenly he divined the reason for the extreme care with which the bag was carried. The men were immediately below the three watchers now. He could make out pretty well what was the size and shape of the objects that bulged the waterproof bag.

"I have it," he shouted. "Dynamite!" "What for?"

Rodney shook his head again. The man in front was in plain view. He was a tall figure, his face was heavily

bearded. From the angle at which they saw him it was impossible to recognize him, nor was he in his frantic progress assuming the usual attitude and bearing of a man under ordinary conditions which sometimes betray him to those who know him well. Nor could Helen Illingworth with her trembling hands focus the glass, which she took from Rodney before the struggling adventurers had passed; and yet there was something in the figure below that made her heart beat faster.

She pressed her hand to the wet garments over her heart and stared. Suddenly Rodney raised his voice and shouted at the very top of it. Winters joined in, and even Helen Illingworth found herself screaming. The three men below were not more than five or six hundred feet away, but evidently they could not possibly hear in that tumult of nature. No voices would carry through any such rain and wind. They were too intent on their paths and on what they had to do to look upward. They rounded the shoulder of the mesa and disappeared in the pines at its feet.

The three on the top looked at each other.

"The dam still holds," said Rodney, quite unsuspecting what was in the woman's heart.

Even as he spoke, Helen Illingworth turned away. She ran heavily in her sodden garments along the broken mesa top past the house to the upper edge. There below her were the three men just emerging from the fringe of trees. Rounding the end of the mesa, they had at last struck firmer ground. Helen Illingworth could see them through the pines on the old trail. The going was bad enough, but it was nothing compared to what they had passed over and presently they burst out of the woods and ran along the grassy, well-rounded hogback that divided the valley from the ravine.

The woman had no idea what was toward, what was their purpose. She could only stare and stare at the rapidly moving far-off figure indomitably in the lead, and the others following after. There Winters joined her.

"Rodney sent me to look after you; he feels that he must stay back and watch the dam for his paper."

"Look," said Helen, pointing far down. The men halted at the very narrowest part of the hogback. They were clustered together. The bag lay on the ground behind them. One man bent over it, evidently opening it. Another man swung the shovel viciously, the third grabbed the pick. Winters had been too far removed from engineering even yet to figure out what was toward. They could only watch and wonder.

CHAPTER XX.

The Victors.

Meade knew that they were fighting a losing battle. Every one of the higher grade men knew it also. The spillway was entirely inadequate, but it suddenly flashed into his mind, with that consciousness of the hopelessness of the struggle, that perhaps there was another way to discharge the flood. The same idea might have come to any other of the more intelligent of the men from Vandeventer down if they had taken a moment for reflection. If they had not been so frantically, so frightfully engrossed in their present puny but gallant efforts to save the dam, they certainly would have remembered. That the possibility came to Meade rather than to any of the others was perhaps due to the fact that he had noted the situation later and had studied the conditions more recently. Those solitary rambles of his, those careful inspections of the terrain of the valley, had been made long after the original surveys and the results of his observations were still fresh in his mind.

The water was rising so rapidly since the cloudburst and he saw the inevitableness of the failure so clearly that he did not dare to waste time to look up Vandeventer, tell him his plan, and get his permission. Every second was of the utmost value. When the thought came, he acted instantly. He was in the position of the commander of a small force to whom is suddenly presented the bare possibility of wresting victory from defeat by some splendidly daring and unforeseen undertaking. And he was the man to seize such a possibility and make the most of it.

He had endeared himself to some of the men and the respect in which he was held by Vandeventer was shared by the others. When he called two of the most capable of the workmen, a big, burly Irishman and a stout little Italian, to follow him, they did it without a moment's hesitation.

"The rest of you keep on here," he shouted as he left the gang. "Murphy and Funaro, come with me. Keep it up; I think I know a way to help," he yelled back through the rain as he scrambled off the dam up the rocks to the spillway. It was not his fault that they could not hear and could not understand.

The water was rushing through the spillway about knee deep, and the three men plunging forward through

it had difficulty in keeping their footing on the broken, rocky bottom. When they reached the other side, Meade shouted above the storm:

"Murphy, bring your pick and shovel; take that iron range-pole, too. Here, Funaro, you take your shovel and these."

As he spoke he ran into the office shack and wrecked a transit tripod, ruthlessly separating the legs from one another by main force and pitching two of them into the little Italian's outstretched arms.

Without a question, both men complied with his directions. In a huge crevice, almost a small cave, in the spur of the mesa which overhung the east end of the dam the explosives were stored. The dynamite was kept in oilskin bags, the detonating caps in waterproof boxes. There were sixteen sticks or cartridges in each bag. Each stick was an inch and a half in diameter and eight inches long. One bagful should be ample. Indeed, if that did not do the work, the attempt would fail.

The men waited while Meade selected a bag of dynamite, a box of detonators, and a package of fuses. It was a cardinal rule that dynamite cartridges and detonating caps should never be carried by the same person, because the combination so greatly increased the risk of premature explosion. The fulminate of mercury in the detonators was very volatile, highly explosive and immensely destructive, considering its size. One such cap could blow off a man's hand, or even his head, and in its explosion might detonate the dynamite. Hence the separation when being carried.

Meade decided to take that risk. He knew how perilous was the undertaking, how liable he was in his hurry to fall against the rocks, slippery and half submerged in that pouring rain. He knew what the consequences of such a fall would be. He would center all risks in himself. He thrust the box of detonators in his pocket, the package of fuses inside his fannel shirt, and carried the dynamite bag in his hand. He would need his free hand to protect himself, so all the tools were carried by the other men.

The little Italian shook his head as he noted these preparations. He happened to be one of the explosive force, those whose duty it was to do the blasting. In his practical way he knew a great deal about the properties and possibilities of usefulness of the dynamite. Meade's purpose was obvious, even to Murphy, who was only a laborer, though where he proposed to work neither man had any idea at all.

"Dynamite no work in sis weather," said Funaro impressively.

"Probably not," answered Meade, hurrying his preparations, "but it's our only chance."

"Give me se caps," urged the Italian gallantly.

"No, I'll take both."

"It ees danger."

"Yes, but come on."

Meade, wasting no more words, sprang at what was left of the trail, and the two men gallantly followed him. The hogback at which he was aiming was perhaps a little more than two miles from the dam. On the ordinary trail and prepared for the run, he could have managed it in fifteen

minutes; as it was, they made it in thirty. The extreme possibility of the life of the dam seemed to Meade not much greater. He went in the lead, and by his direction the others kept some distance behind him.

"If I fall and explode this dynamite, there's no need of all three of us being blown up," he had said, and it was no reflection on their courage that they complied with his direction.

Indeed a stern command was necessary to keep the two men back. They had caught something of the gallant spirit of the engineer, and the big Irishman and the little Italian were as eager as he. Helped by a few hasty

words as they ran, they had both of them learned what he would be at. They both realized that they were the forlorn hope, that if they could not save the dam nobody and nothing could. And there was a trace of the age-long rivalry between the Celt and the Roman. The scion of the legionary and the son of the barbarian who had fought together in the dawn of history vied with each other then. Again and again Meade had to order them back. He was keenly sensible of his danger. He knew that if he fell, if the dynamite struck the ground violently, it might explode. He knew that the unstable fulminate of mercury in the detonators might go off at any time—perhaps that was the greater danger—but he never checked his pace or hesitated in a leap or sought an easy way for a second. His soul was rising and his heart was beating as they had never risen or beaten in his life. And the hearts of his men beat with his own.

He knew, of course, if the dam went out the railroad, the bridge, the town, the citizens, the women and children, and everything and everybody would go. If he could save them, his act might be set off against the loss of the International. But whether that were true or not, whatever the consequences to him, he was bound to save them. The weight of every man, the weight of every woman, the weight of every child in the valley, the weight of all the business enterprises of the town, the weight of the great viaduct of steel, the weight of the huge dam itself, was on his shoulders as he ran. He carried the burden lightly, as Atlas might have upborne the world with laughter. For, despite his determination and haste, he had in his heart the great joy that comes when men attempt grandly and dare greatly for their fellow-men. If he could only by and by see his hopes justified by success, his happiness would be complete.

And there were thoughts personal as well as general. If he died, whether successful or not, men would tell about his endeavor. She would hear. It came to him afterward, when he learned how she had looked down upon him as he ran, that he had somehow felt her presence, not a presence impelling him to look up, but a presence driving him on. He lost his hat, he tore off his long coat and threw it aside as he plunged on with his precious bag in his hand. He did not dare to look at his watch, he did not stop for anything, but it seemed that he must have spent hours in that mad scramble over the water-covered rocks. He heaved a deep breath of relief when he rounded the mesa and struck the trail. Bad as was the going, it was nothing to what they had passed over.

Presently he broke out into the open slope and there before him was the rounded curve of the hogback, to gain which he had risked so much. Were they in time? Yes, the water in the lake was not flowing, it was only rising. Evidently the dam still held. He ran along it till he reached the narrowest part of it, twenty feet wide between water-covered valley and sharply descending ravine. The shortest separation between Picket Wire and the Kicking Horse! The water in the lake was within three feet of the crest. The rain was coming down steadily. He could realize by the water level where he stood that it must be lapping the top of the dam now, or a little above it. He had five minutes—ten at most. He was still in time. The thoughts came to him as he ran. And as he saw the place again he made his instant plan.

He laid the dynamite down just as Murphy and Funaro reached him and stood panting, their heavy breathing, the sweat mingling with the rain in their wet faces, evidencing their exhaustion. From Murphy, who had been the faster, Meade took the two tripod legs, stout oak staves about an inch and a half thick, with sharp metal points. He jammed them down into the ground about five feet from the edge of the Kicking Horse ravine and about fifteen feet apart.

"Holes, there," he shouted, "deep enough for five cartridges."

Funaro nodded. He knew exactly what to do. Murphy had often seen the explosive gang at work. He was quick-witted and he had only to follow the Italian's actions. The work was simple. Seizing their spades, the two men cut into the sod, using the pick to dislodge small bowlders and break up the earth. The soil was light and porous, and it had been well soaked by the rain. After they had made an excavation about two feet deep, they laid aside their shovels, and with the iron range pole as a starter and the bigger tripod stakes to follow, they made two deep holes in the ground, forcing the pole and then the stake into the earth, which the continuing rain tended to soften more and more. They made these holes about four feet deep below the excavation, driving in and twisting and churning the stakes by main strength.

They could by no means have accomplished this save for the softening assistance of the rain and the furious energy they applied. They had been

working since four in the morning at the dam, they had made that difficult run at headlong speed, yet they labored like men possessed. They even wasted breath to call challengingly and provokingly and to set forth their progress each to the other. In almost less time than it takes to tell it, they had completed the holes and so informed the engineer triumphantly.

Meade, as usual, had reserved to himself the more dangerous, if less arduous task. Covering himself with big Murphy's discarded slicker, which fell over him like a shelter tent as he knelt down, he opened the box of detonators, selected one, and attached the fuse in position carefully. Then he unfolded the paper about one of the cartridges and placed the detonator, wrapping the paper around it thereafter. He prepared two cartridges this way with the greatest care.

The men rapidly but carefully cut slits in the covering of the cartridges, and lowered four cartridges down each hole, forcing them gently into place with the butt ends of the tripod stakes and compressing them so that they filled the holes completely. Then Meade placed his two prepared sticks with the detonators on top of the other four. He cut the fuse to the proper length in each case, and, keeping it

carefully covered with the raincoat, he held it while the others filled in the holes and the excavations and carefully tamped down the earth. All that remained was the lighting of the fuse. And then? Would the dynamite go off? With fuses it was uncertain in its action at best, and although these fuses were supposed to be so prepared as to be independent of weather conditions, more often than not rain spoiled a blast. If this blast failed it was good-by dam—good-by everything.

Meade drew out from the pocket of his flannel shirt a box of matches. He had to light the farther cartridge fuse, then run fifteen feet and light the nearer one, and then make his escape. He had made the nearer fuse a little shorter so as to secure a simultaneous explosion if possible.

Tony Funaro now interposed gallantly.

"Giva me da light," he demanded, extending his hand.

"G'wan wid ye," shouted the big Irishman eagerly; "lemme do it, sor."

"Stand back, both of you," cried Meade, succeeding after some trouble in striking a match.

He had cut off a shorter length of fuse for a torch, the better to carry the fire from one blast to another. As it sputtered into flame, he touched the first fuse, then the second, and turned and ran for his life after Murphy and Funaro. They had just got a safe distance away when with a muffled roar the two blasts went off nearly together. When they ran back they saw that two-thirds of the hillock on that side of the ravine had gone. A wall of earth through which water was already trickling rose between the great gap they had blown out and the lake, the upper level of which was much higher than the bottom of the great crater they had opened.

"Hurrah!" yelled Meade, the others joining in his triumphant shout. "Now, another hole right there," he pointed to the foot of the bank. "Drive it in slanting and it will do the job."

"Will the dam be after holdin' yit, sor?" asked Mike Murphy, seizing his pick.

"I hope so, but, for God's sake, hurry."

With two men working, the last hole was completed before Meade was ready. Funaro, indeed, came to his assistance in preparing the cartridge. Presently all was completed. Reflecting the pleas of both men, Meade struck the match, and this time, since there was but one blast to be fired, he touched it directly to the fuse and waited a second to see that it had caught and ran as before.

At a safe distance they drew back and waited. Nothing happened. A few seconds dragged on. They saw no sign of life in the fuse, no light. In spite of the care they had taken, it had got wet. It would not work. The precious moments were flying. They stared agonizingly at the fuse through the rain.

"I'll have to take a look at it," said Meade desperately.

Funaro and Murphy caught him by the arms. They all knew the tremendous risk in a nearer approach. The fuse might be alight still. At any second the flame might flash to the detonator and then—Yet Meade had to go. That charge had to be exploded if he detonated it by hand, he thought desperately, and he had not come so far and worked so hard to fall now.

"Hold it, men, hold it; for God's sake, hold it," shouted Vandeventer, rising from his crouching position against the palisade to resume it instantly he had spoken. "Keep it up. If it goes down, let's go down with it. Hang on—hang on! We'll hold it. We aren't beat yet."

Broken words, oaths, protestations, curses, cheers, expletives in strange languages from the polyglot mob of men burst forth. Even cowards had been turned into heroes because they had fought by the side of men. Here and there a man not weaker physically, perhaps, but less resolute, less spiritually consecrated, less divinely obsessed, dropped out of the rank that pitted itself in furious, futile, but sublime fury against the wavering wall. Some of them fell backward and lay still. Some had fainted and some of them were half dead. A few here and there sank down on the trampled, muddy embankment and buried their heads in their hands, sobbing hysterically. But most still blind, mad, sublime, held on. And the palisade did not fall. It did not bend back any further.

The throbs that told of the tremendous pressure of the waves, the quiver that experience could feel the prelude to failure, began to die away, to stop. What did it mean? The thunder grew still, the rain diminished, it ceased, the clouds broke. Some great hand, as of God, swiftly tore the black vault of the heavens apart. Faint light began to glow over the sodden land. Through the rift they saw dimly one great peak of mighty range. What had happened?

"Here," said Vandeventer.

How white he looked, how haggard, streaks of gray in his black hair that had not been there before, but his eyes were blazing. He was still the indomitable chief of the Spartan band. The nearest men gave him a hand. He clambered up to his former vantage point on top of the highest log of the stockade and stared down. The rise of the water had stopped! He could not believe it, yet it was true. The rain had ceased again, but by every natural law the drainage from the hills would continue for some time in full volume. Yes, by all rights the dam was doomed. The water still trickled through the palisade in many small streams. That had been a gallant effort they had made, even if a vain one.

For ten minutes he stood silent, exhausted. Then he saw. The water was not rising. No, it was falling; only a trifle, but enough. Presently it had stopped filtering through the retentment. He looked back. Not a drop ran on the other side of the palisade. Vandeventer knew that the water must be discharging somewhere. The lake must have broken through somewhere. He only needed that hint to recall the hogback, and then Meade. He saw it all now.

"We've won, the dam's saved," he cried greatly to the men who stood back of the palisade staring at him. "Roberts has blown up the hogback. The water's falling. See for yourselves."

Every man sprang up the palisade. Someone laughed and then someone raised a cheer, and those mud-covered, sodden, worn-out men, who had been about to die, saluted in heroic acclaim him who had led them to victory and by implication him who had made that triumph possible.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



He Was as One Dead.



His Soul Was Rising and His Heart Was Beating—

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"Don't go," cried Murphy. "It ees danger," shouted Funaro. But Meade shook them off and bade them keep back. What was his danger compared to the issue involved? That last charge had to be exploded. He stepped quickly toward it, and as he did so he threw his eyes up toward the gray, rain-filled heaven in one last appeal.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)