The Spider's Web

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By S. Ten Eyck Bourke

Jim Halpern would have refused the contract to build the big Burmese bridge for Contractor Rounds after he found Tom Stone was to go out with him as constructing engineer if he hadn't wanted to make good with Nora Rounds, and, being essentially a man's man, undertook to do it by making good with her father.

Contractor Rounds himself, knowing both men had an eye on pretty Nora, took it none too seriously when Halpern pointed out that while the Trans-Asian railroad had ordered the bridge flung across the half-mile gorge in far-off Burma with a lavish disregard of cost no man could refuse, they wanted it built in a minimum of time that presented enough difficulties to satisfy any ordinary bridge builder without adding to them by signing on a man of Stone's quick, unruly spirit and jealous temper.

"He's a capable civil engineer, if it wasn't for his black temper with any one over him," Halpern said. "A bridge builder hasn't a chance unless he's a sort of uncrowned king with absolute authority over all his men. I'll have trouble enough dodging that spider's web of forfeitures for delay the Trans-Asian has tied us up with, without him to foment discord among the superstitious Burmese natives. I'll have to depend on to fill up the scant crew of American bridgemen you're allotting me, Mr. Rounds."

"You know I haven't the money to pay for breaking Stone's contract, Halpern," he said. "I'm in a financial hole that will swamp me unless you make good on that bridge; it's make or break for me on that, son."

Halpern was under no illusion as to the difficulties he would face in flinging the gossamer steel structure of the mammoth bridge across the tropic gorge, with its towers set to defy the terrific winds of the monsoon on mighty caissons sunk in the river that swirled 800 feet below it. But he knew Rounds could not find another dependable engineer to take the contract, as he had, on the contingency of a partnership if he made good; besides he was serving his own personal interest—a very big interest—with little Nora, when he said shortly, as Rounds knew he would:

"I'm sticking, of course, Mr. Rounds!" and went on his way halt around the world to make good before he asked for the girl he wanted.

A week of exasperated effort in the distant Burmese seaport—a week of precious time he could ill afford to lose—acquainted in rounding up reluctant native laborers and riveters to rustle their equipment inland, and fill out his crew of workmen, served to swamp his distrust in Stone in more immediate worries, chief among them being the necessity of taking on an Eurasian, as interpreter for his Burmese after he had failed to unearth a native who could fill the post.

"It's Hobson's choice Halpern told his assistants. "I can't waste any more time. But I'm slated for trouble with him; that drop of white blood knocks the native stand-up fight out of them, and they hate a white man because the black blood keeps them cringing, so they lay for him in the dark. Keep an eye on him Stone."

Stone eyes him abliquely, with the smoldering thought that if Halpern failed he might still get his chance with Pretty Nora, in spite of her emphatic "No" she had sent him off with. Halpern, the chief he was expected to back loyally in this far-off wilderness, being as he shrewdly surmised, the one who stood between him and the girl, he wouldn't grieve if the gigantic enterprise that had already set the Burmese valley resonding to the clangor of steel and the blows of hammer on her hot metal, came to naught, in spite of Rounds' vital dependence on its success. Not if it meant his rival's undoing.

Halpern was bending every energy to the work, driving his men as they put the tangle of beams and rods, of trusses and braces together, with the traveler, the huge derrick, diligently swinging its long arm over them, as tirelessly as he had concentrated on the estimates that had given him the thickness of every bolt, the exact effect of wind and vibration, of the expansion of heat and cold on every rod, till he knew just where to use a rigid steel and where a steel so flexible he could almost tie it in a bow-knot.

The slender structure had won its way well into space, supporting itself on its own web like a spider, and they were starting to sink the fourth caisson, when Stone went down to the little Burmese seaport with some of the Burmese laborers, and the Eurasian, Sarka Dass, for a shipment of supplies Rounds was sending out from the States. He came back in a sullen humor that should have warned Halpern there was trouble afoot.

But Halpern, who had picked up a smattering of Burmese by now, was occupied with certain mutterings he had heard among his men. He only glared when Stone tossed over the mail with an insolent:

"A lady's handwriting, Halpern!"

Stuffing the epvelope with Nora's writing on it in his pocket, and leaving the rest on the table in his tent, he strode off to the bridge where the Eurasian was working in the noon glare, near the lip of the gorge.

"It is these 'bends' which you say is a twisty, crampy disease that comes in time to all compressed-air workers, sarr," the Eurasian said. "Since two of their number have suffered the men are saying the airlock is a jinjinnee of the air, and this sicness is a manifestation of his displeasure because you are building this bridge to block the open space of the gorge."

As he spoke a ragged, bent form flashed suddenly into view on the bank as if the earth had erupted him, weaving in a fantastic dance to the weird chromatic notes of the chant he intoned. Sarka Dass' face blanched; he lifted a warning finger to his lips.

"Better you pay him, sarr, before the Burmese hear," he said. "That is the Song of the Spider's to which he likens your bridge. The natives will not work if they know the spider's web is their omen of doom."

"I'll thrust the damned fakir in his own rags in one of the tenths," Halpern began.

"Oh, sarr he is holy man!"

The Eurasion's shaking voice arrested Halpern. Involuntarily he ganced out over the gorge to where the rest of the men were working on the fourth caisson. Already the great box rested on the river bottom, with the Burmese digging in the watery mud beneath its iron shod edges, while the American bridgemen supervised the excavation from above to make sure that they were even all around so that the top-heavy structure would not overbalance when the men were sent down into the air chamber.

With its steel cords and slender beams, the huge steel span was indeed not unlike a huge spider web, and the men poised high in the air on the swinging beams were the flies caught in its meshes that the ragged fakir on the bank was singing about. Halpern could use caution where there was need; he thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Be rid of him, Sarka Das," he ordered.

Halpern could have sworn his Burmese workmen had seen and heard nothing of the trouble-maker, and he gave Salka Dass no chance to betray his presence and the singing of the dire Song of the Spider to them. Yet before nightfall a panic fear had spread among them, openly that spoke of the bridge as a spider's web on which they would not venture again.

"They'll go if I have to herd them out with a gun," Stone said, soming late that night into Halpern's tent. "We can't risk any delay, behind as we are with the work. I had Sarka Dass tell them."

Halpern shot him a quick glance. Ordinary prudence should have told the man he risked plunging them all in imminent peril; Stone had been taciturn enough before, had shown scant interest in pushing the work on the bridge, then why had he interfered now in the one sure way to halt further progress indefinitely unless——

"You'll need that gun all right, Stone'" he said grimly. "If Sarka Dass was fool enough to repeat that there isn't a Burmese in the camp by now. But they'll come back to bust up things for us!"

Halpern was right. Hurried investigation showed that every Burmese had flitted, silently as the shadows into which they had melted. But it was noon on the following day before they gave signs of any hostile intent.

Halpern had his men marshaled by then; they were a scant company; eight of the American bridgemen with Stone and himself, all grimly determined to hold off the Burmese until re-enforcements came from Jerminda some 20 miles distant, where he knew the white officer in command of the native garrison.

Sarka Dass had not fled; the Eurasian's superstitious terror of the day before had vanished. He bore himself with an assurance that somehow augmented Halpern's distrust of Stone, which had revived with the prescience of disaster.

The whine of a bullet cut short all speculating; more bullets hit into the ground about the trees and boulders which sheltered the little defending party. The hillside they faced swarmed with black dots led on by a gyrating, sweeping figure in white.

"That's their priest," Halpern said, grimly sighting along his rifle barrel. "I bet that's the dancing chap that came around yesterday, to tell them our bridge was an evil spider's web that would get 'em if they didn't watch out!"

Instead of descending into the open, the Burmese, under the priest's guidance, were making for the cliff that commanded the level where Halpern had entrenched his men. A sudden dazing inspiration seized Halpern, once up there, the Burmese could pick off their enemies at leisure while the Americans spent their bullets futilely. It was a desperate chance, but the other way they were doomed, like flies in a spider's web.

"Four men to go with me up the far side of that cliff and shoot the fear of hell into those devils!" he shouted.

"You're mad, man! There are 200 against five!" It was stone's voice, raised in warning, but Halpern had a sudden sense of a note of triumph underlying the caution; he could have sworn he caught a gleam of triumph in the man's dark eyes.

Berserk rage swept over him with the conviction that Stone was at the bottom of the jeopardy they were in that for purposes of his own he had wanted the Burmese to wreak their worse on the bridge.

"I don't know how you managed it, Stone," he cried, "but you've engineered this frame-up on us! I'll get you for it; but first I mean to get that holy phonograph up yonder and hold him for a hostage against the safety of our viaduct!"

He was off at the words, his men at his heels—five men against 200, inexorably climbing to the crest of the hill. They were more than half way up before the native priest discovered them and took up his death chant again.

"They come!" he chanted. "The gods have stricken them mad. We shall slay these death devils who have brought the thrice accursed web of the spider in our valley to enmesh us in its strands!

The Americans could not understand the words, but they knew the meaning of the knives that gleamed in the hands of the score of tribesmen who rushed down upon them.

The five waited until they could pick out the whites of the eyes from the savage black faces. Then Halpern rasped out a quick command and the guns spoke, steady and quick as the rapple of notes drawn out by a hand ripped across the keyboard of a piano.

Like foam crumpling from an onrushing wave, the Burmese withered away. Only the white-robed priest, carried on by the impetus of his own down'ward rush, was flung head-long down the steep slope, to fetch up among the men who had sought him as their prize—the hostage for their safety and the safety of the bridge.

"Make back tracks! Hustle, you chaps!" Halpern sang out. "I'll cover you, but don't let that parson get loose, not if you drop holding on to him."

Standing at the top of his little line, Halpern pumped his repeater from his hip, and at each report a charging Burmese crumpled or leaped shrieking into the air.

The upward climb, the rush of their assailants, and the Americans' stand had occupied but a few moments. Their retreat was even briefer, but now the Burmese were descending, too, cautiously, keep out of the range of Halpern's gun, but inexorably.

"We'll have the real fight down below boys. Best we can do is to make the bridge and use this nice, dancing person for a shield," he panted when they reached the lower level. He made for the steel web that hung suspended from the gorge, herding his men before him.

Heavy Penalties For Hunters

Five hundred dollars, the maximum fine, recently was levied by a judge in Michigan against a hunter for selling 32 ducks in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Another violator of the same law, in Connecticut, who has been guilty of repeated offenses was recently sentenced to three months in jail. This offender was not given the alternative of paying a fine. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act has been in force since July, 1918, and several hundred convictions have been secured. These cases are cited by the Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture, which administers the law, to show the increasing concern with which the courts regard violations of this important statue, designed to protect migratory birds, insectivorous birds and non-game birds.

Band Birds to Learn All their Habits

With a view to determine the exact routes followed by migratory birds, their speed of travel , the causes of unusual movements by such birds, and many other questions of interest to naturalists as well as to the public, the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture, has taken over the work heretofore carried on by the American Bird Binding Association, which has headquarters at the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. This work includes the trapping of birds and the placing of identification bands on their legs, after which the birds are released. Subsequent discovery of these bands on trapped or dead birds is reported by the finders to those in charge of the work, who thereby are able to trace the movements of the birds so marked.

The department's work of bird banding will be in charge of a former member of the staff of the Colorado Museum of Natural History, who recently entered federal employ. In addition to the questions suggested above, information will be sought concerning the theory that some birds mate for life. The theory that birds return to the nest sites of the previous year will also be investigated.

To carry on this work effectively birds must be trapped in large numbers for banding. In the immediate future it is proposed to devote special attention to the trapping and banding of waer fowl on both their breeding and wintering grounds. Shore birds will be studied in a similar fashion. It is expected that the information secured will be of much value in enforcing the migratory bird treaty act. The Biological Survey asks the co-operation of all former members of the Bird Banding Association and the public in general, particularly persons in a position to establish trapping stations. Observers engaged in this work should be sufficiently near their traps to visit them two or three times daily so as to prevent captured birds from injuring hemselves. Experiments are underway to determine the most suitable types of traps, and arrangements are being made to supply volunteer co-operators with numbered aluminum bands. Persons interested should address the Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., for further information.

For Mothers and Babies

Better babies, physically and mentally, are the results of the campaigns being waged by our government. Just now the celebration of the second anniversary of "Children's Year" shows more determination than ever to make the United States safe everywhere for children. In 38 States, as well as the District of Columbia, and far away as Hawaii, we are carrying on humane and intelligent child welfare rwok. Everybody is working in close co-operation with the Children's Bureau to put the work of Children's year on a permanent basis.

France, Italy, Russia, many lands, are following out in our lead. They are urging the establishment of infant consultation centers all through France, with a properly qualified "woman visitor" to direct both medical and social investigations. She is to be assisted by public health nurses, and child welfare agencies.

Certain standards for the protection of mother and children have been formulated by the Children's Bureau. These standards which are being studied in many places have already been applied in some communities. The passage of the Sheppard-Towner maternity bill would make possible nation-wide application of the standards for both mothers and babies. Resolutions passed at recent illegitimacy conferences would ,if put into effect, protect those unfortunate babies born out of wedlock. Also a committee of doctors and industrial experts are working on the proctical application of the standards for working children.

In fact, Uncle Sam is proving himself the protector and guardian of mothers and babies everywhere throughout the United States. Wisely too, for he knows that upon them depend much of the progress and welfare of our land.

Rabbit vs. H. C. L.

Besides killing approximately 35,000 jack rabbits which were injurious to crops, the rabbit "drives" which have taken place in Eastern Washington during recent months have helped to lessen living costs by putting on the market a considerable amount of rabbit meat. The Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture, under whose supervision the drives were conducted, found on investigation that there was a good demand for wild rabbit meat. Trial shipments made to seven markets indicated that white-tailed rabbits would bring the shipper about $2.50 a dozen and black-tailed rabbits about 50 cents less. Persons desirous of marketing rabbits were advised that those which had been shot were preferred to those which had been harried and killed by clubbing, and that the carcasses should be drawn as soon as possible after they had been cooled. The sales made the past season were chiefly in Spokane, Portland, Seattle and Tacoma. Considerable interest is being shown in the proposal to further extend sale of jack rabbit meat by trapping the animals in inclosures, properly baited, and supplying certain markets with shipments of a definite size at stated intervals.

Foreign Trade Shows Country's Prosperity

Reflecting the country trade prosperity, recent figures issued by the Department of Commerce show that March exports were $820,000,000, the second highest month on record. Imports for the same month were $484,000,000, exceeding by $10,000,000 the previous high month.

For the nine months ending with March, the exports were $6,051,000,000, or more than a billion dollars in excess of the same periods in 1919, while imports for the nine months were $3,719,000,000, or approximately a billion and a half greater than for the nine months of the preceding year.

Meat Animals In Combinations

The keeping of cattle and of swine appear to be almost inseparable operations. This fact is being brought out in the returns of the "Better Sires—Better Stock" crusade of the agricultural colleges, the United States Department of Agriculture, and co-operating agencies. This general practice has long been known, but much more definite information is being gathered, and the purpose is to extend it to such an extent as to determine the relationships among all meat animals.

If nearly every man who keeps cattle also keeps hogs, and if nearly every man who keeps hogs also keeps cattle, the inevitable conclusions is that the combination pays, especially when purebred sires are used. But it remains to be determined what are the most common and the best paying proportions. The same thing applies also to combinations of cattle and sheep and swine. One benefit of the work will be that it will enable the man of small personal experience to avail himself of the wide experience of a great number of men in working out the combinations of meat animals that he will carry on his farm.

Mistake to Marry Your Housekeeper

Los Angeles—"The attempt to save and control the salary of a housekeeper by the expediency of marriage is a blunder from the beginning," said Judge Taft in deciding the divorce suit brought by Dorsey G. Andrews against Bessie Alma Andrews.

The trial showed that before her marriage to Mr. Andrews, Mrs. Andrews was his housekeeper. She received the money at the end of the month as housekeeper to pay the bills, and also her wages. After marriage, she declared, her wages stopped, and Mr. Andrews doled out the money every day to pay the bills. She declared that she hardly had "two bits to spend on herself." She was Mr. Andrew's second wife.

The court denied Mr. Andrews a divorce and granted Mrs. Andrews $50 a month alimony.

Keep the Morning Paper Clean

What an exasperation it is to find the morning paper either down in the mud or fluttering far down the street. It seems as if a vagrant breeze waited only until the paper boy should throw the paper on the porch, before it whisks it away. An ordinary spring clothespin will foil the wind. Attached conveniently outside the door, it serves as a clasp into which the newsboy may fasten the paper.

Caring for the Human Machine

Consider the furnace. Theoretically this is a machine for the economical production of heat. If the proper amount of the proper kind of fuel is properly put into it, if the ashes are properly cleaned out, if the drafts are properly managed, the chances are that it will heat the house properly. If, on the other hand, too much or too little fuel is put into it, if the fuel contains too much inflammable material, if the fire is not kept clean of ashes, or if the dampers are badly regulated, the furnace operates inefficiently or ceases working altogether. Perhaps the most important thing next to putting in the fuel is to clean out the ashes. If these are allowed to accumulate in the ashpit, the grate bars may be burned out.

Food is taken into the human body for the purpose of producing heat. The standard of its value is the number of heat units it contains. If too little fuel is taken into the human body and insufficient number of heat units to operate it are received and it works inefficiently. If, on the other hand, too great an amount of food is taken, the body becomes clogged and works just as inefficiently as if it had received too small an amount. The most important thing is to remove promptly all of the waste materials remaining after the food has given up its heat units. If too great an amount of this debris is allowed to remain the fires of the body are in danger of being put out by these poisonous materials. The elimination of these materials is one of the functions of the intestinal apparatus. Perhaps this is even more important than an educated set of brains. Certainly an educated set of brains cannot work effectively so long as the intestinal apparatus is badly operated.

Man in our present state of civilization is obliged to pay particular attention to functions which in a state of nature took care of themselves. A robust man engaged in active exercise in the open air may commit dietary indiscretions which would be exceedingly harmful of a sedentary worker. Exercise as a part of the daily life is, however, absolutely necessary for both. Plain, wholesome food is just as necessary for the brain worker as for him who labors with his hands. Above all, both must keep the human furnace well shaken down and without accumulation of the ashes and debris in order that the fires of life may burn brightly and steadily.

Much Crushed Rock

The proposed road-building program in Minnesota this year will require about 667,000 tons of crushed rock or gravel, or nearly 20,000 carloads of aggregate, according to information secured by the Bureau of Public Roads, United States Department of Agriculture. The figures give some idea of the magnitude of the road-building program now being carried on in many States. Largely on account of a shortage of crushed stone or gravel 58 miles of road which were to have been built in 1919 were not completed. The roads are to be completed this year, while about 180 miles of new construction requiring crushed rock or gravel has been authorized. This makes a mileage of 250 scheduled for 1920.

SKI JUMPING IN SUMMER

Since the first caveman slid down a glacier, skiing has been considered a cold weather sport. Among the snow-clad hills of the cold north countries, skiing has developed until it is the national sport of Norway. But now comes an expert ski jumper who established his own precedent, in good American fashion, by skiing on the hottest summer day. Of odds and ends he has built a slide, approximately 100 feet long and terminating at a gap of twenty-five feet, beyond which is a landing incline of heavier, broader construction, and surfaced with canvas. This is kept slippery by applying soap and lard.

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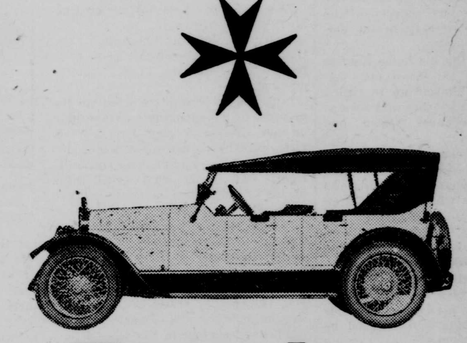
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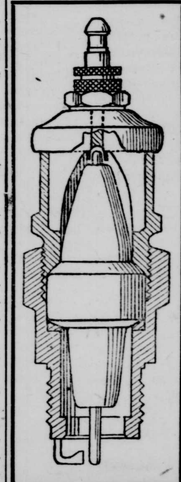
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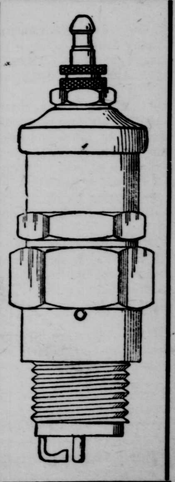
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