SAVED THE TRAIN.

The bridge was a trestle bridge, long and lofty and very slender.

In far Island City life concentrated itself upon the bridge. There were painters and carpenters, watchmen and platelayers, smiths, signalmen and engineers.

These, with their families, a few lawyers on and some railroad officers who had made the "city" their home, constituted the whole of the settlement.

And with all of them the bridge seemed to dominate every other interest. It was their great topic of conversation. They were proud of being connected with it. They felt a kind of proprietorship in the huge spidery structure.

It was a sociable little community, too; much given to hospitality and talking, as is the custom of all small communities, a profound interest in the private affairs of its individual members.

As the Widow Rockwell put it, in discussing with Mrs. Shaw of the City hotel the marriage recently arranged between his daughter and Jeff Davis:

"It's just like's if there was a weddin' in every house all over town."

Had the old people witnessed a little scene which was even then being enacted down below in the valley they might have been less confident.

Along the river bank, where a rough track wound in and out with the windings of the stream, a man and a girl were strolling moodily side by side.

The man did most of the talking. He was a tall, handsome young fellow, with a fair beard and mustache and a face that would have been pleasant and good humored under ordinary circumstances. But it was clouded now, and he spoke disconsolately, almost querulously.

"Who is he, Thea, anyway?"

"I dunno. How should I?"

They walked on in silence until they found themselves immediately underneath the bridge, with the great network of beams and crossbeams towering above their heads.

"Thea, I don't like to see you as that fellow chucks up so once together. Who is he? What's he into here?"

"There ain't no call for you to like him's far as I can see," retorted the girl. "As as for who he is an what's his business, he ain't told me, an I'm not goin to ask him."

"I'm sorry, Thea," the man answered humbly. "I didn't mean no offense to him or you, but I thought he might be told you something about himself. As he's had plenty o' chances o' telling you things, seems to me."

"Mayain he has, what then?"

"What then? Why, Thea, I'm frightened of this man; jealous of him, if you like. Thea, he hasn't been saying anything—anything foolish to you?"

The girl was leaning against one of the supports of the bridge, her head thrown up and resting on the timber, her hands clasped behind her back. She just shifted the position of her head, so as to look the man straight in the eyes, and said in a quiet, dangerous tone:

"I dunno what you mean, Jeff."

"Then you dunno what they're sayin up yonder?"

"If they're sayin things 'gainst me'n Mr. Burton, they'll be precious careful not to say 'em to me, I guess, or they'd be some trouble for some one before long."

"As if I tell you"——

"That's what I am waiting for now."

The young man hesitated before replying. The threat of "trouble for some one," and a peculiar note of challenge in the girl's voice as she uttered it, told him that he was on perilous ground.

"I'm waitin to hear what they've got to say 'bout me'n Mr. Burton."

And at last he blurted out very clumsily and shamefacedly the cause of his complaint.

"They're sayin—mind, Thea, I don't set no store by such talk—they're sayin as how he's been sparkin up to you an foolin you, an I—I"——

"And you believed them?"

"No, I say I don't take no count of their talk, Thea."

"Then why are you tellin me all this?"

The man was silent, not knowing how to answer. He felt himself to be no match for Althea in an argument.

"Thea," he stammered awkwardly, "I didn't believe a word of it, only I—I didn't know what to believe, seein him always frolicin around you, an you listenin to him an all."

"Oh!" Her voice trembled a little now. "An that's 'bout enough, I reckon. You believed's how Mr. Burton was makin love to me, an you believed's how I listened to him. Is that so, Jeff?"

"I—I s'pose so," he answered rather shamefacedly. And then for a time neither spoke. At last Althea broke the silence.

"An you think I'm goin to marry a man that can't trust his wife nowys that? You think I'm goin to marry a man that believes every word o' them gossipin old women up town, an they daren't say what he believes an what he doesn't? You didn't mean no offense, an I don't take none. Only there's no more talk of marryin between you an me, Jeff."

Jeff didn't see at all. Half dazed and not quite understanding what it all meant to him, he "bowed's how it might be best that way, may be."

Althea had scarcely counted upon this. She expected something altogether different—protests, perhaps petitions for forgiveness, a final victory for herself.

She had never intended him to accept his dismissal at her hands in this way, and, in blank amazement, which she took for indifference, answered her.

"So that's how it is, Jeff."

"I s'pose so." Jeff spoke shortly and, as she thought, sullenly. And again there was a long silence.

"I reckon I'll have to go over now," Jeff said presently, as though thinking aloud. "I'm an early up to Mount Ararat depot tomorrow, an tomorrow evenin I'll come down an take my traps an start 'em over there." Then, after a pause, "Good night, Thea."

Once she started and half opened her lips to call him back, but yielding to the sight of his disconsolate bearing she let him go without a word and let Jeff, with the opportunity gone.

Alone now, Jeff was only one among a whole regiment of admirers, and if she didn't care who should she?

Besides, there remained the sense of all this trouble, the good opinion of her, who had come down to inspect the bridge and had found the accomplishment of the City hard at work to do it harm.

Thea Burton herself would not have confessed to anything more than the most harmless flirtation—a frivolous interlude, rather, brought about partly by her wounded pride and partly, with girls of her own class, not certainly nothing more serious.

The street that had been the cause of all the offenses, broke now and suddenly—such a street as the Star Island valley had not known for many years. All that night it raged and well on to the next day, and Althea, sitting by herself at home, had ample leisure to think matters over.

Her feeling at first was one of freedom and consequent relief.

But this feeling was short lived, and when it passed it left her very lonely.

Burton was out, facing the storm down by the bridge.

But she did not think of him somehow. Her mind kept reverting to the thought of Jeff, puzzling over his strange indifference of the previous evening, wondering whether she had understood him rightly.

And by neither she found herself in a very agony of remorse and humiliation. Yes, she had treated Jeff shamefully.

She had dismissed him heartlessly, scornfully and without cause. And now she would have given all the world to be able to call him back again.

At last she could bear it no longer. The close atmosphere of the room seemed to suffocate and choke her. Rain or no rain, she must get out of the house and breathe fresh air if only for half an hour.

So throwing a shawl over her head and shoulders, she slipped quietly out and walked, alone and unnoticed, down the deserted street.

Insensibly her steps tended toward the bridge. In the old days—she thought of that time as though it had been years and years ago—she and Jeff used often to walk some way out along the bridge and stand enjoying the magnificent view up and down the valley.

Twilight had fallen before she stepped on to the bridge, but the way was so familiar to her that she did not notice this.

The rain had ceased, and the wind, though still strong enough at that great height, had abated considerably since morning. Althea faced it and drew long, refreshing breaths as each gust struck at her out of the darkness.

The cold air seemed to brace and exhilarate her spirits, and the novelty of her position, suspended between earth and sky, with blind, empty space on all sides of her, gave her a curious sense of detachment and mental exaltation. She forgot Jeff—forgot all her own troubles.

But home and everything in her past life seemed so distant, so vague and insignificant, that she easily dismissed the matter from her mind and pressed on again. The bridge swayed slightly in the wind. She must be just above the river now, she thought.

Suddenly the hand rail by which she had been guiding herself slipped from her grasp. The speed at which she was walking carried her on a pace or two, and then she stopped, struck with a momentary fear, and groped after the rail with her hand.

Not finding it she stepped cautiously backward and touched it just at the point where she had let it go. The rail was broken off short, the wood jagged and splintered. And at the same moment a spindl shook the bridge and sent Althea down on her hands and knees, clutching at one of the foot planks and straining every muscle to hold herself against the wind.

She was not frightened in the least. Slowly for perhaps 10 or 12 feet she crawled along in this manner, and then one hand put out, very cautiously before the other sounded the plank and found only empty space.

Again she stretched out the hand, this time to right and left as far as she could reach, and again it found nothing. There was no more bridge!

Althea raised herself into a sitting posture, drawing her feet up under her skirts and resting upon one arm. She must consider the thing that had happened.

She was miles from Island City, without the trains. No daily arrival or departure of the trains to lend a little interest to its quiet existence. No train between midnight and morning.

No train—that was just. There would be a train tomorrow—the train Jeff was to take to the bridge to shoot an hour's time, and—Althea's heart stood still at the recollection—there was to be—and Jeff was moving back by it. In that moment all her troubles, all her causes of anxiety, passed out left her numb, dazed and trembling.

In that one moment there had dawned into the girl's mind the knowledge that upon her and her only depended the safety of this train, with its living, unconscious freight, among them the man whom she herself had sent to face this hideous danger, to meet an almost certain death.

But there was the work to be done, and she must do it somehow. Further, she must do it quickly. The time was too short to allow of her getting back to the city and starting a movement among the valley. And of course the telegraph wires had broken when the bridge gave way.

So there was only one way open to her, and the moments were all against success.

The sky had cleared a little, and it was just possible now to see the point at which the bridge came to an end and the black chasm that lay beyond it. One of the darkness peopled the end of a long pole, which had been horizontal, but which now pointed at a steep angle, wedged firmly among other beams that crossed it far below out of sight.

Althea took a firm hold of this pole, leaned all her weight on it to test its stability, and then with a terrible sinking at her heart swung off into the darkness. Almost immediately her foot struck another beam, and to this she lowered herself cautiously.

It was safe firm enough to bear her weight, and she found a whole stack of these timbers resting against it, by which she was able to drag herself down still.

The rain, which had fallen lightly and not away from her end of the gap, now let fitful as close that the descent was not really difficult.

It was the darkness and the uncertainty that she feared. Once or twice a fine her gave away beneath her weight and fell, dragging a number of others down with it.

And once the end of a beam to which she was hanging swung across flatwise, and lowered her gently 10 or 12 feet before it overbalanced itself and swung off from its resting place, leaving her almost immediately on this bottom.

And so from step to step down searching, swinging, falling, she kept on her way until at last, after what seemed to her an interminable length of time, she saw the glimmer of broken water below her, and knew that she had almost reached the stream.

She checked herself, and leaning forward peered down into the darkness. There was a sheer drop, though of what distance she had no means of judging, between her and the water, and she could find no means of getting either to right or left. So, shutting her eyes tightly and swinging to the full length of her arms, she let herself go.

The signalmen on the further side of the Star Island valley bridge had just finished his supper and settled himself comfortably by the stove to enjoy his evening pipe when he was roused by the sound of footsteps scrambling up the bank that led to his box.

A moment later he saw the figure of a girl framed in the doorway. Her dress was torn, drenched with water and thickly plastered with mud. Her long, dark hair, tangled and dripping, hung about her shoulders, and a thin stream of blood was trickling down her face from a cut on the forehead.

For an instant the man sat and stared at her, dazed and silent. Then he staggered Althea and hoped to his feet.

"The train!" she gasped. "The train. Has it passed yet?"

"No, train's half an hour behind time, but she's about due now, I reckon."

"Thank God! I'm in time, then. Stop them! Stop the train, for God's sake! The bridge—the bridge is gone!"

The man looked incredulously at her. Then, beginning to grasp the truth, he snatched a red battery from the wall and without a word rushed down the ladder and out onto the track.

Ten minutes later the cabin was invaded by an angry, curious crowd of passengers and officers. Jeff, who had been traveling in the car in the rear of the train, was among the first to enter.

Coming out of the darkness into the lighted room he only saw the signalman standing in the center of an excited throng and trying vainly to answer all their questions at once. Snatches of conversation reached Jeff through the din of voices.

"Brave girl."

"All over our lives to her."

"Splendid heroine."

And, while he wondered what it all meant, a hand was laid timidly on his arm, and a tired, pleading voice whispered:

"Take me out of this, Jeff. I can't stand it any longer."

And Jeff looked around and saw her and began to understand.

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