

The Servant of the City

By ALAN SULLIVAN.

THE chief engineer pushed back a pile of blueprints, and intently studied a foolscap sheet. "Masonry eight and a half a yard, and concrete five dollars in place—how on earth can the old man do it?" he questioned himself with wrinkling brows. "Fifteen per cent. the lowest all round! Brent has gone crazy!"

His thoughtful and unseeing eyes turned from his desk out over the furrowed bay to the green slopes of Governor's Island. Mentally he surveyed the long procession of contractors, on whom, for sundry and technical reasons, he had put professional screws. Poor footings, bad bonding, inferior material—the list of delinquencies grew as he pondered; and now, to cap it all, the trickiest, shiftiest, most dangerous of them all had put in a tender which it was practically impossible to decline.

A great corporation had intrusted to him the design and construction of a barrier of masonry which was, with buttress wing and ramp, to impound the crystal floods of a hundred green hills for the well-being and safety of swarming millions. In boldness and magnitude, the project was unapproached, but Peter Stewart, C.E., had accepted the appointment with unimpressible and Scottish equanimity. Far corners of the world attested his handiwork in Titanic structures that groped at the very ribs of mother earth for foothold, but the vast proportions of the new Catskill dam overshadowed them all—was Brent to be the man?

As he pondered, a clerk entered and laid on the desk a yellow sheet, with a typewritten slip attached. The chief glanced at it indifferently, his mind dominated by new possibilities, and then suddenly his lips puckered into an inaudible whistle. It was a potent message:

Rio Bastia, Brazil.

Main dam burst. No water, light, power; come immediately. Super-vise reconstruction; own fees.

Fondino, Mayor.

"Brent, again, by thunder!" he murmured. Instinctively his fingers pressed a button, and a red lamp over his door sprang into light. It was Stewart's signal, an imperative demand for solitude, and, on the instant, every man of the staff constituted himself a guardian over that door, while the chief resolved into thought.

Professional pride, his belief in himself—that he was one of those whose office it is to control the powers of nature to the uses of man—the reflection of his exacting, self-sacrificing career, all the influences which guide men who are strong were rioting through his head—but on the surface of things, not a sign.

Brent's work had melted into ruin in South America, and Brent's tender was the lowest in New York. Its acceptance meant a clear saving of eighty thousand dollars to the municipality, provided specifications were lived up to; but there came the rub—would they be? It was unthinkable that the board could sacrifice such a reduction in cost.

There is a certain subjective despondency which comes at times over the minds of honest men when they realize how comparatively futile are the best endeavours of the wisest of us; and such a shadow fell, for a moment, on the pulsing, pounding brain of the quiet, gray-eyed engineer. But, far back, unmarred and untouched by change of circumstance, lay the bone and muscle of his endeavour—an abiding faith in the ultimate, if unseen, end of good work. Then there was Haskell—he had forgotten Haskell.

As the creases in his cogitations smoothed themselves out, something of the humour of it all relaxed his mood into a grim placidity that boded ill for backsliding contractors. "The powers of nature to the uses of man." Brent should be—was—a power of nature; and, with concise, unrelenting exactitude he would be guided to his appointed end.

The red light winked and died, and simultaneously the chief clerk was summoned.

"Thompson, get me the next sailing for Rio Bastia, and tell Mr. Haskell I would like to see him."

"I've got the sailings here, sir—thought you'd want them. The *Neronic* to-night at eight, and Mr. Haskell is on the work. Said he was going to check contour levels, and won't be here till to-morrow."

Stewart hesitated a little, running his fingers—a favorite trick—through the mass of his gray hair.

"Get me a berth, and please take a letter to Mr. Haskell. It's too private for the office."

In later years, Thompson's memory invariably fixed itself upon that afternoon. The dull roar of traffic in canon streets below filtered through the quiet office, as this dispassionate, silent engineer expressed himself in such a letter as but few men ever write. The wisdom of long experience, kindly warning, confidence, encouragement—through all these channels his inmost self revealed itself. Not the business letter of a professional man to a subordinate, but the projection of his ethics and ideals into the heart of a trusted friend.

As Thompson echoed the words with flying pencil, he felt his own mind expanding with this new interpretation of things mundane, and saw in his employer the reflection of all things admirable. The chief finished, then paused, and, looking at the clerk with the ghost of a twinkle in his eyes:



"Dad, what is it? What's the matter?"

Drawn by S. S. Finlay.

"By the way, Thompson, I'm glad it's not necessary for me to ask for Mr. Haskell all the help the office can give him."

"No, sir," Thompson replied, with much fervor. "It is not."

The accent on the last word brought a smile to Stewart's face. "This," he said slowly, "is his great opportunity."

WHILE Thompson's machine was clicking the chief's message in the thirteenth story of the Broad Street Building, a tall, heavy-shouldered, red-faced young man was striding down the flank of a hill not one hundred miles from New York. Beneath him, a rocky rib thrust out toward a sister promontory across the valley, and between, crystal clear, chattered and foamed a mountain stream.

Here the great Catskill dam was to rear its impregnable front. The sparse woods on either side were laced with straight, clear-cut lines and ranks of posts to indicate where should come the water's margin when the torrent had been smothered by a man-made sea. A hundred feet below, the fat fields smiled—fields that the thin lips of rising floods were to lick, then swallow—and Haskell smiled back at them, for spring was in the air, and life was good.

He stopped for a moment at the bluff, picturing the coming transformation. There the toe of the dam would cross the hollow; here its broad, flat

coping would knit itself into living rock. It was good, very, very good; but best of all, in three hours he would be in New York, and in five he would be gazing into the softest pair of brown eyes that ever befogged the vision of a young engineer.

So it came that while his chief sat in a corner on the bridge of the *Neronic*, watching the great light at the Hook punctuate his departure, Stanley Haskell mounted a broad pair of steps on West Fifty-sixth Street, and inquired whether Miss Helen Brent was at home.

As she rose in greeting, he experienced the sense of absolute fitness with which she always impressed him. The perfection of her surroundings had never excited his curiosity; it seemed only suitable, and the contrast with his own worldly position was a matter of no import. She had come into his young life as a rose leaf drops on the surface of an un-stirred pool, and his heart had mirrored every delicate charm. As the days had passed since their first meeting, he had felt conscious of ambitions and hope and strange translations of mood, in all of which she had her part.

Now, looking at her across the great, flickering hearth and meeting her quick, responsive glance, the odds against him suddenly felt heavy. He was ill at ease, speaking disjointedly, furious with himself that the golden minutes sped so fast and fruitlessly.

She rescued him—womanly and intuitive.

"You have not told me what you've been doing with yourself since Sunday."

"Tramping the Catskills, and looking through a telescope at a pole with black and white stripes on it, and blessing the man who wouldn't hold it straight."

"Leveling?" she said, being a contractor's daughter.

He nodded. "Yes, it's going to be the biggest thing of its kind, this dam. Stewart, my chief, designed it. He is going to super-intend. I suppose I'll be there all the time."

"Father has built a great many. He was speaking about it to-night; in fact —" she hesitated.

"If it's a state secret, leave me out," broke in Haskell opportunely. "I've got too many of them already."

"At your early stage in life!" she laughed. "That's hardly fair."

Haskell did not answer at once—he was trying to put into words thoughts that would not be assembled. That afternoon, in the silence of great spaces, he had formulated his sentences; but it was with the confidence of the untried. Now, when he would have given everything to discover whether he was anything to her, the power of understanding expression had left him.

Helen's slight figure lay motionless in the depths of a big chair. The room was in subdued light, and the yellow flame leaped uncertainly on the hearth, touching her brown hair into gold. Her eyes rested for a moment on him, and he was about to speak, when Brent's heavy step sounded at the door.

Haskell shot at the girl a look so eloquent that her voice faltered as she greeted the contractor.

"Father, you know Mr. Haskell?"

Brent, a huge, colourless man, with heavy jaw, held out a soft, engulfing hand.

"Know him!" he said, in a thin voice that seemed not to belong to his bulk. "Know him! Old friends, ain't we, Haskell? Heard of him often. Expect to hear of him more—eh, Haskell?"

The latter wedged in his brief acknowledgment between modesty and assent, and the thin voice went on:

"Been in the field—see it by your nose. Where was it?"

"Catskill dam, sir. I got in to-day."

"So!" Brent's left eyelid dropped—a trick some had reason to remember—and his voice shaded in tone. "You're on that work with Stewart?"

"Yes." The engineer had, he could not tell why, a feeling of annoyance.

"Nice job, but no money in it for the contractor."