

The Price of Failure

Story of a Big Bridge, a Flood, and the Grit of an Engineer

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"I COULDN'T do it, Gracia. I'm a Charteris Valley man; I've seen the river in flood in the spring. It's little more than a thread of water now, and Wilson, nor no other man who hasn't seen it when the ice goes out, knows what the Charteris River can do."

"Then you won't get the contract after all?"

"Probably—oh, certainly—not."

"And it meant so much to you! And Wilson, Payne and Scott don't need it; they're made. Look at us—beginners!"

Connelly laughed mirthlessly.

The Charteris River bridge was the first big work that had come in the way of the firm of Connelly and Lester, contracting engineers; and this was, as Connelly knew, only owing to the personal interest of Big Peter MacDonald, who owned controlling shares of the R. & S. O. Railway. But to make good in this particular work meant a name for the beginners and a chance of successfully competing with rival companies of more experience. Lester, his young partner, had been boyishly enthusiastic over the scheme, yet hardly more so than Connelly himself. They had gone to Northbury together and after a week of careful survey and consideration had drawn up specifications and decided on the amount of their tender. It was a greater task than Connelly had anticipated, and his engineer's heart warmed to the work. He set about making plans for its completion even before the tender and the accompanying specifications, for which the R. & S. O. had asked, were forwarded. They still lay in the desk of the little up-town office, but Connelly knew just where he could find his workmen when the time came, knew personally the bosses he meant to put on his job, had talked dams and pumps and excavation, had looked up his material, and waited only for the acceptance of his tender to send out orders and set all things in motion toward the fulfilling of his designs.

As he had said, he was a Charteris Valley boy. Only a mile from Northbury and the site of the big bridge was the old farm home where were still his mother and Bob, the elder farmer brother, and his wife. He had all the loyalty of a country-bred boy for his own town, and it meant much to him that his first work of importance should be there. It was a good omen not to be overlooked.

His brother had insisted that Gracia and little Bob should come to the farm while the work went on, for Jeffrey would be more often at Northbury than in the city; and this invitation had been accepted with eagerness. Since they were married they had had no holiday such as this—could afford none—and they had talked of this summer with all the interest that had gone to the planning of their honeymoon.

And then had come disappointment. The rival firm of Wilson, Payne and Scott had sent in a tender for the contract, estimating the cost of the work some five thousand dollars below the lowest estimate of himself and Lester.

Connelly understood the difference. He and Lester had been struck with the peculiarity of the river bed. Above the village the steeply-eroded banks showed in places alternating layers of rock and sand, and he had insisted on borings to make sure of the bridge foundation. Below the usual loose rubble of small boulders, gravel and silt they had struck the rock, apparently an absolutely firm foundation for the big abutments. But three feet of boring brought the surprising knowledge that below this lay a layer of quicksand some eighteen feet in depth and in its turn resting on another layer of rock. They had discussed this fact in all its bearings. Lester had been for relying on the upper rock for the bridge foundation, but Connelly, with his larger knowledge of the little mountain river, had demurred, and they had finally concluded to bore through the first layer of rock, excavate the sand and base their abutments on the lower rock level. Wilson had not recognized the necessity of this latter excavation. To him the three-foot layer of rock had seemed sufficient.

MacDonald had pooh-poohed the

notion of further excavation when Connelly had discussed the matter with him the day before. Wilson's reputation as an engineer was as wide as the continent. If he did not think it necessary surely Connelly was being needlessly particular.

"I want you to have this contract, Jeff," he had added, earnestly; "I've owed your father-in-law a debt I couldn't pay, except to Gracia, and in some such way as this. 'Twas a kindness that went deeper than any mere business deal and I swore I'd pay him back some day. There, lad, don't be so proud! I wouldn't back you up if I didn't think you worth it. But I can't work the whole committee of directors to accept a tender five thousand dollars higher than that of the best firm in the city. Have some sense, man."

Connelly had gone straight to the office and he and Lester had talked the matter far into the night. Lester had been eager to accept Wilson's judgment of the work and send in their estimates on those grounds, but Connelly still held to his original idea.

"It wouldn't hold, Lester," he protested. "It might stand for years—but some spring there'll be a great old flood, and somewhere along the bank that ledge of rock will wear 'rough, ground out by the huge boulders and ice-blocks the Charteris brings down in a March flood. With that quicksand below it and an outlet further down stream it wouldn't be long until the whole shelf goes. It might never happen; but it might happen, too, and I consider it's up to us to guard against chances."

"Then you won't send in the tender?"

"YES, I will, and I'll tell the directors exactly why our estimate is so large. Surely they can see our reasons."

"They can't—with Wilson against us. Do you really think for one moment, Connelly, that we'll get it?"

"No," Jeff had answered, frankly, "I don't."

"And you'd sacrifice the company—everything—for this one notion!"

Jeffrey winced.

"Well, of course, I'm sorry you see it that way, Lester. Seems to me we'd sacrifice the company by doing inefficient work—work below the level of what we know is required."

"But Wilson's one of the best men on the continent. You acknowledge yourself that he knows more than any of us—"



Across the sunny quiet of their little breakfast table Gracia was propounding the question.

"Not in this, Lester, I don't."

"Why not in this? Just because here you have a different idea!"

So the discussion had gone. Connelly felt that his partner could not understand his position. He knew Lester was bitterly disappointed over the failure of their plans. He remembered that the boy had told him that when the bridge was complete he and Amy Dennison were to be married. He thought of pretty little Amy Dennison with a half-contemptuous smile. He caught himself being sorry for Lester that she was so different from Gracia.

At the end of the discussion, well on toward midnight, Lester had risen. "Well, Connelly," he had said, "if you feel that way about it there isn't any need of discussing the matter further. You are my chief and the matter rests in your hands. For my own part I'd rather our estimates didn't go in at all than have them turned down; but do as you like. Of course if you feel as you do about it we can't cut out that extra excavation. Only, with every other engineer of note in the country against you, I don't see how you can still consider it a necessity."

At the door he swung round and came back, holding out his hand. "Perhaps I'm sore because I'm disappointed," he said; "at any rate I can appreciate—and honour—the stand you're taking. And we've been good friends; let's not—"

Connelly's hand met his in a strong, quick grasp. "Thank you, Jack," he said. "Believe me, I'm sorry."

All night he had pondered the question. Was there any real danger of the rock layer giving way? Was he, as Lester had said, sacrificing the company, Lester and Amy Dennison, Gracia and little Bob, for a mere whim?

And with the morning, across the sunny quiet of their little breakfast-table Gracia was propounding the same question—Gracia, whose sense of honour in little things had been so much more intuitive than his own—even Gracia could not see the reasonableness of his attitude. He shoved his fingers up through his dark, thick hair, setting it all on end.

"Perhaps you are wrong after all, Jeff. Maybe there isn't any real need of excavating. That rock layer has been there for thousands of years, hasn't it? And besides—well, Mr. Wilson has built so many bridges and is so clever—don't you think you could risk it, Jeff? It looks such a big chance for you, success held out for you to take—"

The wistfulness in her tone went to his heart. He shoved his chair back and stood up. Gracia looked at his untasted breakfast.

"Jeff!" she cried, "aren't you going to eat any breakfast?"

"I must get down early," he answered. "We'll have a big dinner to-night instead after that meeting of directors to celebrate our failure."

"Perhaps when you and Mr. Lester talk it over you'll see differently," Gracia said, hopefully, at the doorway. "I almost think you will."

Connelly did not answer, only smiled back to her a bit soberly as he went down the steps.

ALL morning as he sat at his desk the memory of the wistful note in his wife's voice haunted him. "Poor girl," he mused, "she hasn't had a very easy time since we were married. It's been up-hill work, and now when things might be better"—and there was little Bob, college ahead for him, and all the things money could buy and which his father had never had. Wilson certainly had had more experience than he, was a recognized authority on bridge construction; and the bridge might stand—probably would—in spite of the hidden bed of quicksand below. Toward noon he figured out the cost of the work without the extra excavation and found it tallied fairly well with Wilson's estimates; and the tender for contract from Connelly and Lester, which Jeffrey himself took across to the secretary of the R. & S. O., was based entirely on these latter figures.

He went back to the empty office and sat drumming idly on the table. The die was cast. Lester was out of town,