

THE BRIDGE

By Jeanette Lee

"Solid as a Rock," They Said, but Tom Found the Hill Road a Better Way.

CARTER BALDWIN'S horn rimmed spectacles looked keenly at his son. The glasses were for use, not for ornament, and they were made to look out—not into. The gleam behind them was shrewd. It could gauge men and iron to a nicety. It dwelt on the young man with stern appraising pride. Tom Baldwin's glance met the horn rimmed gaze and smiled back easily. "Ready to stop?" he asked. "No. I have the reports to go over yet." He laid a capable hand on the neat pile of papers beside him. "Don't wait for me. I'll come out later—when I'm through."

shoulders were bent and he walked like an old man as he crossed to the window and stood staring out between the bars. In the distance he could see the smoke from the foundry black against the cool air. The foundry was his life work, and "Carter Baldwin Iron" was famous throughout the world for honest workmanship. A feeling like nausea wrenched him as he gazed at the belching chimneys—twenty-three years ago he built the first one, and the plant had extended till it covered an acre of ground, with its dozen blackened stacks smoking at the sky. He watched the smoke plumes with silent gaze as if in them he might read an answer to the anxious puzzle that confronted him.

Tom was his pride—his life, bone and sinew of himself! But those black chimneys were more than life. His stern mind swept over its past. He was younger than Tom, hardly more than a boy when his chance came, 23 that spring—too poor to marry—hardly more than a day laborer in the Trowbridge Construction Company. Looking ahead it had seemed that years must elapse before he would have money to carry out the ideas that filled his brain. Then his chance came. He had hardly moved a hand to find himself councilman for his ward, then on the committee of public building, and then—when the project for a river embankment and a new bridge came suddenly before them—chairman of the committee, with practically unlimited power.

Every move of the game since had been played with integrity and pride. He had not deceived himself as to the nature of that first transaction. He could call a spade a spade. There had been no bribe offered or taken for the placing of the contract with the Trowbridge Construction Company, but he knew that whoever managed the election that made him councilman, whoever placed him at the head of the building committee expected the contract to go to the company—and they got it! He had resigned his position when he was made councilman and he did not go back to them. But when the deal was over and the bridge finished he owned a block of stock in the reorganized company. The stock built his foundry.

He was a clean tool that they used for their dirty work. He had never flinched from it or deceived himself about it. But from that day to this his record was clean. There was not a page he feared to show to any man. The construction company had passed out of existence, some of the members died, others moved away. There was no one now to accuse him. Today Carter Baldwin's word was as good as his bond.

And in the room outside, the door of the big safe stood open. He stared into the greenness. Great welts stood on his forehead. The whole face was drawn and contorted. Across it swept the battle of Carter Baldwin's soul. For twenty-four years he had held aloof from every form of questionable business. Truth and fair dealing had become a kind of passion with him in his growing business—as if by cumulative striving he might blot out that first hideous mistake—and now he had looked into the open door of his safe. He could keep Tom from prison, or he could preserve his own integrity. He could not have both.



The girl came in, radiant. She glanced from one to the other, smiling quizzically. "Do I suit you?"

"To bad! I couldn't stay for you, sir! The president smiled. "Not this time, Enright. Thank you." The man nodded. "Glad to do it." He passed into the clear light. The president's eyes followed him. He stepped to the door and looked out. The street was deserted except for a car or two standing at the curb. When he turned back he closed the door behind him. He crossed to the safe and went in, switching on the light. The deposit boxes of the two banks stood on opposite sides of the safe confronting him, the savings bank on the left, the First National on the right. He opened the one on the right and ran through the securities. Then he turned to the left. It was as he thought—a whole block of securities lacking—transferred bodily to the other box. He stood looking down at it.

What a child's trick! How simple—and effective! And it never occurred to him it could be done. It had never occurred to any one—except Tom! The perspiration stood on his forehead in the close vault. He wiped it away impatiently. He counted the amount of the securities—forty thousand dollars. He well knew which they were and in which box they belonged. But Burnham would not know. He would not even suspect anything was wrong! What carelessness on the part of the State—to permit two banks under one roof, both securities in one vault, and one man cashier, with free, unquestioned access to them! The temptation fairly thrust itself at a man, when once it was seen! The law ought to make such a state of things impossible!

money that was building the foundry, she had never talked business. She withdrew into herself. She left him to go his way alone. And the personal allowance he placed to her credit in the bank remained there, almost untouched. For the house and for the children she spent his money freely. . . . He had never been sure. She turned her eyes to him. "What is it, Carter?" The question hung on a breath. Then he looked at her. "Tom's in trouble," he said quietly. She leaned forward with parted lips—"Tom! O!" Her hands unclasped and leaped to him. "What has he done?" The quiet of her face was broken. "Misappropriation of funds. Stealing's another name for it." His voice was harsh.

She gazed up at it, breathless. "I would save him! Give him the chance his father missed." There was sadness now in the sternness, and a longing in the eyes gazing into hers. "You have your money!" The bitterness of years flung it at him. "I lost you, Mary! Do you think that means nothing to me? I have not known rest. I could not reach you. The gold piled up between us!" He broke off harshly. "Never mind me. We must think for Tom—now." But she was moving nearer to him. Her hand reached out, almost timidly. "I did not know—I thought you cared for money—and your success—and I was lonely!" She broke down. Her face was on his shoulder. His arms were around her. He held her to him. The minutes on the clock ticked past. He looked up. A shadow touched the curtained glass of the door. A hand was on the knob. He glanced at the clock. Five minutes past the hour. He got up slowly.

CONTINUED ON PAGE SEVEN