

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch
Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato Scott
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
London Descartes Wells Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Bunner Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Richter Chekhov da Shakespeare Chamberlain Irving
Doré Dante Shaw Wodehouse
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Newton



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The Last Spike And Other Railroad Stories

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THE LAST SPIKE

"Then there is nothing against him but his poverty?"

"And general appearance."

"He's the handsomest man in America."

"Yes, that is against him, and the fact that he is always *in* America. He appears to be afraid to get out."

"He's the bravest boy in the world," she replied, her face still to the window. "He risked his life to drag me from under the ice," she added, with a girl's loyalty to her hero and a woman's pride in the man she loves.

"Well, I must own he has nerve," her father added, "or he never would have accepted my conditions."

"And what where these conditions, pray?" the young woman asked, turning and facing her father, who sat watching her every move and gesture. [Pg 4]

"First of all, he must do something; and do it off his own bat. His old father spent his last dollar to educate this young rascal, to equip him for the battle of life, and his sole achievement is a curve that nobody can find. Now I insist he shall do something, and I have given him five years for the work."

"Five years!" she gasped, as she lost herself in a big chair.

"He is to have time to forget you, and you are to have ample opportunity to forget him, which you will doubtless do, for you are not to meet or communicate with each other during this period of probation."

"Did he promise this?"

"Upon his honor."

"And if he break that promise?"

"Ah, then he would be without honor, and you would not marry him." A moment's silence followed, broken by a long, deep sigh that ended in little quivering waves, like the faint ripples that reach the shore, — the whispered echoes of the sobbing sea.

"O father, it is cruel! *cruel! cruel!*" she cried, raising a tearful face to him. [Pg 5]

"It is justice, stern justice; to you, my dear, to myself, and this fine young fellow who has stolen your heart. Let him show himself worthy of you, and you have my blessing and my fortune."

"Is he going soon?"

"He is gone."

The young woman knelt by her father's chair and bowed her head upon his knee, quivering with grief.

This stern man, who had humped himself and made a million, put a hand on her head and said:

"Ma-Mary" — and then choked up.

II

The tent boy put a small white card down on General Dodge's desk one morning, upon which was printed:

J. Bradford, C.E.

The General, who was at that time chief engineer in charge of the construction of the first Pacific Railroad, turned the bit of paste-board over. It seemed so short and simple. He ran his eyes over a printed list, alphabetically [Pg 6] arranged, of directors, promoters, statesmen, capitalists, and others who were in the habit of signing "letters of recommendation" for young men who wanted to do something and begin well up the ladder.

There were no Bradfords. Burgess and Blodgett were the only B's, and the General was glad. His desk was constantly littered with the "letters" of tenderfeet, and his office-tent filled with their portman-teaus, holding dress suits and fine linen.

Here was a curiosity—a man with no press notices, no character, only one initial and two chasers.

"Show him in," said the General, addressing the one luxury his hogan held. A few moments later the chief engineer was looking into the eye of a young man, who returned the look and asked frankly, and without embarrassment, for work with the engineers.

"Impossible, young man—full up," was the brief answer.

"Now," thought the General, "he'll begin to beat his breast and haul out his 'pull.'" The young man only smiled sadly, and said, "I'm [Pg 7] sorry. I saw an 'ad' for men in the *Bee* yesterday, and hoped to be in time," he added, rising.

"Men! Yes, we want men to drive mules and stakes, to grade, lay track, and fight Indians—but engineers? We've got 'em to use for cross-ties."

"I am able and willing to do any of these things—except the Indians—and I'll tackle that if nothing else offers."

"There's a man for you," said the General to his assistant as Bradford went out with a note to Jack Casement, who was handling the

graders, teamsters, and Indian fighters. "No influential friends, no baggage, no character, just a man, able to stand alone—a real man in corduroys and flannels."

Coming up to the gang, Bradford singled out the man who was swearing loudest and delivered the note. "Fall in," said the straw boss, and Bradford got busy. He could handle one end of a thirty-foot rail with ease, and before night, without exciting the other workmen or making any show of superiority, he had quietly, almost unconsciously, become the leader of the track-laying [Pg 8] gang. The foreman called Casement's attention to the new man, and Casement watched him for five minutes.

Two days later a big teamster, having found a bottle of fire-water, became separated from his reasoning faculties, crowded under an old dump-cart, and fell asleep.

"Say, young fellow," said the foreman, panting up the grade to where Bradford was placing a rail, "can you skin mules?"

"I can drive a team, if that's what you mean," was the reply.

"How many?"

"Well," said Bradford, with his quiet smile, "when I was a boy I used to drive six on the Montpelier stage."

So he took the eight-mule team and amazed the multitude by hauling heavier loads than any other team, because he knew how to handle his whip and lines, and because he was careful and determined to succeed. Whatever he did he did it with both hands, backed up by all the enthusiasm of youth and the unconscious strength of an absolutely faultless physique, and directed by a remarkably clear brain. When the timekeeper [Pg 9] got killed, Bradford took his place, for he could "read writin'," an accomplishment rare among the laborers. When the bookkeeper got drunk he kept the books, working overtime at night.

In the rush and roar of the fight General Dodge had forgotten the young man in corduroys until General Casement called his attention to the young man's work. The engineers wanted Bradford, and Casement had kicked, and, fearing defeat, had appealed to the chief. They sent for Bradford. Yes, he was an engineer, he said, and when

he said it they knew it was true. He was quite willing to remain in the store department until he could be relieved, but, naturally, he would prefer field work.

He got it, and at once. Also, he got some Indian fighting. In less than a year he was assigned to the task of locating a section of the line west of the Platte. Coming in on a construction train to make his first report, the train was held up, robbed, and burned by a band of Sioux. Bradford and the train crew were rescued by General Dodge himself, who happened to be following them with his "arsenal" car, and who heard at Plumb Creek of the fight [Pg 10] and of the last stand that Bradford and his handful of men were making in the way car, which they had detached and pushed back from the burning train. Such cool heroism as Bradford displayed here could not escape the notice of so trained an Indian fighter as General Dodge. Bradford was not only complimented, but was invited into the General's private car. The General's admiration for the young pathfinder grew as he received a detailed and comprehensive report of the work being done out on the pathless plains. He knew the worth of this work, because he knew the country, for he had spent whole months together exploring it while in command of that territory, where he had been purposely placed by General Sherman, without whose encouragement the West could not have been known at that time, and without whose help as commander-in-chief of the United States army the road could not have been built.

As the pathfinders neared the Rockies the troops had to guard them constantly. The engineers reconnoitered, surveyed, located, and built inside the picket lines. The men marched to work to the tap of the drum, stacked arms on [Pg 11] the dump, and were ready at a moment's notice to fall in and fight. Many of the graders were old soldiers, and a little fight only rested them. Indeed there was more military air about this work than had been or has since been about the building of a railroad in this country. It was one big battle, from the first stake west of Omaha to the last spike at Promontory — a battle that lasted five long years; and if the men had marked the graves of those who fell in that fierce fight their monuments, properly distributed, might have served as mile-posts on the great overland route to-day. But the mounds were unmarked, most of them, and many there were who had no mounds, and whose home

names were never known even to their comrades. If this thing had been done on British soil, and all the heroic deeds had been recorded and rewarded, a small foundry could have been kept busy beating out V.C.'s. They could not know, these silent heroes fighting far out in the wilderness, what a glorious country they were conquering—what an empire they were opening for all the people of the land. Occasionally there came to the men at the front old, worn newspapers, telling wild stories of the [Pg 12] failure of the enterprise. At other times they heard of changes in the Board of Directors, the election of a new President, tales of jobs and looting, but they concerned themselves only with the work in hand. No breath of scandal ever reached these pioneer trail-makers, or, if it did, it failed to find a lodging-place, but blew by. Ample opportunity they had to plunder, to sell supplies to the Indians or the Mormons, but no one of the men who did the actual work of bridging the continent has ever been accused of a selfish or dishonest act.

During his second winter of service Bradford slept away out in the Rockies, studying the snowslides and drifts. For three winters they did this, and in summer they set stakes, keeping one eye out for Indians and the other for wash-outs, and when, after untold hardships, privation, and youth-destroying labor, they had located a piece of road, out of the path of the slide and the washout, a well-groomed son of a politician would come up from the Capital, and, in the capacity of Government expert, condemn it all. Then strong men would eat their whiskers and the weaker ones would grow blasphemous and [Pg 13] curse the country that afforded no facilities for sorrow-drowning.

Once, at the end of a long, hard winter, when spring and the Sioux came, they found Bradford and a handful of helpers just breaking camp in a sheltered hollow in the hills. Hiding in the crags, the warriors waited until Bradford went out alone to try to shoot a deer, and incidentally to sound a drift, and then they surrounded him. He fought until his gun was unloaded, and then emptied his revolver; but ever dodging and crouching from tree to rock, the red men, whose country he and his companions had invaded, came nearer and nearer. In a little while the fight was hand to hand. There was not the faintest show for escape; to be taken alive was to be tortured to death, so he fought on, clubbing his revolver until a

well-directed blow from a war club caught the gun, sent it whirling through the top of a nearby cedar, and left the pathfinder empty-handed. The chief sprang forward and lifted his hatchet that had caused more than one paleface to bite the dust. For the faintest fraction of a second it stood poised above Bradford's head, then out [Pg 14] shot the engineer's strong right arm, and the Indian lay flat six feet away.

For a moment the warriors seemed helpless with mingled awe and admiration, but when Bradford stooped to grab his empty rifle they came out of their trance. A dull blow, a sense of whirling round swiftly, a sudden sunset, stars—darkness, and all pain had gone!

III

When Bradford came to they were fixing him for the fun. His back was against a tree, his feet pinioned, and his elbows held secure by a rawhide rope. He knew what it meant. He knew by the look of joy on the freshly smeared faces at his waking, by the pitch-pine wood that had been brought up, and by the fagots at his feet. The big chief who had felt his fist come up, grinning, and jabbed a buckhorn cactus against the engineer's thigh, and when the latter tried to move out of reach they all grunted and danced with delight. They had been uneasy lest the white man might not wake.

The sun, sailing westward in a burnished sea [Pg 15] of blue, seemed to stand still for a moment and then dropped down behind the range, as if to escape from the hellish scene. The shadows served only to increase the gloom in the heart of the captive. Glancing over his shoulder toward the east, he observed that his captors had brought him down near to the edge of the plain. Having satisfied themselves that their victim had plenty of life left in him, the Indians began to arrange the fuel. With the return of consciousness came an inexpressible longing to live. Suddenly his iron will asserted itself, and appealing to his great strength, surged until the rawhide ropes were buried in his flesh. Not for a moment while he stood on his feet and fought them on the morning of that day had hope entirely deserted him. Four years of hardship, of privation, and adventure had so strengthened his courage that to give up was to die.

Presently, when he had exhausted his strength and sat quietly, the Indians went on with the preliminaries. The gold in the west grew deeper, the shadows in the foothills darker, as the moments sped. Swiftly the captive's mind ran over the events of the past four years. This [Pg 16] was his first failure, and this was the end of it all — of the years of working and waiting.

Clenching his fists, he lifted his hot face to the dumb sky, but no sound escaped from his parched and parted lips. Suddenly a light shone on the semicircle of feather-framed faces in front of him, and he heard the familiar crackling of burning boughs. Glancing toward the ground he saw that the fagots were on fire. He felt the hot

breath of flame, and then for the first time realized what torture meant. Again he surged, and surged again, the cedars crackled, the red fiends danced. Another effort, the rawhide parted and he stood erect. With both hands freed he felt new strength, new hope. He tried to free himself from the pyre, but his feet were fettered, and he fell among his captors. Two or three of them seized him, but he shook them off and stood up again.

But it was useless. From every side the Indians rushed upon him and bore him to the ground. Still he fought and struggled, and as he fought the air seemed full of strange, wild sounds, of shouts and shots and hoof-beating on the dry, hard earth. He seemed to see, as [Pg 17] through a veil, scores of Indians, Indians afoot and on horseback, naked Indians and Indians in soldier clothes. Once he thought he saw a white face gleam just as he got to his feet, but at that moment the big chief stood before him, his battle-axe uplifted. The engineer's head was whirling. Instinctively he tried to use the strong right arm, but it had lost its cunning. The roar of battle grew apace, the axe descended, the left arm went up and took the blow of the handle, but the edge of the weapon reached over and split the white man's chin. As he fell heavily to the earth the light went out again.

Save for the stars that stood above him it was still dark when Bradford woke. He felt blankets beneath him, and asked in a whisper: "Who's here?"

"Major North, me call him," said the Pawnee scout, who was watching over the wounded man.

A moment later the gallant Major was leaning over Bradford, encouraging him, assuring him that he was all right, but warning him of the danger of making the least bit of noise. [Pg 18]

IV

With all his strength and pluck, it took time for Bradford to recuperate. His next work was in Washington, where, with notes and maps, his strong personality and logical arguments, he caused the Government to overrule an expert who wanted to change an important piece of road, and who had arbitrarily fixed the meeting of the mountains and plains far up in the foothills. [1]

When Bradford returned to the West he found that the whole country had suddenly taken a great and growing interest in the transcontinental line. Many of the leading newspapers had dug up their old war correspondents and sent them out to the front.

These gifted prevaricators found the plain, unvarnished story of each day's work as much as they cared to send in at night, for the builders were now putting down four and five miles of road every working day. Such road building the world had never seen, and news of it now [Pg 19] ran round the earth. At night these tireless story-tellers listened to the strange tales told by the trail-makers, then stole away to their tents and wrote them out for the people at home, while the heroes of the stories slept.

The track-layers were now climbing up over the crest of the continent, the locaters were dropping down the Pacific slope, with the prowling pathfinders peeping over into the Utah Valley. Before the road reached Salt Lake City the builders were made aware of the presence, power, and opposition of Brigham Young. The head of the church had decreed that the road must pass to the south of the lake, and as the Central Pacific had surveyed a line that way, and General Dodge had declared in favor of the northern route, the Mormons threw their powerful influence to the Southern. The Union Pacific was boycotted, and all good Mormons forbidden to aid the road in any way.

Here, again, the chief engineer brought Bradford's diplomacy to bear on Brigham and won him over.

While the Union Pacific was building west, the Central Pacific had been building east, and [Pg 20] here, in the Salt Lake basin, the advance forces of the two companies met. The United States Con-

gress directed that the rails should be joined wherever the two came together, but the bonus (\$32,000 to the mile) left a good margin to the builders in the valley, so, instead of joining the rails, the pathfinders only said "Howdy do!" and then "Good-bye!" and kept going. The graders followed close upon the heels of the engineers, so that by the time the track-layers met the two grades paralleled each other for a distance of two hundred miles. When the rails actually met, the Government compelled the two roads to couple up. It had been a friendly contest that left no bad blood. Indeed they were all willing to stop, for the iron trail was open from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

V

The tenth day of May, 1869, was the date fixed for the driving of the last spike and the official opening of the line. Special trains, carrying prominent railway and Government officials, were hurrying out from the East, while [Pg 21] up from the Golden Gate came another train bringing the flower of 'Frisco to witness, and some of them to take an active part in, the celebration. The day was like twenty-nine other May days that month in the Salt Lake Valley, fair and warm, but with a cool breeze blowing over the sagebrush. The dusty army of trail-makers had been resting for two days, waiting for the people to come in clean store clothes, to make speeches, to eat and drink, and drive the golden spike. Some Chinese laborers had opened a temporary laundry near the camp, and were coining money washing faded blue overalls for their white comrades. Many of the engineers and foremen had dressed up that morning, and a few had fished out a white shirt. Judah and Strawbridge, of the Central, had little chips of straw hats that had been harvested in the summer of '65. Here and there you saw a sombrero, the wide hat of the cowboy, and the big, soft, shapeless head cover of the Mormon, with a little bunch of whiskers on his chin. General Dodge came from his arsenal car, that stood on an improvised spur, in a bright, new uniform. Of the special trains, that of Governor [Pg 22] Stanford was first to arrive, with its straight-stacked locomotive and Celestial servants. Then the U.P. engine panted up, with its burnished bands and balloon stack, that reminded you of the skirts the women wore, save that it funnelled down. When the ladies began to jump down, the cayuses of the cowboys began to snort and sidestep, for they had seen nothing like these tents the women stood up in.

Elaborate arrangements had been made for transmitting the news of the celebration to the world. All the important telegraph offices of the country were connected with Promontory, Utah, that day, so that the blow of the hammer driving the last spike was communicated by the click of the instrument to every office reached by the wires. From the Atlantic to the Pacific the people were rejoicing and celebrating the event, but the worn heroes who had dreamed it over and over for five years, while they lay in their blankets with only

the dry, hard earth beneath them, seemed unable to realize that the work was really done and that they could now go home, those who had homes to go to, eat soft bread, and sleep between sheets. [Pg 23]

Out under an awning, made by stretching a blanket between a couple of dump-carts, Bradford lay, reading a 'Frisco paper that had come by Governor Stanford's special; but even that failed to hold his thoughts. His heart was away out on the Atlantic coast, and he would be hurrying that way on the morrow, the guest of the chief engineer. He had lost his mother when a boy, and his father just a year previous to his banishment, but he had never lost faith in the one woman he had loved, and he had loved her all his life, for they had been playmates. Now all this fuss about driving the last spike was of no importance to him. The one thing he longed for, lived for, was to get back to "God's country." He heard the speeches by Governor Stanford for the Central, and General Dodge for the Union Pacific; heard the prayer offered up by the Rev. Dr. Todd, of Pittsfield; heard the General dictate to the operator:

"All ready," and presently the operator sang out the reply from the far East:

"All ready here!" and then the silver hammer began beating the golden spike into the [Pg 24] laurel tie, which bore a silver plate, upon which was engraved:

"The Last Tie
Laid in the Completion of the Pacific
Railroads.
May 10, 1869."

After the ceremony there was handshaking among the men and some kissing among the women, as the two parties—one from either coast—mingled, and then the General's tent boy came under the blanket to call Bradford, for the General wanted him at once. Somehow Bradford's mind flew back to his first meeting with this boy. He caught the boy by the arms, held him off, and looked at him. "Say, boy," he asked, "have I changed as much as you have? Why, only the other day you were a freckled beauty in high-water trousers. You're a man now, with whiskers and a busted lip. Say, have I changed, too?"