

# THE ROADMASTER'S STORY.

## THE SPIDER WATER.

BY FRANK H. SPEARMAN,

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NOT officially: I don't pretend to say that. You might travel the West End from fresh water to salt without ever locating the Spider Water, by map or by name. But if you should happen anywhere on the West End to sit among a gang of bridge carpenters, or get to confidence with a bridge foreman; or find the springy side of a roadmaster's heart—*then* you might hear all you want about the Spider Water; maybe more.

The Sioux named it; and, whatever their faults, no man with sense ever attempted to improve on their names for things—whether birds, or braves, or winds, or waters; they know.

Unfortunately our managers hadn't always sense, and one of them countenanced a shameful change in the name of Spider Water. Some polytechnical idiot dubbed it the Big Sandy; and the Big Sandy it is to this day on map and in folder. But not in the heart of the Sioux or the lingo of trackmen.

It was the only stream our bridge engineers could never manage. Bridge after bridge they threw across it—and into it. One auditor at Omaha, given to asthma and statistics, estimated, between spells, that the Spider Water had cost us more than all the other water courses together from the Missouri to the Sierras.

Then came to the West End a masterful man, a Scotchman, pawky and hard. Brodie was his name, an Edinburgh man, with no end of degrees and master of every one. A great engineer, Brodie, but the Spider Water took a fall even out of him. It swept out a Howe truss bridge for Brodie almost before he got his bag opened.

Then Brodie tried—not to make friends with the Spider, for nobody could do that—but to get acquainted with it. For this he went to its oldest neighbors, the Sioux. Brodie spent weeks and weeks, summers, up

the Spider Water, hunting. And with the Sioux he talked the Spider Water and drank fire-water. That was Brodie's shame, the fire-water.

But he was pawky, and he chinned unceasingly the braves and the Medicine-men about the uncommonly queer creek that took the bridges so fast. The river that month in and month out couldn't squeeze up water enough to baptize a pollywog, and then, of a sudden, and for a few days, would rage like the Missouri, restore to the desert its own and living image, and leave our bewildered rails hung up either side in the wind.

Brodie talked cloudbursts up country; for the floods came, times, under clear skies—and the Sioux sulked in silence. He suggested an unsuspected inlet from some mountain stream which, maybe, times, sent its stormwater over a low divide into the Spider—and the red men shrugged their faces. As a last resort, and in desperation, he hinted at the devil. And the skeptics took a quick brace, with as much as to say, "Now you are talking," and muttered, "Bad Medicine."

Then they gave him the Indian stuff about the Spider Water; took him away up where once a party of Pawnees had camped in the dust of the river bed to surprise the Sioux; and told Brodie how the Spider—more sudden than buck, fleeter than pony—had come down in the night and ambushed the Pawnees with a flood. And so well that next morning there wasn't enough material in sight for a ghost dance.

They took Brodie himself out into the ratty bed, and when he said heap dry, and said no water, they laughed, Indianwise, and pointed to the sand. Scooping little wells with their hands, they showed him the rising and the filling; water where the instant before was no water; and a bigger fool than Brodie could see the water was all there, only underground.

"But when did it rise?" asked Brodie. "When the chinook spoke," said the Sioux. "And why?" persisted Brodie. "Because

the Spider woke," answered the Sioux. And Brodie went out of the camp of the Sioux wondering.

And he planned a new bridge which should "stand the chinook and the Spider and the devil himself," said Brodie, "Medicine or no Medicine." And full seven year it lasted; and then the fire-water spoke for the wicked Scotchman, and he himself went out into the night.

And after he died, miserable wreck of a man, the Spider woke and took his pawky bridge and tied up the main line for two weeks and set us crazy, for it cost us our grip on the California fast freight business. But at that time Healey was superintendent of bridges on the West End.

His father was a section foreman. When Healey was a mere kid, he got into Brodie's office doing errands. But whenever he saw a draftsman at work he hung over the table till they kicked him down stairs. Then, by and by, Healey got himself an old table and part of a cake of India ink, and with some cursing from Brodie became a draftsman, and one day head draftsman in Brodie's office. Healey was no college man; Healey was a Brodie man. Single mind on single mind—concentration absolute. Mathematics, drawing, bridges, brains—that was Healey. All that Brodie knew, Healey had from him, and Brodie, who hated even himself, showed still a light in the wreck by molding Healey to his work. For one day, said Brodie in his heart, this boy shall be master of these bridges. When I am dust he will be here what I might have been—this Irish boy—and they will say he was Brodie's boy. And better than any of these doughheads they send me out he shall be, if he *was* made engineer by a drunkard. And Healey was better, far, far better than the doughheads, better than the graduates, better than Brodie—and to Healey came the time to wrestle with the Spider.

Stronger than any man he was, before or since, for the work. All Brodie knew, all the Indians knew, all that a life's experience, eating, living, watching, sleeping with the big river, had taught him, that Healey knew. And when Brodie's bridge went out, Healey was ready with his new bridge for the Spider Water, which should be better than Brodie's, just as he was better than Brodie. A bridge like Brodie's, with the fire-water, as it were, left out. And after the temporary structure was thrown over the stream, Healey's plans for a Howe truss, two-pier, two-abutment, three-span, pneumatic cais-

son bridge to span the Spider Water were submitted to headquarters.

But the cost! The directors jumped the table when they saw the figures. Our directors talked economy for the road and for themselves studied piracy. So Healey couldn't get the money for his new bridge, and was forced to build a cheap one which must, he knew, go some time. But the dream of his life, this we all knew—the Sioux would have said the Spider knew—was to build a final bridge over the Spider Water, a bridge to throttle it for all time.

It was the one subject on which you could get a rise out of Healey any time, day or night, the two-pier, two-abutment, three-span, pneumatic caisson Spider bridge. He would talk Spider bridge to a Chinaman. His bridge foreman, Ed Peeto, a staving big one-eyed French Canadian, had but two ideas in life. One was Healey, the other the Spider bridge. And after many moons our pirate directors were thrown out, and a great and public-spirited man took control of our system, and when Ed Peeto heard it he kicked his little water spaniel in a frenzy of delight. "Now, Sport, old boy," he exclaimed riotously, "we'll get the bridge!" And after much effort by Healey, seconded by Bucks, superintendent of the division, and by Callahan, assistant, the new president did consent to put up the money for the good bridge. The wire flashed the word to the West End. Everybody at the wickiup, as we called the old division headquarters, was glad; but Healey rejoiced, Ed Peeto burned red fire, and his little dog Spórt ate rattlesnakes.

There was a good bridge needed at one other point, the Peace River, a treacherous water, and Healey had told the new management that if they would give him a pneumatic caisson bridge there, he would guarantee the worst stretch on the system against tie-up disasters for a generation; and they had said go ahead; and Ed Peeto went fairly savage with responsibility and strutted around the wickiup like a cyclops.

Early in the summer, Healey very quiet, and Peeto very profane, with all their traps and belongings, moved into construction headquarters at the Spider, and the first airlock ever sunk west of the Missouri closed over the heads of tall Healey and big Ed Peeto. Like a swarm of ants the bridge workers cast the refuse up out of the Spider bed. The blowpipes never slept, night and day the sand streamed from below, and Healey's caissons sank like armed

cruisers foot by foot towards the bedrock. When the masonry was crowding high-water mark, Healey and Peeto ran back to Medicine Bend to get acquainted with their families. Peeto was so deaf he couldn't hear himself swear, and Healey was as ragged and ratty as the old depot; but both were immensely happy.

Next morning, Sunday, they all sat up in Bucks's office reading letters and smoking:

"Hello," growled Bucks, chucking a nine-inch official manila under the table, "here's a general order—Number Fourteen."

The boys drew their briars like one. Bucks read a lot of stuff that didn't touch our end, then he reached this paragraph:

The Mountain and Inter-mountain divisions are hereby consolidated under the name of the Mountain Division, with J. F. Bucks superintendent, headquarters at Medicine Bend. C. T. Callahan is appointed assistant of the consolidated divisions.

"Good boy!" roared Ed Peeto, straining his ears.

"Well, well, well," murmured Healey, opening his eyes, "here's promotions right and left." Bucks read on:

H. P. Agnew is appointed superintendent of bridges of the new division, with headquarters at Omaha, vice P. C. Healey.

Bucks threw down the order. Ed Peeto broke out first: "Did you hear that?"

Healey nodded.

"You're let out!" stormed Peeto. Healey nodded. The bridge foreman dashed his pipe at the stove, jumped up, stamped across to the window, and was like to have sworn the glass out before Healey spoke.

"I'm glad we're up with the Spider job, Bucks," said he. "When they get the Peace River work in, the division will run itself for a year."

"Healey," said Bucks, "I don't need to tell you what I think of it, do I? It's a cursed shame. But it's what I've said for a year—nobody will ever know what Omaha is going to do next." Healey rose to his feet. "Where you going?"

"Back to the Spider on Number Two."

"Not going back this morning. Why don't you wait for Four to-night?"

"Ed, will you get those staybolts and chuck them into the baggage car for me when Two pulls in? I'm going over to the house for a minute."

They knew what that meant. He was going over to tell the folks he wouldn't be home for Sunday as he expected—as the

children expected. Going to tell the wife—the old man—that he was out. Out of the railroad system he had given his life to help build up and to make what it was. Out of the position he had climbed to by studying like a hermit and working like a hoboe. Out—without criticism or reason or allegation. Simply, like a dog, out.

Bucks and Callahan looked down on the departing train soon afterward, and saw Healey climbing into the smoker. Every minute he had before the new order beheaded him he spent at the Spider. One thing he meant to make sure of—that they shouldn't beat him out of the finish of the Spider bridge as he had planned it. One monument Healey meant to have; one he has.

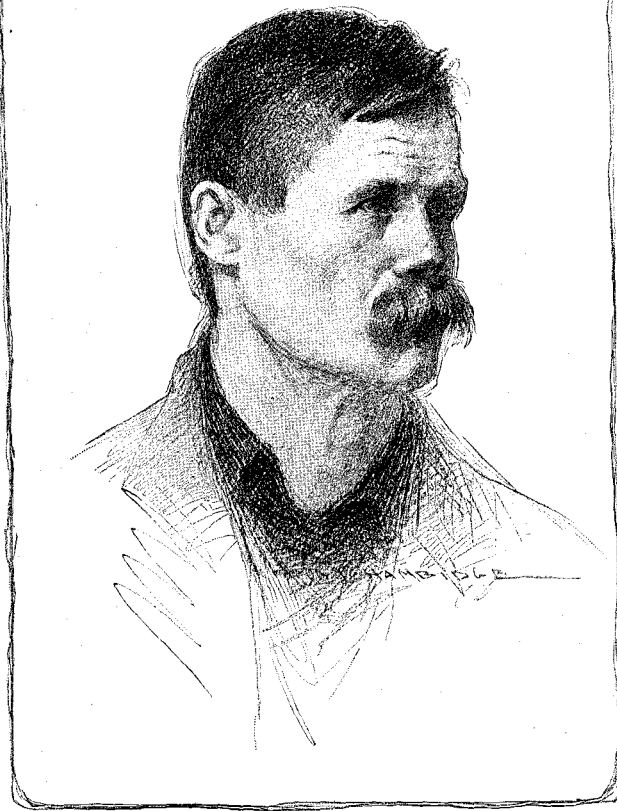
After he let go on the West End, Healey wanted to look up something East. But Bucks told him frankly it would be difficult to get a place without a regular engineer's degree. It seemed as if there was no place for Healey but just the mountains, and after a time finding nothing, and Bucks losing a roadmaster, Healey—Callahan urging—agreed to take the little job and stay with his old superintendent. It was a big drop, but Healey took it.

Agnew meantime had stopped all construction work not too far along to discontinue. The bridge at the Spider was fortunately beyond his mandate; it was finished to a rivet as Healey had planned it. But the Peace River bridge was caught in the air, and Healey's great caissons gave way to piles, and pulled the cost down from a hundred to seventy-five thousand dollars. Incidentally it was breathed from headquarters that the day for extravagant appropriations on the West End was passed.

That year we had no winter till spring, and no spring till summer; and it was a spring of snow and a summer of water. The mountains were lost in snow even after Easter. When the snow let up, and it was no longer a matter of keeping the track clear, it was a matter of lashing it to the right-of-way to keep it from swimming clear. Healey caught it worse than anybody. He knew Bucks looked to him for the track, and he worked like two men, for that was his way in a pinch. He strained every nerve making ready for the time the mountain snows should go out.

There was nobody easy on the West End, Healey least of all, for that spring, ahead of the suns, ahead of the thaws, ahead of the waters, came a going out that unsettled the oldest calculator in the wickiup. Brodie's

Healey



old friends began coming out of the up-country, out of the Spider Valley. Over the Eagle Pass and through the Peace Cañon came the Sioux in parties and camps and tribes. And Bucks stayed them and talked with them. Talked of the Great White Father and the Bad Agent. But the Sioux did not talk, they grunted—and traveled. After Bucks Healey tried, for the braves knew him and would listen. But when he accused them of fixing for a fight, they denied and turned their faces to the mountains. They stretched their arms straight out under their blankets like stringers, and put their palms downward and muttered to Healey, “Plenty snow.”

“I reckon they’re lying,” growled Bucks, listening. Healey made no comment; only looked at the buried mountains.

Now the Spider wakes regularly twice; at all other times irregularly. Once in April; that is the foothills water. Once in June; that is the mountain water. And the June rise is like this  $\sim$ . But the April rise is like this  $\wedge$ .

Now came an April without any rise: nothing rose but the snow, and May opened bleaker than April; even the trackmen walked with set faces. The dirtiest half-breed on the line knew now what the mountains held. At least while we looked and wondered came a very late chinook. July in May. Then the water.

Section gangs were doubled, night walkers put on. By-passes were opened, bridge crews strengthened, everything buckled for grief. Gullies began to race, culverts to



choke, creeks to tumble, rivers to madden. From the Muddy to the Summit the water courses swelled and boiled; all but the Spider; the big river slept. Through May and into June the Spider slept. But Healey was there at the wickiup, with one eye always running over all the line and one eye turned always to the Spider, where two men and two, night and day, watched the lazy surface water trickle over and through the vagabond bed between Healey's monumental piers. Never an hour did the operating department lose the track. East and west of us everywhere railroads clamored in despair. The flood swept from the Rockies to the Alleghanies. Our trains never missed a trip; our schedules were unbroken; our people laughed; we got the business, dead loads of it! Our treasury flowed over; and Healey watched, and the Spider slept. But when May turned soft and hot into June, with every ditch bellying and the mountains still buried, it put us all thinking hard.

On the 30th there was trouble beyond Wild Hat, and all our extra men, put out there under Healey, were fighting to hold the Rat Valley levels where they hug the river on the west slope. It wasn't really Healey's track. Bucks sent him over there just as the Emperor sent Ney, wherever he needed his right arm. Sunday, while Healey was at Wild Hat, rain began falling. Sunday it rained; Monday all through the mountains it rained; Tuesday it was raining from Omaha to Eagle Pass, with the thermometer climbing for breath and the barometer flat as an adder—and the Spider woke. Woke with the April water and the June water and the storm water all at once.

Trackwalkers Tuesday night flagged Number One, and reported the Spider wild, with heavy sheet ice running. A wire from Bucks brought Healey out of the west and into the east, and brought him to reckon for the last time with his ancient enemy.

He was against it Wednesday with dynamite. All the day, all the night, all the next day the sullen roar of the giant powder shook the forming jam above the bridge, and after two days Healey wired, "Ice out," and set back without a minute's sleep for home. Saturday night he slept and Sunday all day and Sunday night. Monday about noon Bucks sent up to ask, but Healey still slept. They asked back by the lad whether they should wake him. Bucks sent word, "No."

It was late Tuesday morning when the tall roadmaster came down, and he was fresh as

sunshine. All day he sat with Bucks and the despatchers watching the line. The Spider raced mad, and the watchers sent in panic messages, but Healey put them in his pipe. "That bridge will go when the mountains go," was all he said.

Nine o'clock that night every star was blinking when Healey looked in for the trackwalkers' reports and the railroad weather bulletins. Bucks, Callahan, and Peeto sat about Martin Duffy, the despatcher, who in his shirt sleeves threw the stuff off the sounder as it trickled in dot and dash, dot and dash over the wires.

The west wire was good; east everything below Peace River was down. We had to get the eastern reports around by Omaha and the south—a good thousand miles of a loop—but bad news travels even around a Robin Hood loop.

And first came Wild Hat from the west with a stationary river and the Loup Creek falling—clear—good-night. And Ed Peeto struck the table heavily and swore it was well in the west. Then from the east came Prairie Portage, all the way round, with a northwest rain, a rising river, and anchor ice running, pounding the piers bad—track in fair shape, and—and—

The wire went wrong. As Duffy knit his eyes and tugged and cussed a little, the wind outside took up the message and whirled a bucket of rain against the windows. But the wires wouldn't right, and stuff that no man could get tumbled in like a dictionary upside down. And Bucks and Callahan and Healey and Peeto smoked, silent, and heard the deepening drum of the rain on the roof.

Then Duffy wrestled mightily yet once more, and the long way round came word of trouble in the Omaha yards with the river at twenty-two feet and cutting.

"Hell to pay on the Missouri, *of course*," growled Peeto.

"Keep still," exclaimed Duffy, leaning heavily on the key. "Here's something—from the Spider."

He snatched a pen and ran it across a clip; Bucks leaning over read aloud from his shoulder:

OMAHA.

J. F. BUCKS:

Trainmen from No. 75 stalled west of Rapids City—track afloat in Simpson's cut—report Spider bridge out—send—

And the current broke.

Callahan's hand closed rigidly over the

hot bowl of his pipe; Peeto sat speechless; Bucks read again at the broken message, but Healey sprang like a man wounded and snatched the clip from his hand.

He stared at the running words till they burnt his eyes, and then, with an oath, frightful as the thunder that shook the mountains, he dashed the clip to the floor. His eyes snapped greenish, and he cursed Omaha, cursed its messages, and everything that came out of it. Slow at first, then fast and faster, until all the sting that poisoned his heart in his unjust discharge poured from his lips. It flooded the room like a spilling stream, and none put a word against it, for they knew he stood a wronged man. Out it came—all the rage, all the heartburning, all the bitterness—and he dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands. Only the sounder clicking iron jargon and the thunder shaking the wickiup like a reed filled the ears of the men about him. They watched him slowly knot his fingers and loosen them, and saw his face rise dry and hard and old out of his hands.

“Get up an engine!”

“Not—you’re not going down there tonight?” stammered Bucks.

“Yes. Now. Right off. Peeto, get out your men!”

The foreman jumped for the door. Bucks hesitated barely an instant, then turning where he stood, cut a telephone plug into the round-house. Callahan saw it, and leaning forward spoke low to Duffy. The little despatcher snatching the train sheet began clearing track for a bridge special. In twenty minutes twenty men were running as many ways through the storm, and a live engine boomed under the wickiup window.

“I want you to be careful, Phil,” Bucks spoke anxiously as he looked with Healey out into the storm. “It’s a bad night.” Healey made no answer.

The lightning shot the yards in a blaze and a crash split the gorge. “A wicked night,” muttered Bucks,

Evans, conductor of the special, ran in.

“Here’s your orders,” said Duffy. “You’ve got forty miles an hour.”

“Don’t stretch it,” warned Bucks. “Good-by, Phil,” he added to Healey, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“In the morning,” echoed Healey. “Good-by.”

The switch engine had puffed up with a caboose; ahead of it Peeto had coupled in the pile driver. At the last minute Callahan concluded to go, and with the bridge gang

tumbling into the caboose, the assistant superintendent, Ed Peeto, and Healey climbed into the engine, and they pulled out, five in the cab, for the Spider Water.

Healey, moody at first, began joking and laughing the minute they got way. He sat behind Denis Mullenix, the engineer, and poked his ribs and taunted him with his heavy heels. At last he covered Denis’s big hands on the throttle with his own bigger fingers, good-naturedly coaxed them loose, and pushing him away got the reins and the whip into his own keeping. He drew the bar out a notch and settled himself for the run across the flat country. They were leaving the foothills, and when the lightning opened the night, they could see behind, through the blasting rain, the great hulking pile-driver nod and reel out into the Painted Desert like a drunken man; for Healey’s schedule was the wind and his limit the wide throttle.

As they sped from the shelter of the hills, the storm shook them with a freshening fury, and drove the flanges into the south rail with a grinding screech. The rain fell in a sheet, and the right-of-way ran a river. The wind, whipping the water off the ballast, dashed it like hail against the cab glass; the segment of desert caught in the yellow of the headlight rippled and danced and swam in the storm water, and Healey pulled again at the straining throttle and latched it wider.

Notch after notch he drew; heedless of lurch and jump; heedless of bed or curve; heedless of track or storm; and with every spur at her cylinders the engine shook like a frantic horse. Men and monster alike lost thought of caution and drunk a frenzy in the whirl that Healey opened across the swimming plain.

The Peace River hills loomed suddenly in front like moving pictures; before they could think it the desert was behind.

“For God’s sake, Phil, let up!” yelled Callahan, getting his mouth to Healey’s ear. The roadmaster nodded, checked a notch, threw a hatful of air on the shoes; but the fire was in his blood, and he slewed into the hills with a speed unslackened. The wind blew them, and the track pulled them, and a frenzied man sat at the throttle.

Just where the line crosses the Peace River the track bends sharply through the Needles to take the bridge. The curve is a ten degree. As they struck it, the headlight shot far out upon the river—and they in the cab knew they sat dead men. Instead of lighting the box of the truss, the lamp lit a black

and snaky flood with yellow foam sweeping over the abutment, for the Peace had licked up Agnew's thirty-foot piles—and his bridge was not.

There were two things to do; Healey knew them both, and both meant death to the cab, but the caboose sheltered twenty of Healey's faithful men. He instantly threw the air, and with a scream from the tires, the special, shaking in the brake-shoes, swung the curve. Again the roadmaster checked heavily, and the pile-driver, taking the elevation like a hurdle, bolted into the Needles, dragging the caboose after it. But engine and tender and five in the cab plunged head on into the Peace.

Not a man in the caboose was killed. They scrambled out of the splinters and on their feet, men and ready to do. One voice came through the storm from the river, and they answered its calling. It was Callahan, but

Durden, Mullenix, Peeto, Healey never called again.

At daybreak, wreckers of the West End, swarming from mountain and plain, were heading for the Peace, and the McCloud gang—up—crossed the Spider on Healey's bridge—on the bridge the coward trainmen had reported out, quaking as they did in the storm at the Spider foaming over its approaches. But Healey's bridge stood—stands to-day.

Yet three days the Spider raged, and knew then its master, while he, three whole days, sat at the bottom of the Peace, clutching the engine levers, in the ruins of Agnew's mistake.

And when the divers got them up, Callahan and Bucks tore big Peeto's arms from his master's body and shut his staring eye and laid him at his master's side. And only the Spider, ravening at Healey's caissons, raged. But Healey slept.

## A LAMENT OF THE COUNTRY.

BY WILLIAM WALLACE WHITELOCK.

GIVE back, oh city, from thy clutch  
 My children to my breast,  
 That, ravished, aches to feel their touch,  
 And lull their pain to rest;  
 My dug's are full, while hark! they cry  
 For food, but cry in vain—  
 Oh, vampire of the glittering lie,  
 Give back mine own again!

My fields are golden seas of grain  
 I bore for them to reap;  
 My bounty swells some gambler's gain  
 Who heeds not while they weep.  
 My children render to my arms,  
 Thou wanton draped in red,  
 That lur'st the quick with deadly charms,  
 And send'st me but the dead.

Give back the children whom I nursed  
 And brought to man's estate,  
 Until they heard thy voice accurst,  
 Thou cursed one of fate!  
 Mine age is lonely, and my breast  
 Yearns for my faithless sons,  
 That I may lull their pain to rest,  
 My poor deluded ones.