

The Bridge



**Martha
Ostenso**

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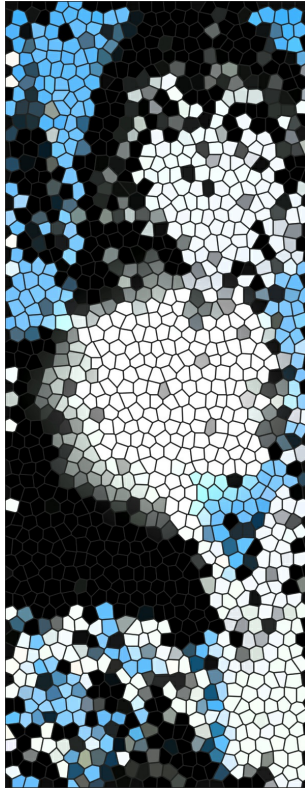
The

BRIDGE

By **Martha Ostenso**

The story of a man who turned his back on life

The Bridge



*“It seemed an eternity
before Charlotte turned
her head, with a sob”*

IT WAS a black-and-silver land now in the anonymous season between winter and spring. On the lake margins the muskrat huts were tattered cones of straw and reed, disintegrating and drifting among the floes. Ice, hurled by waters livid in release, pounded the shore and built new shelves of white sand at the very feet of the great Norway pines, heavy and somber from a week of rain.

The man had come up from the cranberry bog where the red sedges grew. He had not gone there for rabbits or any other living thing unless the color of the marsh could be called that. He was through with taking life, as he was

through with giving it—or restoring it, even. Life, its affirmation and its denial, was no longer the fountained ecstasy of Doctor William Oliver's soul.

He had gone to the marsh only to look at its inanimate beauty, because his love of beauty was a thing that stubbornly refused to die in him. While he had stood there on the rain-curtained slope, leaning against a wetly fragrant balsam, he had resisted the impressing thought that soon the swamp hollow would be a small and urgent sea of buds, with a tiding up to flower and then another ebbing into death.

Tennyson's lines had come to him—striding out with grisly tread from his poetry-loving boyhood—

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood. . . .

His own tragedy had taken place in neither hollow nor wood, but that was the way with everything: any chance joy he might have gleaned from his lonely existence in the north woods since his flight last November had been obliterated at once by the play of his own imagination upon it.

He leaned forward now against the wind and the rain of the April morning, his leather jacket soggy about his neck, thorns of the underbrush clawing at his high laced boots. Once, sinking to his knee in the winter fastness of some forest denizen, he grasped a tree to steady himself. His woolen glove, catching on the stump of a broken branch, came off and bared his right hand.

The sick feeling came over him again as he saw his naked hand limned there against the raw darkness of the tree with pocked snow at its roots, rain in its noded branches. Hastily he thrust his hand back into the glove and wondered bleakly what he would do when summer came, when it would be only pointed torment to keep his hands covered. For during the winter he had been in his cabin only to eat and sleep, even on the coldest days.

His trained mind told him that this was obsession of a corrosive sort, but he had got beyond caring what it was. He could not endure the shape and strength and skill of those hands that should have saved a man's life—that *might* have saved it, too! For more than four months he had kept them hidden from his own sight.

Gaunt and tall and broad as this north region itself, Doctor Bill Oliver made his way across the mile and a half toward the cabin that had seemed to be waiting for him when he had come here and found it last fall. The snows that had lain eight feet deep had sunk like fallen cakes, and now in open glades

rivulets chattered above the groan of pine and hemlock and oak in the lashing wind and rain.

A baby ribbon of a brook had gorged itself on the melting snow until now it was twelve feet wide and passable only by the grace of two or three boulders still scarping above its testy white swirl.

At last he gained the upper ridge. He would have to cross the county road now into another stretch of timber. It was a roadway but little frequented at this time of year, except by the few settlers who drove their nags or their dilapidated cars to and from the village seven miles away. In the summer it would be different, with campers dotting the lakes. But by that time Bill Oliver would have made his way farther north, perhaps even across the border, into more certain oblivion.

A high stand of sumac, still rustily tasseled, and scrub oak lined the saw-tooth bank of the road. Bill Oliver climbed out of the little gully, thrusting aside the densely woven branches, and stood a moment later looking down at the highway. His gray, black-lashed eyes narrowed in quick appraisal of the automobile on the road below—and of the two men changing a tire with angry haste. But his appraisal was not quite quick enough. One of the men glanced up and stared at him standing there in the scrub on the rise, not fifty feet away.

BILL OLIVER, quicker than thought, flung himself to the ground. Half rolling, half scrambling, he reached the bottom of the gully. Then, on a crouching run, he darted through a growth of evergreen so thick that only a man possessed could have made his way through it. When instinct told him he had gone far enough he finally stretched himself out on a dark bed of pine needles and wet snow, his lungs aching, his ears pounding with blood.

Charlotte's cousin, Jim Huron, might not have recognized him, after all, in these clothes and with a full week's beard on a face reddened with weather. If he had only grown his beard all winter and not feared the suspicions of the natives! Well, Jim Huron had probably not recognized him—they had seemed in a deuce of a hurry about changing that tire!—and even if he *had*, Jim wouldn't spend time looking for him in these woods.

It was clear enough to Bill Oliver why Charlotte's cousin had been on that road at all. Jim had always wanted a summer place in the north woods. He would go as far as the Rainy Lake country if he could find nothing attractive closer to the city. Jim had probably been scouting around. It was just one of those coincidences of fiction that he, Bill Oliver, should have seen him.

But that glimpse of Jim had brought everything back, horribly vivid as a recurring nightmare.

DOCTOR OLIVER was driving home again, in the citron-colored November twilight, from the city where the conference in the clinic had been postponed because of the illness of the chief speaker. He was driving home alone to his neat little town of Corliss, where he was head surgeon in the neat little hospital, and where, in his neat little bungalow, Charlotte had been unbelievably his wife for three years. Charlotte, of the red-gold coronet of smooth braids, eyes blue as star flowers, and limbs like those of Diana—Charlotte who had been so patient with him during those three years of his complete devotion to his work!

She would not be expecting him until after two o'clock in the morning. Purposely he had not telephoned her that the conference had been put off. He would be at home by ten o'clock. He would tiptoe in to where she would be at her piano or reading a book—she had said she would spend the evening at home—and gather her into his arms for one of those precious hours of love which his work had cheated them of these weeks back.

While he drove, swiftly but carefully, his eyes lightened at the thought that probably now, two years after that near disaster, he and Charlotte might risk another baby. His work was absorbing him more and more, with the prospect of his appointment to the staff of the General Hospital in the city as a reward for his intensive research in brain surgery.

Charlotte was twelve years younger than he—only twenty-four and she should have something to interest her besides small-town bridge parties and teas and tennis and golf. In another two years, of course, they would be established in the city, where they would have a little leisure. He would be able to play a little, to be again Charlotte's proud courtier—not merely an overworked medico of a husband with cases in every nook of the county.

His grin carved happy creases in his lean cheeks as he turned his car into the service station two blocks from his home. In another five minutes he would be seated beside his own log fire, in his deep chair, with Charlotte, a warm, dear part of him, in his arms—quiet, and yet not quiet at all!

“Change the oil, Pete,” he instructed the overalled attendant, “and check the tires.”

“Right you are, Doc!” Pete replied.

Bill Oliver got out of the car. “You won't mind running her up the street for

me, eh? I feel like stretching my legs before I turn in.”

“Not a bit, Doc,” Pete assured him with the genial familiarity of the small town. “Flynn’s still on duty.”

A drug store was just across the street. Bill Oliver went into it and bought, without a blush, two pounds of the peanut brittle Charlotte loved. He liked it tolerably himself, but he adored hearing Charlotte’s white teeth crunching it with such gusto. He hurried out again, his blood rising, and the moonless autumn darkness of his street enveloped him with its immediate promise.

Was the house completely dark? he wondered in surprise as he came around from the front entrance past the crisply whispering lilacs to the side veranda. No, the window drapes of the tiny library, where Charlotte would be sitting reading before the fire, were drawn, but a sliver of light between them made his heart leap.

As he stole up the steps he remembered, irrelevantly, that it was Queenie’s night off—unfashionably, the Olivers gave Queenie Sundays and a night during the week. Not so irrelevant, after all, he thought, smiling at the clumsy workings of his own brain when he was supposed to be a specialist in brains! The rest of the house was dark because Queenie always frugally turned out every light before she left, except those in the room her mistress happened to be occupying at the moment.

Bill opened the door noiselessly. He held the paper bag full of peanut brittle well away from him so that it would not crackle. Then he stepped through the little foyer and looked, grinning, into the dimly lit, friendly room with its fireplace, where the logs snapped, red-tongued. On the hearth-rug stood Charlotte, her body curved and half swaying, in the arms of Roy Ferris, Doctor Oliver’s young assistant surgeon at the hospital.

Perhaps it was only two seconds, but it seemed an eternity before Charlotte turned her head in his direction, with a sob from the depths of her body, a sob that was not for him. Then, as she stared at him, her eyes widened and closed drunkenly. But Charlotte was not drunk—not in the ordinary way of being drunk.

Doctor Ferris stepped back from her as though a knife had been run through him, and he was trying not to believe it. In the firelight he was white-lipped, straight as a ramrod, and Bill realized for the first time that Ferris was handsome in a slender, intense, and dark way.

“I seem to have come back at an inopportune moment,” Bill heard himself say dully. The candy crackled in the bag as his palms closed upon it.

“Bill!” Charlotte was awake now, out of that trance of her body. She was plunging toward him across the room, her lips parted, her eyes dark and terrible.

The telephone rang in the entry, the extension telephone that meant the hospital around the corner. Bill walked over, dropping the bag of peanut brittle on an end table as he strode past. He spoke curtly into the transmitter.

“Yes? Yes . . . certainly . . . yes. Right over!”

He moved back into the library, and so deliberately that neither Charlotte nor Roy Ferris could know that he felt as though he were walking on a bank of fog.

“There’s been an automobile accident,” he said, leaning forward with his hands in his pockets and bowing to his assistant. “Elderly man—skull fracture—pressure in occipital area. Immediate operation indicated. It’s the chance you’ve been waiting for, isn’t it, Doctor Ferris?”

Before Bill’s eyes, Roy Ferris seemed to snap into many parts. His hands fumbled across the back of a chair, but they seemed to be in rigid sections, like a mechanical toy.

“For God’s sake, Bill!” he stammered. “I— I——”

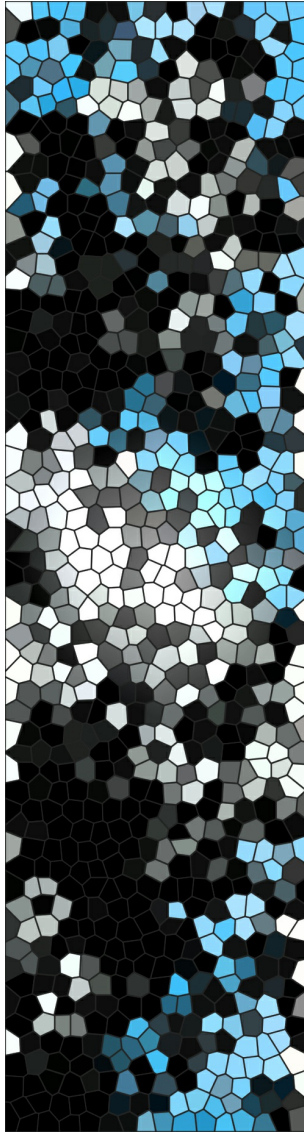
He broke off, staring blindly around at Charlotte, who stood with clenched hands, gazing at Bill Oliver in terrified silence.

“Let’s go!” Bill said. The sound issued from his throat like the rattle of poker chips. “We haven’t a minute to lose. It’s your big chance.”

FOR only an instant longer Roy Ferris remained as though spellbound, his fists knotted on the back of the chair. Then, without a word, he walked across the room to the hall, picked up his hat and coat, and went out through the front door, Bill Oliver following him.

Their arrival at the hospital dressing room seemed to Bill to have been accomplished instantaneously, as when, in a dream, one is whisked without interim from one place to another. There had been no conversation between the two men, Roy Ferris having walked a pace ahead of Bill on the way. Now, in silence, they were scrubbing up, adjusting caps and masks, and the two swift nurses were fastening their gowns at the back. Kimball, the young interne, was

methodically, conscientiously giving his report.



*“He knew nothing
but stark dread
until he saw her”*

“. . . patient presents on admission deep jagged wound in occipital area . . .
fragment of shattered windshield penetrating skull. . . .”

How the fool’s voice droned on! Bill thought with cold madness. Better for

all of them if the broken glass had penetrated Kimball's skull!

"Doctor Ferris will operate," Bill said distinctly. The sound of his own voice was like an explosion in his brain. But he was not to know until later that echo and reëcho in those hills and valleys of gray cells could go on forever.

Presently they were in the operating room. Brilliance upon brilliance smote Bill Oliver's eyes—the lights, the white walls, the uniforms of the nurses, the gleam of the instruments on the portable table, the prone, white-draped figure of the unconscious man; the sheen of his hairless head except where the ragged, crimson wound showed—and the glistening sweat on the forehead of Doctor Roy Ferris.

"Doctor Ferris will operate"

Scalpel . . . hæmostat . . . sutures . . . trephine . . . Doctor Oliver assisting.

Assisting? Up to the site of trauma, Bill thought, and laughed ferociously beneath the white, impassive mask of the fixed stare he kept upon Roy Ferris. The pulsating cavity of the head on the operating table no longer interested him. He kept his eyes upon the grayly beaded, desperate face of Ferris as he bent over the patient. And Ferris knew those eyes were upon him, boring mercilessly, with diabolical vengeance, into his soul, his very life.

The nurse who was watching the patient's pulse made a startled movement. Something like an electric shock seemed to pass through her, through the head nurse, through the anæsthetist, and through Doctor Ferris—through all the living tissue in the white room. Without looking at them, without feeling, without hearing or seeing, Bill Oliver knew it. There was quick motion; there were dipped, quiet words, but Doctor Oliver had already plunged out of the operating room.

LESS than five minutes later, his overcoat on his arm, his hat in his hand, he was reeling into the dark areaway behind the hospital. There he was deathly sick.

He was in his own house again. He was sliding past his and Charlotte's bedroom, from which, into his furred senses, there seemed to come a convulsive sobbing. He was clawing his way up the narrow stairs to the attic room, turning the light on there, and with the automatic precision of the blind he was digging out his camp kit, changing his clothes to flannel shirt, breeches, boots, leather jacket, corduroy hunting cap.

His duffel bag hung on a nail under the rafters. In reaching for it he ran a

small sliver into his thumb. That steadied him a little, reminded him to take along his first-aid kit.

“First aid—for me!” he grinned to himself. “That’s good!”

He stole downstairs again and heard no sound from the bedroom. In a hall cupboard he quickly found the first-aid kit and stuffed it into his duffel bag as he made his way down to the ground floor.

Only one more thing to do—and it was done quickly. At his desk in the library he wrote a note to his lawyer, Archibald Thwaite, transferring his bank account and properties to his wife, Charlotte Oliver. From the little safe behind the desk he removed five hundred and sixty-eight dollars in cash. He shoved the money as though it had been a handkerchief, into the breast pocket of his leather jacket. That, he thought, ought to be enough for a man who meant to walk indefinitely into the wilderness.

As he went out of the house, into the edgy blackness of the November night that smelled now of snow, he thought he heard a breathless call behind him, from the second-floor landing. He was not sure. One sound only thudded in his ears: “Doctor Ferris will operate!”

BILL OLIVER raised himself to his elbows in the snow and the patches of pine needles. How long had he been lying here? he wondered. Long enough, surely, for Jim Huron to have driven on. In any case there was no need for coming out upon the road again at the same spot where he had seen Charlotte’s cousin.

He got laboriously to his feet and found that his calves were aching. His body must have taken considerable punishment in that lope through the thickset trees. Slowly he began to walk back toward the road. And for the thousandth, the ten-thousandth time his mind returned to that operating room the last night he had been in it.

If he had only glanced at the incision—if he had only seen, for a certainty, whether or not Roy Ferris’s knife had slipped—but he had seen nothing, heard nothing. He had been mad! The patient had died—there was no forgetting that—but he may have died of shock or internal injuries. It didn’t matter now. What really mattered was that Bill Oliver had *wanted* Roy Ferris to fail. There had been betrayal in that.

WHEN he had crossed the highway with no one in sight he cut through the woods to the old road that had fallen into complete disuse years ago, when a new bridge had been built across the river seven miles

downstream. The old bridge, soft as punk, had been crossed by nobody but himself since he had rented the cabin from Karl Jensen, the Swede trader. On the bridge the turbulence of the river assailed him. He crossed his arms on the rotten railing and leaned his head down upon them.

“Charlotte—Charlotte!”

It had been in this breaking, treacherously sweet season between winter and summer that he had first known he loved Charlotte. And now, his body like steel from battling through miles of winter storm in the effort to forget, and from chopping and dragging in his own firewood, and from plunging on snowshoes seven miles down the river twice a week for his brief supplies—now he knew that Charlotte was deeper in his being than ever before. There was betrayal in that, too—betrayal of the deepest instincts in him.

He crossed the bridge and felt it sway beneath him. Islands of ice roared and crashed against its rotting piles. The river had risen ten, possibly twelve feet, he surmised indifferently. It meant nothing to him or to any one else. Nobody ever drove across this bridge, nobody ever walked over it except himself, and he could hike the seven miles downstream on his own side for his supplies if the flood should sweep the old bridge away. The sooner the bridge went out the better, in fact. He would rid himself even of the fear that some one might be moved by curiosity, if nothing else, to visit his cabin. Not that he had any good reason for his fears.

ONE bright Sunday morning in January he had heard voices of children and had gone to his window to look out. Jensen’s two little girls had come as far as the bridge and turned back home again. His eyes had followed them along the trail until they were lost behind the dense pines. Children—Karl Jensen’s children—and another one about ready to be born, he had surmised on his last visit to the trader’s place up the river. With the single exception of the two little girls, Bill Oliver had not heard a human voice or seen a human face anywhere near his cabin in more than four months.

What was left of the old trail stopped virtually at his own cabin, a hundred yards or so from the bridge. Beyond the log structure, which stood on a knoll richly treed with evergreen and birch, was one of the “leaves” of Four-Leaf-Clover Lake.

Bill Oliver entered the cabin, rebuilt the fire in the fireplace, lit the kerosene stove, and prepared a lunch of canned string beans, bacon, bread, and tea. While he ate at the bare, split-pine table, he gave intense thought to the glimpse he had had of Charlotte’s cousin, Jim Huron.

He didn't think Jim could have really seen him in that brief second of exposure there above the road. It didn't matter, in any event. Charlotte had probably already begun proceedings for divorce on the grounds of desertion—he had left the way open for her to do that very thing. No danger of any one from Corliss coming north into the wilds a hundred and fifty miles to look for *him!*

THE lengthening April twilight, wet ocher with a restless horizon, was setting in when Bill heard a sound that brought him to the door of his cabin. When he opened the door Charlotte stood there, straight and slim in her short squirrel jacket, wearing a small star flower of a hat that matched her eyes. Her tawny pallor had a gray cast, and her lips were pale.

“Bill!”

She stood quiet, looking at him in the open doorway.

With his feet spread wide to steady him and his hands clenched at his back, he regarded her stonily.

“I suppose—Jim Huron telephoned you,” he said in a cold voice.

“Yes,” she replied tremulously, and came so close that she might have touched him. “Won't you let me come in?”

His face like granite, he stepped aside and permitted her to enter. She seated herself weakly in a woven birch chair beside the fire and tried to smile up at him.

“Your bridge out there, Bill,” she explained with a shaking laugh, “—it seemed to want to prevent me getting across to you. I had to leave the car on the other side. Even so—it almost gave way under me.”

Bill started, frowned at her white look, then went to a shelf and brought her a small glass of brandy.

“Here—drink this,” he ordered sharply.

She gulped it down with a wry face. Bill sat down on the chair across the fireplace from her, his hands in his pockets, his chin on his chest. When he glanced at her again, her eyes met his with desperate pleading.

“It was the man up at the store—Mr. Jensen—who told me where to find you,” she said. “He warned me about the bridge, too. Jim telephoned me from there—this morning.”

“I thought so,” Bill said wearily. “But Jensen didn’t know who I was.”

“He didn’t know your name—he didn’t even know you were a doctor—until I told him. I had to describe you——”

“You went to a lot of trouble for—for nothing,” he said bitterly.

She shrank from his gaze. “Archibald Thwaite and I put notices in the personal columns of all the papers—for months——”

“I haven’t looked at a paper.”

Charlotte hurried on. “I wouldn’t let him do more than that to find you. I thought—if you still cared for me—” Her voice broke. “But—it was my fault, of course. I’m not asking for anything, Bill. I just wanted to tell you—even if you refuse to understand. I was jealous of your work. I saw myself becoming—just something you’d have time for only after your passion for your work had been satisfied. I felt lonely—and neglected. I know that wasn’t fair of me—and I don’t know what came over me that night.”

SHE sat forward in her chair, leaning toward him. “There had never been anything between Roy Ferris and me before that night. I swear it, Bill! There wouldn’t have been anything that night if I hadn’t been—been pitying myself. I’m not trying to excuse it. It was my fault. But I haven’t seen him since. He resigned from the hospital staff the next day.”

A log in the fireplace broke in two with a shower of sparks. Bill’s eyes moved bleakly to the west window, where a narrow ribbon of gold sunset threaded through the black and dripping hemlocks.

“But I didn’t come to tell you that,” Charlotte continued hardily. “I—I have never loved any one but you, Bill—and I never shall. I had to say that, whether it matters or not.” Her thin, white fingers laced nervously in her lap, and her eyes were bluer than blue with tears. “What I wanted most to tell you is that you really must go back to your work. You left it because of me. You are free to go back to it now—without me.”

He looked at her with slow irony. “You don’t seem to understand,” he said. “My neglect of you was wrong—it was a kind of betrayal. But what I did that night in the operating room was betrayal of another sort. It was criminal. I wanted Roy Ferris to bungle the job. I wanted him to fail. Don’t you see now—there’s no going back for me!”

“Did you know the patient did not die because of any blunder in the

operation?” Charlotte said. “He was a heart case. He died of shock.”

Bill’s nostrils sharpened as he leaned suddenly forward. “That lets Ferris out!” He laughed bitterly. “But it doesn’t do anything for me. I was too insane that night to know what Ferris was doing. The point is that I *wanted* him to make a mess of it.”

HE GOT up and took a dazed turn about the room.

“I see,” Charlotte said softly. “And—if he *had* made a mess of it—I would have been the one to blame.”

His face, engraved with suffering, was half averted. “But—since he didn’t _____”

Charlotte reached her hands toward him in anguish. “This is not going to wipe out the past, Bill. One thing only can do that. You’ve got to go back to your work. The world needs you and——”

“Yes?” His laugh was a raucous bark. “The world needs me? I’ve been in this God-forsaken hole for months and not a soul has come to see me. That’s how much the world needs me. Even old Jensen avoids me as if I had leprosy.”

Charlotte’s hands clenched the arms of her chair, but a smile started secretly at the corners of her mouth. “I can’t blame them much, Bill. The way you look you—you frighten them.”

He looked down at her with shocking humor. “Yes, I frighten them! Do you know that since I’ve been here I’ve spent most of my time out of doors so that I shouldn’t have to see my own naked hands? My hands—frighten—*me*! They still do.”

Before he had finished speaking Charlotte sprang up and was crouching before him, her arms about his knees, her wet cheek pressed against his corduroy breeches.

“Bill—dearest!” she whispered. “I have done that to you!” She longed to press her cheek against the hand that lay inert on his thigh, but she only gazed at it, the tears streaming from her eyes. Then she looked up at him quickly. “But—Bill—they will frighten you no longer—if you just—if you could just once see them at work again.” She dropped her head.

With a muffled groan he bent toward that bright head. Then he straightened angrily and got to his feet.

“You’d better start back,” he said in a thick voice, “before it begins to get dark. The roads are bad, as you must know.”

But Charlotte remained crumpled forward on the floor in an attitude of obstinate humility. Her clothing was awry, but she seemed unaware of it. Her lips were parted, and when she spoke the words came in panting little sobs.

“I’m not going back, Bill! I’m staying until you come with me. If you go anywhere else—I’ll follow you!”

Through sheer will power he drew his eyes away from her and stalked to the kerosene stove. With a great clatter he proceeded to light the stove, laughing loudly and mirthlessly as he did so.

“It won’t take you long to get sick of pork and beans and condensed milk,” he said through clenched jaws.

She had stood up. “Can’t I help you make supper, Bill?”

But he swung upon her so savagely that she shrank back and caught her breast.

“Get this straight, Charlotte,” he said decisively, “you can help me in no respect whatever!”

Without a word she went to the pine table and remained seated until he put before her a tin plate upon which was heaped the most unappetizing fare she—or he, for that matter—had ever beheld. While he fell to with grim determination he dared not glance across at her. He knew that her eyes were full of laughter that would undo him.

“That was very good,” Charlotte said demurely when she had, to his chagrin, eaten every scrap of the shriveled and warmed-over macaroni and the dried wisps of sardines.

The tea was pretty fierce too, he thought, letting it stand and go cold after an experimental sip, but Charlotte drank hers with apparent gusto.

At last Bill got up unceremoniously and took his cap from its nail on the wall.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“When you wish to retire,” he said, “there’s a cot in the bedroom. When I come back—I’ll bunk out here.”

And before she could utter another word he had plunged through the door, and the quickening dusk of the woods had swallowed him.

IN THE pearl-gray half light of early morning Charlotte sat bolt upright on the cot. She had been awakened by a rending, crushing overtone in the roar of the river. The bridge!

What time was it? she wondered. She knew she had lain awake for hours before and after Bill had returned. The creeping sounds of the night inside the cabin and the thunder of the river outside had frightened her, and she had almost broken out crying when Bill's step had come softly across the threshold into the kitchen.

She had listened with all her being to the muffled sound of Bill removing his clothes, and her breath had almost died in her throat when she heard him come quietly to her door. But in the next moment she had found herself inclosed in a narrower, more terrifying darkness. He had closed the door between them. And finally, exhausted from sobbing into her pillow, she had fallen into a stupor of sleep.

Charlotte reached to the window ledge for her wrist watch. It was half past four. She sprang out of bed, dressed hastily, and flung open the door between the two rooms. The outer room was empty, and a lightning glance at the wall where Bill's duffel bag had hung vindicated her first and worst fear. The bag was gone—Bill was gone!

Even yesterday the bridge had seemed too flimsy to support her unimportant weight. And Bill's heavy tread——

With a smothered scream she rushed out of the cabin and saw that the river had risen to within twenty yards of the door. The water, with its ice floes livid in the near dawn, swirled blackly past, and of the bridge there was no sign save a splintered pile or two on the opposite shore.

In her blind terror for Bill, the danger to herself did not even occur to her. He had gone down with the bridge—there was still a chance that he might be alive in that lashing torrent. She began to run along the flat, tree-tangled overflow of the river, stumbling, sobbing, shouting his name, and searching with frantic eyes that broken surface where the water battled with the ice.

IT WAS a few minutes before sunrise when Bill walked down the road from Karl Jensen's. He felt magnificent as this new day that was breaking, and so strong that he had refused the tremulously grateful trader's offer to drive him down to the bridge. Had not he, Doctor Bill Oliver, delivered into the

world, single-handed, an hour ago, a boy infant who would have taken his mother with him into eternity if it had not been for the doctor's help? These natives, Bill thought with a happy laugh—their regard for dates was negligible.

He was glad Jensen's midnight knock at the cabin door had not wakened Charlotte. He had steeled himself to go alone through the ordeal of fighting death again. If he had failed . . . but he had won, and now he could go back to Charlotte and tell her.

He quickened his step and grinned as he glanced at the duffel bag slung on his arm. In his haste to accompany Jensen a few hours ago, he had not paused to remove from it his emergency kit, but had taken bag and all.

Last night had been terrible, before Jensen had come. Bill had sweat blood, rambling through the woods, and later in the cabin, with Charlotte so near.

The road turned—water swept over it in a smooth sheet—the bridge was gone! He stared at Charlotte's car, standing in safety on a small rise. Then he ran forward and looked dazedly across the river. It seemed from here that the water must be at the very door of the cabin. Jensen had said that he had never seen the river so high.

In panic, Bill Oliver threw his duffel bag to the ground, stripped to his waist, tore off his shoes, and plunged into the water. He had swum in ice water before, but this was different. Sunrise-colored reefs of ice! Charlotte, Charlotte! Again and again a spinning, incandescent mass seemed to fling itself at his head, his flailing arms.

Even as he fought with a power beyond himself, the thought came to him horribly that if he didn't get across he would have failed Charlotte again in being true to his profession. He struck out now like a madman—and realized with a shock of sanity that he was at last clambering out on the other side of the river.

The first thing he saw was that the water had really begun to recede from the slope of the cabin. But what did that matter? He was here! he thought with joy.

The bedroom was empty. It was while he was running out to shout Charlotte's name that he thought of the bridge. Her clothes—they were in neither of the rooms. And her car was still on the other side!

Fear can run through the veins like fire, like ice. Bill did not know how far he had rushed downstream, the water reaching his knees, hoarsely calling, searching as best he could through the spring tangle of woods. He knew

nothing but stark dread until he saw her—in the deep, moist glow of that swimming forest, clinging to a tree to keep herself from falling.

He gathered her up, white and wet and almost senseless, and carried her for many minutes, until in a high and sunny space the sound of the river did not reach them.

“Bill,” she whispered at last, close against him. “I—I thought you had gone down with the bridge, Bill.”

His laugh was exuberant. “A fool went down with that bridge,” he told her, “forever, my darling!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story was published in *Pictorial Review*, December 1934 issue (Vol. XXXVI No.3)

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations in the original article were by J. Clinton Shepherd and are not yet in public domain so have been omitted. Placeholders have been used instead.

A cover has been created for this project.

[[The end of *The Bridge* by Martha Ostenso]