

Mr. Eads' Bridge

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CHAPTER SIX

Rails Across the River

"Amazing," Becky said. "What did you do after the war?"

Mr. Eads swept his arm toward the bridgework behind them. "After the fighting ended, it became clear that railroads were the key to moving beyond communities hugging riverbanks. The city of Chicago has always been a rival to St. Louis in their race to regional importance. Chicago gained an early head-start in bridging the Mississippi by rail to connect to the West and its emerging markets."

"So your bridge won't be the first one to cross the Mississippi?"

"That honor will not be mine. They drove the golden spike to mark the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad from coast to coast four years ago, and the first bridge crossed the Mississippi River in 1856. But this St. Louis and Illinois bridge will be the first connecting St. Louis to the East. The railroad is the future of America, and I don't want our fair city to be left in the backwaters."

"Mr. Eads created an innovative design to compete for the right to build the bridge," Laura said.

"Tut-tut, I had little choice," Eads chuckled. "The steamship companies lobbied for such dire restrictions that one could only overcome them with new and superior ideas."

"What kind of restrictions?" Becky asked.

"Well, let's see. It couldn't be made of wood; the lowest part of the superstructure had to be at least fifty feet above the water; it couldn't be a drawbridge or a suspension bridge; it had to carry both rail and vehicular traffic and had to have one span of at least 500 feet or two spans of at least 250 feet."

"And you met all of those conditions?"

"Exceeded them, dear girl. This bridge will have three spans, each one longer than 500 feet. We are eighty-eight feet above the water, and the superstructure is comprised mainly of steel. Each of these are firsts in history; and when complete, it shall be the longest arch bridge in the world."



It sounds as if your wonderful ideas have made this project easy," Becky said.

"Easy!" Mr. Eads scoffed. "I should think not. I have undergone vile criticism from so-called experts, predicting that the bridge would fall down, that the technology was unworkable. Fools, all of them."

"Wasn't there a protest recently from the steamship industry that almost stopped the project?" Laura asked.

"Oh, yes, that," Eads huffed. "They claimed that the bridge was a menace to navigation and insisted that we build a canal on the Illinois side so they could avoid the bridge completely. Ridiculous, as they intended it to be, but they got the Army Corps of Engineers to agree with them."

"What did you do?" Becky asked.

"I reached out to my friend Ulysses S. Grant, the former general who benefited so much from my ironclads during the war. Grant is now President of these United States. He simply ordered the Corps to drop their support of the canal and let the bridge construction move forward."

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