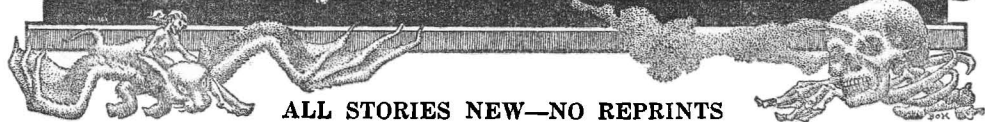


# Weird Tales



MAY, 1942

Cover by Ray Quigley

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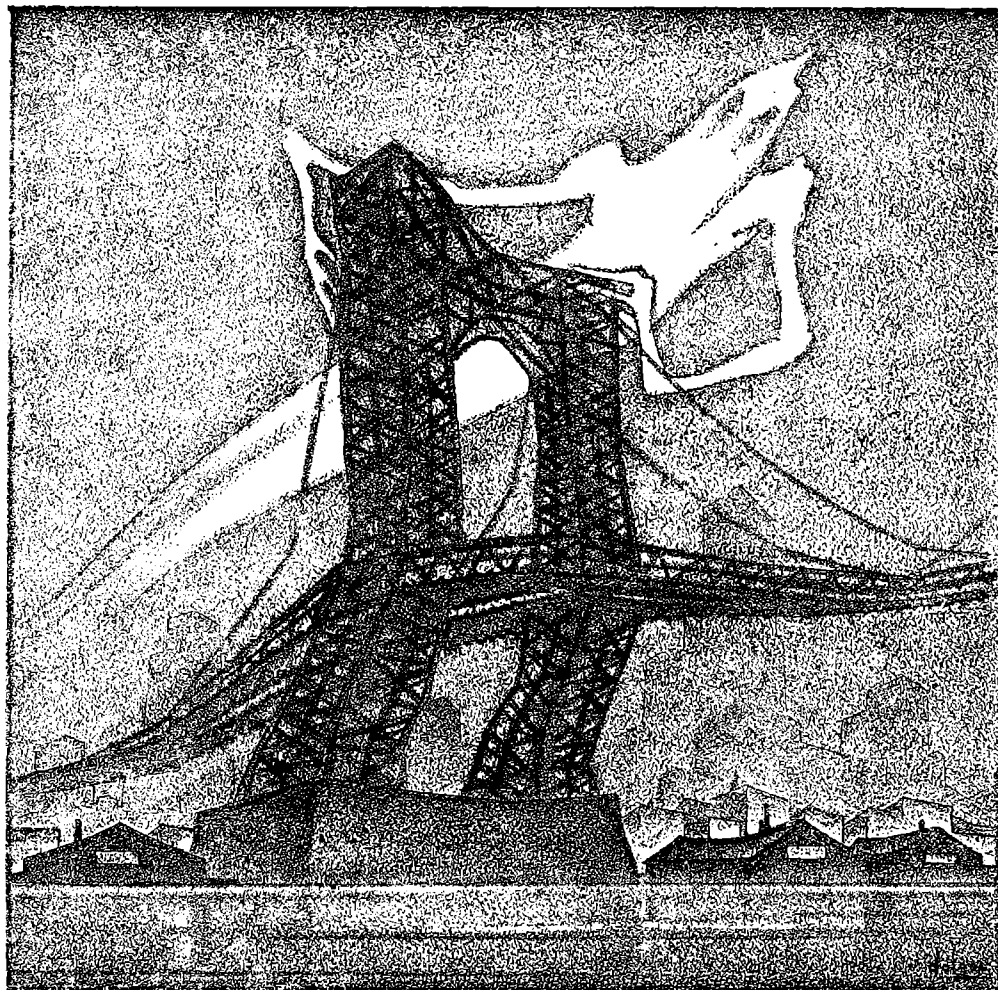
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# The Concrete Phantom

By WESTON PARRY

*It was to be the longest bridge in the world—remember? But somebody had other plans . . . !*

I SUPPOSE I'm the only man left alive who knows what really happened to the Interstate Bridge. Oh, the newspapers were full of it at the time. Some called it sabotage—there were a lot of strikes going on then, and the boys were only too glad to pin it on the building

unions. Others said the engineer had made an error of a fraction of an inch—you know the kind of romantic baloney the feature writers like to dish out.

The engineer did commit suicide later and they wrote a lot about that, but I happen to know it was woman trouble. That

engineer was one of the best in the country. He didn't make any mistakes.

Unless you call it a mistake to leave the supernatural out of your calculations.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those guys who goes to spiritualist seances and talks about auras and ectoplasms. I always thought I was pretty hardboiled until I was called in on the Interstate Bridge case. When you've been a private detective for twenty years, you learn that most crimes and disasters can be traced right back either to human rottenness or human ignorance, and I don't know which is worse and whether they aren't often the same.

But there was nothing human about the collapse of the Interstate Bridge. You probably saw it in the newsreels: the high, strong, curving span of steel, trembling and swaying in the wind, then buckling like a matchbox under a giant heel.

It was to be the longest, greatest bridge in the world, remember? Well, Somebody had other plans.

It happened more than ten years ago if you recall. When I left the case, after it had been officially closed, I wasn't quite sure—just uneasy enough so I never could go after my work with the same enthusiasm again. But a couple of months ago I obtained the final proof. Now I'm living with my brother and sister-in-law and their kids in the country. I told everybody I was retiring because I was getting too old for my job.

That's not true. I just want to spend the rest of my days in front of a warm fire with my relatives near me, where a boy's shrill whistle or a little girl's smile will snap me out of it when I begin to think too much about the horrible revengeful force that was willing to pay any price in human lives to trap one man.

Even now I become cold all over when I remember it, the Thing, whatever or whoever it was, that baffled company officials, FBI men and millions of horrified

newspaper readers all over the country. That missed once and waited ten years for its chance.

I can't believe it was Mike Wroblinski alone. It was Wroblinski and whatever dark secret he found in the other world. There are many evil things we don't understand. But about the Interstate Bridge, I understand more than most people.

My share in the business began in September. You remember the disaster itself took place three months later, during a December gale that shouldn't have damaged more than a few fishing boats and telephone poles.

I was hired by the Ellis Contracting Company to do a little quiet investigating about a series of nasty accidents that had been happening on the bridge, nothing really serious you understand, but damned annoying.

Gordon Ellis, president of the company, talked to me personally. He was a tall, skinny character, with a tight mouth always clamped around a cigar, and mean eyes propped up by heavy black pouches. He was probably in his early forties at the time, but he looked older, sallow as an old cornstalk and jittery as a fly under glass.

Ellis didn't waste any time on superfluous details. He gave me the facts cold. In August, his foreman, Tim Reddy, had walked out on a girder and been snatched back by a crew just before the supports gave way and plunged a good hunk of steel into the river. The girder could not be retrieved in that depth and current, but the executives and Reddy grilled the crew working on it. Everything seemed above board. The men were trusted and long-time employees. The big shots put it down to a mistake and told the men they'd pay for any more errors with their jobs.

**T**WO weeks later a company tug rammed into an object near the huge concrete approach to the bridge on the river's left

bank. The captain was a rough Irishman who swore he'd gone by the same spot hundreds of times and was damned if he didn't think someone had planted a rock there to put a hole through his boat. The executives managed to calm him, but when the tug was hauled off, they found she had been lying on top of a large block of concrete which no member of the Ellis Contracting Company could identify.

"I tell you, we've got to get to the bottom of this," Ellis snapped at me. "Nobody remembers pouring that concrete. We built the approaches weeks ago. Only a lunatic would pour a concrete block that wasn't going to be used. And how did it get into the river? And if it was sabotage, how could anyone plant the thing without being seen? Why, it's like stealing a house."

Then there was the riveter who was found unconscious atop the structure and couldn't tell who had struck him. His riveting machine had disappeared, and the only conclusion was that he had been hurt in some inexplicable manner and the machine had fallen into the river. Or that someone had stolen it after knocking him out.

There were other things. But the story that seemed to enrage Ellis more than all the rest was one persistently reported by Giuseppe Antonino, a night watchman known to have a peculiar fondness for red Italian wine.

After the loss of the riveting machine, a minor event in itself but one that might mean almost anything, Giuseppe began to spread it around the waterfront cafés and hangouts, that while he, was on his trick, between midnight and dawn, he frequently heard the sound of muffled riveting.

I talked to him about it. "Meester," he'd say earnestly, his black eyes staring out of a face that got paler with each word, "I looka and I looka and I looka, and whata do I see? Notheeng. Notheeng

buta ratatatata ina da dark, ana nobody ona da bridge, nobody noplace. Everytheeng quiet lika da grave, and a ratatatata, lika dat. Believa me, eet's not human. You knowa whata I teenk? I teenk eet's a ghost."

"Baloney," I answered, and advised Ellis to put more men to guard the bridge at night. He did so, but nothing ever was found, and the men began to repeat Giuseppe's story.

You can imagine what that did to the morale of the crews working on the bridge. Most of them pretended they took no stock in the tale, but you could tell they felt it, by the cautious way they moved, the way they jumped when anything unusual happened or a loud noise sounded or someone came up suddenly behind them. It got so work on the bridge was slowed down about a third.

And Ellis with an ironclad deadline in his contract!

"I tell you we've got to do something," he kept saying. "My whole contract, my future depends on building this bridge in time."

That was how the affair stood the night Ellis and I decided to go on the bridge at 3 a. m. and hear the ghost riveter ourselves. It seemed he usually went into action at that hour. You can see we were still hard-boiled and discounted the ghost story. Privately we suspected the guards of gathering in the men's locker shed and sampling Giuseppe's wine, while they were supposed to be on duty.

But when I joined Ellis at 3 a. m. in the pitch darkness, under a cloudy sky that blacked out the moon, with only the wind whistling through the girders to break the eerie silence, and the two of us shivering like small dots above the swirling river, I can tell you I didn't feel good at all. Not at all.

Because three hours earlier I had sat in the back room of Bill McManus' tavern

and listened to a story that turned my stomach to oatmeal.

I WAS up at the bar, drinking rye with beer for a chaser, when I noticed a small group of men farther up the room, nudging one another and giving me the eye.

I pretended not to see, but watched in the bar mirror as they whispered together, evidently holding a consultation. Finally one of them, an old-timer named Zych, climbed casually off his stool and sauntered over to me.

"You the detective Ellis hired to look into these accidents?" he asked abruptly.

I nodded. At first I had tried to keep my mission a secret, but it wasn't much use, with all the men I talked with repeating the conversation to their friends. I did have a couple of guys planted among the workmen, however, and nobody ever got on to them.

"You be interested in a story?" he asked, looking down at the bar, where his finger was drawing wet circles.

"What kind of a story?" I asked warily.

"Something that might give you a tip," he said, "and might not."

"Okay, spill it. I'll listen."

He already had his back to me. "Come into the other room," he said over his shoulder.

I followed him into the back. We sat around a table with the other members of the group, who had come after us with a great show of nonchalance.

"You don't know what's up around here, do you?" Zych began.

I admitted I didn't.

"Ellis never told you about Mike Wroblinski, did he?"

"Mike Wroblinski?" I asked. "No, I don't think he did."

Zych snorted, and over the other faces around the table came a series of queet smiles, the kind that men put on when

they have a shady secret, something unpleasant.

"What is this anyhow?" I asked suspiciously.

"Nothing but a story," Zych answered. "You can take it or leave it."

And so he began.

Mike Wroblinski was one of the older workmen, a Pole who had been with the company for forty years, capable and trustworthy, but a taciturn individual who didn't mix much and never talked about himself. His only effort at mixing—if you can call it that—had been to join the Workmen's Sick and Death Benefit Association.

"He told somebody once they had to give his old man a pauper's funeral," Zych explained, "and he didn't want that to happen to him. He wanted to be buried decent, from a church, when his time came."

Wroblinski had been riveting at the point where the bridge curved to meet the top of the left concrete approach. Nearby him other laborers were pouring concrete into a huge mould which was to form one of the pillars.

At about noon on the day Zych was describing, Wroblinski climbed down and approached Reddy, the foreman. He complained of feeling ill and asked if he could take the rest of the day off.

Ellis happened to be passing with the engineer and overheard the conversation.

"Go back to work, Wroblinski," he ordered curtly. "We've had enough delays on this job as it is. If we let every man with a hangover go home we'd never get anywhere."

Wroblinski turned his dark scowling face toward the boss.

"I ain't got no hangover," he muttered. "I don't feel good."

"That's enough out of you," Ellis shot back. "Go up to your job or you don't work here any more."

The Pole turned his burning eyes full into Ellis' own. His lip snarled upward a little, and then he walked away, grinding out unintelligible words between his teeth. He returned to his post and started to work.

Then—nobody quite knew how it happened—the Pole must have been seized with a dizzy spell. First he was seen to stand up on his narrow perch, staggering like a drunken man. The next moment he had thrown up his hands, and with a terrible scream that came thinly down to the horrified onlookers below, he fell like a plummet into the gigantic mould, while tons of liquid concrete rolled over him.

The man on the concrete mixer jammed on the brakes. It was too late. He had only a glimpse of something that struggled desperately under the turgid mass before it was blotted out of sight, in a living grave.

"It was quick-drying concrete," Zych said, smiling grimly.

"Wasn't there anything you could do?"

"Do? Ha! The stuff was as solid as a rock before we could rig up a platform."

"How did they recover the body," I asked. I felt a little sick.

The same sinister smile played on Zych's face.

"The body? Oh, yes, the body. Ellis went to Wroblinski's sister and gave her ten thousand dollars to shut up about her brother and give up all claims to the body."

"But—"

"Don't you see?" Zych asked. "It would have cost several times that amount to break up the mould and start the work all over again."

"You mean—?" Prickles of horror were running up and down my spine.

"Yeah," Zych finished it for me. "Mike Wroblinski's body supports the left side of the Interstate Bridge. Some funeral, eh, for a guy that wanted to be buried decent. Now do you know why all these

accidents have been happening? Now do you know who the ghost riveter is?"

I tried to shake the idea out of my mind as too absurd for belief, but my 3 A. M. meeting with Ellis sent all the terrors I had ever heard crowding into my memory.

WE STOOD alone on top of the great bridge. Never had I felt so out of touch with all mankind. The wind lashed at my face, and suddenly the intricate steel network under my feet no longer seemed to me the strong man-made creation of comforting day, but a flimsy insecure cobweb suspended under the limitless sky of night.

Ellis' face looked more pinched than ever. I started to speak, anxious for the sound of my own voice in the weird atmosphere. But before I could open my mouth the sound began: Ratatatat, ratatatat, as though from a great distance, just as Giuseppe had described it.

Ellis clutched my arm. "What's that?" he whispered hoarsely.

We strained to listen. The same riveting noise again, this time a little nearer.

From our high position we overlooked almost the entire bridge, but nothing stirred, nothing breathed in the darkness.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go see." I started toward the middle of the bridge.

"No!" Ellis' voice was so sharp that I spun around. "No!" he repeated, and this time the exclamation was almost hysterical. When he noticed my astonishment, he tried to recover his nerve.

"I mean—well, all right. I'll follow you."

I moved ahead. Ellis was at my heels, almost hugging my back in the darkness, and I could feel that his trembling had nothing to do with the wind.

We went on, step by step, slowly, and the nearer we got to the center of the bridge the louder grew the riveting, rising to an ominous pitch.

We were about fifty feet from the exact center of the structure when I first began to feel it, a sort of sickening vibration that seemed to come from below.

I took a tentative step forward and stopped. That slight motion seemed to have exerted a direct control over the vibration. As my foot advanced, the whole bridge shook to an even broader rhythm, while—there was no doubt about it—an overpoweringly loud humming sound filled my ears. It was like standing on the runway between two giant presses rotating at terrific speed.

My mouth was dry and I could feel the hair rising on my scalp, but I gulped and attempted to address a matter-of-fact question to Ellis.

"Did you give orders to start any machinery—?" I began, and quickly broke off. Ellis hadn't heard me. He was standing in an attitude of unnatural stiffness, head up, eyes staring, and even in the darkness he looked as pale as death.

"My God, my God," he kept muttering over and over again.

I licked my lips and repeated the question, shaking his arm.

"What? No, no, of course not," he answered shrilly. "What machinery would we have under the bridge? Don't be a fool. This isn't—this hasn't anything to do with the company."

"Sounds as though some big engine had gone crazy," I hazarded, attempting a laugh that didn't quite come off. "I'm going ahead."

As I spoke, I stepped forward, and immediately the vibration increased until the whole bridge appeared to sway in a dizzy forward-backward motion, like those rolling stairs in amusement parks. The hum became a roar, and instinctively I stood still and clapped my hands over my ears.

When I stopped, the vibrating quieted. And then, above the hum and the shriek-

ing of the wind, above the rush of the water below, the riveting began again. Ratatatatat. Ratatatatat.

I turned. Ellis was gesturing to me, his arms thrown out in supplication. He had managed to fight his way against the gale until he was a quarter of the way over to the bank from which we had come.

As I stared, the bridge suddenly gave a terrific lurch, and I felt a hideous shuddering underfoot, the grinding of steel on steel, the sharp clang of sprung metal.

Ellis' scream reached me above the awful din: "Run, run for your life. The bridge is going." I saw him struggle forward and I followed, stricken with terror.

It was as though the bridge knew it must finish the job before Ellis reached safety. Every step he took seemed to drive the bridge to a frenzy of self-destruction, to wild tearing sounds, gigantic heaves, cruel efforts to break out of the pattern fettered by the engineers.

And always above the uproar came the steady ratatatatat of the riveter, growing more frenzied as the distance narrowed between Ellis and the shore.

I battled my way forward. A savage gust of wind threw me against one of the half-finished supports. My foot slipped and I fell to my knees. A lurch from below knocked me sideways, and for one awful moment, I hung in space, with nothing between me and the white-crested flood of the river.

With both hands I grasped the support and pulled himself up. My face was numb with cold, but under my heavy clothes, my heart was pounding and the perspiration was pouring off my body.

Faintly in the distance I could hear the confused shouting of many men. The unbelievable spectacle had drawn the crowds out of the waterfront dives. I heard the emergency whistle shrieking through the night, but it made no impression on me. At that moment, I was concerned only

with each straining, fighting step I took across that devilish structure.

And then Ellis staggered to within a few yards of safety, directly over the left-bank approach. I saw him stand there, cowering, bent nearly double, and in spite of my danger, I clung motionless to one of the girders, panting for breath, watching him.

The man acted like a person suddenly gone mad. He put one foot forward and jumped back, screaming with terror.

At first I didn't understand, and then the truth burst on me, and I was paralyzed with horror. Ellis stood exactly over Mike Wroblinski's grave. And something, somebody, was driving him back each time he tried to cross that evil spot.

And now the bridge, or Wroblinski, or both of them and the devil together, seemed to put their shoulders to the final job.

Huge girders snapped like so many threads around me. The entire bridge seemed to crumple and pile up in the center, bending upward with a dreadful grinding noise. I was scrambling on my hands and knees, as the structure dipped sharply downward from where I stood toward the shore, at an angle of almost 75 degrees. I clutched desperately at a support, but it was no use. My stiff hands refused to hold me, and I was thudding and bumping down a steep incline, knocking into cold steel as I went.

My bulging eyes suddenly looked out into space as I hurtled toward the edge. I think I screamed as I saw death rising to meet me, and then something struck my head with resounding force, and everything was wiped out in blackness.

**W**ELL, you saw the rest of it in the newsreels. The bridge yawned apart under Ellis and he certainly would have gone into the river, if a girder hadn't fallen and pinned him down. The rescue crews saved him and then reached me, where I lay with my head rammed against a broken

piece of rail. An hour later the Interstate Bridge was nothing but a pile of steel swirling in the river, and five of the rescuers had been killed.

That's how it was. Nonsense, you say? Engineering failure, you think? The investigating Congressional Committee could not find any error. But its members hadn't heard that savage ratatatatat of the riveter.

I heard it, and I know it was rage, blind evil rage, that crushed the bridge; rage that turned mad with frustration when Ellis was carried off; rage that could brood in its own poisonous hell, awaiting another day of vengeance.

**A**FTER I left the case, I heard vaguely of Ellis—that he had recovered from his injuries after a month in the hospital, that he had taken to drink, that his wife had left him. Two years later I read in the papers that the Ellis Contracting Company had gone bankrupt. The engineer committed suicide about this time, but there was a woman mixed up in it, as I said before.

Ten years later—a few months ago, in fact, I was present when the last chapter was written.

I used to have my lunch in a small Italian restaurant directly across the street from a large vacant lot, on which a "For Sale" sign had stood for years.

One day construction crews appeared, and a new building began to go up, with deep foundations and huge pillars of concrete. A sports stadium, they told me.

Then one noon I arrived to discover the street roped off, policemen forming a cordon about the foundations, crowds jostling and shouting, fire engines and ambulances drawn up.

"What is it?" I asked Tom Murphy, a cop I used to work with.

"Accident," he said briefly. "Hunk of concrete they were lifting in a derrick slipped out and fell on some poor guy.



Flattened him out like a pancake. Nobody can understand how it happened. Just one of those things, I guess.”

I saw men working feverishly — and vainly—about the concrete block. By craning my neck, I caught a glimpse of a ragged trouser and torn shoe toeing sadly in toward the mass that covered the rest of the body.

“A workman, eh?” I asked. “Where’d they ever get a slab of concrete like that?”

Murphy shrugged. “The Boys’ Club was kinda short of money for the stadium. They bought up part of the wreckage of the old

Interstate Bridge. You know, the one that collapsed ten years ago.”

In the act of lighting a cigarette, my fingers froze on the match and I let it fall to the ground.

I didn’t know why, but suddenly I was bathed in sweat and shaking from head to foot.

“Know who the guy was?” I asked Murphy. I tried to be casual, but the words came out like a croak.

“Yeah. Some poor bird that et over at Noonan’s lunch cart with me. He was down and out, but I heard he useta be a big contractor. Name of Ellis, I think.”