

“X” and “H.” A Telegraph Operator’s Story

I

My temperament, as I am well aware, is very peculiar; in most things I am what might be termed an extremist. Persons and things which I like I am very fond of; and what I have a distaste to I hate from the bottom of my heart, if I may be permitted the use of so strong a term as “hate.”

This characteristic renders life at once pleasant and disagreeable. Beautiful things almost fascinate me, making of earth a heaven; while repulsive things convert this heaven into something far different. Society, fortunately, is made up of such a variety of individuals, each possessing some trait peculiar to himself, that it furnishes a wonderful course of study, and at the same time renders me happy and miserable. This is a long prelude to my story, but a necessary one, as will be perceived ere I am done.

‘Born of poor but respectable parents,’ I was blessed with an excellent opportunity for study; and devoting myself to my books, I, in a short time, accomplished what it would have taken most persons much longer to perform.

By the most earnest endeavor I was enabled to graduate from Harvard, with no little honor. I think I can say with entire freedom from egotism. Having graduated, I was offered a situation as a correspondent for one of our popular journals, which suited me nicely, and which I at once accepted, in as much as I was to travel in and write from Europe. In this way I could visit those time-hallowed places with which I had in a measure become acquainted through my long study of the classics; and certainly nothing can be more pleasing to one interested in the Homer and Virgil, the thrilling utterances of Demosthenes and Cicero, than a personal acquaintance with the places where they lived and died.

While in Venice I made the acquaintance of a gentleman named Simpson, from New York. He was a wealthy merchant, and was traveling with his family on account of the ill-health of his wife. The family was a very pleasant one, but the daughter, a young lady of about nineteen, interested me more than the others.

I have said I was extremely fond of beautiful things; and among women Eva Simpson was the most beautiful I had ever met. Did I possess the faculty of description which novelists have, I would gladly paint her portrait in ink; as I have not, I will only say, picture to yourself the most beautiful brunette you can imagine, of the medium height, and rather slim, and you will have a truer conception of her than I can give you. And her disposition was as charming as were her looks and ways. I was fascinated, withal, by the aptitude she manifested in the comprehension of things in general, which I noticed throughout the entire period we were intimately associated.

I was at this time only twenty four, a susceptible period in a man’s life; and of course in a few weeks I was deeply in love with her, on every possible occasion seeking her society, and superlatively miserable if a day passed and I did not meet her. Of course, with her beauty, wealth and intelligence, cavalries by the score there were, only too glad to do homage at her shrine, among whom were gentlemen of means, who could give her such an ‘establishment’ as she

deserved, which I could not—having my own way to win, with no glory or property for me save what I gained by my unaided efforts.

As most poor people are, I was proud-spirited, and for a time was uncertain what to do under the circumstances; but ‘faint heart ne’er won fair lady;’ so one evening, as we were listlessly gliding along in a gondola, the moonbeams casting dark shadows across the watery streets, I in impassioned words declared my love, and asked her to become my wife, stating my circumstances exactly as they were. She heard me through, and then said quietly:

“Mr. Earl, that you are not rich, would make no difference, so far as my love is concerned. And your candid confession of your love for me is very dear. There is no gentleman of my acquaintance whom I esteem more highly. I will not deny that I was aware that you esteemed me highly, for I knew my society was agreeable to you. I did not imagine you *loved* me so much, or I would have taken the means to prevent it. Not that your love is unpleasant to me; far from it. I only speak on your own account, I could *love* you, did I try, but that would be wrong, as I am, and have been for two years engaged to a gentleman in Illinois. Rest assured,” she continued, “your friendship will be as dear to me as ever. Nor can we, for want of the greater, afford to give up the less love, can we?” she said with a smile.

I assented to this; and though *friendship* is not quite so dear to one in love as it may be to others, I rested satisfied, as no one was at fault for my disappointment save myself; and there was no little consolation in thinking, if she could never be mine, neither could any one of her other attendants, who were so zealous in their attentions, win her. In a few weeks I left Venice for other parts of Europe, and when I parted from her, she wished me the greatest prosperity, and invited me to call on her in her own home, when we had again reached our native land. So we were verily “the best of friends,” as she said. We deemed it expedient not to enter into correspondence with each other; so, during the entire period which I passed in Europe, after leaving the City of the Sea, I never heard from her but once, and that through a gentleman whom I met in London, who was in Venice during my stay there, and whom I suspected of having also made proposals to Miss Eva Simpson, though I never knew it for certainty.

II

On returning to America, when I had completed my tour of observation, I was undecided to what I had best give my attention as a vocation. Each of the professions seemed to be full to overflowing, and I could not endure the humiliation of occupying a second or third rate position in any of them. I was offered a situation as principal in a flourishing school, but did not consider my temperament compatible with the instruction of the young, and, besides, teaching was too monotonous, possessing too little excitement to suit my nervous disposition. I could have had a position on the editorial corps of the journal of which I had been indirectly connected for two years, but the life of a journalist is a hard one, not particularly remunerative, and offers but little chance for promotion.

While attending to my studies, the natural sciences had afforded me great pleasure; and no point in their entire realm was so fraught with interest and wonder as that of electricity. There was a certain incomprehensible something about it which won my closest attention; and though I never

anticipated becoming a second Franklin, much as I could have desired such a result, I did long for a situation in which I would be enabled to study its hidden mysteries.

So, when my duties as correspondent ended, I devoted my time to the study of telegraphy and after several months I sought and obtained a situation as operator in an office in Michigan. True, the salary was not large, but where is the person, interested in any subject, who allows merely pecuniary interests to interfere with the prosecution of his favorite pursuit?—especially if it is sufficiently remunerative to support him in a respectable manner. As with others, so it was with me; only by as much as my temperament was more active and nervous than in the disposition of the majority of people, so I am more zealous in my calling than are most persons who act as operators, and who only consider their occupation valuable in so far as their situation affords them a good subsistence in an easy manner.

Beside myself there were three operators in the office where I was located; but ere many months, my earnestness was rewarded by promotion to manager, which being the highest position there attainable, I was for the present contented.

Medical men, by long acquaintance with disease and suffering, are said to lose in a great measure their sensitiveness; and the same may be said of operators. Of course, matters of great importance only are submitted to transmission by telegraph; hence a large part of messages relate to sickness and death. I remember how I was affected when first I received a death message; one announcing the decease of a young man, the only support of a widowed mother in her declining years. I knew the woman, and from my heart I pitied her, could hardly have felt worse had it been my own brother who was dead. But in time this wore away—my feeling of unhappiness on such occasions—and I came to consider all messages whatever merely in a business point of view.

One evening, after business hours, I was sitting in my office, making up reports, and at the same time enjoying a fine Havana, when a young man came in, and, without saying a word, quietly seated himself near the stove. He was a fine looking gentleman, dressed very fashionably, yet in excellent taste, with no inclination to the “flash.” But there was a certain something in his countenance which did not exactly please me, though I paid but little attention to it or him—merely nodding as he entered, and then kept on about my business.

After a while, as he said nothing, I asked him if I could in any way accommodate him. In reply he said:

“I hope you will pardon me, but I used to telegraph myself; and being under the necessity of remaining in this town over night, where I am entirely unacquainted, I came here, thinking, if you were not too busy, you would perhaps allow me the use of some of your keys in refreshing my knowledge of the subject. It is one in which I was greatly interested, but I have not had anything to do with it for several years.”

Aware of my own interest in the subject, and presuming him an enthusiast like myself, I said:

“Certainly, sir; you are welcome to use any of these keys. This is on the line between T. and F., and there being no night officers on that line, you can use it with no fear of breaking anyone.”

“Shall I not trouble you?”

“Not at all,” said I. And the gentleman came inside the fence inclosing the operating-room from the rest of the office, and seating himself, commenced his writing. He was certainly a skillful operator, even surpassing myself in the rapidity with which he wrote. For a time he amused himself with making different letters and writing various sentences, and then he commenced rapidly calling ‘X,’ signing when he did so ‘H.’ There was no such ‘call’ on the line, and I could not understand why he ran on that letter; but at last there came ‘i, i.’ ‘X.’

I thought to myself, the gentleman is ahead of me here evidently understands something which I do not; so, quite interested, though apparently absorbed in my own work, I paid closest attention to his writing. Immediately, on having his ‘X’ answered, he wrote:

“Rhvevbgstrmtzoiozwbuli lkvezgrim? H.” And in a moment the reply came:

“Bv xlnv wldn ginliild mrtsq. X.”

After this the stranger kept on with his promiscuous writing, and when he was done, said

“Thank you, sir, for your kindness. I find that I have not entirely lost my knowledge of the art.”

“You are welcome. No you have not forgotten how to use the key, by any means, and once you must have been very skillful.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” said he, with a smile. “There was always something fascinating to me in telegraphing; so when I was attending school, I fear I devoted more time to it than I ought—more than was consonant with the success in other pursuits; at least the professor used to advise me to give more attention to my studies generally.”

“It is, indeed, a wonderful science,” returned I; “and it is surprising that, being so valuable, it should so frequently be used for evil purposes.” And as I said this, I fixed my gaze upon him closely.

“So it is,” he replied, without a feature in his handsome face changing. “And the same is true of nearly everything,” he continued. “The best things are often turned to the worst uses.”

A short conversation ensued and then he arose to depart, placing a card in my hand as he did so with the remark:

“I have neglected to introduce myself, but if you ever visit E—, I shall be pleased to entertain you. You will easily find my residence. Again thanks for your kindness, and good evening.”

I responded to him a “good evening,” and on looking at the card found the name CHARLES HAMPTON.

I know I heard the name before, but at first could not remember where; then like a flash it came to me. This was the name of Eva Simpson’s betrothed, and there could be no mistaking the identity. She told me E— was the place of residence of the Charles Hampton and it was my visitor’s home. Moreover, he—the stranger—was evidently a gentleman of wealth and culture. Two persons of the same name were possible; such a resemblance in other respects was far from probable. Were we then in some mysterious way to be connected?

For a long time I pondered upon the strange fate leading to this meeting, and then my mind reverted to the mysterious telegraphing.—True, the letters sent and received were devoid of sense, but I was confident there was some meaning, if only it could be found.

By long practice an operator becomes as familiar with other operators’ writing over the wires as with an individual’s penmanship; but I could not locate X’s writing. Possibly it might be some stranger in an office, as my visitor was. The thought struck me that mayhap I would be able to get him again. So I went to the key and called ‘X,’ signing ‘H,’ till I was tired. No response came; so if ‘X’ was a regular operator on the line, he was not deceived by my calling.

Then I set my wit at work to decipher the senseless sentences, and found the key to the solution by transposing the alphabet; using z for a, y for b, etc. The letters read as follows;

“Is everything all ready for operation?” and the reply was

“Yes, come down to-morrow night.”

I was now convinced something was up, even if Hampton did go down; but I could only await developments. I did not sleep much that night; and falling into a drowse, I was continually in trouble, of an indefinite kind, in which Eva, Hampton and myself were strangely mixed up.

I made no reference to the matter among the other operators in the office, for fear something would thereby result to entirely overthrow any plans I might form.

Two days subsequent to the occurrence a message from F. was received at our office for Mr. Kimball, well known as a detective. It was the following:

“Bank robbed last evening. Come at once.
Sig. President.”

Mr. Kimball went down and remained several days, and on his return came into the telegraph office. I asked him as to his success, and he said:

“Positively I have had none. It is the most curious case I have ever known. The bank officers suspect no one, nor is there any one on whom suspicion the least suspicious thing can be fastened.”

When he was through, I said:

“Excuse me, but I think I can work this one up for you.”

“Do you indeed?” asked Mr. Kimball.

“I do, assuredly,” I returned.

“Have you had any experience as a detective?”

“Never.”

“I should say this was a blind case for a novice.”

“Doubtless it is; but I will tell you what I wish you would do.—Take me down to F. and introduce me as one of your fraternity who, having heard of this case through yourself, desires to try and work it up. Will you do so, or does it seem too strange a freak to deserve a moment’s consideration?”

“I confess, Mr. Earl, it appears freakish. Inasmuch as things can be no worse, I am willing to give you a chance to try what you can do, trusting you will exercise due caution.”

“I will, indeed,” said I. “Come in to-morrow morning, and I will go down with you; or no”—I added. “You go down in the morning, and I will follow you in the P.M. That will prevent any suspicion that you have an ‘accomplice.’ I shall assume such a disguise that I hardly think you will recognize me. Please meet me at the M—House.”

“I will do so,” said Mr. Kimball; and he went away.

That afternoon I arranged my work so I could be absent several days. The season of the year was favorable, in that business was comparatively quiet, and my reports for the month were all made up.

III.

The disguise I assumed the next day consisted of long heavy whiskers and moustache— my face was smooth,—a wig of bushy hair—my own was straight,—and a pair of plain-glass spectacles; and going out on the street, I was not recognized by any of my friends.

Arriving at F., I went immediately to M— House, and as it was nearly time for tea, I took up a paper to look over, having registered my name as “Henry Quimby, Chicago, Ill.”

While I was scanning the contents of the paper, Mr. Kimball came in, and, not finding my name on the register, turned away, evidently disappointed; then he came and sat down, only a short

distance from me, watching the door very closely to see if I came in. I smiled to think how effectually I had deceived him, and said, in a whisper:

“So you didn’t recognize me?”

He recognized my voice, and turning to me, replied quietly,

“I declare, you are transmogrified. I guess you’ll do.”

“I shall endeavor to,” said I. “Have you been to the bank?” I added.

“Yes. I have arranged everything in that direction, and the President and Cashier will call on you this evening, at your room. That will obviate observations by outsiders.”

“That is a good idea,” said I, “and now, we will, hereafter, act as strangers.”

Soon tea was announced, and I confess I was sufficiently hungry to relish my food that night. I was about to rise from the table, when who should come in but Charles Hampton, accompanied by a young man a few years his junior. Of course, Hampton could not penetrate my disguise, and I determined to remain at the table a while longer and watch. So I ordered another cup of tea and some more rolls, and taking a paper from my pocket, appeared to be very busy over its contents.

In no long time the table was deserted, save by us three, and I was confident something would now ‘turn up’ to aid me, for I was persuaded Hampton was the rogue though I had not much to found such an opinion on. But not one point did I make by my endeavor, for they quietly ate their supper, and as quietly went out from the dining-room, hardly making any remarks during the entire meal. They had gone from the table only a moment, when I also arose and went to the office and got a cigar. Hampton and his friend did likewise, and then left the house.

In the evening Kimball called and introduced the president and cashier of the bank. I found them very genial persons, glad that I was willing to aid them in a case which promised such uncertain results.— The total loss was about \$80,000, including bonds, notes, papers, etc. The gentlemen thought the notes and papers, which could not with safety be disposed of, would be returned; in which case the loss would stand at a figure not far from \$40,000.

“By the way,” said the President, “you will find Mr. Hampton willing to aid you in your work.”

“Mr. Hampton?” I returned.

“Yes, Mr. Charles Hampton, of E—, Ill. His father is president of the bank at that place, and he is the bookkeeper. His father is one of the directors of our bank, and of course, Mr. Charles is much interested in the affair.”

“I presume his aid would be valuable, but I prefer to labor unaided, with your permission.”

“Certainly, if you desire it,” was the response.

“Thank you; and we will avoid being seen in company of each other, or at least I will not visit you, till have attained to some result, for fear the guilty ones, if in this vicinity, may become suspicious. You and the directors will, of course, discuss matters as quietly as possible, and in a week I trust to make a favorable report,” said I.

“Your hopefulness gives me courage,” said the cashier, and then I was left alone.

I confess I was working up the case in a peculiar manner, striking with the conclusion that Charles Hampton was the guilty party; my aim was to prove it. Somehow I must continue to have him become acquainted with *Henry Quimby*.

Fortune favored me; for on the second evening of my stay in F. lounging into the billiard-room of the hotel, I found him cue in hand. Begging his pardon, I told him, if agreeable, I would like to play him a game. And we did play several, and I was [unreadable text] . . . his acquaintances, I was introduced to his friend, Frank Powers, whom I found to be a clerk in the bank.

In my own mind I was confident I was gaining ground, as confident as I was that Charles Hampton and Frank Powers were the ones on whom the blow would fall. But first I must make an examination into circumstances, particularly those of Powers.

I found he was a steady, respectable young man, respected, too, with no bad habits or small vices, such as are common to a place like F. An invalid father and a young sister were dependent on him, to whom he was thoroughly devoted, often sacrificing needed things to their comfort. The bank officials had the greatest confidence in him, as did every one of whom I indirectly made inquiries. I found, too, that he passed more or less of his leisure time in the telegraph office. This was worthy of notice.

Now I must learn more of Hampton, and for this purpose, I went to E—. All I could learn in reference to him was decidedly in his favor, his reputation being excellent. He lived with his father, and was far from a spendthrift; considered rather close, taking into account his position and expectations I confess I was at a loss, for I fully expected to find some weak point; not one was perceptible.

So I returned to F. a little discouraged. That evening, going into the reading-room I found Hampton writing a letter. He recognized me by a nod of the head; but on passing behind him I found a letter, or rather an envelope, by his chair, directed to him, in one corner of which was printed, “Kentucky Grand Lottery.” Here I was certain was another point; at any rate I determined to make a bold push, result as it might. So when I left the room, I told him I would like to have him call on me at my room, that evening if convenient. He said he would, and a few moments after I went to my apartment, he came to my door, rapped, and was admitted.

After a few moments’ conversation, I observed:

“Mr. Hampton, you have not suspected it, but I am here in the capacity of a detective, to find the person or persons who committed the bank robbery.”

“Are you? I really never *did* suspect it,” said he. “Have you any clue to them?”

“I have more than a clue,” said I. “I am certain I know the guilty ones.”

“So sure as that?” asked he, smiling.

“Yes, sir,” said I; “and,” looking him in the face, “*you and Powers are the persons.*”

“I?” he returned, while his lips trembled visibly. “I?”

“*Yes, you, Charles Hampton. You may as well confess all, for I have proof in abundance.*”

I never saw anyone more dumbfounded than was he; and, in a little time, he did confess all, even to the smallest point. I will not go into detail, but merely say, he and Powers had both invested largely in lottery schemes, from which they never realized anything, and also in stocks of less value than the paper required to transact the business. He had never been dissipated, but was desirous to become rich, that he might enjoy more luxuries. He completely exonerated Powers from any guilt, further than he himself instigated.

He said the robbery was easy to accomplish, inasmuch as Powers had a mirror in front of him whereby he could notice the various numbers used about the combination locks.

“But,” said he “how came you to suspect me?”

Removing my wig, whiskers and glasses, I said, “Do you know me now?”

“You are the telegraph operator at L—”

“And your telegraphing was what convicted you. When you were writing I noticed you call X several times. There is no such call on the line, and when it was answered I was surprised, so I took your message and the answer and studied them out, and was convinced something was wrong,” and then I told him about the envelope, etc., till he understood the entire matter as well as I.

“It is all up with me, as far as secrecy is concerned,” said he. “But can I not compromise with you? If it becomes public, Frank is ruined, and I consider him innocent, though possibly you may not. And, honestly, I know a lady whose heart would be broken by my wickedness becoming known to her. I deserve punishment, but I have a regard for the feelings of others. Provided I return the entire amount taken, and enough more to pay all expenses, with a satisfactory sum to settle with you, will you endeavor to arrange the affair without publicity?”

“I do not know as it is right to do as you desire, but I will see what can be done. I trust there is no need of placing you under arrest?” said I.

“I claim to be a gentleman in spite of this error,” he returned, his eyes flashing. “And what good would it do me to attempt to run away?”

“You are right. Excuse me for harboring any suspicions, even for an instant,” said I. “Please call on me to-morrow at eleven.”

“I will do so,” said he, and left the room.

In the morning I called on the bank officials and informed them of my success, but mentioned no names.

“And,” said I, “I restore you your property. Will you grant me the favor not to ask who the guilty ones are, and permit them to go unpunished, and that they even go without further consideration? This is their first, and I know it will be their last offence. Besides their punishment will seriously affect many innocent persons.”

They thought it was a peculiar way to do business, especially [unreadable] for a long time were uncertain how to act; but influenced by my arguments and the good I had done, they finally assented to my wishes; and a mystery was always attached to the affair in the minds of every one save us three. Charles Hampton is now my warmest friend, and Frank Powers is himself a bank president.

No, I did not marry Eva Simpson, but Charles Hampton did take her as a wife, nor do I know that his one misdeed rendered him any less worthy to be her husband. He knows of my once love for her, nor does he wonder at it, loving her so much himself. He made up for depriving me of Eva by giving me his own sister, whom all confess a charming woman.

May all telegraph operators be as successful as I was, is my best wish.

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