

The Telegraph Operator's Story

VERY few people know much about telegraphing, how it is done, or what strange things sometimes happen over the wires. So strange that I often wonder that no one ever writes a story about them. Such a story could be written, a true story, but a very thrilling one nevertheless. People like you, who live in cities, only see down stairs in an office, and know nothing of the actual operators. All you see is an office with a couple of clerks, each of whom has a pen in each hand, one behind each ear, and another in his mouth, to show you how busy he is, telegrams going up a miniature dumb-waiter and coming down the same, and small boys, more or less dirty and noisy, who, on receiving these telegrams, start off with deceptive haste, which moderates as soon as they are fairly out of sight. A messenger never walks unless he has an important message. On all other occasions he arrives at an awe-inspiring trot, which impels you to bestow sixpence upon him. But of the actual operator you know but little. He is of all men most mysterious. His name is generally Mac, occasionally Jim. No one knows where he lives. He knows a fellow called Bill in Chicago, who gets a hundred and ten dollars. He carries a photograph of a female with him, but he always calls her a "gal." If he does not wear a slouched felt hat, he luxuriates in a painful beaver.

I couldn't explain so that you would understand me how it is that a line is worked. Anyway, there are two sorts of operators, one those who read by sound, one those who read by paper. You see the current is alternately let on and broken so as to raise or depress a brass needle. When the needle is down it makes a mark on a narrow band of paper which runs under it. If it is only down for a short time it makes a dot, like this -, if for a longer time it makes a dash, like this —. Combinations of these two signs make up the alphabet. This was the old way of working. The present and quicker way of reading is by sound. A dot makes a certain sound, a dash makes a sound a little more distinct, and by practice one learns to read this as naturally and quickly as if listening to the human voice.

Now in all large offices they read exclusively by sound; but at country offices the operators, whom we call "plugs," read by paper. It is much slower, and is not half as reliable, especially in wet weather, when instruments work with great difficulty.

Now the story I have to tell you actually occurred in Canada a couple of years ago. At the time I was working in a city office. The line extended a couple of hundred miles from Montreal to Caradel. About midway was a large town, Binville, the other offices were at country villages. The operator at Binville was a young man named CHARLTON, who had been some years in the States, and was a very expert operator and clever fellow at anything. He was not the actual agent of our company. The actual agent was a respectable lunatic named CHIGGLE, who was also postmaster. He knew little or nothing of his business, but entrusted it all to CHARLTON, who did pretty much as he liked. So CHARLTON was in effect postmaster and operator.

Perhaps you don't understand the working of the post office. A few words will explain all that it is necessary you should know to understand my story. When they dispatch a mail from an office, they send with it a letter bill. On that bill is entered the amount of postage due on letters forwarded to the office to which the mail is sent, and the amount of postage paid in money or by stamp on letters mailed at the dispatching office. On the right hand half of this bill are entered

the numbers and addresses of all registered letters and parcels forwarded by that mail. When a letter is registered its address and number are entered in a book, and on the letter bill. The receiving postmaster enters it in his book, and initials the letter bill as an acknowledgement.

There was an agency of the Caradel Bank at Binville, and every week, sometimes twice a week, the head office remitted packages of its own notes to Binville, to be put in circulation there. These packets contained from four to six thousand dollars, and were sent by mail registered. You will see that if through omission of the mailing clerk such a parcel was not entered on the letter bill, the receiving clerk could pocket the parcel and say he never received it. There would be nothing on the bill to show that such a parcel was forwarded.

One Sunday morning in April, while CHARLTON was sorting the mail from Caradel by the flickering gas-light, he came across a large packet from the Caradel Bank. He threw it aside as usual till he had completed the task of sorting the mail. When he came to compare the registered letters with the bill he found seven letters in the parcel, only six entered. The clerk at Caradel had omitted to enter the bank parcel!

CHARLTON sat down and thought it over. It was a big temptation, six thousand dollars. It was Sunday and no offices were open. CHIGGLE never looked at the bills, the postmaster at Caradel would never suspect anything wrong, the agency at Binville would wait till Tuesday expecting their parcel. He had two days' start. He sat down an honest man and rose up a robber. It was a terrible temptation to go through, and I think that many a stronger fellow than CHARLTON would have fallen. He put the parcel into his satchel, went home to breakfast, came back and attended to his office duties. At noon the office closed, and his work was over. He broke up the parcel, stowed the notes away about him, changed his dress, and hired a horse to go to a French village some dozen miles from Binville. It was a wet Sunday, the early spring roads were deep with sticky mud, the wheels sank to the axles, and slipped in the cavernous ruts. Arriving at this village, he left his horse and walked on three miles to another little hamlet, where he engaged a wrinkled old *habitant*, a furry horse, and a springless cart, on the representation that he was a telegraph repairer sent out to fix some damage done to the line. On he jolted until he reached the village of Kena, about twenty-five miles from Binville.

He left his venerable charioteer at a tavern, and walked boldly over to the telegraph office, which was in a private house. It was presided over by a fat girl in a hat and red shawl. She was about the pluggest of "plugs" that you ever heard of. Her instruments about matched her. They were shaky, old-fashioned, out of all adjustment, apparently compounded out of a thrashing mill and a wooden clock. The weather was abominable. The instruments worked accordingly, sometimes getting off a hundred fine dots utterly invisible to the naked eye, and concluding with a stubborn dash six feet long. The operator was almost crying over it, and no wonder.

But CHARLTON's practiced ear caught two words "robber escaped."

His breath came quick for a minute, the room swam before him, and he almost fell. In another second his self-possession came back, and he asked the mixed operator if the line was working well now? The girl turned round and asked his name. JOHN BELL, a repairer. He was sent down to investigate the working of the offices, and see after the line generally. The poor girl was

overjoyed to see the providential BELL. The line was working wretchedly, the weather was bad, the instruments old, and she had an important message to take. It was addressed to the chief constable, and she could not make out a word. Would Mr. BELL help her?

Of course he would. So he cut off the register, and working on the feeble, rickety old relay, the following message ticked faintly off:

BINVILLE, April 10, 1866.

To Chief Constable, Kena:

The operator here, one CHARLTON, has stolen parcel bank notes, six thousand dollars. Robber escaped. Probably passing your way. Bills on Caradel Bank. Arrest him. Officers on his track about an hour behind him.

SAMUEL CHIGGLE.

If you think, however, that CHARLTON copied out this message you are mistaken. He listened to it, and then, interrupting the sender, asked him to repeat it slowly as the line worked very badly. The operator swore, and recommenced. Charleton calmly wrote out this.

BINVILLE, April 10, 1866.

To Chief Constable, Kena:

Post office robbed of six thousand dollars. Caradel Bank bills. Robber escaped up your way. One thousand dollars reward. He will try to pass himself off as a detective in pursuit of Mr. CHARLTON, and has forged a warrant. Seize him.

SAMUEL CHIGGLE.

This message was sent to the chief constable, a fat little Canadian, principally clad in a pair of beef-boots and a fur cap. One thousand dollars! He would be a millionaire, a thousandaire rather. Local prints would narrate his sagacity and bravery, and his grandchildren would talk of him as the man who single-handed captured the desperate robber of the Caradel Bank.

But there was no time to lose. The valiant chief constable and six myrmidons hid themselves in the adjoining room, having first *ceinturid* themselves elaborately for the fight. CHARLTON asked the next office when the detective had passed, and saw that he had a clear half hour before him. He went to the tavern, ordered his patriarchal charioteer to sup and be ready to leave in an hour, ordered his own supper, left his satchel conspicuously on the table, went to the office and telegraphed that the robber was arrested, and that they need not be on the watch, and then took to the fields. He went down towards Binville, and at a turn of the road met a cart reeling and rocking furiously through the swashing mud. A stout man was lashing the horse furiously with the reins, and swearing lustily at the road inspector. CHARLTON crouched under the fence till he passed, and then struck for the river. He found an old wrinkled *habitant*, who came grumbling and shivering to the door, shading his guttering candle with his dirty fingers. CHARLTON hired this old man and his two bead-eyed, black-haired boys to put him across the river. It was a case of life and death, he said. The river was high and the ice running. The course of the stream was choked by huge, grinding sheets of ice. Occasional crooked channels of clear water showed between these, smoking in the chill night air under the light of the moon. They pushed off in a crazy wooden canoe, and with bold hearts adventured into the floating ice. Sometimes it was fair paddling through the channels, every minute becoming narrower as the ice fields came together.

Then they had to leap out and drag the canoe over a cake of ice, straining wearily at the gunwale. "Courage, my old, sacred milch cow!" shouted the cheery old inhabitant. "Embark! embark! she is at large; paddle, paddle, my friends," he chirruped.

"En roulant ma boule roulant,
En roulant ma boule."

Plashing into clear water, then one leg in the canoe, the other in the floating puddle impelling it onwards. After four hours' hard work they reached the opposite shore, five miles down stream. Too late to cross back, so the ferrymen slept there. No sleep for CHARLTON, for in half an hour he was clattering and plashing over the roads in a French cart, bound for the frontier. He passed a buyer of cattle and oats, dodged along unfrequented roads, and at two o'clock on Tuesday morning was across the lines in the land of freedom—to him. He got away, and probably is a flourishing and enterprising merchant by this time.

But to go back again to our heroic detective, who was swearing along the road to Kena. He arrived there and drove direct to the office. He leaped from his seat, and dashing up the steps, panted:

"I'm a detective."

"Hurrah!" shouted the vigilant rustic chief, bursting from his ambush and, followed by his myrmidons, flinging himself upon his city confrère.

Tableau. The combat thickens; on ye brave! "Sacre-e-e. Bull of Heaven! Sacred milch cow! Tail of a cow! Name of a nightingale!" shouted the warriors as they triumphantly bore down the officer. "Hurrah! the thousand dollars is to us—is to us!" The foeman was stretched gasping on the floor with two black eyes, a jellied nose, nine front teeth knocked out, his hair strewn to the winds of heaven, and his clothing pulpy. In vain his assertions, his protestations—in vain the warrant. They were prepared for that. The unfortunate man was bound hand and foot, placed in a cart and escorted by most of the able-bodied population of Kena, at once started for Binville. It was two o'clock in the morning when they arrived there. The news had preceded them, and the little city was all awake to see the triumphal entrance of the daring robber. On wound the mournful procession, the village chief, intoxicated with joy, dancing in front of the cart, his faithful myrmidons encircling it, like Indian bearers around a palanquin. The captive had howled and kicked himself hoarse, and was now lying exhausted in the cart, occasionally giving an apathetic wriggle or a despairing bleat. They haughtily waved back the throng, and led him to the jail. The gray-haired old jailer came wheezing forth with his keys clanking.

"Let me get at him!" howled the fiery CHIGGLE, bursting through the crowd; "let me strangle him!"

In furtherance of this charitable intention, Mr. CHIGGLE seized the prisoner by the throat. Then with an unpronounceable shriek, a perfect hash of a word, he stove in the saltatory country constable's hat.

“Great heavens,” he cried, “it’s the detective!”

Tableau.

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