

## *Detected By Electricity*

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### *A Somnambulist Murderer Reveals His Guilt*

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I am now a telegraph operator of twelve years' service; but my story requires that I revert to the time when, poor and penniless—my father dead—my poor mother was striving with all her earnest might to keep our little family together. Alas! The strength of woman is unequal to the determination of her mind, and my poor mother, overcome by her great exertions for the support of myself and sister, died five years after my father's demise. Thus my sister and myself, aged respectively ten and twelve years, were thrown upon the mercy of a cold and pitiless world, without money, without friends, and, as I then thought, without relatives, but I have found many of the latter in my more prosperous and independent days.

I remember quite distinctly how I fared the first day that I attempted to get work. Everybody looked upon my tidy suit and ingenuous countenance as the worst symptoms of depravity and innate dishonesty, turning me away without a civil or sympathetic word. In vain I told my story, and pleaded a desire to do anything. It was the same thing for a week, when one night, worn out by fatigue and the many rebuffs which I had received, I turned my steps homeward, and when going down a narrow and obscure alley—I now avoided the more crowded thoroughfares—I became unmanned all at once and burst into a bitter and burning flood of tears. I really thought my heart would break, and Heaven only knows how long I might have remained there weeping but for an interruption which proved the turning point in my life. I felt someone touch me upon the shoulder and ask me very kindly why I cried so.

“If I were to tell you,” replied I, “you would say I was a vagabond, and ought to be in the orphan asylum or workhouse.” “No child,” said he, “you may be sure of my sympathy if you tell a truthful story, so dry your tears and tell me all about it.” I felt my heart warm toward him at these kind words, and told as shortly as possible our whole little history, as simple as it was. “You are a noble boy,” said he, as I finished my narrative, “and deserve some reward. Where is this little sister of whom you speak so affectionately?” I told him. “Well, would you like to take me there? I would like to see her, and if you have told me the truth, I think I can probably put you in the way of employment.”

I assented at once, and he followed me to our home, which was then only a few blocks distant. I was delighted at the evident pleasure and gratification with which he saw and kissed my dear little sister Minnie. I thought, in fact, that he would never tire of holding her in his lap, and telling her pretty stories. On the morrow he came with his wife, who was delighted with Minnie's auburn curls and blue eyes, and took her to her home, while I went with Mr. Howard. He promised me that Minnie should be adopted into his childless home, and I should at present be employed as messenger in the telegraph office, with the hope of advancement according to my ability.

At the office I became acquainted with another messenger by the name of Charles Durbridge, whose eccentricity of character struck me very forcibly at that age. Like myself, he had been taken out of the street by Mr. Howard, and placed where he now was. I was often grieved and

shocked, however, by his want of gratitude for Mr. Howard, because he had many fine qualities, considerable education, and almost an inimitable tact for amusing us boys. We used to familiarly call him "Dully," for no other reason, I think, than that his character in no way deserved the appellation. We always ran together, and when there was a possibility of our getting away from the office for a few moments, we would generally be found in one or other of the parks, conversing on what we considered abstruse subjects. We became, in fact, almost inseparable, and dissatisfied without we were together.

Thus passed a year, when Mr. Howard told us that we were to begin learning telegraphy. It was slow work for me, but Dully was an apt scholar, and he at the expiration of six months had become a pretty fair "paper operator," and was sent to a little station called Avonville, some twenty miles away, his principal duty being to report trains, and receive coal orders for a mine near there. He was also agent for the railroad. Eventually, I, too, became a reliable operator, and was sent to an unimportant station in the opposite direction from Avonville, called Stuart. I was also upon a railroad, and as we travel free upon them all could visit my sister at N—— every Sunday if I chose to do so. I felt her absence very forcibly now, but as I had become quite self-sustaining in my fifteenth year could stand it better than I had at first supposed.

Mr. Howard ran down occasionally to see how I was getting along, and used his influence among the citizens for making my stay there pleasant and agreeable. My greatest trouble was the rudeness of older operators over the line, and I lay it down here as a maxim that operators have less patience than any other profession of men. Still, I never wavered, but did the best I could and as near right as possible. I heard from Dully occasionally; he was fast becoming a "sound operator," in fact was sanguine of accomplishing it in six months. I was somewhat anxious about his morals, concluding from what few remarks I could elicit from him, that he was rather "fast." His letters were always pleasant, however, and were my most welcome visitors. About twelve months after taking charge of Stewart, Dully told me he was going to N——, as Mr. Howard considered him competent to work in that office, and in a few weeks sure enough I heard him over my line forwarding and receiving the most lengthy telegrams at the rate of forty words per minute.

I was not envious of Dully's success, but on the contrary, resolved to emulate him, and get the place in N—— which Mr. Howard had long promised me; however, I was doomed to remain at Stewart until my seventeenth year, at which time I was considered a fair "sunder," and was called into the main office. I believe this was the happiest event of my life; indeed, I had worked hard, and felt that I deserved the promotion. I was not by any means the best operator in the room; in fact, there were several better ones, besides Dully, who could copy faster writing, and more legibly than myself. The operators were rather inclined to regard my arrival as an innovation, thinking me, no doubt, a favored individual; but I soon proved to them that I could easily do what was required of me, and I will here do Mr. Howard the justice to say that he never advanced his friends only as they rendered themselves worthy of promotion.

Dully had taken rooms with several more operators, and from what I could learn, and from what I afterward saw, I became convinced that he was leading a very high life; in fact, I could not see how he managed to live so well on the salary he was then getting. I never ventured to remonstrate with him but once, when he seemed to be so much hurt and annoyed that I never

ventured to do so again. I noticed that he afterward treated me with some reserve, and eventually with marked coolness. I don't know how we ceased to go together, but we have all had such experiences, and there is no necessity of particularizing. Suffice it to say that he took a table in the other end of the room, and I very seldom saw anything of him, though I knew him to be leading the same wild, reckless life. Mr. Howard spoke to me about it once, when I told him what I had done and the result. He seemed to regret Durbridge's course very much, and I saw that he was displeased also. For five or six months it went on this way, seeing each other very seldom, and then with scarcely any recognition.

One morning I was surprised to see him, after coming into the office, walk directly to my table and sit down by me. I saw that he had been drinking and was considerably excited.

"Wilmore," said he, "I've come to tell you goodbye."

"Why, Dully, you are not going away? What do you mean?"

"Yes. I am going this morning; your friend, Mr. Howard, has ordered me back to that miserable hole at Avonville."

"I know Mr. Howard is a friend of yours, Dully, and will not do anything but what is right."

"No," said he, "Howard is a vil—"

"Dully, you must not speak of Mr. Howard in that manner. If you have no more respect for yourself or gratitude for his many kindnesses, I think you had better not talk to me."

"Very well," said he, extending his hand, which I refused to take.

"Will you not tell be goodbye, Wilmore? You know I always liked you."

"No," I replied, "not unless you apologize for the insult you have offered Mr. Howard and myself."

"Very well, then," and he went downstairs.

I never knew from what cause this had been done, but I am satisfied, from what has since occurred, that Mr. Howard was aware of some crime which he had committed, and was endeavoring to shield him from the law. I was appointed chief operator not long after that occurrence, and had to exercise a general supervision of all the lines that led into the office. I had been holding this position over a year, when the sad events occurred which I have to relate. Mr. Howard had been absent for several weeks, on an inspection tour, and was expected back on this evening. I remember that his wife was very much disappointed at not meeting him when the train came in, and had sent me a note asking me to ascertain the occasion of his delay. I spoke to Durbridge about it, asking him where Mr. Howard was. He replied very shortly, telling me that he had not heard from him, and was not interested in his whereabouts.

It was Sunday night, and about 12 o'clock, I found myself alone, the night operators having all gone home. Presently I heard "N" called in a very rapid and excited manner, and ran to the key. It was Avonville, and I answered at once. Without a word of warning or explanation, he sent me the following dispatch, which has become indelibly fixed in my mind, and I will give it as "S," this was the signal for Avonville office, gave it to me:

AVONVILLE, 21.

To Albert Wilmore, N: —

Mr. Howard was assassinated here last night by some unknown person. Break the sad intelligence to his wife. See you tomorrow morning with remains.

CHAS. A. DURBRIDGE.

26w. D. H. For Operator.

I don't know how much I suffered, nor how long I should have remained there in tears, but for the watchman who came and told me it was very late. I folded the message in my pocket, and went downstairs. The thousand kind acts of Mr. Howard passed through my mind in rapid review. I felt that in losing him I had no ambition left to strive in the world, and how I suffered in that brief time, no one will ever know. Death had never come so near me before. I knew that I was utterly incapable to break it to his wife, but it had to be done, and I went to the house at once. I think I tried to be cautious and careful, but somehow or other I did not succeed, for she fell forward in my arms senseless, a stream of blood dripping from her lips. We were unable to restore her to consciousness, and when the physician came she seemed to be dead, for any motion or life there was left. But he was better rewarded, and I left her about half an hour afterward very quiet, and went to the depot to meet Durbridge. I had but a short time to wait, as the train was then due.

Durbridge came off among the first, and I was struck by his peculiar appearance. When he saw me he turned a shade paler, which made him look even more haggard.

"Durbridge," said I, "this is very sad and sudden. Can we do nothing about it?"

"Tis," said he; "poor Howard, I shall miss him now. I don't know; we must work!"

"You realize now what a friend he was to us?"

"Yes: God forgive me for any hard word I may have uttered. He was, indeed, a true friend."

This was the first time I had ever seen Durbridge in tears. I did not look at the remains, as Durbridge told me that he had been terribly mangled and lacerated. He was buried that evening, his wife accompanying us to the funeral.

II.

It was now several months since Mr. Howard's death, and we were trying to become reconciled. Mrs. Howard had persuaded me to resign and accompany her and my sister to a country seat, which she wished to place in my hands. It was about the middle of the month, and I intended resigning at the end. For some cause or other I was detained very late that night at the office—every one else had left. It was in November, and a very windy, stormy time. I renewed the coal in the grate, and sat there looking into the embers and revolving in my mind the various events which had so rapidly and lately transpired. We had failed to obtain any trace of his murderer, or murderers, and I was beginning to fear that they would never be brought to justice. There was, in fact, a mystery to me about the whole affair, and it was becoming to me more and more inexplicable.

While thus buried in thought I was suddenly interrupted by the clicking of an instrument. It was something unusual at that time of the night, and as we have but little lightning in November, I knew some one was trying to work. I listened closely the second time, and presently I heard the same click again. It was the Avonville instrument. I went over to the table and placed my hand upon the instrument. I turned the adjusting screw up gradually, and at last fixed it so I could hear the sound plainly. I saw at once that the writing came reversed, and tried to remedy it by changing the poles of my battery, but I could not hear it all then. I replaced the wires, and resorted to an old way of mine for getting reversed or bad writing, that is, I put paper on the bar which received the down stroke of the armaton of the sounder, by which means I muffled the down sound and strengthened the return stroke. By close attention I could now hear what was going on, but for the life of me I could not tell why the writing came so high.

Presently it began again; it was a dispatch:

AVONVILLE, 21.

To Albert Wilmore, N: —

Mr. Howard was assassinated near here last night by some unknown person. Break the sad intelligence to his wife. See you tomorrow morning with remains.

CHAS. A. DURBRIDGE.

26. D. H. For Operator.

Here followed some twenty or thirty dots. Then he began again, writing very firmly, "Oh, God forgive me, Howard. I would not have done it but—"

Then, as if speaking to me, he continued, "Wilmore, I murdered him. If you do not believe me, drag the pond."

A terrible suspicion passed through my mind. Had Durbridge murdered Howard? If so, why was he writing it on the line? I don't believe I am superstitious, but I did think, what a medium for spirits, if they chose to use it. I waited awhile to see if he would write any more. I then opened

the key and called him, but received no answer. I then heard the sounder give one stroke as if some one was cutting out, and although I waited half an hour longer, I heard nothing more.

My nerves, I must admit, were shaken, but I resolved to work out the mystery, and upon the following night returned. At the same time, I again heard the preliminary click; the same message was sent, and the same disconnected sentences. The next day I went to a detective by the name of Harris. I told him all the circumstances, and asked him to go to Avonville with me. He consented, and we arrived at Avonville that night, about 10 o'clock. I did not intend doing anything until 12 or 1, when I thought we would see who was writing. I knew the position of the office, having been there before. At 12 I went with Harris to the depot, and we stationed ourselves as noiselessly as possible near a window, which opened from the office into a center hall, through which we could plainly see everything in the room. About 1, a light was struck in the bedroom, and presently Durbridge came out. I saw at a glance that he was asleep; in fact I had suspected as much, knowing him to be something of a somnambulist. He went to his instrument and took five or six blanks from a clip, which he dampened and placed beneath the buttons on his "cut-out." This accounted for the high writing. He now took hold of his key, after loosening the spring, and commenced writing with the back end. This was the reason he came reversed. He was doing, in fact, everything he would not have done had he been awake. He then wrote the same message over, and, after replacing it on the file, the same disconnected sentences, which, if true, would utterly damn him. I turned almost deathly sick, and, God knows, I prayed that Durbridge would be found guiltless and my suspicions false. He had now gone back to bed, and we went away.

Harris asked me if I knew where the pond was. I told him, and upon the following morning we were there, with the proper appliances for dragging the bottom. They had not worked two minutes before a suit of clothes was brought up. The blood stains were very visible, but what paralyzed me most was "C.A.D." marked upon each piece; in fact, I had often seen him wear the suit. It is unnecessary for me to continue. When Durbridge was arrested, he confessed everything, and acknowledged the justice of the law.

He was condemned to suffer an ignominious death. I have never gone into a telegraph office since. — *New Orleans Picayune*.

*Journal of the Telegraph*, March 15, 1870  
*Hornellsville [NY] Tribune*, April 15, 1870  
*Schenectady Reflector*, June 23, 1870