

"Why, I thought you wouldn't come back till night?" she said, enquiringly.

"Think I was going to live in the country," queried Paul, with a strut, "with mud, mud everywhere? I'll bet Doc Jones will have to take his old horse down to the river. Why, he's just plastered with mud."

"How much did you make?" she asked, pausing in her work.

"Three twenty five, clear," returned Paul, indifferently, "and now I'll have enough to get mamma that wrap Gertrude spoke of."

"Better get yourself a suit," said practical May, glancing at the messenger's frayed uniform, "that office is hard on clothes."

Paul looked down at his coat and knickerbockers. Yes, they were becoming shabby. He frowned, and turned towards the table, where Gertrude had placed a cup of coffee and some delicate white bread.

"Can't hold it," he soliloquized between mouthfuls, "that old office is hard on everything. I can't learn telegraphy."

"Why, Paul," exclaimed Gertrude, "don't be so foolish! Take your time—you're only a boy."

"Humph!" and Paul was silent.

"There goes the bell, Gertrude," said May, with a laugh, "maybe it means a sleigh-ride."

"Mud ride, you mean," interposed the lad, brightening up visibly.

"Say, Paul," began May, as Gertrude vanished from the kitchen, "why don't you make a novena. It's near Christmas and you could finish on that day. You know I made one last year and I got what I wanted."

"I don't know," observed the lad, dubiously.

"Oh, Paul!"

"Oh, what did I say?" he retorted testily, "I mean that I—I don't know what I mean. I just mean I don't know."

"Didn't I get what I wanted?" she asked triumphantly.

"Yes, but you prayed well. I don't think I could pray enough."

"Oh, Paul!" exclaimed May, in a tone of despair, "I believe that office isn't a good place for you, or you wouldn't say you couldn't pray enough."

Tears started to the lad's eyes. This was more than he could bear. What he really imagined was that to obtain what he viewed as a great favor, would require more prayers than he could say. It was a boyish view of the matter and he was a boy.

"I'll pray as much as I can, May," he said, in a pained tone, "but don't think I can pray enough."

"That's enough, Paul," she said, gently, "do your best. That's what I did."

Gertrude appeared at this juncture and nodded to her brother.

"Mr. Shilling is here, Paul," she said, "and wants to see you. I believe his uncle is dead. Wasn't mentioned in that despatch you took to his brother?"

"We're not allowed to tell what's in a message," replied the young official, with some dignity.

"Oh, bother! Come in and see him then."

Mr. Shilling was a very wealthy merchant of Weston, and he enjoyed a certain popularity. He was always affable and obliging—obliging when the obligation meant a social or friendly duty, which he could discharge without pecuniary loss to himself. But he drew a sharp, clear cut line when the American dollar loomed up in the perspective of an obligation. He was benevolent, but he could not be termed beneficent. He wished well to everybody and showered kind phrases—commendable in themselves—upon young men starting out in life. And he helped them, too, when the effort could be made without cost.

"Ah, Paul, I am glad to see you," he began, with a gracious smile, as the messenger entered the room. "You have brought unpleasant news to my brother—I received a message after you left town. Will he take the train here for Toledo, or go to Cassville?"

"He said he would take the train here," answered the lad, beginning to feel very small in the presence of this great man.

"Ah, very good," observed Mr. Shilling, stroking his beard. "By the way, my boy, how are you getting on at the office? I feel interested in young men making their first start."

"Pretty well—that is, not very well," stammered Paul, feeling himself grow smaller and still more confused, "I can't receive, fast enough."

"Ah, that is too bad," observed the great man, reflectively, "but then you are young, Paul, and have plenty of time."

"That's what mamma and the girls say," returned the messenger, his eyes fixed upon the carpet.

"And it is very true," continued Mr. Shilling, gravely, "but tell me, Paul, wouldn't you like to go to college? I hear that you stood well in your class and with talent and a college training you might carve out a prosperous career."

Paul's heart bounded at the words. College had long been the subject of his boyish dreams. It was to him a new world of splendid realities and marvelous possibilities. He had read and re-read "Tom Brown at Rugby" until its heroes were as familiar to him as old companions, but college as a something to be realized in his mind, had never entered his mind. He knew that his mother could not meet the expense. But Mr. Shilling's words awoke desires which up to this moment had never been clearly defined. Telegraphy was a stepping-stone to certain high preferences,

while college was the grand avenue which led one to the threshold of everything life has to offer. Paul darted a quick, questioning glance at the great man.

"Because if you have such a desire," resumed the benevolent gentleman, "you will doubtless be enabled some day to gratify it. Where there's a will, there's a way, you know," and Mr. Shilling smiled encouragingly.

Paul's sudden hopes were dashed to the ground. The wonted frown settled on his brow. He wondered what the man was talking about.

"Yes, Paul," said the latter, rising, "where there's a will there's a way. We shall see, Paul, we shall see," and he nodded significantly.

"Thank you, sir," muttered the lad, his spirits rising perceptibly under the powerful rays of a kind, hopeful word.

Wreathed in significant smiles, Mr. Shilling took his departure.

"Making more nice speeches, was he?" enquired Gertrude, rather spitefully, as she entered the room.

"Yes," answered the lad, abstractedly.

He was thinking that perhaps they were more than mere words of encouragement.

"Well," he added, after a prolonged silence, "I s'pose I'd better go back to the office."

And bright dreams gave way once more to dull reality.

The days immediately preceding Christmas Eve passed quietly and monotonously. There were daily the same humdrum duties to perform, such as sweeping the office, delivering telegrams, overhauling and cleaning the local batteries and practicing on the learner's instrument, or "taking" messages in their ceaseless flow to and over the main lines. College and dreams of college gradually passed from the young student's mind. He felt that he was fast becoming more expert in deciphering Morse and he accordingly took fresh courage.

Christmas Eve at length dawned upon the valley of the Maumee. Snow and ice held nature in its cold embrace. Sleighbells jingled through the gay streets of Weston and along the lonely country roads. Man and beast seemed happy to breathe the fresh, crisp air. The river lay stretched in its sinuous bed between cultivated fields and meadow and woodland, like some huge serpent motionless in death. Here and there the wind had swept from its smooth surface a coating of snow, revealing a glittering expanse of solid ice. Boys and girls, men and women, their faces flushed with a healthy glow, flitted hither and thither, intent upon the enjoyment of the hour. A wintry sun lent its light to the happy scene and caught up a thousand flashing rays from the bright skates of the merry-makers, as they glided to and fro.

Paul was returning from a trip across the river, when this gay sight met his eyes. He dearly loved to skate and he could skate remarkably well. But he realized now that he was a bread-winner, and bread-winners must time their hours of amusements to suit their work. He sighed once more, as he resumed his rapid walk.

When he reached the office he found the day operator awaiting him at the door. The latter was enveloped from head to foot in his great ulster, while his gloved hand supported a small valise. Paul gave him a questioning glance.

"Paul, you will be operator this afternoon. I am going home for my Christmas turkey," and the young telegrapher smiled.

"Whew!" was all the messenger could utter.

"You won't have any train orders until this evening," continued the operator, "and the night man will attend to them. Don't be afraid. You can receive as well as some operators on this line."

Paul looked dubious.

"If any fellow on the line asks you a foolish question or tries to act smart, why tell him to—climb a tree."

The messenger smiled uncomfortably. He knew that this was more easily said than done.

"I'll do my best," he said, with a shrug.

"Here comes my train," continued the operator, looking up the track, "now remember, you have no orders for anything—let the fast mail go through. It doesn't stop here, you know."

Paul nodded, the train steamed on its way and the operator was gone. The lad felt a strange sense of responsibility creeping over him—a something which was of such reality and magnitude, as to seem palpable. He entered the office and looked around. The agent had closed up his books and had gone home. There was no one around to give him advice—no one to tell him what to do should any unforeseen incident arise. True, the station baggagemaster sat in his little office near by, smoking a wheezy odoriferous pipe, but he knew nothing concerning the movement of trains. Plainly, there was nothing for him to do, but to make the best of his unpleasant situation.

Giving the fire in the clumsy box stove a vigorous shake, he threw himself into the operator's arm chair beside the clicking instruments. Messages seemed unusually numerous, and Paul endeavored to catch the thread of these brief discourses. He fixed his attention on the commercial wire and heard the words: "Come at once. Father is dead." A sad Christmas for somebody, thought the lad, as he turned to the railroad wire.

Train orders were flying thick and fast. The despatcher seemed roused

to unwonted activity and gave his orders with a curtness and rapidity that amazed the attentive listener. It was: "Hold train ninety-nine." "Nothing for fifty seven." "Tell that slow poke on sixty eight that he isn't making running time." "Is twenty one coming?" "Turn your signal." "Thirty five will head in on passing track," and thus the instructions and reprimands passed from the despatcher's office to the various points along the line. Besides all this clatter, a constant stream of formal orders, couched in the terse, imperative language of the road, issued from the same seething brain in the main office, to the different crews then manning their respective trains.

Snatching a sheet of paper, Paul amused himself in trying to copy these rapid orders. Here and there he lost a word, or failed to catch the name of a meeting place, but he grasped enough of most orders to learn what trains were to meet. He continued this exercise for about fifteen minutes, when his interest was particularly aroused by copying an order for something to meet train forty three at Weston, his own station. He managed to catch a few letters of the word "S-p-a-l West," but could not guess what they signified. The despatcher ordered the Toledo operator to repeat his order and receive the "correct." Paul followed the repetition, but it was sent very rapidly by the Toledo expert and the former could only distinguish, "S-p-i-a-l West." Another letter added, it was true, but still unsatisfactory. But he noted particularly that he had correctly copied Weston, the meeting place.

He waited for the operator at Delta to repeat his copy of the order, but other pressing business crowded in upon the line, other trains were to be kept in motion; other instructions were to be given and Delta did not repeat at once. The student sat drooping over the "sounder," wondering what under the sun "S-p-i-a-l West" could possibly represent. Suddenly "De," call for Delta, flashed over the wire and the letter "Z" which served to vary the monosyllable of the call, told that the despatcher "wanted" the operator at Delta. Nor was the latter tardy in responding; he dreaded the despatcher's sharp reprimand. It chanced that he was a young and inexperienced telegrapher, otherwise he might not have been so prompt. "R-r" came the signal from "Z" meaning that the despatcher desired Delta to repeat his order.

Paul bent low over the instrument, determined to find out this time what "S-p-i-a-l West" signified. And he was not disappointed, for he copied the word entire, "Special West." But as he listened to the conclusion of the order, he was surprised, not to say, alarmed, to read Watson instead of Weston, as the meeting place. The word was sent hurriedly, but he felt convinced that he was not in error. Watson was the first station east of Weston and it seemed evident to him that the operator at Delta had made a serious blunder; what was worse, the despatcher failed to correct the mistake. He was overcrowded with demands for orders from various freights along the road and from two belated passenger trains near the west end of his district, and his wearied brain had lost much of its accustomed vigor. Thus reasoned the young student, as he sat with knitted brow, staring at the order in his hand.

But what was he to do? Ought he remain silent and trust to the operators or despatchers discovering and correcting his mistake, or ought he "call" the latter and ask him to give the proper meeting place? But, then, suppose that he himself had made the mistake—that he had misunderstood the operator at Delta? Was it reasonable to presume that one of the oldest and most experienced despatchers on the entire system had failed to read the repeated order correctly—that the very man who had given the proper order, would make such an inexcusable blunder?

The more Paul reasoned and, the faster his imagination worked, the more confused did Paul become. He looked about the office, there was no one there to give him advice. He glanced through the open window. Two little boys had improvised a sliding path on the platform, and their merry shouts and laughter jarred harshly on his ear. Unconsciously he placed his hand to his forehead, and was startled to find it wet with a cold perspiration. Something in his head seemed ready to snap in twain. In his desperation he rapped on the window pane. The boys turned round, and, at his beck, ran towards the window. He looked at them helplessly, scarcely knowing why he had called them. They answered his frightened, enquiring gaze with a broad grin.

"Say," he shouted, with a wave of his hand, "tell Dan I want to see him. Quick!"

Dan was the veteran baggagemaster, and the boys knew him well, for he had often taken them by the coat-collar and ejected them unceremoniously from the waiting room. They dashed away, and a moment later Dan appeared with his great black pipe set firmly between his teeth. Dan and the pipe, or rather the pipe and Dan, were inseparable. They seem to be complements of each other.

"What's up, youngster?" he asked gruffly, without removing the calculator.

"Oh, Dan, I'm afraid there's a mistake in an order, and I don't know what to do!"

Paul's face was a lively picture of the distressed mind within. The bag-

gage man opened his eyes and shook his head.

"Not in my line," he said sagely, "Didn't the operator tell you what to do?"

"He didn't say anything about a special," replied the lad, mechanically holding up his copy of the order, "and there's one coming. I'm sure it ought to meet forty-three here, but Delta has given it orders to go to Watson."

"They'll meet on the main track, then," observed Dan in grim humor. "Wait!" he added suddenly, struck by a new idea, "I'll call the agent, as night man."

Dan hurried away with a near approach to a trot.

"Paul, why don't you come to supper? We've been waiting a half hour," and May's golden head appeared in the waiting-room window.

"Why, Paul, what is the matter?"

Well might anyone ask the question, for the boy's face looked wild and haggard; his lips were parted as if to ask a question; his wide open eyes seemed abnormally large, and bore that strange, vacant stare which is common to the insane. He started towards her with the fatal order in his hand.

"Oh, May," he cried in agony, "I don't know what to do. I'm afraid there'll be an awful wreck."

"Oh, Paul!" and May looked the terror she felt.

"I hope Dan will hurry," he said slowly, as if speaking to himself.

"Where is he?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"Gone after the agent, or night man."

"Why, Paul, I saw them both in a sleigh, going over the river."

Paul clasped his hands in new terror.

"Oh, what'll I do?" he cried piteously. "All the people will be killed."

"Where are the trains?" asked May.

"One will pass here in a few minutes," he replied, glancing at the clock.

"Then, stop it, Paul," said his practical-minded sister, "don't let it pass."

"I can't—it's the fast mail—never stop here."

"Better stop it than have it wrecked, you silly boy," cried May impatiently.

The superintendent would discharge me—"

At this moment a long drawn whistle sounded in the distance. It was the signal of forty-three. Paul started forward. A deep flush, which told of desperate resolve, came to his cheeks. He was about to do what the operator had warned him never to attempt—to stop the fast mail.

"Paul!" cried May with warning emphasis.

He needed no urging. Relying upon the wording of his copied order, he determined to stop the train, and if he had made a mistake, to take the consequences. He loosened the pulley chain beside his table and a sharp click told that the signal was set. May entered the office, and standing at her brother's side, glanced up the track. The head-light of the approaching train shone brightly along the rails. Paul sat in silence, staring at his order. A moment later forty-three's engine stood panting like some great animal, before the office window.

"Well, what are your orders?" asked a quiet voice at Paul's elbow, and turning, he saw the colored lantern and bright brass buttons of the conductor.

"I don't know," was all the lad could say.

"What's that?" enquired another voice—a cool, imperative voice, and Paul started to his feet.

A tall, mustached man, with regular, even handsome features, stood beside the conductor. His keen blue eyes seemed to pierce one through and through. A half scornful smile played about his deep red lips. Paul recognized him at a glance. It was G. W. Stephens, the superintendent, the one who could be said to hold the fortunes of two thousand men in the palm of his graceful white hand.

"Did you have orders to meet the special west at Watson?" enquired Paul, marvelling that he could speak at all.

The conductor nodded.

"Well, I heard the 'special west' get orders to meet you here," continued Paul feverishly, "and I wouldn't let you pass."

"Didn't the despatcher tell you to turn your signal?" asked Stephens in the same cool tone.

"No, sir. I was—I didn't like to ask him."

Another wild whistle reached Paul's ear. He leaned forward and peered through the window. A glaring head light in a direction opposite to that of forty-three met his gaze. He turned to the two officials with something like a smile of relief—it was more—a smile of triumph. The "special west" was at hand!

"You've done your work well," said Stephens, consulting his watch, "and now turn back your signal. Your name?"

"Paul Gaiwan."

"Where is the operator?" he continued.

"He's not here just now," replied the boy.

"It seems so," observed the official dryly. "Tell him to report to me. Give me that copy."

"My boy," said the conductor warmly, "you have saved us from an awful fate. I have a son about your age and a daughter, too, like this little one, your sister, I suppose, turning towards May, "and I'll them to-night how their papa, with many others, owes his life to you."

Paul colored and nervously fingered his messenger badge.

"I'll see that you are properly rewarded for this," interposed Stephens, without any show of feeling. "But it seems to me that a boy of your age ought to be at school."

"Oh, he wants to go to school," put in May, her awe vanishing, "but mamma can't afford to send him away."

"Send him away?" echoed the superintendent, fixing his masterful blue eyes upon her, "ah, I understand. He wishes to go to college?"

"Yes, sir," answered Paul and May in unison.

"Humph!" Well, you will hear from me, Paul. Now, good bye," and the great official actually shook hands with the two little watchers. They were well-nigh overcome at this unexpected honor.

The conductor swung his lantern and forty-three, with its ten coaches teeming with life, started forward on its journey. Then the "special west" steamed by the station, bearing five more coaches of excursionists. As each train passed the office, Paul and May looked up at the faces in the windows—men, women and children—wealth, pleasure and innocence—all unconscious of the frightful doom averted. If one or the other passengers noticed the two children on the platform, it was, perhaps, only to wonder why they were foolish enough to stand there in the cold watching a train.

Christmas morn ushered in a blinding snow storm. Everybody who was anybody in the town, and many who were nobodies, ventured out, despite the storm, to visit a church, a neighbor's house, or a confectioner's establishment, just as the individual viewed the object of the holiday. The Gaiwan family, however, observed the feast as Catholics. The mother and Gertrude attended first Mass, while Paul and May went to the second and completed the novena to the Babe of Bethlehem; for notwithstanding Paul's doubts as to his ability to pray enough, he had acted upon his sister's suggestion. The real peace and joy of these two young hearts must be felt to be understood.

Words would but mar the picture. When Paul and May returned home late that morning, Gertrude met them at the door. Her cheeks glowed with excitement and pleasure. Mrs. Gaiwan stood in the center of the room, a proud, happy smile on her face. Gertrude held up a telegram, bearing the stamp of the great company which Paul served. His eyes asked the question his lips could not utter.

"Guess what it is," said Gertrude gaily.

"A message?"

"Why, of course. Well, here, read it."

Paul grasped the envelope and drew forth a yellow sheet. It was dated "General manager's office, St. Louis, Mo.," and ran as follows:

"Christmas greeting from the F. P. & W. railway to Paul Gaiwan. Your skill and promptness yesterday saved two passenger trains from certain destruction. We know that many of our patrons owe their lives to your care. Acting upon the suggestion of G. W. Stephens, division superintendent, we have decided to reward your fidelity by enabling you to fulfill your commendable ambition. The management will send you to any college you may select, and pay all expenses until you graduate. Instructions and further details will follow by mail.

T. A. Townsend, General manager T. P. & W. Ry.

The novena was answered and Paul's boyish ambition was about to be realized! He looked at his mother, then at Gertrude, and finally at May. With a cry of gladness he threw himself into his mother's arms and was clasped to her breast. Happy the boy who has a mother to share his joys and sorrows!

When Mr. Shilling, who, by the way, chanced to be a passenger on the "special west" that night, heard of Paul's good fortune, he rubbed his hands together in a benevolent manner and said:

"Ah, Paul, I was sure something would come of your striving. What did I tell you? 'Where there's a will, there's a way.' We shall see, Paul, we shall see."

His smile and his manner of speaking were charming in the extreme. Mrs. Gaiwan said:

"Now, Paul, endeavor to thank God for His kindness, by making the most of your opportunities."

"Who would ever think, Paul," said May, brushing back her curls, "that you could get to college in this way. Not one boy in a thousand could have done so."

And Gertrude added with a smile, "No, nor one in a million!"

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