

## A CANADIAN CHRISTMAS.

## The Thrilling Experience of a Telegraph Operator in the Wilds.

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1882, how vividly I remember it! The deep, ugly red scar which starts at my left temple and runs clean down to my left jaw was made on that day.

It is not because I am unduly sensitive of my altered appearance that I have told so few the story of the ugly scar, but on account of the horror that I yet experience when recalling the terrible incidents that led to my receiving it. How many lives were saved by that wound I shall never know.

The great Canadian Pacific Railway, which connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific, was in the year 1882 only built about 200 miles west of Winnipeg, which left a huge gap of several hundred miles of untouched prairie before one of the world's wonders, the famed Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, was reached.

Such was the rapidity with which the rails were laid and telegraph offices erected, that when winter set in fifty telegraph operators were needed to take charge of the empty stations.

The management found it hard to induce men to go out and bury themselves for the winter in the vast prairie, which was only then being opened up. To-day men are only too happy to make homes in

the fine as the finest flour, and with amazing force drove it through the little telegraph office which sheltered her from its deathly embrace, as though enraged against this earnest of approaching civilization. At times so fierce was the onslaught that the tense telegraph wires could be heard humming even above the demoniacal gale of the storm.

I knew it was unmanly, but I could not help it; the tears would start to my eyes in such a queer manner. My thoughts had been with mother and dear old London, where I had left her two years ago to try my fortune in Montreal. I knew she was thinking of her eldest born, whom she had tried so hard to keep at home.

Christians awake, salute the happy morn. I had to do to was to close my eyes, and I could hear my companions singing the grand old hymn in the greatest city in the world.

It was a relief to hear the telegraph instrument, which had been quiet for hours, call my office. Both passenger trains were ten minutes late, and were slowly struggling toward my station. It was just 2 a. m. when I received the order from the dispatcher at Winnipeg to detain the east-bound train at my station when she arrived, till the west-bound express crossed her. Double tracks are yet unknown out there. I replied back that I understood the order, and was just about to let the red lantern swing round from the station and face the track, when I was startled by hearing a tremendous

floor heavily; he gave a cry of greedy exultation, felt in the pocket of the coat and drew out a bottle of whisky, and proceeded without delay to break off the neck of the bottle on the stove. It was forbidden to sell whisky to Indians, but that did not matter much; they always managed to get it.

Just as he was about to raise the ragged mouth of the bottle to his lips the telegraph instrument began to work. It had the effect that I feared; both the Indians, with superstitious dread in their eyes, involuntarily took a couple of steps back toward the wall where I was sitting and devoutly hoping that they would wrap up in their blankets and go off to sleep; no such good fortune.

I had not passed them two feet when they both caught me violently by the shoulder and in excited, guttural tones began in a threatening manner to say something to me. Seeing that I did not understand, the tall brave, pointing the bottle which he still tightly clutched in his left hand at the talkative instrument, said fiercely, "No go there 'no go there'!"

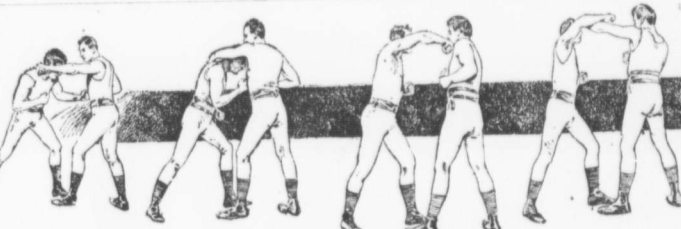
I really understood what they meant; the Indian's fear of telegraph instruments, and his inability to understand electricity, was known to every operator west of Winnipeg.

As easily as I could have lifted an infant, the great savage, with his unengaged hand, swung me from my feet and contemptuously dropped me on my chair again, after which he took a long draught out of the bottle and then handed it to

patcher was calling my office. Like a flash the order to detain the down train, express that he had sent came back to my memory, and with a thrill of horror I remembered that I had forgotten to turn the red lamp. The despatcher, I knew, wanted to ask me if the train had arrived. Involuntarily I started to my feet. The only sounds now to be heard were the ticking of the instrument and the ceaseless cries of the storm.

The Indians, the instant they again heard the ticking, ceased their muzzled mirth, again looked apprehensively at the mysterious instrument and hurriedly glanced at me. Their treacherous, suspicious natures were thoroughly aroused on seeing me standing and looking eagerly at the instrument. I knew not how near the train might be, as I must. I thought of the fearful loss of life which would surely occur unless I could reach the cord that hung above the instrument, and with one pull swung round the red lamp and let it beam across the track. I had received the order to expose the light, and unless I did so I knew full well that the company would hold me responsible for any accident that might occur. I had written the order in the order book when receiving it.

All this passed through my mind like a flash. I dreaded not the company, but I could not let scores of lives be sacrificed in order to save me from endangering my own. I had always thought I was as stout as the stuff brave men are made of, but



How Fitzsimmons' Deadly Blow May be Avoided.

this wonderful country, which has very aptly been termed the future granary of the world.

Money is a loadstone that few men can resist, and when I heard that \$80 a month was being paid out there for operators, I was resigned my position in Montreal, and with \$20 and a pass in my pocket I started on Nov. 2, for Manitoba.

Four days later I reached Winnipeg, and was at once sent out to Elkhorn, a bit of a station 150 miles further west. When I took charge, Nov. 8, four inches of snow already hid the earth, which did not see the sun again till March 20, when its four-foot-thick chilly covering had at last disappeared.

Two passenger trains a day and an occasional construction train was the only break in the monotonous life which I led. It was a dreadfully lonely life. I was alone in the station, and as December began to wane, and the dread blizzards began their wild revelry, heaping the snow into such mounds on the tracks that the trains were delayed for days. I got as homesick and as nervous as a girl of fourteen instead of a young man of twenty.

Christmas eve ushered in better weather. All day it had been storming and snowing. At one a.m. the glass showed two below zero. The storm had risen and raged from the west. The riotous wind, as it swept along the vast prairie, unobstructed for scores of miles by houses or trees, caught up the newly fallen snow in its mad embrace, tore it into fragments

kicking and howling at the door. In my surprise I forgot to turn the lamp which was to signal the engineer to stop at the station for orders.

Little wonder I was agitated; the nearest house was seven miles away; no white man could have walked a tenth of that distance in such a blizzard and have lived. Had the shooting and kicking been less imperative I might have been less impatient. With trembling hands I drew the bolt. Before I could step aside the door was thrown violently open, and to my dismay two stalwart Cree Indians burst their way into the little office. It was the manner the savages entered that made me feel nervous. It was no uncommon thing for me to have Indians draw into the station at night, and to see rooping bands of them pass the station at all hours, but the two drunken Cree Indians, even an Indian scout might have been pardoned for fearing had been unarmed and placed in the same position I was in.

Without appearing to notice me, the braves walked over to the glowing wood stove and began to warm themselves. I wanted to show that I trusted them, and brought two chairs and asked them to be seated; as I spoke they both turned their wicked, burning black eyes to me, but again did not deign to speak, but kicked the chairs to one side and began taking off their great skin coats and caps and red-and-white blankets.

As the taller pettishly struck his wraps down, something hard struck his

his companion. The effect of the liquor upon their savage natures showed itself almost immediately; they began to yell and shout, and putting their hands around their mouths uttered cries like prairie wolves. I shrank back to the wall.

In ten minutes they had finished the bottle and had become nothing better than howling maniacs. They took hands and capered round the stove, stamping the floor viciously with their moss-covered feet. Releasing hands, they would wave their long arms about their heads in a most grotesque manner, uttering at the same time the most bloodcurdling war-whoops.

In their eyes was the baleful light of the wild beast. The coal-oil light which but dimly lit up the room threw a yellow shade upon their dark, perspiring, brutal red faces, making them look like ensnarled from the Evil One, dancing in fiendish glee over some evil deed; the storm, as though in sympathy with the savage scene, began to howl, shriek like a mad thing, and drove through the casement and ill-constructed door miniature snowbanks.

Every moment I expected they would seize me and in their insane glee practice upon me some savage torture. Would they never cease? For nearly thirty minutes I sat still as death where they had flung me. Safety for me lay in not attracting their attention. A dreadful orison was in store for me.

The instrument, which had been silent for a time, again woke to life. The dis-

when put to the test I gloried in finding that I feared not death.

I was quite calm as I began carefully to walk over to the instrument. The drunken savages were on me ere I had taken six steps. As they fell me to the earth I heard a dull, muffled roar; that saved me from losing my senses—it was the rumbling of the east-bound locomotive. The Indians also heard the noise, and as they turned to listen I once more sprang to my feet and dashed past them. One of them I passed in safety, but as I dodged the big brave he struck viciously at me with the broken bottle.

His aim was but too true; the ragged mouth of the bottle opened my face like comical bullet. I had only a few more steps to go. Before I felt I knew that I had turned the light.

The conductor put me on the train and took me to Winnipeg, where I remained in the hospital for three weeks.

The Indians had gone when he entered the station. He had seen the order in the book, and had waited the arrival of the west-bound express, which arrived five minutes after he did. Had he not seen the red light he would have gone on, and the trains would have met about ten miles east of the station.

The detective tried to trace the brutal savages, but did not succeed.

Yes, as long as I live I shall remember Christmas Day, 1882, when I was employed in the Far West by the great Canadian Pacific Railway.