

HOLIDAY READING.

*

TELEGRAPH STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS.

You ask me for a Christmas story of the telegraph. I can hardly hope to write anything to reach that dignity, but I may offer you some recollections of my own career as a telegrapher in Montreal, which, if they are not particularly striking, are at any rate true.

It was in 1855 that I entered the service of the Montreal Telegraph Company, then in its infancy. Those Canadians who are familiar with the vast ramifications of the system today, and the casual traveller or observer who may cast an eye at the maze of wires in the cities and along the highways of the country, can hardly conceive of the small beginnings from which this great corporation sprang. When I joined the service of the company there were only four wires running out of Montreal, one to Toronto, one to Quebec, one to Portland and Troy, in New York State, and a fourth to Ottawa, then known as Bytown. The last named line was constructed as a private venture, being owned by the firm of Dodge, Dickinson & Co. In those days, for I am speaking of nearly forty years ago, the Cunard steamers were the most important Atlantic liners plying between Europe and America. They called alternately at New York and Halifax, the latter place being the home of the founder of the line, Samuel Cunard, and the mails were eagerly awaited, for that line was then our only medium of communication between the old and the new world.

Recalling events of that period as they come to mind, there stands out conspicuously the reception of the news of the taking of Sebastopol, towards the close of the Crimean war. "Old man" Dakers, as the boys used to familiarly call the long-time secretary of the Montreal Telegraph Company, was a well-known figure to the mercantile community of Montreal for nearly forty years. On receipt of the news of the success of the allied army against the Russians, Mr. Dakers rushed bareheaded to the *Herald* office to announce the welcome victory, and have means taken for speedy circulation of the news. He was followed by a great crowd, attracted by the rumors quickly sent flying, and only with great difficulty made his way back to the telegraph office through the excited people.

The Montreal Company "in the fifties" had a competitor in the British North America Telegraph Company, which operated a line of wire to the city of Quebec, then a much more important commercial centre than to-day. Among the employees of the latter were Stanley and James McNider, and James Stephenson, the present popular and able general superintendent of the Grand Trunk Railway. Mr. S., it is not generally known, like many another successful railway official began life as a telegraph operator. There was also a line of the Vermont and Boston Telegraph Company, operating on the Bain system, which in its day did excellent service in accommodating business to New York and Boston.

It was in 1863 that I was assigned to the charge of the New York wire, then the most important of the lines, and until my with-

drawal from the service of the company, in 1868, I continued to operate and supervise this particular department. During these five years events of great consequence and wide-spread interest took place, more particularly in connection with the Civil War in the United States, and the tremendous speculation developed in gold. A large contingent of Southern gentlemen, mostly men of ample wealth, took up their residence in Montreal during the war, making their headquarters at the St. Lawrence Hall, and from this famed hostelry they plied the arts of the speculator with boldness, sometimes with a rashness almost unparalleled. The commercial telegraph service at that time was far from satisfactory, owing to the fact that the work of three railways was then crowded upon the wire used for ordinary commercial business. As a consequence interruptions were quite frequent. Mr. O. S. Wood, then manager of the Montreal Company was quick to realize that the railway and commercial service could not be accommodated on the same wires, and he accordingly arranged for a new wire, having direct connection with the Gold Room in Wall street. Then the fun began. The merry game of the speculators was played incessantly. Fortunes were sometimes won and lost in a day, the Southerners clinging to the idea that the Confederate States would ultimately triumph, operating mainly on the "bull" side, and even when gold touched its highest point, namely, 285 per cent., in June of 1864, these Southerners still loaded up with the precious metal.

I recollect the case of a Virginia gentleman, an excellent fellow socially, who made the rash wager that gold would sell at 500 before the end of the year 1864. Of course his expectation was disappointed; and when he was returning to his old home in the South he informed me that his operations in Wall street during his two years' residence in Montreal, had cost him no less than a quarter of a million dollars. Unfortunately, his experience was not singular. Day and night the ticker sounded: a wire from Montreal was run into the Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York, and all evening our office was crowded with the gold operators sending and receiving messages. "Throw in your greenbacks and pull out gold," was their motto. During the last five years of my service with the company its business with New York was enormous.

Another event which I recall as having caused a great sensation at the time was the assassination of President Lincoln on Good Friday, April 14th, 1865. I see that Mr. Eason has mentioned it in his telegraph reminiscences in your columns. The excitement produced in Montreal by the dastardly deed was intense, and the pressure of messages upon our wires very heavy in consequence of the feeling resulting. After President Grant issued his proclamation of amnesty, the Southern contingent of Montreal residents left this city for their old homes, sadder and poorer, but wiser men.

The first Atlantic cable message received in Montreal came on July 31st, 1866. It was addressed to George Winks & Co., then large and successful dry goods importers, and was from the firm of Leaf & Sons, of London,

England. This message was regarded with great interest and curiosity by the "boys" of the relay and register; and as showing how expensive a luxury was a cablegram in the early days of the service, I may say that the cost of a single message of ten words was at that date \$100.

Only two of my old associates in the operating room are now in Montreal—L. Longmoor and A. McNaughton. Thirty odd years ago, Stanley Patterson, who is now president of the Midland Banking Co., Port Hope, and Norman W. Bethune, superintendent of the Great North-West Telegraph Co. at Ottawa, were colleagues of mine. I did not then know H. P. Dwight, but have learned to know him since and am proud to think of him as a friend. Charles R. Hosmer, the general manager of the Canadian Pacific Railway Telegraph system, whose rapid and continuous rise to the highest position in his company's business has been due to industry and executive talent, was an operator in Coteau in 1865, three years before I retired from the service.

Montreal, December 20th.

A CASE OF FRIGHT.

Many stories could be told of the queer superstitions of the country people about the powers and qualities of the electric telegraph in its early days. That it could bring rain; that it would kill cattle; that it meant ruin to the farms it crossed and probably blasting to the trees it touched, were portions of the popular belief of ignorant folk. Those who have lived in French Canadian communities will know that the young people in them are accustomed to be frightened by references to the *loup garou*, a sort of spectral animal which appears to occupy in the minds of peasants in France much the same place as the werewolf or "black dog," or as the spectre-hound of Sir Walter Scott's poem, in those of English. The writer when a lad has been made to shiver and stay in the house for a whole evening by a report that "the Rougaroo," as it was pronounced, had been seen "up back of town" and was a great eater of children. A similar unreasoning but genuine dread was caused by the advent of the telegraph buildings or repairers.

One day, when on a repairing trip to the north, it happened to the writer and his companion, the late Mr. Robert McGregor, of Essex, to find a thirty-foot telegraph pole upon the ground and the wire "grounded" upon a shed close to the road. Part of the pole having rotted, it had to be shortened, and when we went to replace it in the ground the job was beyond our strength. So McGregor looked about for help, and finding a French Canadian whom he knew, digging a drain at the corner of his small and shabby farm, called him over. He came, but when he learned what was expected of him he declined to touch either pole or wire.

"Why, Auguste, what are you afraid of?"
"Bien, m'sieur, dat's curieuse ting, dat's telgraf. Je ne veux pas etre estropie, voyez." Meaning, that he did not propose to be crippled by contact with it.