

When the Line Broke

A Frontier Man's Interpretation of "Coals of Fire"

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KASEN was the loneliest of all the emergency stations on the telegraph line of over twelve hundred miles between Ashcroft in British Columbia, and Dawson in the Yukon Territory. No man had ever remained there for any length of time. A year at the longest was enough to satisfy even the most inveterate hermit, who had a craving for "a lodge in some vast wilderness." In the summer, when an occasional steamer passed the door, and the days were long and bright, the life could be endured; but when winter settled in stern and fierce, the place was almost unbearable. And yet there was communication with the outside world, for the steady tick of the instrument in the office brought news from many distant parts. The operator could talk with his brother operators miles away, and that was something. But it was not a human voice; it was only the tick, tick, which had to be interpreted. There was no breathing, living personality in that; nothing to satisfy the longing of the heart for companionship.

Norman Thurdage believed that such a life would be all he desired. To get away from people who would not stare at him; to be in a place where he would not have to answer questions, and where he could forget the past. But as regards the latter he was mistaken. For now on this night, two days before Christmas, six months after he had taken charge of the office, his thoughts were by no means of an enviable nature. He had time to think, with no one to disturb his meditation.

How busy was the wire. What an incessant ticking was going on, and he could read everything, news of the world, messages of business, but principally Christmas, greetings flashing along to cities thousands of miles away. There was no message for him. No one thought of the lone operator at Kasen.

How different it had been two years before. What a bustle there had been about his house; what loving greetings had been sent and received. He saw it all as he sat there; his cozy home, his family gathered around him, and the merry Christmas festivities. He heard again the shouts of joy of his little ones, and saw the smile upon his wife's face. Such a vision was pleasant, and it brought a thrill to his heart. But this was soon replaced by a cloud of darkness. He watched it as it rose, at first no bigger than a child's hand, and increasing in size until it had enshrouded his whole life like the darkest pall. He recalled the day he had walked from his ruined home with bowed head, uncertain steps, and the fire of wildest passion surging within his breast. He would seek the wretch who had brought such misfortune upon his head; he would find him no matter to what part of the world he had fled. And he had sought in vain, but he had not relinquished the quest. He needed money, and Kasen was a good place where he could save. In a year or two he would continue the search with more determination than ever.

It was a wild night. Wind, mingled with snow, raced howling over the land. It beat against the little window; it swirled around the rude log station, and tried to force open the door. Yet through it all went on that incessant tick, tick, tick. The lone watcher listened as in a dream, for his thoughts were elsewhere. He did not try to read the messages now, for they were nothing to him, and the fond greetings which were hurtling on their way only caused him greater mental agony.

Ere long he was roused from his reverie. The ticking had ceased, and the raging of the elements was all the sound he heard. A fear of what had happened smote his heart. It was not unlikely with such a storm abroad. His fingers tapped the key, and then he waited. But no response did he receive. At once he realized the trouble—the line was down! Quickly grounding his wire he called up the station to the north of him. At once a reply

came ticking back that all was well there. Then to the south he called, fifty miles away, and waited. But no response was returned, nothing but a dead silence. The trouble was, therefore, to the south, and it was his duty to go until he found the break, or should meet the lineman who would be sent out from the emergency station next below Kasen.

Thurdage knew what such a journey would mean. The significance of "wire down" was well known to linemen and operators scattered along that desolate waste of over twelve hundred miles. Time and time again it had sent them forth to take their lives into their hands on brutal mountain sides, through driving storms, and in places where the nimble wild sheep could hardly maintain a foothold. "Wire down!" It was the one thought which now occupied Thurdage's mind as he began to make preparation for a start as soon as possible. Usually there were two men at Kasen, an operator and a lineman. But



"Kill me. One blow will do it!"

the latter had gone to the nearest town miles off, to bring back the Christmas mail.

At the first streak of dawn Thurdage was well on his way, speeding along the edge of the river on his slim, narrow snow-shoes. A little pack was strapped securely over his shoulders, containing blanket, provisions, and his small outfit needed for repairing the wire. In his hand he carried a rifle, for wolves had been prowling around of late, hungry and savage. The storm had ceased, but the wind still blew down the river with unabated force. Through the dim morning light he could see the wire, and not a foot of that filmy thread escaped his watchful eyes. It was quite light by the time he reached the place where the line edged away from the river, to lose itself in a heavy forest region, to dart out over a bleak stretch of wild meadow, then to wind up along a rugged mountain side, and at last to swing down again to the river, where stood the little shack, used by the linemen as a resting-place.

To follow the line through such a region was no light task. But it was just what Thurdage needed. It was better than sitting in that lonely office with maddening thoughts racing through his brain. It was action he wanted, something to battle against. He even enjoyed the struggle. A spirit of elation seized him, such as he had not known for months. Like a silent spectre he threaded the depths of that silent forest. Nothing living met his eye. No track of bird or animal appeared upon the newly-fallen snow.

Swish, swish, swish, sounded the snow-shoes as hour after hour he plodded forward. He traversed the forest; he sped over the wild meadow, and no break could he observe. And now the mountain reared itself above him, grim and forbidding. Along its side he had to make his precarious way. Up and up he moved, pausing now and then to take breath. It was only for a moment, however, and then up and on. The wind whirled the snow around his body, and raced screaming across the wire over his head. He was a mere speck crawling over that blinding, untrodden way. How he kept his footing on the narrow ledges he hardly knew. But keep it he did, and not once did his nerve forsake him.

At length he reached the highest point where the wire hung, and then the descent to the river began. He was tired and hungry now and looked forward to the little cabin some distance ahead. He could pause there for rest and refreshment ere continuing his journey through the afternoon. Before another hour had passed he caught

a glimpse of the broad, white stretch of river lying away to the right. His steps quickened, and hurrying forward he soon came opposite the spot where the cabin was situated, a few rods back from the shore. Presently he paused and stared straight before him. The line was down, and the pole which had stood close to the bank was lying upon the snow. It was not the broken wire which caused him such astonishment. It was the sight of the pole. It had not been broken by the force of the wind, but had been cut with an axe a few feet above the ground. He examined it carefully, and found that the wood was much haggled and not cut with the strong, decisive strokes of a skilled woodsman.

"An Indian must have done it," Thurdage remarked to himself, as he rose to his feet from his kneeling position. "The rascal must have been along here in the night. He can't be far away now; in the cabin, maybe. If I can catch him it won't be well for him. I shall connect the wires so the line can be used, and have a snack of food before doing more."

Saying which, he unfastened the pack from his back, opened it, and took out the necessary appliances used by linemen in repairing breaks. After considerable difficulty he brought the two ends of the wire close to each other. But before making the connection he paused for a brief space of time. It was a fascinating moment, and he was the master of an interesting situation. Only a few inches of air separated thousands of people to the north from communication with the great outside world. He knew how impatient so many must be. What questions were being hurled at worried operators as to when the line would be up. A few turns of the wrist and the work would be done. He was only a unit among the mass of humanity, but of what vital importance now as he knelt in the snow looking upon those two frosty, lifeless ends of wire. He would make the connection, the messages would flash as before, but few would ever care or know by whom the work had been done.

When this task had been finished, he picked up his pack and moved slowly toward the cabin. Nearing the place he noticed that smoke was issuing from the stove-pipe stuck through the roof. It quickened his pulse and caused him to advance more warily.

"Ah, ah," he said to himself, "the chap has taken shelter in the shack, has he? It's a snug place out of the storm. No one would have disturbed him here for a long time had he not meddled with the wire. There may be more than one in that building, and I may have a difficult job ahead of me."

He was close to the cabin now, and paused to listen. Hearing nothing he cautiously opened the