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WALHALLA, S. C.:

WEDNESDAY, OCT. 25, 1905.

TAUGHT A CRICKET TELEGRAPHY.

How a Night Operator Taught an Insect Dots and Dashes—Prevented a Wreck.

[Chas. C. Boyd, in Columbia State.]

"I note with unfeigned pleasure that one of the great railways of the country has recently dived far down into its overalls and fished out the price of a college diploma as reward for a North Carolina maiden who some time ago stood on the bank of a swollen mountain stream over which the bridge had been swept away by the maddened torrent, and saved a passenger train loaded with human freight, from dashing into the yawning gap by waving a red petticoat high above her bared head—a signal that caught the watchful engineer's eye and caused the driver of the iron horse to slap on the air and bring his charge to a dead stop on the brink of what must have been a watery grave for many score of travelers," said Chester Rockhill, running his nervous digits through his disheveled bush.

"Of course, this magnanimous act on the part of the mushy-hearted corporation naturally evokes gushing words of approval," continued the speaker, crossing his legs and gazing intently into the anxious physiognomy of his auditor, "but the lynx-eyed management of the arrow-pierced monogram hasn't always coughed up kopeks to preventers of wrecks on its line. But then, I'm not throwing any kicks, for the case I have in mind just now has never been piped to the men behind the jingle tank—hence no shafts of criticism can justly be hurled at the innocent heads of the unknowing high-ups. They can't be blamed because the savior of a hundred lives consigned to their keeping went to his death uncrowned and sleeps in a spot unmarked by marble slab; for his identity has never been revealed. True, a university education would have been about as useless to him as knives and forks are to native born Chinamen; still had he been known at the time his cunning averted a frightful catastrophe, the deafening, generous plaudits of a charitable and semi-appreciative public would have done the ding-dong in his ears, jarred his supersensitive nerves and hastened the coming of his mundane finish."

"What was his patronymic?" asked the listener.

"Didn't have any."

"What! Such a hero without a name?"

"Oh, yes; he had a single name, all right, all right."

"What was it?"

"Joe."

"Joe! Was that all?"

"Yes; Joe—that was all."

"Odd name for a man."

"He wasn't a man."

"Ah, I see; a mere boy."

"No, he wasn't a boy."

"A woman, then?"

"No, he wasn't a woman."

"Must have been a girl, eh?"

"No, he wasn't a girl, either."

"Well, what was he?"

"A cricket."

"A cricket?"

"Yes, sir; just a poor, little, inoffensive South Carolina cricket."

"An ordinary hearthstone cricket?"

"A hearthstone cricket, yes; but not an ordinary one—no, not by several centimetres."

"And pray tell me how a cricket ever prevented a railroad wreck and saved a hundred lives?"

"Well, it was in this way," returned Rockhill, refilling his clay puffer and throwing his trotters across the exchange table that stood between us:

"Fifteen years ago I was night telegraph operator at Winnsboro,

S. C., for the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta railroad, now an important division of the Southern system. The telegraph office was in the passenger station, which was located in an office building in the heart of the business section of the town. The ticket room, express room, baggage room, waiting room, telegraph room and mail room were all in one. A large fireplace furnished heat in the winter for the whole layout.

"There was but little doing after dark in the Fairfield county metropolis, and after the day ticket agent, telegraph operator, baggage agent, express agent, intelligence bureau, etc., a courteous gentleman named Skinner, left the place at dusk, the clock hands moved as slow as a United States Senate committee investigating the case of a Mormon member of the upper branch of the National Congress. Barring an occasional visit from the lone policeman, Gilbert, who guarded the slumbering little city, I had but few between-suns callers, and the pages of my noctuary were filled mostly with anecdotes related by the puritanical patrolman.

"One night, while I was alone and all was quiet as a cemetery, save the ticking of the big time-piece that hung on the wall, and the every-now-and-then clicking of the telegraph instruments, when some operator along the line reported the arrival or departure of a train to the dispatcher at Columbia, I was attracted by what seemed at the time to be the jumbled echo of Morse telegraph characters emanating from the vicinity of the fireplace. This kept up for several nights, and to give the acoustics a fair test, I would open the telegraph key on one of the wires and make a lot of letters and then listen for the echo. Not all of the characters resounded at first, the letter 'e' being the only one that came distinct—that letter being the shortest one in the Morse alphabet. After a week's time I was able to get the echo from such letters as 'g' and 'u' and 'h.' Then I commenced on the two-letter system. I would make the combination 'Ja' a dozen times, and the hearthstone would answer 'Ja.' But when I went near the fireplace to investigate, a mausoleum stillness would creep over the room. I was puzzled, and laid the case before Policeman Gilbert and his brother officer, McMaster, to ferret out, but after a week of study and watching the minions threw up their hands and said they were stumped.

"Finally I observed that frequent chirruping under the hearth when the telegraph instruments were not busy, had the same tone as the echo of the Morse signals. This goaded my thinking, and I nursed a notion in my noodle that all the noise was being made by a cricket, and this conception was confirmed before many more nights went by.

"Having noted that the gryllus was already possessed of a rudimentary smattering of telegraphy as a result of his place of abode in the dark recesses of the hearthstone, where he could hear the sounders clicking day and night, and believing he had a thirst to know things, I determined to teach him the entire alphabet, and found in him an apt student. In a few weeks the little, black orthopteran had thoroughly mastered every detail. He had learned all the letters and figures and punctuation marks, so that when I would talk to him on the instrument he would repeat back in inimitable Morse, every character by rubbing the basal parts of the veins of his front wings together. Later, the cricket grew tame and would venture from his habitation and come over and stay on my table or sit for many hours at a time on a plug in the switchboard. I gave him sugar and tender, young mosquitoes to eat and christened him 'Joe.'"

"Oftentimes, during the dead hours, Joe would wait until I had finished

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sending him several sentences before he began repeating, and then the dots and dashes came with such rapidity as to severely tax my brain to translate and follow him; but this was the exception rather than the rule, for he generally repeated the words at the same speed as they were transmitted to him. He soon reached that stage of proficiency where he could repeat train orders and seemed to appreciate fully their importance, being always particular not to omit a letter or a figure that the dispatcher had sent.

"Of course, Cricket Joe couldn't manipulate the telegraph key. He had to rest content to listen at what was made by the operators on the wire and then, by creating a friction between his front wings, disseminate the stored-up letters and words, imitating the sounder with a nicety only approached by the most expert telegrapher.

"I used to send entire chapters out of the Bible to Cricket Joe for our mutual delectation and he repeated the Scripture with evident and unmistakable pious regard. He was passionately fond of the Holy Writ, and seemed particularly impressed with proverbs, delighting to repeat at odd moments from that book, his favorite quotations being 8-33, 9-11 and 19-20.

"One morning I left my office earlier than usual and went to my room in the Duval Hotel to go to bed. I hadn't been asleep half an hour when I was awakened by hearing my office telegraph call—'Wn.' This was repeated probably a hundred times in quick succession and was followed with the numbers '31' the train order wire signal. The office call and the train order signal were supplemented with the pleading 'For God's sake answer.' I located the clicking at my chamber window and made answer by striking the iron couch with a twenty-dollar gold piece, and the next instant I heard the request: 'Stop No. 73.'

"At that my blood almost froze in the veins. I knew that No. 73 was the Florida Limited, and growing apprehensive of impending disaster, I threw on my clothes and dashed, barefoot, across the street to the passenger depot, reaching the telegraph office just in time to drop the semaphore arm to red and stop No. 73, which was then in sight, coming down the track at a speed of 50 miles an hour. The conductor hadn't got on the ground to inquire what was wrong before the headlight of a northbound special showed up in the yard a quarter of a mile away. The special was fairly scorching the wind, but the read light spelt danger, and the engineer succeeded in bringing his train to a standstill with the nose of the locomotive's cowcatcher rubbing against that of the southbound limited.

"The dispatcher had been calling me all this time for dear life and Cricket Joe's wings were working overtime. The crews came in the office, got clearance cards and ten seconds after were hurrying to their destinations. The passengers were not awakened and never knew what a close call they had had, they never knew that they had been saved from terrible death by a Palmetto State cricket; they never knew that the operator at Ridgeway went to sleep and failed to flag down the northbound special and give it a new meet order, while the operator at Blackstock was wide awake and delivered a duplicate order to the Florida limited to go on to Rockton—a point between Winnsboro and Ridgeway—where it would pass the special, instead of meeting it at Winnsboro, as previously ordered to do.

When the man at Ridgeway woke up he told the dispatcher that the special had gotten by without the order. The dispatcher knew now that there was but one way to prevent a death harvest through a head-on collision between the two fast trains—and that was to get Winnsboro to stop the fleet limited. The dispatcher called and called and called, but there was no response, for I was in bed fast asleep. But Cricket Joe was roosting on the relay spring and heard the train order signal. He heard the dispatcher at Columbia say, 'For God's sake, answer,' and 'Stop No. 73.' He planted all of it in his trusty wings and squeezing himself through the station door keyhole, made his way to my window, where he woke me with

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the office call and repeated all he had heard.

"Next day I carried Joe lots of nice things to eat for his dejeuner and we continued fast friends until the minute of his sad and untimely death."

"How did he meet his end?"

"He was sitting one cloudy night, on the topmost cross-arm of the office telegraph pole, watching for an extra freight train for which I had orders, when a pitiless bolt of lightning struck the wires nearby and a huge globe of green fire, seeking the ground through the Winnsboro switchboard, struck Joe as it passed into the station and killed him."

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