

A Mysterious Message

It Came Over a Wire, but Was Doubtless Wireless

By WILLARD B. CHURCH

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The first blizzard of the season came in November, an early date for a winter storm, and, what was more unusual still, it was the most severe of the season. Farmer Hardwick, sitting beside the stove in his living room, satened to the howling wind thrashing the leafless branches of the trees and hurling the snow like a sand blast against his window panes. A telegraph pole stood on the roadside in front of and very near to his house, and it seemed to him that the sounds made by the rushing currents of air were the wails of lost spirits.

Hardwick, like most farmers of the present day, was connected by telephone with his neighbors. The instrument was placed in an addition to his house used for everything pertaining to a farm, from matches to firewood, from a gimlet to a grindstone, from a jug of vinegar to a cask of cider. There were openings through to this universal "catchall," and the doors between standing open. Hardwick heard some one calling up a number of a telephone subscriber. The voice was a man's, but didn't sound like that of any of the men on the farm. As soon as the speaker was connected with the number he had asked for he spoke one sentence quickly, but Hardwick could not hear what he said.

Only a few moments had elapsed between the call and the communication when Hardwick got up from his chair and went through the rooms to where the telephone was located to see who was using it. To his surprise, no one was there. The receiver hung in its place, and there was no indication that any one had been near it. Hardwick ran to the only door leading out into the yard and pulled it open, but no one was in sight.

"That's queer," he muttered to himself and, going back to his seat by the stove, sat down to think about it. At the time Farmer Hardwick heard the voice at his telephone Cicely Boardman, who was upstairs in her own home sewing in preparation for her coming wedding with Harvey Brown, heard above the storm a ring on the floor below. Going down, she took up the receiver and, having spoken the usual "Well," heard her lover's voice say to her:

"It's in the northeast corner of the smokehouse."
There was a click, followed by silence. She called again and again, but, receiving no answer, concluded that Harvey had been shut off in the midst of what he was saying, and, hanging up the receiver she went back to her work.
But since she could both work and think at the same time she pondered on what her lover had tried to communicate. There was nothing intelligible to her in the message she had received, and had not the voice been unmistakably her lover's she would have assumed that, using a party wire, she had heard that which had been intended for some one else. But Harvey's deep tones were too familiar to her to be mistaken for those of any other man. The message was so inexplicable that she began to feel a dread, though of what she did not know.

The next morning Cicely took up the work on her wedding garment with a singular despondency, mentally repeating the words "an impending calamity." Presently she heard some one without knocking off the snow, the front door open and a heavy step. Then followed muffled voices below. Cicely listened, her heart sinking like lead within her. A little later when her mother came into the room with dread on her face Cicely moaned:

"You don't need to tell me mother, Harvey is dead."

The mother put her arms about her daughter, saying not a word.

Harvey Brown had started during the storm to walk from his home to that of his fiancée, a distance of two miles. The road led past Farmer Hardwick's house, and Brown's body was found buried in a drift under one of the telegraph poles not far from Hardwick's. Whether he had sunk down confused and benumbed by that interminable whirling of snow or whether his efforts to get on had brought on some sort of a stroke was not evident. The night had been very cold, and it was thought that, bewildered and exhausted, he had stopped to rest and had been frozen.

Cicely and her mother were in straitened circumstances. Harvey Brown, not only owned the house in which he lived, but had inherited a fortune invested in stocks and bonds. Cicely's approaching marriage with him had been looked forward to by her as a great relief. Harvey had suggested hastening the wedding that she might be his legal heir. The next of kin to him was the son of his father's brother, a ne'er-do-well, whom Harvey believed would stoop to any chicanery to get possession of the property at Harvey's death, to which, without a will or a wedding, he would be the lawful heir. This man, Peter Brown, might secure and destroy a will, but he could

not make a marriage. For this reason Harvey was anxious to have the ceremony performed.

Providence having taken the intended bridegroom, no wife interfered with Peter's legal possession. A will alone could do that. A search among Harvey's papers revealed no document bearing upon the disposition of his property. Peter was recognized as the sole heir by the court of chancery, but was astonished to find none of those securities that his cousin was reputed to have possessed, not even a deed to the homestead, appeared among the deceased's papers. However, this was a valuable piece of property, and Peter Brown moved into it.

Cicely Boardman was overwhelmed by her loss. At first her mind dwelt solely on the blighting of her life. It was not till later that her loss of fortune occurred to her. Even a competency would have made a great difference to her and her mother, who was in feeble health. But gradually she rose above both these misfortunes so far as to take hold of the world again and perform the work Providence had allotted her. She had but just resigned a position as teacher in the county school. After her fiancée's death she resumed it.

Cicely knew little about the Brown estate, except that Harvey had told her that it was of considerable value. When she had resumed a condition to enable her to think about worldly affairs and heard that the estate had turned out to be of much less value than had been expected she was surprised. Could her lover have misapprehended the matter to her? The supposition was not to be entertained for a moment. She had dwelt almost to brooding on the words she had heard in his voice, or a voice very like his as in some way connected with his death, but no interpretation to them had occurred to her. When she was told that Harvey had left no fortune except the Brown homestead an explanation of the message telephoned to her on the day of his death flashed into her brain.

"It's in the northeast corner of the smokehouse."

What smokehouse? There was no smokehouse on the Brown property. She and her mother occupied a few acres of ground that had formerly contained the buildings of a farm. A smokehouse was, besides the dwelling, the only building left. Had Harvey while waiting for his wedding been seized with a presentiment that he might die unmarried and, remembering that in this case his cousin would get all his property, buried something for her in the smokehouse? Taking up a pick and shovel, she went into the smokehouse and began to dig.

She had but to remove a few inches of earth when she came to one of those tin boxes commonly used for keeping documents. Taking it up, she ran with it into the house and opened it. The box was locked, but the key was tied to the wire handle on the lid. Opening the box, she took out bonds, stock certificates and lastly a deed to the Brown homestead. One paper remained on the bottom contained in an envelope sealed with wax. It was addressed to Cicely. Tearing it open, she took out a folded paper, indorsed in printed letters, "Last will and testament of," and the writing "John Harvey Brown." Unfolding the document, Cicely read a few words bequeathing all the testator's possessions of every kind to her.

But why had her lover told her that he had left the box in the smokehouse? Gradually a probable explanation came to her. Harvey feared that in the event of his death before his marriage his cousin, even if Harvey made a will in her favor, might gain possession of the document and destroy it. Harvey was a secretive man and might not have intended to speak of the buried box if no necessity arose for doing so.

And here came up the mystery of the telephone message. Had not Harvey when caught in the storm been aware of his danger, gone into a house where there was a telephone and sent the message? But this theory would not hold, for if he could go into a house he might remain there and be out of danger. Moreover, if Harvey had sent the message from any house on the route he was known to have traversed the fact could be ascertained.

Cicely handed the will into the court of chancery and was put in possession of her property. One day she drove over the road from the Brown homestead to the place where Harvey's dead body had been found looking for houses in which there were telephones. The only instrument was in Farmer Hardwick's. She interviewed Hardwick, heard his story, and the two stood face to face with a deeper mystery than the one that had thus far puzzled them.

Cicely Boardman has not married and will never marry. She occupies the Brown homestead alone since her mother died, living a life of solitude. She is known as a woman whose mind is normal on all subjects save one. That one is a belief that she received a telephone message from her fiancée after his death. Farmer Hardwick's lent color to the story she tells so long as he lived, but even his corroboration failed to convince any one of Cicely Boardman's sanity.

There are a few advanced thinkers—who, believing in the possibility of communication of the dead with the living, claim that there are natural methods for such communication as well as wireless telegraphy before the latter was discovered, and that some day a new law will come to light by means of which we may speak with friends in another sphere with no more astonishment than we now feel, and in their place see a desire to know more of his fair challenge. He snatched into the garden,

Two Rings

The One Led to the Other

By R. A. MITCHELL

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In the city of Charleston during the middle of the last century a young girl sat in a window opening on to a garden. She was not one of the delicate, willowy creatures of whom poets love to sing, but a magnificently formed, tall woman with a remarkably handsome face. Though the year was nearly spent, the leaves on the trees had not yet all fallen, and a balmy breeze came up from the south. The garden in which Margaret Lemoine looked longed to an adjoining house, and two gentlemen were smoking on a rustic bench almost directly beneath the window she occupied. They were both young men of the world and were chatting about social matters. Charles Thibodeaux was speaking.

"The northern city I most fancy in America," he said, "is New York. At least it is to me less objectionable, particularly considered, than other northern cities. But my delight is our own beloved New Orleans. In the Crescent City the men are brave to recklessness and the women are beautiful. I spent last winter there."

"Who was the most beautiful woman in New Orleans society last winter?" asked the speaker's companion, Edward Remington.

"The most beautiful woman, to my thinking, was a widow—a Mrs. Lemoine. Though nearly forty, she retained her youthful appearance. She was a queenly beauty, tall, splendidly formed and with a face devoid of a single wrinkle. But I am sorry to say there were unpleasant things said about her. Some past indiscretion had cast a blench upon her good name."

Margaret Lemoine paid no attention to what the young men were saying till she heard her mother's name spoken; then naturally she pricked up her ears. When she heard the name cast upon her mother's good name the blood rushed to her cheeks and her eyes lit with a sudden fire. She leaned forward to hurl back the accusation, but words failed her. The young men, unconscious of what was above them, smoked on. Mrs. Lemoine withdrew from the window and began to pace the floor.

"It is time," she said, "that this woman's slanderers received a check. But how? Oh, that she were a man and I were a man! Women are defenseless against each other. Men can at least die in defense of their good name. If Tom had lived he could have made this man who has treated mother's good name so lightly eat his words. Why was I not born masculine?"

"Yielding to an impulse, she seated herself before a writing desk and dashed off the following:

"I have overheard your aspersions on the good name of one I love and respect. I demand whatever satisfaction you may be able to afford me. Since I prefer to remain incognito I shall conduct my own side of this affair. If you are not a coward write me making an appointment for a meeting."

Hastily folding the paper on which this communication was inconspicuously written, Margaret went to the window and tossed it at the feet of the young men. Both reached for it, but Thibodeaux secured it. Then after a glance upward and with no sight of any one who might have thrown it he read its contents aloud to his friend.

"The two looked at each other with a serious expression. "Ned," said Thibodeaux, presently, "I don't like the situation."

"Nor I. In listening to your remarks I am as culpable as you who have made them."

"You have nothing to do with the matter. The responsibility rests on me."

After a conference it was decided that Thibodeaux should write a note to this Mark Renard, whoever he might be, and it should be left at the door of the house from which the note had been thrown. It said that the writer acknowledged himself to be blamable in repeating a scandal for which he had no proof and apologized therefor. If after this apology Mr. Renard still insisted on a meeting his demand could not be denied. A reply would be looked for the next afternoon, sent in the same way as the first message.

Naturally Thibodeaux was desirous of knowing something of the mysterious challenger. Early in the afternoon appointed for the reply he took position behind the blinds of a window commanding a view of the house from whence it should come. In time he saw a shutter open just far enough for a hand to pass through and toss a note on to the bench on which he had sat the day before. The distance was too great for him to discover that the hand was delicately formed, but he saw something that astonished him. The sunlight striking it was sent back in a bright flash. Evidently Mr. Renard wore a jeweled ring.

Men seldom wear rings unless they are seals, which are not likely to sparkle. Therefore Charles Thibodeaux was not long in divining that his correspondent was a woman.

Thoughts of a bloody encounter vanished, and in their place came a desire to know more of his fair challenger. He snatched into the garden,

Thibodeaux after which thought he would have the note delivered to him. The instructions will give you some idea of the excitement that I am sure you will find in the third chapter of your left hand.

The young man missed no convenient every possible method of proceeding. At first he was inclined to meet his challenger on the spot and there make it known that he knew her. But he feared that she might be further irritated. Before the day was done he had decided on his course. He wrote her as follows:

"It is not by receiving your fine, my dear sir, that I can atone for my fault, but by hunting down the perpetrator of the scandal. I received it from a woman and was confident it originated in a woman. If within three months I do not bring you a retraction from its originator I will deny you the satisfaction you demand. I shall look for your reply at the same hour tomorrow."

The next afternoon Thibodeaux watched Mrs. Lemoine's window through a pair of glasses and saw the hand much more clearly than before. This time the note was thrown by the left hand.

"Not married and not engaged," Thibodeaux remarked to himself with satisfaction. "I'm pleased to notice that the third finger is unoccupied." The note had evidently been written in an exuberance of delight and was consequently a dead give-away.

Your proposition is accepted. You have shown yourself to be a noble man. If I were a woman I'm sure I should fall in love with you."

"Thank you," remarked Thibodeaux. "That's exactly what I wish you to do."

After writing one more note, stating that he was leaving for New Orleans and hoped within the specified time to bring the vindication, he made ready for his departure.

But two of the three months had elapsed when Mrs. Lemoine received the following note from the man who was to quash the slander or fight:

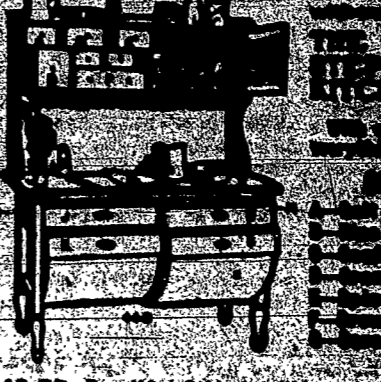
I had your letter with an acknowledgment from Mrs. Lemoine's translator that there was no truth in the story she circulated. I am sorry, however, to admit my dear sir, that your good opinion of me expressed in a letter written before my departure was misplaced. I acquired this retraction by dishonorable means. I made love to the woman who wrote it, accused her of misrepresenting the facts in this case and secured in return the only upon her written confession. I am yours unworthily.

CHARLES F. THIBODEAUX.

Having dispatched this self-accusing epistle, the writer waited impatiently for a reply. It was this:

I assure you, sir, that by your conduct you have not only relieved me and the subject of the confession of a burden, but you have shown yourself, notwithstanding your own opinion of your act, too honorable to be sorry for anything. Your decision was perfectly excusable. I shall always respect and admire you for it. It is needless for me to add that my challenge is withdrawn.

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