

The MISTAKES of a young RAILROAD TELEGRAPH OPERATOR and some of the thrilling experiences which grew out of them!

Part I.

By HARRY BEDWELL.

The railroads for which the author worked as a telegraph operator are all located west of the Mississippi River. The experience, which covered three years, was recent, having terminated within two years. — The Editor.

THE real reason, I think, for my taking up the study of telegraphy and railroad book-keeping was that I was just a little lazy. In my ignorance I thought that if I could once learn the trade, and get a position, all my troubles would be at an end. Poor, misguided young heart! I was then not quite eighteen years old.

It was nearing the end of a term of high school, examinations loomed up big and black in the near future, and a little farther along, graduation. So I quietly stepped out of a side door and entered the depot of the only railroad that ran into our small town, and began to learn to railroad.

My first responsible position as agent and operator was very nearly forced upon me. The traveling auditor came to the station at which I was learning, to make a transfer of agents, and before he left he asked me if I did not think I could hold down the station. I answered doubtfully that I did not think I could. To which he laughed softly, and said that he thought that I ought to hold a small station.

A short time after this I received a telegram from the chief despatcher ordering me to go to a small station on one of the branches, and begin work as agent. He also sent me a wire pass, and said that the auditor would meet me at the station and make the transfer. As there was no examination to pass which would show what kind of an operator I was, I decided to take the job.

I arrived at the station all right, the transfer was made, and, after giving me some fatherly advice, the auditor left me alone with my first station. Of course I felt rather proud of myself, but for a time I also felt very homesick.

For a time I got along all right as there was little work to be done, but I lived in great fear of the despatcher. For this particular despatcher could, when he chose, send a lot of words in a minute, and it was his delight to frighten "hams," as he called students and young operators. Every time my call sounded on the wire I began to tremble, and if it were the despatcher, I generally had to go outside and walk around the station to quiet my nerves sufficiently to manipulate the key.

Guessing at a Train Dispatcher's Orders

Things moved along this way for perhaps a month; and then came the dreaded day. The engine of a passenger train broke down within a short distance of my station, and I was compelled to copy some train orders. And such copies as I made! No one could have read them as I copied them from the wire. Half was omitted. I had to guess at much of what was sent me when I repeated the order to the dispatcher, and then I re-copied the order before delivering it to the trainmen. In the state of nerves into which I was thrown by this sudden rush of work, I was apt to leave out a part of the order when I re-copied it, or in guessing at what was left out, guess wrongly.

Think of it: leaving out a part of an order to a passenger train governing its movements against other trains! But the company was short of men, and almost any kind of an operator would do. This was a road which paid its operators and agents poor wages, and as a consequence all good men avoided it.

Surely the god of all fools watched over me with unusual care, for most of my mistakes were trivial ones and caused no accidents. But my troubles were like those of many other young operators when starting to work. The wonder of it is there are so few wrecks caused in this way. There are many narrowly avoided ones, however, of which the public never hears, and sometimes the officials themselves do not learn of them.

There was so little work to do at this small station that I improved not at all in telegraphy; and when I was ordered to another place to take the position of day operator I was hardly equal to the job.

This new position was at a place I shall call Noel. There were two other men working in this office besides myself: the agent and his assistant. I was supposed to be just the operator, but in reality I was a kind of an assistant to both the other men. I did what work they could not find time to do, and the rest of the time I could devote to getting the trains by the station with as little delay as possible.

I still had to re-copy the train orders after I received them, and this kept me very busy at times; for the dispatcher sometimes sent three or four orders, one after the other. These I would string out on a piece of "clip," omitting some parts when the dispatcher got too fast for me, and filling in when I copied them on the manifold.

As before, my good luck was with me for I made but few mistakes, and these caused no accidents. But still, there is no credit due me for this, for I was very careless, and recopying orders is a very dangerous practice among young operators. Think if I should have written the name of the wrong station in the order! And this is very easily done.

Young, Careless and Forgetful

Two branches ran into this station from the north, but for two miles to the south there was but a single track over which the trains of both branches ran. At the end of these two miles of track the branches again separated, this time at a little junction where there was nothing but a little shack in which was kept a register and a telephone. The telephone was connected with the station at Noel.

All trains were supposed to stop and register at this junction as the trains on either branch were despatched from separate offices, and neither branch knew what the trains on the other branch were doing. On arrival at the junction, north-bound trains would call me up

on the telephone, if they needed orders or instructions; and if the conductor were in doubt as to extras, or trains that were not registered correctly, he got his information from me. I was supposed to ask the despatcher if I were in doubt; but this took time, and the trainmen generally preferred to take the risk. Thus, I had a great deal of control over this little stretch of track.

But sometimes when a train was in a hurry they neglected the formality of registering. They knew that the operator should keep rather a close watch upon them, and if a train at the junction were in doubt, they could get protection from me.

A good operator could easily have protected these trains, but I was very young, very careless, and often forgot. Sometimes a conductor at the junction needing time on an overdue train on the other branch, would call me up, and ask me to hold the other train until the one at the junction arrived at my station. Twice during my stay here I let a south-bound train by me after I had promised to hold them for a train coming from the junction. But no collision resulted, as both times this happened the incoming train was sighted by the outgoing train just as the last-named was leaving the yards and was not going at a fast rate of speed. Either time, if the outgoing train had started a few minutes sooner, the two trains would have met on a crooked piece of track which ran through a dense wood.

It was a close call both times, and it was due merely to a little carelessness on my part — carelessness and inexperience. But I wonder why the railroads are permitted to employ such inexperienced and careless men? Of course they did not know that I was such a one, but that was because they did not take the trouble to put me through an examination. Neither did they know of these mistakes of mine, for the trainmen, after roundly cursing me, let the matter drop. You see, what the officials did not know did not bother them much.

"Getting Into a Tight Box"

The agent at this place was a middle-aged man, old in the service of the company. He seldom came down to the depot on Sunday, and on that day his assistant, Hills, and I ran things very much as we pleased. On Sunday we had but two passenger trains to meet, and these came near the middle of the day. The rest of the day Hills and I were free to do as we pleased. One Sunday evening we were loafing around the depot with nothing to do, when Hills suggested that we run down to the next town, a distance of about six or eight miles, and see what was going on.

There was a hand-car, we knew, down in the yards with the wheels chained together, and locked with a switch-lock. But, as both of us had a switch-key, there would be no difficulty in getting the car. Hills claimed the acquaintance of a young lady or two in the next town, so we decided to go down and look them up. After a little delay, Hills got one of the young ladies on the 'phone, and made an appointment.

We found the hand-car easily enough, and with some difficulty got it onto the track. Then began the up and down hill ride to the next town. It was hard work climbing those two hills, and we were not what you would call in trim condition.

It must have been over an hour before we sighted the switch-lights of our destination, and stopped to open a switch. As we pumped slowly down through the yards, we saw the headlight of an engine which was drawn up before the depot. Under the headlight were two small, white lights which marked the train as an extra.

When we had the hand-car off the track, we crossed over before the engine, and walked down the station platform on our way up town. We came to a stop beside the lighted office

window, and glanced in.

Inside the office were the trainmen of the extra; the operator sat at his table repeating an order. I could hear distinctly the click of the sounder. When the order was completed, the dispatcher addressed a message to the conductor of the extra, ordering him to pick up five loads of time freight at Noel!

When I heard this, little shivers began to run up and down my back, for I remembered well enough those five cars of freight that this train was to pick up, and I also remembered that I had not left the register and way-bills outside. I knew that if the conductor found no bills in the box he would not take the loads; and when the chief dispatcher learned of this he would probably tell me that he did not need me any more. How to get back to Noel with the hand-car before the extra got there, was the question.

A Wild Ride On a Hand-Car

I explained to Hills, and we drew away from the depot discussing the question, the young ladies forgotten in the more urgent question of getting back home and saving my job.

"The only thing to do," said Hills with decision, "is to hitch the hand-car onto this freight train."

I had doubts, but there seemed no other way out of it, and so it was decided. We rushed down into the yards, as anxious to get out of town as we had been to get in. We got the car onto the side track, ran down to the main line switch, and then pumped back up to the rear end of the extra.

We had brought the chain with us that locked the car wheels together, and we began the task of attaching ourselves securely to the extra's caboose. We managed somehow to fasten the chain to the drawhead, and then to the car. I remember we had to lock the chain to the car with the switch-lock to make it secure.

We did not have to wait long after that until the train started. The first jerk of starting lifted our light car clear of the track, and sent it bouncing along after the caboose. Then for the first time we began to have grave doubts as to the safety of our position. We peered at each other through the darkness. Then Hills said, "We had better sit down, I think." I thought so, too, and we crouched down on the floor of the small car, out of the way of the rising and falling handles.

As we passed the depot, two trainmen swung aboard the caboose, but they went directly into the caboose without seeing us. In our haste we had forgotten to reckon what the trainmen would do if they discovered us, and now we had other dangers to think of.

"I wish we had disconnected the handles from the gear," Hills complained above the noise of the moving train.

"I wish we hadn't started at all," my plaint arose into the darkness as the train gathered speed, and the handles, close to our heads, began to pump up and down with dangerous swiftness.

"And those girls," Hills cried. "What will they think of us? I wish you could remember to leave that register out!"

I felt aggrieved, but said nothing because I could think of nothing to say just then.

"Anyway," Hills called with more cheerfulness after a pause, " anyway, it won't take us so long to get back home."

It was up grade for a little way out of town, and then came the down grade. It was bad enough when the long train was mounting the grade, but when the cars began to file over

the top of the hill, and the speed increased, it looked worse still. At last, when the whole train was on the down grade we began to see the foolishness of our act. Our little car jumped and bucked like a thing of life, and threatened to leave the track at any moment. Indeed, I thought that the car was off the track at least half of the time. And I do not understand to this day how it stayed near the track at all.

We lay flat on the floor of the car, and hung on with all our might. Above us the handles swished up and down viciously, and a harsh, rasping sound came up from beneath that was very hard on the nerves. Our feet hung over the rear edge of the car, and our faces were within a few inches of each other at the front end. There were but few places to hold on to the car, and little room for our bodies anywhere.

"I'm going to try to unlock the chain from this car," cried Hills in my ear.

"No you won't," I yelled in a panic. "You'll break your neck if you do."

Hills must have come to the same conclusion, for he did not try to free us from the caboose.

I do not know how we managed to hold on to that lurching, bouncing car, but we did somehow. I was badly scared. In fact, I think we were both badly scared; and I think we had good reason to be, for at any moment the car was due to turn turtle, and there was no telling where we should land, or how. I remember that I put my arm over the top of my head, even as I clung fearfully to that car, hoping thus to protect my skull if I alighted on it.

Then the engine began to climb the next little rise, and the speed slackened. I began to breathe a little easier, and to hope for the best, when suddenly there was a grinding, rending crash that sounded like the crack of doom. The car careened violently, and seemed about to fall to pieces.

My wits left me for a few seconds, and I seemed to be floating in air. I waited with caught breath to come down, but finally. I came to the realization that I was still on the car, and that the car was still bumping along on the track. I peeked out from under my arm, and saw the dark shape of Hill's head and shoulders.

"What happened?" I gasped when I had collected some of my wits.

I was somehow afraid for Hills to answer me; and yet I waited anxiously for him to speak. I was trembling so that I could hardly keep my hold on the car, and, I hate to confess it, I think that I must have thought I, myself, was out of my head, or even worse.

"I think," called Hills at last, with something like a choke in his voice, "that we must have run into the caboose and broken the handles off of our car."

I noticed then that the vicious swish, swish above my head had ceased. Hills was right. When the train slowed down on the grade our car ran faster than the train, and we had bumped into the rear end of the caboose. The handles had probably struck the drawhead, and something had broken.

The car ran more smoothly now with the handles disconnected from the gear, and as we hummed along up the grade, I had time to collect most of my wits, and prepare for the next descent.

Then Hills thrust his face close to mine, and said:

"We had better watch out when we come to the bottom of the next hill, and try to keep the car from running into the caboose."

I saw the logic of this at once. With the handles gone we would run under the caboose at the bottom of the next grade, and collide with the rear wheels, which meant derailment and probably death.

At last the speed began to increase, and we knew that the engine had topped the hill.

Then the whole train slid over, and we swept down the lone descent, our little car dancing and humming along behind; but hardly so much as it had before. But we whipped around some very sharp curves that nearly took our breath away and we were glad indeed when the slackening speed proclaimed the last grade into town was reached.

Our car began to gain on the caboose, and at last we were compelled to put out a hand, and brace against the drawhead to keep from running under the caboose. It was a little dangerous and wearisome, this, and we were nearly exhausted when we came at last onto the incline.

At last we passed the little shack in the woods which marked the junction of the two branches, and we knew that we were only two miles from home! Oh, what a relief! I began to rest a little easier, and we began to plan what we should do when we got into the yards.

We did not stop to register at the junction that night, and were rather glad that the conductor omitted this formality.

Soon we came to familiar landmarks, and, as we approached the first switch, we hauled the hand-car up to the caboose and cut ourselves free from the train. Then we stopped the car, and with much exertion dumped it off the track down the bank and out of the way.

We were shivering with the cold and fright as we ran up the track after the slowly retreating tail-lights of the caboose. The swift ride in the open through the cool night had chilled us to the bone.

We caught up with the caboose, and swung aboard. Then when it had nearly stopped, we dropped to the ground and ran ahead, reaching the depot before the conductor got off of the caboose. We got the register and the way-bills out into the bill-box and slipped back into the depot before any of the trainmen came up, and we waited in the office until they had switched the five cars into the train, and departed. Then we lit a lamp.

We looked at each other for a few moments in silence; for we were both begrimed with dust and ashes, and looked more like tramps than the swains dressed in Sunday best of a few short hours before.

"Why, where is your hat?" I managed to articulate at last.

Hills clapped his hand to his head, then looked at me ruefully. Then he grinned.

"Where is your own?" he said in return.

I clapped my hands to my head, then drew them away abruptly, for there was a very large lump on the back of my head.

But we had saved our jobs, and escaped with our lives, and that was solace enough.

An Engineer Breaks a Rule

I stayed at Noel about two months, and was then transferred to another station. For a time, I was sent from place to place as relief agent, which is not very desirable work. Then, one day, I brought up on the main line with a suddenness that was startling. My career hitherto seemed as peaceful as a parson's compared with what my first few weeks on the main line were.

First of all, I learned that I could not telegraph fast enough to keep warm; second, I learned that I had never seen real trains before. Why, it seemed to me that the trains moved by in herds and droves, and it kept me going all the time to keep the trains moving.

Then there was the block system. It seemed that that system was the most intricate thing that was ever invented, for I never could work it just right. Now, of course, it seems more simple, but then I nearly gave it up in despair. Generally I pulled the wrong lever and

stopped a train when I had intended to give it a clear signal. I still had to re-copy the orders, and I soon saw that if I intended to become a railroad man, I had better learn the trade.

One evening when I came on duty, I filled and cleaned the semaphore lantern, and then drew it up to its place at the top of the pole in front of the station. But on this particular night I did not draw the lantern high enough, and the light did not shine out brightly.

Soon after, a heavy passenger train came thundering through town at top speed. This particular train happened to be one of the crack overland trains, and any one who needlessly delayed it was liable to get his "head cut off." What was my horror, then, to see the flagman of this train coming into the office about five minutes after the train had passed. He asked for a clearance card, and I asked the reason.

He explained that my semaphore light was not shining brightly enough to be seen at any great distance, and the engineer had been unable to see in what position the signal was - whether "proceed" or "stop." But the train had been going so fast that he could not stop her until he was some distance out of town. The depot was set under the bluffs so that an approaching train could not see the semaphore until it was close in.

But the trainmen did not blame me for the delay when they reported it, and I did not "get my head cut off." For, you see, all trains were supposed to approach a station under full control so that they could stop at any moment. This train, however, had gone about half a mile out into the country before stopping.

One Omitted Word Nearly Causes a Wreck

Here I want to tell of an incident in the life of another young operator, like myself, who was working as night operator at the next station south of me. He told me the story himself. He had not worked so long as I had, and he, too, had to re-copy the orders after he had repeated them to the despatcher, and this was the cause of the trouble.

One evening shortly after he came on duty, this operator sat in the office talking to the section foreman. On the table lay some orders which he had copied but a few moments before. One of them was addressed to train Number Fifteen, and read:

"Number Twelve will run thirty minutes late, P. J. to S. J."

Numbers Twelve and Fifteen were passenger trains bound in opposite directions. Number Twelve was superior to Number Fifteen by right of direction, hence the despatcher was saving Number Fifteen from delay by ordering her ahead, and not requiring her to wait at their regular meeting point.

But the operator had re-copied this order, and in so doing had left out a word. The order should have read: "Second Number Twelve will run ... "

There were two sections of Number Twelve that night, and the first section was on time. But here was this operator going to give Number Fifteen thirty minutes on both sections of Number Twelve!

Soon there came the blast of a whistle proclaiming the approach of Number Fifteen. The operator sprang to his feet in a nervous hurry, and ran to the table. (The sudden blast of the whistle of an approaching train always made him nervous.) Number Fifteen was coming close, and he did not wish to stop them for the order.

He tore off two copies from the manifold, and scribbled out two copies of a clearance card. Wrapping an order and a clearance card together, he thrust them into a delivering hoop, and did the same with the other two copies. He should have had them ready before, but his talk with the section foreman had been very engrossing.

He ran out onto the platform in time to deliver the order to the conductor and the engineer without stopping the train. He watched the departing train-lights with quick-caught breath, but with no little satisfaction, for he had succeeded in delivering the order without delay to the train.

Entering the office, he seated himself at the table, marked down the time that Number Fifteen went by, and began to straighten the carbons in the manifold from which he had torn the order. He tore off his own copy of the order, and was about to file it away when he heard a station up the line reporting First Number Twelve by. He glanced down at the order, and saw that he had omitted the one word second. But that one word was fatal if the first section was on time, and that station had just so reported it.

For a few seconds the operator sat there staring dumbly at the order. Then he seized the key and tried to call up the next station, which was where I was working, but he was so nervous that he could not make the call. He wasted a few valuable minutes in this way, and at last gave up in despair. In his fright he began to call for help, but the section foreman who had been in the office only a few minutes before was now on his way home, and no one else was near the station.

At last he thought of the telephone. He seized the receiver, and at last central answered. Yes, central thought she could get the next station, although she was not sure. Anyhow, she saw nothing to hurry about. There was another agonizing wait, and then I answered him over the 'phone. It was some time before he became coherent, but at last I gathered what he had done. I told him that I would fix it all right, and he gave me the number of the order in which the mistake was made.

I could see Number Fifteen coming as I sat down at the table and began to compose another order which would annul the one that he had delivered, and at the same time correct the mistake so that no one would suspect. It did not take me long to do this; but I had to stop Number Fifteen and have the conductor sign the order so as to make the change seem natural. But I did not repeat his signature to the despatcher, as I was supposed to do, and neither did I tell the despatcher that I had stopped Number Fifteen when I reported them by.

It was not until the train had gone that I began thinking the whole matter over, and it frightened me a little. This could just as easily have been I who had made the mistake as the boy who did, and I made some very good resolutions that night which I kept so that before I left that station I could telegraph well enough to take an order without re-copying it two or three times.

Had that operator not heard another operator reporting First Number Twelve, there would most likely have been a collision of two passenger trains, all because of the omission of a word.

When the Railroad is to Blame

Of course, no whisper of this incident ever reached the officials' ears, but are not they hired to keep such things as this from occurring? How? By an examination which would have proven that neither this other young operator nor I was fit to hold a responsible position. A good operator could have told our kind by a five minutes' wire test, and there are always a number of good operators around a chief despatcher's office.

But, say the officials, we cannot get enough men as it is. Of course they cannot so long as they pay them less wages than the day laborers on the sections. But there are companies that get good men and plenty of them, and nearly all of them have a rule which states

clearly that operators shall pass a wire test. But on a great many of them if the chief despatcher is badly in need of men, this examination is omitted.

Most roads give an employee a book of rules, when he goes to work, which he is told he must study. As this book of rules contains very uninteresting reading, it is seldom referred to save in cases of emergency, when it is too late. (continued.)

The MISTAKES of a young RAILROAD TELEGRAPH OPERATOR.

Part II.

By HARRY BEDWELL.

SOMETIMES bad wrecks are caused by a very little carelessness on the part of employees. The following did not end as disastrously as it might, but I am coming soon to some which did.

I was working nights at a place we shall call Rush. Rush is a little town at the end of a stretch of double track. That is, from Rush to a city about forty miles to the south there is but a single track; but from Rush to a city about thirty miles to the north there is a double track.

For some time the main line spout of the water tank a few miles south of Rush on the single track had been out of order, and could not be used; so trains were compelled to go onto a siding at Rush to take water. This necessitated running the train out onto the single track and then backing it onto the siding. The dispatcher had a standing order out at Rush addressed to "All Trains Southbound," notifying them of this broken spout so that they would not have to be delayed in finding out if the spout had been repaired.

Number Fourteen, a southbound passenger train, was due at Rush at seven thirty-five in the evening. For about three or four weeks this train had been accustomed to get this one order at Rush, and so got to paying scant attention to it or the stop signal in the semaphore. Generally, when Number Fourteen arrived, I would hand two copies of the order out of the window to the conductor, or, if I had the time, I would be out on the platform when the engine passed and hand one copy up to the fireman, and another to the conductor when he came up.

But, if I gave both copies to the conductor, he would, on seeing that it was "the water spout order," give the "proceed" signal with his lantern to the head brakeman, who would then open the switch. Then while the train was pulling out onto the single track, preparatory to backing onto the siding, the conductor would go forward through the coaches, and when they stopped for the rear brakeman to close the switch, he would step off and give the engineer a copy of the order.

All this was done to save time, but it rather mixed the meaning of signals so that we laid ourselves liable to what at last did happen.

A Narrow Escape

One evening, Number Fourteen was some twenty minutes late, and, of course, in very much of a hurry. Also, Number Nineteen, a northbound train, was an hour and thirty minutes late. After some figuring, the dispatcher decided that Rush would be a good place

for the two passenger trains to meet and pass, as Number Nineteen would not have to stop at Rush even if Number Fourteen had not arrived, for here began the double track. So he issued an order at Rush addressed to Number Fourteen, giving Number Nineteen the right of track to Rush.

Sitting in the window of the office at Rush that evening after receiving this order, I saw Number Nineteen coming toward us on the single track about four miles away. She was coming down hill and was running like the wind. I watched her until she dropped out of sight into the valley below, and made a mental calculation as to how soon she would arrive. For from then on Number Nineteen could not be seen again until she was within about one hundred yards of the depot, as a grove of trees and the stock pens hid her from sight.

Number Nineteen would, I knew, approach the station at almost full speed as, according to the order, Number Fourteen should stay on her side of the double track until Number Nineteen was by.

I glanced out of the window in the opposite direction, and saw Number Fourteen coming close at hand. She pulled up to the station first, and stopped. The conductor swung off, and came into the office to sign the order. He read it over carefully, then asked, "When will they be here?"

"She is coming up the hill now," I answered as I repeated the signature to the dispatcher. Then I tore off two copies, and handed them to the conductor.

He crammed one copy into his pocket, the other he folded up neatly, expecting soon to hand it to the engineer. Then he leaned back against the table to exchange a bit of railroad gossip, for there was no hurry as his engineer had no right to move until he had a clearance of my "stop" signal in the semaphore.

But the engineer and the brakeman were in a hurry that night. They were a few minutes late and wanted to make it up, so became careless. Thinking that it was the same old "water spout order," and not waiting for the conductor's signal, the brakeman ran ahead and opened the switch. The engineer, supposing that the brakeman had received the signal from the conductor, started out onto the main line all unsuspecting the train that was rushing up the hill but a short distance away. I do believe they would have gone off and left the conductor if they had had a clear track.

Inside the office, I got up from the chair — I do not know why — and slid along the table to the big, double window. I glanced out to see the tail lights of Number Fourteen moving forward over the switch. I also saw a moving shaft of light over the tree tops cast by the headlight of Number Nineteen, showing that they were close at hand.

Trainmen are quick to read danger signals, and the horror expressed in my face at what I saw, told the conductor that something was wrong, and he rushed to the door even before I shouted a warning.

He ran out, and along the track until he caught the rear end of his train just as it cleared the switch. He gave a few frantic jerks at the signal cord and repeated the signal several times, at the same time calling out to his rear brakeman to leave the switch open, and stand by it.

With painful slowness the train began to back into the clear. The engineer, I believe, only vaguely understood what was wrong.

Number Nineteen roared into sight from behind the clump of trees at full speed while yet the engine and front baggage car of Number Fourteen were out on the single track. The brakeman at the switch measured the distance between the two trains, saw death reaching out a cold hand for him, but bravely stuck at his post. So did the engineer of Number

Fourteen, and, likewise, the engineer on Number Nineteen.

The engineer on Number Fourteen opened his throttle wider for more speed backwards, but for some reason the man on Number Nineteen did not see the danger until he was half way to Number Fourteen; then he put on the air brakes. The brakeman at the switch set his teeth hard, gripped the stand with both hands, and tried not to be afraid. I stood in the office window watching this strange scene lit up by the glare of the headlights; and so intense was my interest that I did not realize that if the two trains met the depot would probably be swept off of the right-of-way like a house of cards.

It seemed to me that Number Fourteen barely squeezed into the clear in time. The brakeman swung the switch shut just in time, and Number Nineteen rushed by, the cylinders of the two engines barely missing. I have never seen a braver act than that brakeman's.

What Happened While an Operator Slept

This was my last position on this road. I wanted to go west, and west I went. I had resigned some time before but the chief was very short of men and could not let me go. I journeyed westward as far as —, and there got a position. My first place was as night operator in a town of goodly size not far from the city.

On this road, as on many others, they had the very loose system of leaving the station signal at "proceed" when there were no orders. Sometimes careless operators neglect to change the signal to "stop" even after they have received an order. Thus, a train sometimes gets by a station that has an important order for it. Also, there is the greater danger of a night operator falling asleep, and afterwards taking an order for a train that has passed his station while he slept. The nine-hour law lessens the danger of this a great deal, but hardly enough.

The system of having the normal position of the signal at "stop," and only changing it to "proceed" when a train is approaching a station at which there are no orders, causes but little more delay and work, and is much safer.

One accident which occurred on this road will illustrate.

A night operator fell asleep on duty one night and was awakened by the despatcher sounding his call on the wire. The operator answered, and the despatcher asked if a certain passenger train has passed. The operator answered that it had not.

A layman would naturally think that if the sound of a call on the wire would awaken an operator, the sound of a passing train would do the same. But many times it will not, as in this case. The passenger train which the despatcher was inquiring about had passed this station while the operator was asleep. But the operator took an order for the train, an order which changed the meeting place between it and another passenger train.

The order was never delivered. The two passenger trains collided, and some thirty persons were killed outright. Had the normal position of the station signal been at "stop," the train could never have passed that station until the operator had changed his signal to "proceed," and then he would have known that the train had passed.

10:45 Is Not 11:45

Another incident of an employee's carelessness causing a wreck occurred while I was still working at this first station.

An extra freight train westbound received an order to do about an hour's switching at a

place I shall call Gardner. The despatcher, using the threatened delay to help along another extra bound in the opposite direction, issued an order at Gardner for the westbound train to wait there until eleven forty-five A.M. for the eastbound extra. But when the westbound train arrived at Gardner they found that there was only a few minutes' switching to be done, so the conductor went into the telegraph office at once, and signed his orders.

When the operator gave him the orders, the conductor read them hurriedly as he walked forward to deliver them to the engineer. When he handed the orders up to the engineer he said, "We wait here until forty-five for the extra east," and turning, walked back towards his caboose.

Glancing at his watch, the engineer saw that it was about eleven o'clock, and supposing that the conductor meant ten forty-five (which he did), he started out of town with only a glance at the orders. When he had his train in motion and running at good speed, the engineer began to read the orders more carefully. When he read the one which ordered him to wait at Gardner until eleven forty-five, he glanced up, to see the other train almost upon him.

No one was killed outright in the wreck which followed, but a great deal of property was destroyed, and one engineer was badly injured.

Like the others I have mentioned, this was due to just a little carelessness — a relaxing of vigilance for a few minutes.

An Engineer Asleep in His Cab

Now I come to the second place at which I worked on this western road. It was a smaller town than the one I first worked at, and there was not nearly so much work to do — nothing, in fact, save watch the trains go by, and copy an occasional order.

About two o'clock one morning, the despatcher gave me a "Form 19" order to be delivered to a westbound passenger train. This is the kind of order which does not require the signature of the conductor, and may be delivered without stopping the train.

This was at a time before the road began using "hoops" to deliver orders with, and the operator was compelled to hand the order up to the conductor and engineer from his hand. This took some nice calculating, for the operator had to stand just far enough away from the track not to be struck by the engine, and just close enough for the trainmen to reach the order from his hand.

It was still dark when I heard the train coming, and I stepped out onto the platform with a lantern in one hand, and the order in the other. When the train was close enough, I swung the lantern high in air as a signal that I had a "19" order for them which would clear the "stop" signal in the semaphore. But the engineer did not respond to my signal with two short blasts of the whistle as is customary, neither did he slacken speed as he approached, which is also customary, for if he missed the order he would have to stop, and it is not easy to catch one going at full speed.

I took up a position at what I thought to be about the right distance from the track as the train swooped down upon me, but I kept edging farther away as the train neared, for I did not like the speed at which he was traveling. Then the engine shot by me, but no one reached for the order. I got a fleeting glimpse of the engineer in the cab window as he passed. His head and shoulders hung over the sill, his head rolling from side to side. The man was asleep!

Farther along the train, someone reached for the order, but only brushed my hand. Then

the train was by, and had whisked out of sight around a curve, leaving me a little dazed by the suddenness of its passing.

That was the first time I ever saw an engineer asleep on a moving train, although I had heard of it before. And yet the man had probably been on duty so long that he could not help it.

But this particular order was not so important as to cause a wreck — it merely gave this train time on another passenger train, — but if the engineer slept long enough he was sure to run into something. I do not know where the fireman was all this time that he did not see my signal.

Soon, however, the train came hurriedly backing into town. The conductor had been out on the platform steps when his train passed; it was he who had brushed my hand in an endeavor to get the order. He had thought, though, that his engineer had caught his copy of the order in passing, but was not sure; so he signaled him to stop, and when there was no immediate response he knew the truth. He repeated the signal until the engineer awoke, and then had him back into town for the order.

If –

Transferred again. This time to a small station on the desert; but I was fortunate enough to get the position as day operator. It was a busy little town, there being a "boom" on, and it was filled with the "boom" and "boost" kind of real-estate men. A river flowed close to the town, from which river they expected to make the desert bloom.

The town was about in the middle of a long division, and both ways out of town it was up hill. All heavy passenger trains were compelled to take two engines from here to the end of the division. There was a coal chute and a water tank here, and all trains stopped. I was kept very busy telegraphing, but as I had nothing else to do, it was not a bad job. I was destined to stay here longer than at any other station before or since.

One Christmas eve a lone engine came down from division headquarters to help Number Three, a passenger train, up the hill. Number Three was very late that day, as usual, and did not arrive until a little after dark.

A few minutes before she arrived, the light engine backed down to the station so as to cause as little delay as possible in coupling on. At dusk the engineer tried to light his electric headlight, but there was something wrong with the carbon, and it would not light. He went forward along the running board and tinkered with the light until it did burn, but in his haste he must have done a poor job.

Soon after this the train arrived, and was soon speeding out of town with the helper engine coupled on ahead. Some distance out of town, however, the headlight of the head engine again went out. But, as they were nearing the end of the run, and were so late, and it was on the up grade, and it was Christmas eve, the engineer did not stop to relight the headlight, deciding to take the risk of making the run in safety.

At the first telegraph station out of division headquarters, a freight train was doing some switching that same evening. As they had to use the main line a great deal in their work, the despatcher had given them two hours and twenty-five minutes time on Number Three.

This station was set in among the hills, and an approaching train could not see what trains in the yards were doing until itself was in the yards. So, to provide protection for trains switching in the yards against incoming trains, a semaphore had been erected some

distance from the end of the switch.

That evening when the freight train began to switch, the conductor set the semaphore at "stop," and to protect himself further against incoming trains he put out a torpedo near the semaphore so that in case the light in the semaphore failed the torpedo would check any incoming train.

When the two hours and twenty-five minutes on Number Three were up, the engine of the freight train backed into the clear on the siding to wait until the passenger train had passed before resuming work. The conductor and one brakeman walked up through the yards to the telegraph office, where they separated, the conductor going into the office to see if he could get more time on Number Three, and the brakeman going on to set the semaphore at "clear" so as not to stop Number Three if she was no more than the two hours and twenty-five minutes late.

At the office the conductor learned that he could get no more time on Number Three as she was due at any time. He walked out onto the platform, and from there could see the lighted coaches of the passenger train coming close at hand, although there was no headlight. Then he heard Number Three strike the torpedo and knew that his brakeman had not had time to remove it, so he waved his lantern high in air as a signal to Number Three that the track was clear. The two engineers saw the signal, and came on without checking speed.

But down in the yard, the engineer of the freight train also saw the signal, and took it to mean that his conductor had received more time on Number Three. He could not see that Number Three was coming close at hand as there was no headlight, and he could not hear her for the noise his own engine made. His fireman got down, opened the switch, and climbed back into his engine. Then the freight engine, with some cars attached, started out onto the main line; but just as the front trucks of the engine rattled across the switch points the engineer saw Number Three bearing rapidly upon him only a few car lengths away.

At about the same instant, a brakeman near the end of the string of cars which the freight engine was pulling also saw Number Three, and immediately he pulled on the air brakes. This prevented the engineer from backing up at once, and Number Three collided with the front end of the freight engine. The three engines were derailed and upset; the cylinders of the freight engine were knocked clear off the right-of-way. The two firemen on the passenger train were killed, also the engineer on the head engine.

If the engineer on the front engine of Number Three had taken time to relight his headlight, the freight engine could have seen them coming long before they arrived. But the man paid a heavy penalty for his carelessness, and every wreck that ever happened would not have happened IF a certain thing were not so.

"Examination" of an Operator

I left this station and the service of this company after about seven months' service. I was still bound for the land of the setting sun, and thither I drifted. This time I did not stop until I came to the Pacific. One day I walked into the office of a chief dispatcher.

"How are you fixed for operators?" I asked of him.

He thought that he could use me, he said, and asked the usual questions about previous service. Then he started me on the examination. He gave me a small yellow pamphlet in which were some hundreds of questions; all of which I was to answer. These questions were all answered in the book of rules — i.e. I was supposed to know his book of rules by heart.

But he saw the doubtful look I gave the pamphlet, and brought out his own book of rules, which he gave me. He did not wink when he did it, but I understood that he was badly in need of men or he would have made me answer the questions as best I could.

He showed me a table, gave me a pen, and I set to work to copy the book of rules. It took lots of time and patience, but I finished it at last. After I had passed the physical examination, I was told to go to a certain station and begin work as night operator.

I arrived at the station that evening, and the regular night operator showed me what my duties were. There were a few tickets to sell for an evening train, a few train orders to copy during the night; for the rest — nothing. In fact, there was too little work to do. I got in the habit of sleeping most of the night, which is not good railroading. But it is generally this way, either too much work or not enough. It is hard to strike a medium.

A Close Call

One morning an hour or so before I went off duty, I heard a station some distance to the north reporting that the engine of a south-bound extra had "died" there, and that they would need another engine if the train were to continue on its way. It might be explained that the usual cause of the "death" of an engine is leaking flues. The water leaks out so fast that it is impossible to keep up steam.

After a little time I heard the dispatcher ordering out a light engine from division headquarters to take the place of the "dead" one; also, he changed the meeting place between the "dead" train and other trains bound in the opposite direction. One order gave right of track to a northbound extra to the station at which I was working.

The day operator relieved me at 7 A.M. as usual, and I went to get some breakfast. Afterwards, I returned to the office for a few minutes' talk with the day operator before going to bed. While we were talking, the southbound extra arrived with its fresh engine. It did a few minutes' switching, and then pulled out of town. A few minutes later the day operator reported them out to the dispatcher.

"I think you are mistaken," said the dispatcher when he heard the report. "Look again and see if they aren't at the lower end of the yards."

The day operator looked, I looked, and the agent, who happened to be in the office, looked; but no train could we see. — So the day operator told the dispatcher.

"Is the northbound extra in?" inquired the dispatcher.

It was not.

"Then those fellows have overlooked an order," clicked the dispassionate wire. "They should have waited there until the northbound extra arrived."

We in the office began to look frightened, but we understood. The conductor of the once "dead" train had received the order so long before that he had forgotten about it, as had his engineer. So they had pulled out of town right in the face of the other extra.

"The northbound extra ought to be nearing Blank about now," went on the dispatcher. "One of you try to get Blank on the 'phone, and tell him to hold the northbound extra. I'll try to get CS (a station between us and Blank) to stop the southbound train." And he began to call CS, CS, CS, steadily, persistently.

The agent jumped to the telephone, and asked for the station at Blank, and the dispatcher called CS on the message wire.

At last the agent got Blank on the telephone.

"Is that northbound extra by you yet?" he asked.

"It is coming right here, close," answered Blank.

"Stop them!" ordered the agent. "This is the agent at B —"

"What for?" asked the operator.

"Stop them!" again ordered the agent.

"Can't," said the operator mildly. "The engine has passed my signal."

"Put out your signal, and get outside and flag the conductor as the caboose passes. He'll stop the engineer."

"But I'd like to know what you want him stopped for," persisted Blank.

The agent was almost tearing his hair, but he managed to answer, "To keep them out of an extra south that's got away from us."

"Oh, good heavens!" cried the operator in sudden terror. "I can't stop them now. They are by me and out of reach!"

We turned to the telegraph table where we could hear the despatcher's strong, steady call. CS, CS, CS, went the sounder evenly, dispassionately, with hardly a hint of the importance of an answer, save in the oft-repeated "19" which might mean any one of a dozen things.

"Why doesn't he answer?" I asked petulantly, for the strain was telling on all of us.

"He's not due to begin work until 8:30," said the agent, "and it's only 8:20 now."

Still we sat there waiting, unable to help in any way, listening to the despatcher's steady call. CS was a small place, and had no telephone. It was like sitting at a sick bed, listening to the seconds ticking off the time which would soon bring the change for better or for worse.

At last came the answer: "I, I, CS," equally dispassionate.

"Anything coming?" buzzed the despatcher.

"Extra south coming close," was the prompt answer.

"Stop them!" snapped the despatcher, showing feeling for the first time.

"S. D.," was the simple answer without hesitation; but those two letters told us that the trains were safe. They mean, "Signal displayed." This man had redeemed the lack of promptness of the other. That was railroading!

Quits — After Three Years' Service

As I have said, sleeping on duty is not good railroading, and, since I had been guilty of that sort of neglect, I was called to the train despatcher's office. I fully expected to be discharged, but no, I was only transferred again — this time to a place on the desert so hot and lonely that I could not stand it. So I "threw up" my job. Next, I went to work for a railroad which stationed me on the Colorado desert in California.

As in most desert stations, there was little or no work to do. In the dull season, it was seldom that more than eight trains passed during the night, and generally there were but four or five. I seldom copied an order or a message, and only used the wire to report the trains by. But it was hard work just to stay there, sitting up through the night with nothing to do. Sleep? Yes, I did sleep some on duty, but that is to be expected on the desert in hot weather, for one cannot sleep in the daytime, and the powers that were never censured you if you caused no delays, which was easily enough avoided when there was light traffic.

This was my last position on any railroad. So here I will leave myself, as the novelists say, at the end of a railroad career that is not unlike hundreds of others. **Ω**