

The Tomlinson Code

SHORTLY after Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Tomlinson had returned to Chicago from their wedding journey Mr. Tomlinson was called to New York on business.

"I wish," said Mrs. Tomlinson, "that I could go with you. I shall be terribly lonesome."

"I'd like to take you, my dear," her husband replied, "but I shall be busy, you know, and it would be very disagreeable for you alone in some hotel where you didn't know a soul. Cheer up, little girl! Don't look so forlorn."

"I'm so afraid something may happen to you, and—"

"Nothing's going to happen, and I'll come back just as soon as I can."

"But when will that be?"

"I can't tell exactly."

Before leaving, Tomlinson placed in his wife's hands a number of things that he had not had time to put in his safety-deposit box. Among them was the code-book used to save tolls on telegrams between the Tomlinson offices in New York and Chicago.

When he reached Buffalo he thought it would be well to send his wife a reassuring wire. While writing his message he suddenly remembered the story of the optimist who, having fallen from the roof of a high building, called out as he was passing the third or fourth story, "I'm all right so far." Tomlinson had told this story to his wife while they were on their wedding trip, and she had laughed heartily at it. So the wire that she received read as follows:

Like optimist. All right so far. She had put in the time after her husband's departure thinking of all the horrible things that could possibly happen to him, and the arrival of the messenger-boy filled her with dire forebodings. With nervous fingers she tore open the envelope. Her first glance at the message was reassuring; but after she had read it the second time she began to have doubts. She had never understood the optimist story, and, besides, it had passed quickly out of her memory. Presently she thought of the code-book, and with a wildly beating heart she rushed upstairs to get it.

"Optimist," "Optimist," "Optimist," she kept repeating as she turned over the pages. Ah! there it was. "Optimist: Be prepared for emergencies. Disregard other despatches."

She sank down in a limp heap, and tried to assure herself that there was some mistake. There was the statement that he was all right so far, but eventually she read disaster into even that part of the message. That he was all right so far indicated a fear of future injury or trouble.

Just above the word "Optimist" in the code was the word "Operation," which meant, "Give all particulars at once." When Thomas Tomlinson reached Albany he received this message:

Greatly worried. Can't understand operation.

There had been a period in the message after the word "understand" as Mrs. Tomlinson wrote it; but telegraph operators are not always careful about punctuation marks.

Tomlinson tried all the way to

Poughkeepsie to figure it out. From there he telegraphed again, saying:

Am all right so far. Falling optimist, you know.

It was getting dark when this wire was delivered, and Madeline Tomlinson, as soon as she read it, became hysterical. After a brief session among the sofa-pillows, however, she made a brave effort to be calm, and going to the code-book again, she tried to interpret the cipher. She found that the word "Falling" meant "Believe nothing you hear."

Pressing her hands against her temples, she stared at the words. Then she remembered how her husband had argued against the advisability of her accompanying him, and, also, that he had been vague in his promise as to when he would be likely to return. She rushed to the telephone to call up her mother for advice, but decided when she had the receiver in her hand that she would wait for another message.

Shortly after Tomlinson had reached his hotel in New York he received this wire:

Have heard nothing. Explain at once, or will start on next train.

He bit off the end of a cigar and sat down in the lobby to study the matter. His troubled expression caused several people to look at him anxiously. He saw nothing, however, but the message, which he read over and over.

"She has heard nothing," he muttered. "Confound it! What can she mean by that? Her other wire showed that she had received mine. Ah! My second message hasn't been delivered. She's writing for a reply to her inquiry concerning the optimist."

His worried look gave way to a smile as he went to the telegraph counter and began to write. At ten o'clock Madeline Tomlinson received her husband's third message, which read:

Explanation astray. Optimist joke. Don't understand about operation. Write particulars.

He had put it all in ten words, but his wife did not take time to count them. She had the code-book ready when the messenger arrived, and with feverish haste she turned the pages. "Explanation" was the first word she looked for, and she found, with a sigh of relief, that it meant "No cause for alarm." Then she turned to "Astray," and a sudden numbness came over her as she read its definition: "Say nothing to reporters."

She looked around in sudden fear, as if she expected inquisitive newspaper men to rush at her before she might be able to hide! but only the waiting messenger was there.

Tomlinson had been asleep for about two hours, when he was aroused by the ringing of his telephone-bell. The exchange operator informed him that he was wanted on the long-distance wire, but as it was working badly he was advised to go downstairs and talk.

"Chicago wants you," said the girl at the switchboard when he appeared before her. "Step into the second booth, please. We've lost them, but I'll see whether we can get another wire."

For half an hour Tomlinson stood in the booth, perspiring and expressing uncomplimentary opinions of the telephone system. Pittsburgh tried to repeat Chicago's message to him, but there was a big storm raging in the lower Lake region, and at one o'clock he angrily slammed the door of the booth, saying he was going back to bed. He hadn't even been able to find out who was trying to talk to him.

"Do you wish to leave any word, in case we get a connection?" asked the operator.

"No," Tomlinson angrily replied—"or yes. You can say I'm dead to the world."

Half an hour later Pittsburgh called for Mr. Tomlinson again. The girl in New York answered, "He's dead—"

Then the connection was lost. It was five o'clock in the morning when Tomlinson was aroused from fitful slumber. He had been dreaming that he was in battle, with cannon booming all around him, but on waking he discovered that a bell-boy was pounding at his door. He was wanted at the office immediately. When he got there the clerk handed him a wire which read:

Have body of Thomas Tomlinson properly cared for. Notify authorities at once if foul play suspected. Spare no expense. Am taking first train for New York.

The message was signed by Joseph Lawrence, Tomlinson's father-in-law. "What is the meaning of this?" asked the clerk.

After Tomlinson had paced around an imaginary circle a few times, he replied, "Go on. I'll give you as many guesses as you want!"

It was three hours later when he succeeded in getting Chicago on the long-distance telephone. He had in the meantime been studying the message from his wife. The word "Operation" became more and more ominous as he tried to fathom its meaning. After a good deal of trouble he got his home number, but it was not his wife who answered him.

"Who is this?" he demanded. "I want to speak to Mrs. Tomlinson."

"Mrs. Tomlinson cannot speak to you," was the reply. "She is very ill. What is wanted?"

"Who are you? What is the matter with my wife?" Tomlinson excitedly asked.

"I am Dr. Thurshy. I don't understand your reference to your wife."

"Say, doctor, for heaven's sake, have you people out there all gone crazy? What's the matter with Madeline? Tell me the truth at once. Why should she have to be operated on? Is she in danger?"

"Will you please explain who you are?"

"Who I am? Confound it. I'm Thomas Tomlinson. Who did you suppose I was?"

Then the wire failed again, and Tomlinson was left to rush about like a madman. He telegraphed messages to his wife, to his father-in-law, and to Dr. Thurshy, announcing that he was taking the first train for Chicago, and forgetting all about the business which had brought him to New York.

His messages and others that had been received from the manager of the hotel in New York served to convince Mrs. Tomlinson that the report of her husband's death was unfounded. She was able, therefore to meet him at the door when he jumped from the cab and hurried up the steps. After matters had been explained, Tomlinson put his code-book carefully into his inside pocket, promising himself never to leave it in the house again.

"Just think," his wife said, nestling fondly a little closer to him, as the clock on the mantel began to strike. "Father has arrived in New York by

this time. It was too bad that he got started before we had heard from you." "I don't wish to seem heartless or inhuman," Thomas Tomlinson replied, "but I hope he took on the general proportions of a pancake when he hit the earth!"

She drew away from him in sudden horror.

"Are you speaking of father?" she demanded.

"No. I mean that fool of an optimist!"

—S. E. KISER.

Look at the sides of your head. See how thin your hair is growing around the ears. You need scalp nourishment.

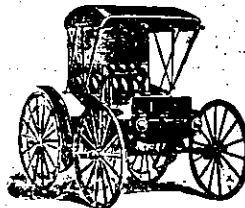


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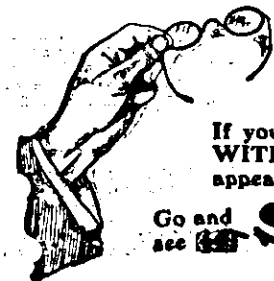
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