

Over the Wires.

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WELL? The operator's voice was a trifle sharp as she answered the call, for it was after closing time for the country bureau of Narahora, and she worked long hours without relief. Betty Somers was inclined to make short shrift of the peremptory voice which summoned her. "Don't you know it is after hours?"

Something in the answering voice startled her. Her eyes dilated, and she raised her head with the instinctive movement of one whose breath has been taken away. Her voice had altered when she spoke again. "Who is speaking?—David Graham—David Graham!" She put the receiver down gently for a moment, and said the name over twice in a whisper. Then she picked it up again and went on in that altered voice: "Yes, I am here. What number do you want? You don't want a number—What did you say? Yes, I can hear in spite of the storm. A big flood coming down—No there is no one here but myself—Yes—Yes, I know Mr. White's house, up on the hill. I must get up there at once—I am sure I shall manage all right. Thank you for thinking of me. Can't I warn some others—You are going to; are you really—Oh, surely it is too risky to ride down the valley in a storm with a flood behind you!—Why, some of them have wires—I will ring them—Surely I have time, and then I

shall be able to reach White's—Do say yes, and give up the idea of riding—Are you there?—Are you there?" He was not. He had left after his last hasty peremptory order, and the girl's face was white as she realized it.

For a few moments she forgot flood and everything else in the amazing fact that David Graham had called up this country bureau, where she had been sent from the city to relieve the local operator, who was ill. David, with whom she had quarrelled two years before, and who had shaken the dust of her dwelling-place from off his angry feet, vowing never to see her again—and so far he had kept his word, and because she knew she deserved it sometimes she hated him, and sometimes, with all the impotent longing of a sore heart, she thought if only she knew where he was, and what he was doing, she would send for him. And instead, with one of Fate's queer tricks, she had been sent to the very place where David Graham was living unknown to her. She laughed at the recollection of his orders to her ten minutes before—it was so exactly like David, though he did not know to whom he was speaking. The laugh passed in the realisation of what the night promised of risky work to David and probably all the men of the district.

The flood would mean peril and suffering to the women and children, who had to leave their homes for shelter on the high lands. Probably many of them

would not have sufficient warning. David had gone down to the valley. She could warn those further off before he could possibly reach them, if he ever did. He had told her she had no time to lose in getting to a place of safety. She concluded that he meant that the roads would be impassable shortly, but if they were—she was one against perhaps a dozen families that she could warn over the wires that were in her charge. In another minute she was at work.

One after another she called up the settlers who had 'phones, and in brief, clear words told them of the threatening flood, asking them to warn others if possible. Some of them were anticipating the danger, others wasted precious minutes in horrified lamentations and demands for details to verify the news. Poor wretch! It was a prospect to make women quail on such a night of bitter storm. Betty's face was full of the gravest pity and concern as she went on with her work, and it was only when she had done all she could that she remembered that she was in the same case as everyone else. It was time she obeyed David's orders, and made her way up the hill. The people with whom she lodged lived a mile away, and were not on the telephone, and she had no means of communicating with them, and wondered whether she would find them up at White's, which was the nearest house on high ground. She donned her cloak and cap, and, shivering a little at the prospect, went to the entrance. As she reached it, she stopped short—had the rain beaten in? Oh, surely it must be only the rain. Mustering all her courage she opened the door, and was met by the icy, driving wind and rain, and something that washed in and left her feet wet. She was too late. In sudden blind terror she used frantic strength, and closed the door against the storm. She was a city-bred girl—just an ordinary, little girl, who faced her daily work sanely and bravely, but who had had no experience of country, hardships and risks.

The horror of the darkness, loneliness, and rising water gripped her, and for a few minutes her nerve completely failed.

Shivering from head to foot, she ran into the office. As she entered a call came over the wires, and, with a gasp of relief, she answered, and recognised Graham's voice. Some voices kept their quality through a telephone—Graham's did. Anyone knowing it could recognise it. Betty had purposely used hers before in a way to mislead him. Now for the moment she had forgotten; and answered as though he knew to whom he was speaking. She said only "I am here!" but the tone was assured as speaking to someone who would not let harm reach her.

There was an instant's pause, and then he spoke sharply. "Who is it speaking?"

Like a flash came the thought to Betty that she wanted to see his face when he discovered who she was, and she replied in that altered voice, "The operator at Narahora Bureau."

Silence—while Graham recalled the tones of the voice which had startled him—and then: "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't you get up the hill?"

"I didn't try."

"Were you afraid?"

"I had something to do first."

"What was it?"

"Warn the telephone subscribers."

She heard his ejaculation, though it was to himself, and smiled. His voice had steadied her nerves. He went on rapidly. "Whom did you ring?"

She ran over the list of names, and he said quietly: "It means a lot to them—the road has given way down here—I can't get on. I rang just to make sure that you got away all right. I should have come to the bureau in the first place, and used the wires, but it was a long mile from my own place, and then I should have missed all the people who have no 'phones."

"Yes, I guessed that."

"Well, about you. Don't attempt to go out by yourself now—no knowing where you would end. I would come right away but I am just looking after a woman who is alone with three small children—her husband is away. Do you think you'll be all right for a while?"

"Betty looked down at the floor awash with water and shivered. But there was no help for it. At the other end was that mother and her three helpless children. It would have been a relief to feel David of her need of him as soon as he had put the others in safety, but it would have added to his anxieties, and she knew quite well that he wasted no time over his work, so she replied, "Yes, I can wait quite well until you have put the others into safety."

"Right, I'll be as quick as I can."

He was gone, and Betty, though her face was white, turned to meet the waiting with all the courage she could muster. She needed it, for it was no light thing for an inexperienced girl to face. The building seemed to rock with the fury of the storm, and in her ignorance she could form no idea how rapidly the water would rise. She perched herself on a table and tried not to look down where the water on the floor made little gurgling sounds as of triumph, but again and again her eyes were drawn to it as if fascinated, and it would seem to her deeper than when she had last looked. There was a clock on the wall, and she would wait a long time before looking at it and then find that only five minutes had passed. So slowly they crept away, and with every gust of wind and rain the water surged in under the door, gaining in volume with all the swiftness that the minutes lacked.

It was bitterly cold, too, and her hands and feet were soon numbed, and her limbs cramped from her uncomfortable position on the small table. She listened to the tearing wind which whistled and battled with the wooden building, and wondered how anyone could stand against such storm outside and whether David had managed to rescue the three little children and their mother. A little stray smile touched her cold lips as she thought of what he might have done had he known who was in charge of the bureau. She was glad he hadn't, but when she thought of his coming and seeing her perched where she was—the floors awash with water, the ludicrous side suddenly struck her and she laughed then grimaced with the knotting pain of cramp. It was a small table, no room to ease cramped limbs, and she had to bear the pain as best she could.

The next hour was one she did not care to remember afterwards. She was faint with pain and cold, and desperately afraid that she would fall and be unable to use her cramped limbs to save herself. She knew that David would have some distance to ride to the bureau



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