

The Forged Telegram

by J.W. Duffield

Bert's stay in Louisville was brief, and all the more so, because neither Tom nor Dick was there to meet him, as they had planned. Bert took it for granted that something out of the ordinary had happened, however, and bore his disappointment as philosophically as he could.

"No doubt they've been delayed," he thought, "and will meet me in the next town. That will be a spur to me to go faster so that I can see them sooner."

He had a refreshing sleep, and was up early, resolved to make a profitable day of it. After he had eaten breakfast, he paid his bill, and was just going out the door when the clerk stopped him. "Just a minute, sir," he said. "Here's a telegram for you. I almost forgot to give it to you."

"When did it come?" asked Bert, as he took the yellow envelope and prepared to open it.

"Oh, just about an hour ago," replied the clerk, "no bad news I hope?"

This question was occasioned no doubt by the expression of Bert's face. "Come quick," the telegram read, "Tom very sick; may die. We are in Maysville. Dick."

Bert's voice shook as he addressed the hotel clerk. "One of my friends is very sick," he said. "He's in Maysville. How long will it take me to get there?"

"Well, it's a matter of close on two hundred miles," replied the clerk, in a sympathetic voice, "but the roads are fair, and you can make pretty fast time with that machine of yours."

Bert whipped out his map of Kentucky, and the clerk pointed out to him the little dot marked Maysville.

"All right, thanks," said Bert, briefly, "good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the other, "I hope your friend isn't as bad as you fear."

But before he finished speaking Bert was on the "Blue Streak," and was flying down the street. In a moment his mind had grasped every angle of the catastrophe. If he went to Tom, it would very likely mean the loss of the race, for a matter of four hundred miles out of his road would be a fearful handicap. But what was the race compared to dear old Tom, Tom, who at this very moment might be calling for him? Every other consideration wiped from his mind, Bert leaned over and fairly flew along the dusty road. Fences, trees, houses, streaked past him, and still he rode faster and faster, recklessly, taking chances that he would have shunned had he been bound on any other errand. He shot around sharp bends in the road at breakneck speed, sometimes escaping running into the ditch by a margin of an inch or so. Fast as the "Blue Streak" was, it was all too slow to keep pace with his feverish impatience, and Bert fumed at the long miles that lay between him and his friend.

Now a steep hill loomed up in front of him, and he rushed it at breakneck speed. Slowly the motorcycle lost speed under the awful drag of the steep ascent, and at last Bert was forced to change to

low gear. The "Blue Streak" toiled upward, and at last reached the top. A wonderful view lay spread out before him, but Bert had no eye just now for the beauties of nature. All he saw was a road that dipped and curved below him until it was lost in the green shades of a valley. Bert saw he would have no need of his motor in making that descent, so threw out the clutch and coasted. Faster and faster he flew, gaining speed with every revolution of the wheels. With the engine stopped, the motorcycle swept along in absolute silence, save for the slight hissing noise made by the contact of the tires with the road. The speed augmented until he was traveling almost with the speed of a cannon ball. At this speed, brakes were useless, even had he been inclined to use them, which he was not. Two-thirds of the way down he flashed past a wagon, that was negotiating the descent with one wheel chained, so steep was it. Had the slightest thing gone wrong then; had a nut worked loose, a tire punctured, a chain broken or jumped the sprockets, Bert would have been hurled through the air like a stone from a catapult. Fortunately for him, everything held, and now he was nearing the bottom of the hill. Ten seconds later, and he was sweeping up the opposite slope at a speed that it seemed could never slacken. But gradually gravitation slowed him down to a safer pace, and at last he slipped in the clutch and started the motor. In the wild descent his cap had flown off, but he hardly noticed it.

"I'll soon be there at this rate," he thought, glancing at the speedometer. "I've come over a hundred and fifty miles now, so Maysville can't be much further." And, indeed, less than an hour's additional riding brought him to the town of that name.

He went immediately to the hotel at which his friends were supposed to be. But when he stated his object to the hotel clerk, the latter gazed at him blankly. "There are no parties of that name stopping here," he said. "I guess you have the wrong address, young man." Bert showed him the telegram, but the clerk only shook his head. "There's something wrong somewhere," he said; "suppose you see Bently, the telegrapher. He could probably give you a description of the person that sent the telegram, anyway."

"Thanks, I will," said Bert, and hastened out. A dim idea of the true state of affairs was beginning to form in his brain, but it hardly seemed possible his suspicions could be true. He soon reached the telegraph office, and accosted the operator.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "who sent that telegram early this morning?"

The station agent glanced at the telegram, and replied: "Why, I can't give you a very good description of the man, for I didn't take special notice of him. He was a young man of medium build, though, with light hair, and now I come to think of it, he wore goggles. Seems to me I heard some one say he was riding a motorcycle in some cross country race, but that I can't vouch for."

"I think I know who he was, all right," said Bert, "and I'm much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," returned the other, and turned again to his work.

Bert walked out of the station with clenched fists and blazing eyes. "It's Hayward who sent that telegram," he muttered, between clenched teeth. "I'd stake my soul on it. But I'll win this race in spite of that crook and his tricks. And anyway," he thought, with his eyes softening, "old Tom *isn't* sick after all, and that's almost enough to make me forgive Hayward. I feel as though I had just awakened from an awful nightmare."

It was characteristic of Bert that his anger and chagrin at being tricked in this dastardly way

were swallowed up in his relief at finding the report of his friend's illness false.

Bert consulted his map, and found that by taking a different route than that by which he had come he could save quite some distance, and started out again, after filling the "Blue Streak's" tanks with oil and gasoline, with the grim resolve to have revenge for the despicable trick that had been played on him, by snatching from Hayward the prize that he was willing to stoop to such depths to gain.

Up hill and down he flew, around curves, over bridges that shook and rattled at the impact of racing man and machine. Steadily the mileage indicator slipped around, as league after league rolled backward, and Bert exulted as he watched it. "We'll make it ahead of everybody else or die in the attempt, won't we, old fellow?" he said, apostrophizing the "Blue Streak." "Nobody's going to play a trick like that on us and get away with it, are they?"

Only once on the return trip did he stop, and then only long enough to snatch a little food. Then he was off again like the wind, and as dusk began^[103] to fall rode into Louisville. As he entered the hotel, after leaving his machine in a garage, Dick and Tom swooped down upon him. "What's up?" they demanded, both in the same breath, "who sent that telegram, do you know?"

"I think I know," replied Bert. "I haven't a doubt in the world that it was sent by Hayward. You remember that we heard he was more or less crooked, and now we know it."

"I wish I could lay my hands on him," exclaimed Dick, with flashing eyes. "I'd make him regret the day he was born. Just you wait till the next time I come across him, that's all."

"If I see him first there won't be anything left for you," said Tom. "Of all the dirty, underhanded tricks I ever heard of, that is the limit."

"Well, I won't contradict you," said Bert, grimly, "but all he'll ever gain out of it will be a sound thrashing. Don't you believe for a minute that it's going to help him win this race. I'll ride day and night until I've made up for this lost time."

And ride he did, crowding three days' mileage into two, until at last he felt that he had recovered the time lost in answering the call of the forged telegram.

Source:

Duffield, J.W. "The Forged Telegram." *Bert Wilson's Twin Cylinder Racer*. Racine: Sully and Kleintech, 1914. 97 – 103. Electronic.