

SEVEN, SEVEN, SEVEN -- CITY: A TALE OF THE TELEPHONE

JULIUS CHAMBERS

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I.

I WENT to my telephone exactly at eleven o'clock on the night of December 30th last winter to call up the editor of my paper. My house was on the west side of Regent's Park, and the wire ran to the City telephone exchange.

Apparently my line was switched into connection with the Fleet Street exchange. But delay followed. I was familiar with the peculiar hum caused by the induction on the wires, but that night the sounds were of an unusual character. The operator at the City office had given me an unused wire.

As I awaited the answering signal to indicate that the desired connection had been made, I heard two people talking in loud whispers, to me unintelligible. Then I heard a door, swinging on a squeaky hinge, hastily closed with a muffled sound — a cupboard door. Then silence. One of the people had entered the cupboard and closed the door. Then a knock, unanswered. Immediately followed a crash at the other end of the wire. I heard the breaking in of a door.

"John!" exclaimed a woman.

"Ah! my lady, I have caught you at last," were the words of the intruder as he strode into the apartment, slamming the broken door against the wall behind. There was a metallic tone in that voice that made me chilly when he added "Where is the scoundrel?"

"I don't understand!" were the affrighted words of the woman.

"Well, I do. He's in that cupboard."

I heard the door squeak again, and the man in the cupboard step out.

"At your service, sir," said a strange voice, low and with a shiver in it.

"I knew it, woman," fairly screamed the head of the family.

"Don't be a brute," said the calm, low voice. "I am here, settle with me."

"You dog!" hissed the first speaker, as he sprang for the offender, overturning a table covered with bric-a-brac, and a mortal combat began.

In a momentary lull while I could distinguish the breathing of the two infuriated combatants, I heard the rustle of a woman's dress as she swept across the floor, the opening and closing of a door. The unfaithful creature had abandoned her lover. Not a sob nor an entreaty for mercy.

I was as sure of the facts and understood the situation as if I had been in that apartment.

The contest was resumed, and crash after crash of broken furniture attested its savage character.

Who were these men? And where? Unquestionably, in a house where a telephone had been left open, or an interruption had occurred during its use. Had the receiver been hung up, communication with that room of mystery would have been severed. The wire leading thereto was "crossed" with the one given me to use.

The struggle was to the death. I could hear the breathing of the contestants as they lay on the floor, but neither man asked quarter. The door re-opened and to a woman's sobs were added appeals for forgiveness. One of the two men had overpowered the other! Which was the victor?

A pistol shot, sharp and crisp! Then, the stillness of death. It was death! The hush could be felt over the unknown length of the wire connecting me with the murder chamber. I was ear-witness to the crime.

Whispers broke the silence; a window was raised. Now, shall I hear the cry of "Murder!?" No. Somebody looked into the street — presumably to ascertain if the pistol-shot had been heard by passing pedestrians. That indicated the home to be in a populous neighbourhood, although the opened window did not admit sounds of passing vehicles. Then the window was slowly closed.

Next, I heard a match struck. Merciful Heavens! This deadly conflict had taken place in the dark!

The lover had been killed; but would that lighted match reveal to the husband the face of a stranger, or of a well-known friend? What would be done with the body ——?

"Are you through?" asked the telephone clerk at the City exchange.

"No, mark that wire with which I am connected. It doesn't go to Fleet Street, but I must know where it runs. Mark it, as you value a five-pound note. I'll be at your office as soon as I can get there."

"All right!" was the prompt reply.

The clerk at the City exchange tied a ribbon round the plug that carried the end of the wire leading me into the unknown house. I related the entire incident and appealed to his curiosity and avarice. As I had divined, he,

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inadvertently, had switched me upon an abandoned line — it had been put up for a special occasion and "cut out" thereafter. It was a lost wire, and did not lead to the Fleet Street exchange or anywhere else!

After making tests, the clerk reported that communication with "the house of the crime" no longer existed, but, as an explanation, he pointed to a thermometer outside the window.

"Make a memorandum of the temperature," said he.

"What's the use?"

"You understand how you got into house on the lost wire?"

"No."

"At a certain degree of cold, that house—line contracted sufficiently to 'cut in' on the dead wire and thus connect us, for a brief space, with the chamber of the murder — wherever it may be."

"We must be careful to have this correct," said I, now comprehending the operator's meaning. "What does the instrument register?"

"Exactly zero."

* * * * * The body of a young physician of social prominence, Henry Clay Stanage (brother of Dr. Oscar Stanage, so prominently identified with the Jasper case), was found at the side of, a path in Hyde Park next morning. He had died from a pistol shot in the right temple, and near the corpse was a weapon with one chamber discharged. Evidence in support of the theory of suicide was so strong that a verdict to that effect by the Coroner's jury disposed of the case in the public mind. I saw the body and found finger marks on the throat and a rent in the back of the dress—coat.

The young gallant had died at the hand of "my murderer." Stanage bore the reputation of a "gay boy." All attempts to establish the whereabouts of the physician on the previous night came to naught.

The ease with which the body might have been placed in a carriage and driven to the spot where it was found became apparent on the most casual consideration.

II.

The only clue I possessed was the abandoned wire. I engaged a telephone-man to find the house of the crime, hoping thereby to bring the murderer to justice, and, incidentally, to secure a piece of sensational and exclusive news for my journal.

The lineman was zealous and over-confident, but at the end of two weeks he had lost the wire near the "Elephant and Castle."

He believed the house we sought to be in Brixton. He sneered at all suggestions from the telephone-operator.

"An ear-trumpet chap can't tell me how to work," said he contemptuously. "I didn't learn my trade that way."

Another wire expert was hired, and I told him the story. Perhaps I had not been sufficiently frank with the first man. The new telegraphist adopted the suggestion of the exchange-operator, and said:

"An accidental crossing of the wires, caused by contraction, admitted you to that room, and enabled you to hear the murder done. We have only to wait, Mr. North, until the thermometer registers zero, then ring up that dead wire from the City exchange and ask, 'What number is that?' You will have landed your game."

That seemed simple. But the winter was unusually mild.

Although I retained the man in my pay for a month, there wasn't a moment in which the thermometer touched zero. We kept ceaseless vigil, one relieving the other at the City telephone office during enforced absence for sleep and meals. I took a room in a boarding house near the exchange, that I might be within easy call. Nothing must thwart me.

One night the weather moderated, and I deemed it safe to go to Kensington to pay a call I had owed for a long time. While I was away, the temperature fell so rapidly that it was within one degree of the desired point. The clerk at the exchange hurried a messenger to the address I had left with him.

In the warm house of my friend, the condition of the weather had been forgotten, but in the street the night was bitterly cold. Possibly the hour had come! At the first chemist's, I saw a thermometer outside the door.

Jupiter! The mercury stood exactly at zero! A cab carried me to the City telephone exchange in half an hour. I stepped inside and, connecting the dead wire, rang.

No answer.

Glancing through the window-glass at a thermometer outside, I saw that the weather had slightly moderated; the reading thereon was two degrees above zero. There it hovered for an hour. Then the mercury slowly descended into the bulb. Now, it stood at one and a half degrees! Ten minutes later the record was less than a degree above!

I rang vigorously, but did not hear any sound at the other end.

In my anxiety, I forgot the thermometer. When I looked again, the mercury had moved up half a degree.

Another wait succeeded, and I had almost decided to give up the vigil for the night, when the bell connected with the dead wire rang. Snatching up the receiver, I asked, my voice almost tremulous: "Well? What number do you want?"

"Who are you?" was the rejoinder.

"This is the exchange. What number do you want?"

"You're Kensington," was the cautious query, after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, what is your number?" I asked, in hopes of obtaining from an unguarded answer the information I had been so anxiously seeking.

"Ah! you want to know what number this is?"

I recognised the voice!

I was talking to the murderer — "my murderer," as I had often mentally designated him, to distinguish him from everybody else's murderer.

And wasn't he mine? Only one other living person knew him beside me — the woman who had witnessed the killing, and had remained silent as the price of forgiveness!

"What is your number?" I asked again.

"Find out!" was the reply.

Then I heard the 'phone hung up. It seemed to me that I had not learned anything new. I was deeply chagrined

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for the moment; but, taking stock of my knowledge, I had acquired much valuable information.

First. — I had confirmed the theory that the house I sought had been reached by a wire that hung in close proximity to the abandoned line.

Second. — The short house-wire hung over, not under, the long wire, because the contraction in the copper-wires of which the house connections were made was slight.

Third. — The man and the house I sought were in Kensington, not Brixton, as the first expert had concluded.

Fourth. — "My murderer" was usually at home at night.

Fifth. — His telephonic connection was made through the Kensington exchange.

Sixth. — The man I believed guilty was on his guard and was suspicious of my inquiries. He would probably be wary of the telephone in future. On the other hand, he would not dare to have it removed at this time.

The "dead" wire was the only clue. My next step was to go to the office of the Telephone Company, and secure an appointment as a receiver in the Kensington exchange. I was inconspicuous, and I donned the remarkable headgear the receivers wear. The wear and worry of the work nearly crazed me the first day. The steel band that encircled my temples completely disorganised my brain. A month passed, and I was no nearer the solution. Despair was overcoming me, when a new suggestion of the greatest importance was made to me.

"Has Moxley tested the wires, as usual?" asked one of the operators during the day.

"Not this week," replied the Exchange Superintendent.

All customers are frequently called up by an expert to ascertain that the wires are in good order. If I could become Moxley's assistant, I reflected, I might be able to hear "my murderer's" voice again.

I secured the place, and made my appearance at the Kensington telephone exchange as Moxley's "helper," — not a position calculated to turn the head of any man. I was delighted, and believed success assured. My duties were to carry the galvanometer and rheostat; but, by dividing my supposed wages with Moxley, he consented that I should test the wires. I was a bachelor, he assumed, and I could live on little money; besides, he liked to encourage enthusiasm in young men. Moxley guaranteed to make me expert in three years.

"George Reilly is the best lineman in England," said he, "and Reilly began with me as 'helper.'"

Only one operator was in the office when we arrived, because the telephone is not in much demand before ten o'clock. I tested the private lines, of which there were several hundreds.

I sought in vain for "the voice." Sixty-three customers failed to answer when called. I marked these "torpid" wires, hoping that the one I wanted was among them.

Having completed the tests of the private wires, I began making connections with the pay-stations throughout the district.

A curious thing occurred.

I rang up a station on Camden Hill; I heard the receiver taken off the hook, but no reply came in answer to my summons. I called again and yet again. No reply.

Warm as was the day, I felt a chill down my spinal marrow. I heard a door unlocked, and, an instant later, the squeaking of a hinge. The wire led into a cupboard.

Again I asked for a response. Finally, the 'phone at the other end, wherever that might be, was replaced on the hook, and — silence.

III.

I left the building, called a cab and drove to the address of the number I had rung up. It proved to be a chemist's shop near Holland Park. Showing my credentials, I demanded to know why the inspection call had not been answered. The chemist was civil, and explained that he had observed, the previous summer, that on hot days the communication with the exchange was interrupted at times. He stoutly maintained that the bell had not sounded. I tried it and called up the Kensington exchange without difficulty. The druggist was in nowise nonplussed. He merely pointed towards the street and said, as he turned to wait on a customer: — "You forget that it is raining. The weather is cooler."

True, there had been a heavy shower while I was in the cab, but so intent was I in pursuit of my only object in life that I had hardly observed it. I understood the chemist's meaning. In the case of the first wire I had attempted to run down, the bit of metal I sought doubtless passed over the abandoned line; by the same reasoning, the wire that had again led me into this modern Francesca's chamber by another route was strung under the one that entered this chemist's shop. Zero weather contracted the metal in one case; summer heat lengthened the line in the other. Contact was made at two different places.

The co-efficient to this last problem was unknown to me. The druggist had not noticed the thermometer just prior to the shower, because he took the temperature only at nine, twelve and three o'clock. I remembered the telephone standard at the top of the London Life Assurance Company's building, where Sergeant Dunn had machinery that automatically recorded every change in the weather on an unimpeachable tally-sheet.

That officer received me courteously. I asked the exact thermometrical reading just before the heavy rainfall. Consulting the cleverly-devised instruments, he replied:

"Exactly 90 degrees Fahrenheit."

The degree of summer contact with the lost wire had been established; but that was all.

I must go on. Had I located the section of the city in which the criminal lived? I feared not. This wasn't a crime of the slums; but the use of a telephone did not necessarily indicate respectability. Why not start at the chemist's and run down the wire from that point?

The end of a rainbow never seems far away.

I sent for Moxley and told him what I wanted to ascertain. He looked knowing; said the task would be easy, and he'd take "a day off" to do it. Although he gave a month to the task, he did not find the house, the man or the woman! But he was full of explanations, and showed how, wholly by accident and not by design, the people at the other end of the wire were absolutely safe if they did not make a "break" themselves.

The days drifted along into September. The warm weather was gone, and I could not hope that ninety degrees of heat would recur. It was equally impossible to restrain my curiosity until mid-winter.

I engaged a room in a boarding-house adjoining the Kensington telephone station. The cables came along thereto underground and were carried up the side of the house in a covered box to the roof; there the strands were separated and strung upon a rack, from which they were conducted to the operating-room below. The discovery that all the wires brought into that station were underground complicated matters seriously. The line I wanted was strung aloft at some point of its length, but where did it leave the subway and how could I recognise it when found?

I now did what I ought to have done long before — secured the services of George Reilly, the most expert "trouble-man" in the country. When the whole subject was laid before him he pronounced unequivocally in favour of starting at the City office to run down that wire. A long chase was more likely of success than a short one.

Reilly went to work with zest. With his experienced eye, he had no difficulty in following the abandoned wire along Holborn, thence down New Oxford Street, where, without apparent reason, it switched off to the roofs, which it followed to Victoria, where it returned to the underground. By the end of the third day Reilly was in full cry through Lambeth, into Kennington, down as far as Pearl Street. At Brixton Station it made a long jump from the top of a tall building, over the railway bridge to another building. Reilly believed he was close upon a solution of the mystery. Out of Brixton Road, atop a telephone pole, emerged a bright copper wire; it crossed closely above the line he was following. His practiced eye told Reilly that the two wires were liable to have contact by the

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contraction of the long wire. The stretch previously mentioned was more than a thousand feet in length, and, at zero temperature, contraction would be fully two-thirds of an inch. Nothing could have been easier than to tie the two wires together and to ring up the house of the crime. But Reilly thought that course unwise.

"My murderer," as I still called him, was on his guard. Having kept the secret for eight months, he knew exactly what he was about.

I was waiting at the City exchange the following day, when Reilly called me over a public line, and asked me to "ring up" the dead wire.

I did so, and someone exclaimed: "Is that you, John? When will you return? Better come at once." It was a woman's voice — That of the woman who had begged for mercy!

Standing back from the transmitter, I asked: "Where?"

"To the ——" Buzz! whir-r-r! zip!

The contact was broken. I called up Reilly and told him to tie the two wires together. He did so, but I could not get "my lady's" ear again. I asked Reilly what he thought. In his opinion, the woman lived in Brixton. The wire ran in that direction.

Reilly announced later in the day a change of mind. The copper wire was a private one, running from a city office to a private house in Brixton. He had traced it to an office building in Cheapside. The wire did not go to Brixton, as he had supposed, although it ran in that direction for a good way. Telephone wires are often pieced together, he explained, and a lineman will sometimes appropriate an old wire, though it makes a long detour.

The members of the firm in whose office the line ended were easily discovered. Reilly slung a coil of wire over his shoulder next day and entered the office. He asked for the telephone, and was shown into the private room of the firm — "Gasper, Todd, and Markham."

At his desk sat John Perry Gasper, Solicitor, aged fifty-seven.

Reilly was not a student of men; he could not read character as he could a Morse instrument. But the wire was what he wanted, and now that he had found one end of it, nothing appeared easier than to secure the other one. After having made two or three pretended tests of the machine, he went away.

The instant he reached the landing outside the office, his manner changed. He sprang down the stairs and to the bank on the ground floor, where he asked for a city directory. There the residence of John Perry Gasper was given: "Cheapside, and Kensington."

Madly triumphant, Reilly hurried to my address, and rushed breathlessly into my room. In a few words he revealed his success. I was as jubilant as he. We hurried to Kensington to look at the house. We almost ran.

No difficulty was experienced in finding the building. It was a corner house of splendid proportions, and the name, "Gasper," shown audaciously upon the door-plate. While my thoughts were busy as to my next action, Reilly's were occupied with a different text. He had surveyed the building from all possible points, in a thoroughly appreciative way; but when he came back from a hasty walk down the side street, he was pale and trembling.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Matter? Why, I'm 'knocked out.'"

"I don't understand," was my reply.

"Can't you see that there isn't a telephone wire entering that house?"

"What wire is that?" I asked, in dismay, pointing upward.

"Oh! that's a district-messenger call. Notice, it runs from the pole opposite the stable, and is of the cheapest iron. There isn't any telephone in that house. See! A reference to the telephone catalogue — which we ought to have made earlier — shows that."

The more he was mystified the clearer became the situation to me. It was a case of another woman — another family! Nevertheless, the other end of the wire and the house of the murder were as far away as ever.

One thing I could establish at once, and I would make the test. Strange that I had allowed a moment to elapse since I had learned of Gasper's connection with the case.

I went to the nearest Call Office, called up Gasper, Todd and Markham, Cheapside, and asked to speak with Mr. Gasper. I hadn't thought what I should say, when a voice answered, "I am Mr. Gasper? What is wanted?" I had only sense enough to reply:

"When did you take the telephone out of your house?"

"Never had any in it," was the curt retort; after waiting a moment, he added savagely, "And I don't want any."

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This was the voice, and Gasper's name was John!

Reilly went back to Gasper's office to see the telephone. Gasper was not there and the expert examined it more carefully. He discovered that the wires led through the back of the little box in which was the 'phone, thence into a large wardrobe. This was locked, but a moment's examination showed that the two wires left that sealed clothes-press. They went out by different windows, but they came from the same switch — a switch inside the wardrobe, by which a private wire could be "cut in" or "cut out." The line over which I had called up the office obviously was a different one from that leading to the mysterious room where the shooting occurred.

This was really a discovery! I speak of it as a "discovery," although it was, as yet, merely an assumption. But Reilly was as sure that a switch existed in that cupboard as if he had seen it. As he told me his theory, I remembered that the office had not responded when the wires were tied together. The bell hadn't rung, because the private wire had been "switched out!"

"One bold stroke," thought I, "and we shall have this story." My next step was startling. I had been admitted to the Bar years before. I called upon a prominent K.C. friend of mine and secured letters of introduction to John Perry Gasper, and finally wrote him asking when I might call with a certainty of a private interview. He named the following afternoon. I presented my letters. One was from the Chief of Police. I watched the lawyer's face, and a tremor crossed it as he broke the seal of the big blue envelope bearing the arms of the department.

I waited for an inquiry from him as to my business; but he was stolid, immobile as marble. His dull, grey eyes appeared slowly withdrawing themselves inside his skull; the eyelids gradually closed to a peculiar squint. Reilly was waiting in the hall, and I knew the moment had come. Now for audacity!

"Will you let me have an expert examine the cupboard immediately behind your telephone?"

"There is no cupboard behind it," was the quick retort.

"Yes, there is — right behind that door against which the 'phone box sits."

My voice trembled, and I was very pale; but my "nerves" did not fail me.

Gasper took up the letters, one by one, read them through more carefully than before, and then muttered:

"Go to the — deuce."

"Not until I find the other end of that private wire leading from the next room," I retorted. "If you refuse, I shall return with a search warrant and thoroughly turn over the entire place. The warrant will be based on the charge that you are defrauding the telephone company; but that will not be the real accusation."

"Ah?"

"Your arrest, which will follow, will mean ——"

"What?"

"That you are charged with the murder of Henry Stanage, who was found dead in Hyde Park last winter, with a bullet in his head, and — your pistol at his side."

I was sure of a sensation; but it came in an unexpected way.

"That's your game, is it?" his voice ringing with exultation. "If ever a man deserved to die, that scoundrel did."

It was my turn to be surprised into speechlessness.

"Look here," exclaimed Gasper, rising to his full height behind the desk. "You're after blood; but, man to man, I stake my life I can convince any judge or jury that that rascal died at the right time. Denounce his murderer, arrest him, indict him — hang him, if you can; I shall defend him to the last extremity, and with every technicality known to the law."

"But you know the murderer?"

"As to who killed Stanage," Gasper fairly screamed, "that is for you to find out."

My K.C. friend assures me that the case is not complete, because evidence heard over a telephone is not admissible in a Court of Law. Gasper knows that as well as the Public Prosecutor.

Therefore, I alone, of all living men, know how Henry Stanage died.