THE Talking Wire

THE STORY OF
ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL

O. J. STEVENSON

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THE TALKING WIRE

The story of Alexander Graham Bell

BY
O. J. STEVENSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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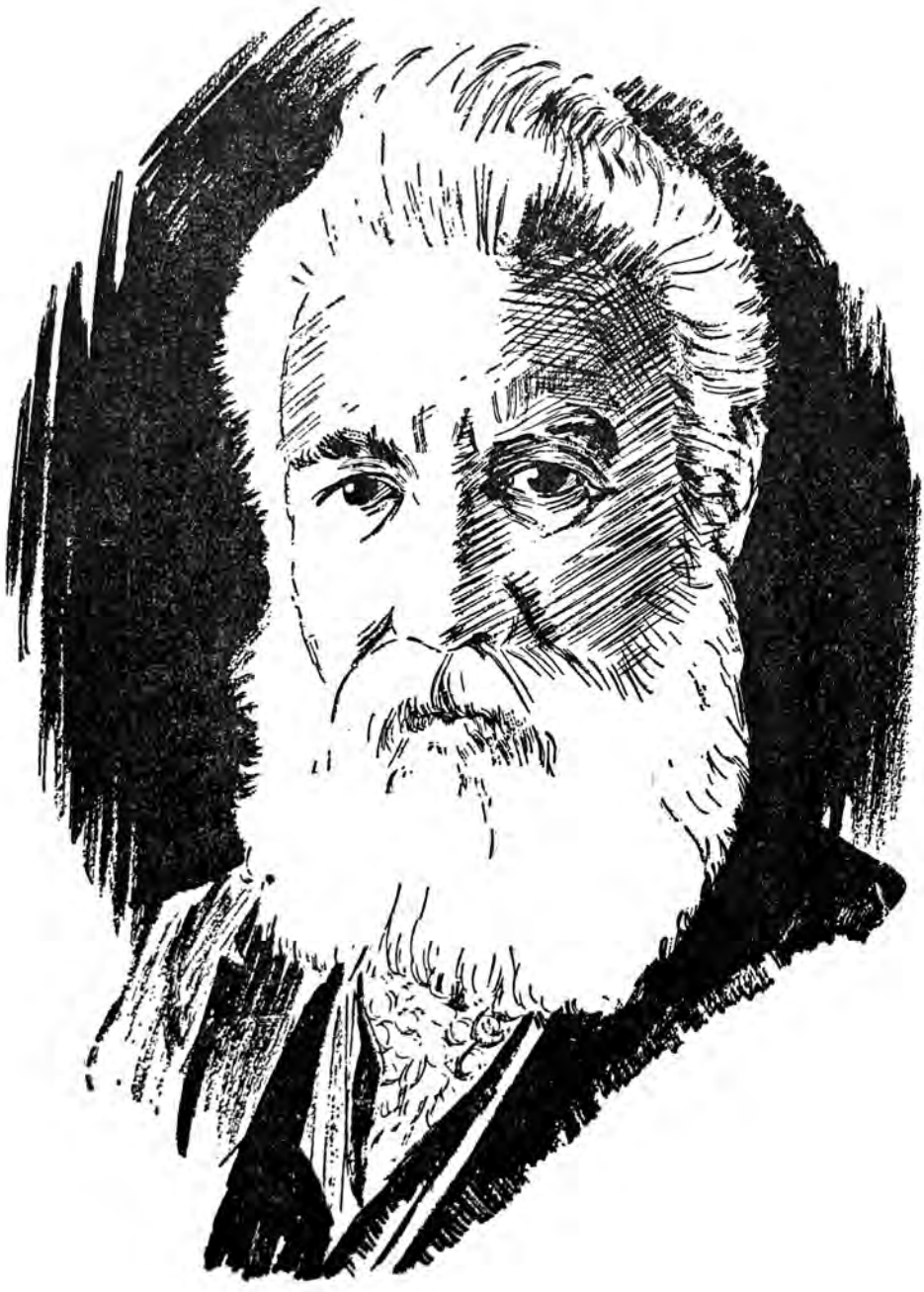
Living Book Press



Contents

Part 1.

BOYHOOD DAYS.

CHAPTER ONE

The Paddle Wheel

Everyone in Edinburgh knew where Herdman's big flour mills were, out at the edge of the city, ten or fifteen minutes' walk from Princes Street Gardens. On a September afternoon, Mr. Herdman, the miller, was standing before a tall office desk, looking over his accounts. Two boys, Ben Herdman and Aleck Bell, were "playing around" somewhere, and, as like as not, they were into some mischief. He could hear them shouting to each other over the noise of the mill. But all of a sudden they became very quiet—usually a sign that some mischief was brewing—and then a different sound caught his ear. It seemed as if the mill-wheels were going to stop. Something had gone wrong! He rushed out of his office, banging the door behind him in his haste. Those boys again! Sure enough, the two mischievous young imps were trying to close the gates and shut off the water. They wanted to see what would happen—and they did! They were always up to something! But this was the worst ever!

When they caught sight of Mr. Herdman, they scuttled away and tried to hide; but when he had opened the gates once more, he routed them out. He was angry, but he didn't quite lose his temper.

"You young rascals!" he shouted. "Come out of that! Haven't I warned you a hundred times? Can't you read? See that sign,

'Keep out'—that means *you*! Come over here to my office. I want to talk to you. You, Ben, you ought to know better. What do you mean?"

"I was just showing Aleck," pleaded Ben.

"Aleck!" shouted Mr. Herdman. "His father'll attend to him. Serve him right, too."

Aleck's heart sank. Mr. Herdman *might* tell his father. He hadn't thought of that. If he did, he knew what would happen! He wouldn't be allowed to come to the mill again.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "It wasn't Ben's fault. I dared him."

Mr. Herdman began to relent. "You know," he said, "I can't be watching you boys all the time. You're giving me no end of trouble. This isn't the first time, but it must be the last. Why can't you do something useful instead of getting into mischief all the time?"

"What is there we *could* do?" ventured Aleck.

"Do?" said Mr. Herdman. "There are a hundred things for you to do—and a hundred things not to do. Look at this!" And, suiting the action to the word, he thrust his hand into a sack of grain that was standing near by, and brought out a handful of wheat and spread it out before them.

"See that wheat?" he said. "See anything wrong with it?"

Aleck looked at it. "You couldn't grind that, could you, sir? They need the—the—"

"Husks," prompted Mr. Herdman.

"They need the husks taken off, don't they?"

"Right," said the miller. "But how? If you can find some way to do that, you'll be a help instead of a hindrance."

"Why don't the husks come off when they're flailed?" asked Ben.

"Sometimes the wheat is not dried out enough before they're flailed," replied Mr. Herdman. "Some kinds of wheat are like that. You can't shake the husks off or rub them off or blow them off."

"If you'll let me take some home," said Aleck, "I'd like to try—two or three handfuls'll do."

"Well," replied Mr. Herdman, "it won't do you any harm to try! Good luck! And don't you meddle with that water again! Or—" The rest of the sentence was lost behind the closed door.

Ben and Aleck were the same age, "eleven, going on twelve." Ben stuttered, and his father had taken him to Professor Bell, the well-known teacher of speech, to see if he could do anything for him, and now he was going to Professor Bell's house once each week for a lesson. That was how Ben and Aleck came to know each other. The Bells lived on South Charlotte Street, not very far from the centre of the city, in one of those large apartment houses in which there were some times a half-dozen families. It was a dull place, and very noisy too; and the family, Aleck and his two brothers, Melville and Edward, didn't very often get out to the open country; and for Aleck an afternoon at Herdman's mill was something to look forward to and dream about. Anything to get away from the city streets and the smoke-stained, grimy stone houses and cobbled pavements!

On this particular afternoon when Aleck reached home he found his brother Melville waiting for him.

"Time you were home," said Melville. "Mama's been looking for you. You haven't done your practice and to-morrow's your lesson. Signor Bertini—"

"Practice!"interrupted Aleck. "I've done enough practice this week. I've got something else to do right now. See here!" He opened the grain sack cautiously, as if a mouse might jump out, and held it up for Melville to see. Melville peered in curiously, and took out a handful.

"Pooh!" he said scornfully. "Just wheat, isn't it? What'll you do with it? Plant it?"

"No," said Aleck. "I've nowhere to plant it, you know that, but I have to find some way to take those husks off."

"That's easy," said Melville. "Rub it."

"No," said Aleck. "That won't do. You just try it. It's too slow. Mr. Herdman has piles and piles of it. You'd never get it done."

Just then a voice came from an open window. "Aleck, you must get at your piano. You won't be ready for your lesson."

Aleck didn't answer. It was no use. His mother was too deaf to hear. He didn't mind practising. He had a good ear and could play almost anything if he heard it once. He had a good music teacher too—the best in Edinburgh—Signor Auguste Benoit Bertini. Aleck's father was careful in money matters, but he spared nothing for the education of his three boys, and Aleck was an apt pupil. He was music to his finger tips; and he had a vague notion that when he grew up he would be a teacher like Signor Bertini, and play before great crowds of people in London. Signor Bertini would be proud of him.

Aleck went to the piano. He played "The Girl I Left Behind Me"—a catchy sort of thing that everyone was singing—then he ran over his lesson once; but he spent most of his time making up pieces—"improvising" Signor Bertini called it—and he forgot all about Mr. Herdman's grain. The music put everything else out of his head. It always did! But that evening he took the little sack of wheat and spread it out on the table. He ran his hands through it. He liked to feel it slipping through his fingers. He rubbed out a handful, but it was slow work and the wheat wasn't very clean after all. Then a new idea came to him. "Why can't I brush the husks off," he said to himself, "the way I brush the mud off my boots? All I need is a good stiff brush." He got an old nail brush from a bureau drawer, and tried it. The husks came off quite easily and he blew the chaff away. He worked till he had two or

three cupfuls—but at that rate of going it would take all day to do a bushel —and what would Mr. Herdman say? He wished he had left those gates alone!

Two or three days later he hurried down to the mill again, and showed Ben the wheat he had husked, and he brushed some more of it to let him see how it was done.

"Neat, isn't it?" said Ben. "Let *me* try it."

They took turns with the brush, and soon had a little pile for Mr. Herdman to see. But it wouldn't do. It was too slow and it was very tiresome work.

"I want to find some way to clean up a hundred bushels at a time," said Mr. Herdman. "It would take all summer to do it with that little brush."

"Why don't you get a bigger one?" said Ben.

Aleck didn't know where to find one, and he couldn't think of anything else. But suddenly a bright idea came to him. Outside in an out-of-the-way corner of the yard there was an old vat, lined with wire or some rough material. Inside it there was a paddle-wheel, one that went round and round when you turned the crank. No one knew what it had been used for, but when Aleck happened to see it, he gave a whoop of delight.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Here's the very thing! Put your wheat into it—a whole sackful—now let's paddle her!"

No sooner said than done! Round went the paddle. The wheat was splashed up against the wire, and the husks came off like magic.

"Hurrah," cried Aleck. "What'll your father say now?"

"He'll not say much," said Ben. "He never does."

Mr. Herdman didn't say much at first; but when he saw the paddles working, he put his hand on Aleck's shoulder and said, "Well done, my lad! Well done!" and Aleck was very proud. Mr.

"Well done, my lad! Well done!"

Herdman had a bigger vat made, and a paddle-wheel that went by water power; and for many a long day the wheat at Herdman's mills was cleaned by the paddle-wheel method.

"Clever boy of yours—that boy Aleck," said the miller when he met Professor Bell a fortnight later. "You know, he's found a way to take the husks off our wheat when the flail won't do it. Came to him quick as a flash. He'll be an inventor someday, if I know anything. A little mischievous—but not enough to amount to anything. How does he get along at school?"

"He's idle," said Aleck's father, "dreaming half the time! He likes arithmetic, but he hates Latin, and won't study Greek, like Sir Walter Scott when he was a boy. 'The Greek blockhead,' they called him."

"I don't blame him," said Mr. Herdman. "What's Greek good for, anyway? Send him down to me and I'll make a miller of him."

But Aleck's father had other plans for him, that were quite different!