AN ELECTRICAL SLIP.

Public opinion had been triumphantly vindicated. The insanity plea had broken down, and Albert Prior was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead, and might the Lord have mercy on his soul. Everybody agreed that it was a righteous verdict, but now that he was sentenced they added, "Poor fellow!"

Albert Prior was a young man who had had more of his own way than was good for him. His own family—father, mother, brother and sisters—had given way to him so much that he appeared to think the world at large should do the same. The world differed with him. Unfortunately the first to oppose his violent will was a woman—a girl almost. She would have nothing to do with him and told him so. He stormed, of course, but did not look upon her opposition as serious. No girl in her senses could continue to refuse a young man of his prospects in life. But when he heard that she had become engaged to young Bowen, the telegraph operator, Prior's rage passed all bounds. He determined to frighten Bowen out of the place and called at the telegraph office for that laudable purpose, but Bowen was the night operator and was absent. The day man, with a smile, not knowing what he did, said Bowen would likely be found at the Parker place, where Miss Johnson lived with her aunt, her parents being dead.

Prior ground his teeth and departed. He found Miss Johnson at home, but alone. There was a stormy scene, ending with the tragedy. He fired four times at her, keeping the other two bullets for himself. But he was a coward and a cur at heart, and when it came to the point of putting the two bullets into himself he quailed and thought it best to escape. Then electricity did him its first disservice. It sent his description far and wide, capturing him 25 miles from his home. He was taken back to the county town where he lived and lodged in jail.

Public opinion, ever right and all powerful, now asserted itself. The outward and visible sign of its action was an ominous gathering of dark browed citizens outside the jail. There were determined mutterings among the crowd rather than outspoken anger, but the mob was the more dangerous on that account. One man in its midst thrust his closed hand toward the sky, and from his hand dangled a rope. A cry like the growling of a pack of wolves went up as the mob saw the rope, and they clamored at the gates of the jail. "Lynch him! Jailer, give up the keys!" was the cry.

The agitated sheriff knew his duty, but he hesitated to perform it.

But the keys were not given up. The clamor had ceased. A young man with pale face and red eyes stood on the top of the stone wall that surrounded the jail. He held up his hand, and there was instant silence. They all recognized him as Bowen, the night operator, to whom she had been engaged.

"Gentlemen," he cried, and his clear voice reached the outskirts of the crowd, "don't do it. Don't put an everlasting stain on the fair name of our town. No one has ever been lynched in this county, and none in this state so far as I know. Don't let us begin it. If I thought the miserable scoundrel inside would escape—if I thought his money would buy him off—I'd be the man to lead you to batter down those doors and hang him on the nearest tree, and you know it." There were cheers at this. "But he won't escape. His money can't buy him off. He will be hanged by the law. Don't think it's mercy I'm preaching; it's vengeance!" Bowen shook his clinched fist at the jail. "That wretch there has been in hell ever since he heard your shouts. He'll be in hell, for he's a dastard, until the time his trembling legs carry him to the scaffold. I want him to stay in this hell till he drops through into the other, if there is one. I want him to suffer some of the misery he has caused. Lynching is over in a moment. I want that murderer to die by the slow, merciless cruelty of the law."

Even the worst in the crowd shuddered as they heard these words and realized as they looked at Bowen's face, almost inhuman in its rage, that his thirst for revenge made their own seem almost innocent. The speech broke up the crowd. The man with the rope threw it over into the jail yard, shouting to the sheriff, "Take care of it, old man; you'll need it."

And so it came about, just as Bowen knew it would, that all the money and influence of the Prior family could not help the murderer, and he was sentenced to be hanged on Sept. 21, at 6 a. m. And thus public opinion was satisfied.

But the moment the sentence was announced and the fate of the young man settled a curious change began to be noticed in public opinion. It seemed to have veered round. There was much sympathy for the family, of course. Then there came to be much sympathy for the criminal himself. People quoted the phrase about the worst use a man can be put to. Ladies sent flowers to the condemned man's cell. After all, hanging him, poor fellow, would not bring Miss Johnson back to life. However, few spoke of Miss Johnson; she was forgotten by all but one man, who ground his teeth when he realized the instability of public opinion.

Petitions were got up, headed by the local clergy. Women begged for signatures and got them. Every man and woman signed them—all except one, and even he was urged to sign by a tearful lady, who asked him to remember that vengeance was the Lord's.

"But the Lord has his instruments," said Bowen grimly, "and I swear to you, madam, that if you succeed in getting that murderer reprieved I will be the instrument of the Lord's vengeance."

"Oh, don't say that," pleaded the lady. "Your signature would have such an effect. You were noble once and saved him from lynching, be noble again and save him from the gallows."

"I shall certainly not sign. It is, if you will pardon me, an insult to ask me. If you reprieve him, you will make a murderer of me, for I will kill him when he comes out, if it is 20 years from now. You talk of lynching. It is such work as you are doing that makes lynching possible. The people seem all with you now, more shame to them, but the next murder that is committed will be followed by a lynching just because you are successful today."

The lady left Bowen with a sigh, depressed because of the depravity of human nature, as indeed she had every right to be.

The Prior family was a rich and influential one. The person who is alive has many to help; the one in the grave has few to cry for justice. Petitions calling for mercy poured in on the governor from all parts of the state. The good man, whose eye was entirely on his own re-election, did not know what to do. If any one could have shown him mathematically that this action or the other would gain or lose him exactly so many votes, his course would have been clear, but his own advisers were uncertain about the matter. A mistake in a little thing like this might easily lose him the election. Sometimes it was rumored that the governor was going to commute the sentence to imprisonment for life. Then the rumor was contradicted.

People claimed, apparently with justice, that surely imprisonment for life was a sufficient punishment for a young man, but every one knew in his own heart that the commutation was only the beginning of the fight, and that a future governor would have sufficient pressure brought to bear upon him to let the young man go.

Up to the 20th of September the governor made no sign. When Bowen went to his duties on the night of the 20th, he met the sheriff.

"Has any reprieve arrived yet?" asked Bowen. The sheriff shook his head sadly. He had never yet hanged a man and did not wish to begin.

"No," said the sheriff, "and from what I heard this afternoon none is likely to arrive. The governor has made up his mind at last that the law must take its course."

"I'm glad of that," said Bowen.

"Well, I'm not."

After 9 o'clock messages almost ceased coming in, and Bowen sat reading the evening paper. Suddenly there came a call for the office, and the operator answered. As the message came over the wire Bowen wrote it down mechanically from the clicking instrument, not understanding its purpose, but when he read it he jumped to his feet, with an oath. He looked wildly around the room, then realized, with a sigh of relief, that he was alone, except for the messenger boy who sat dozing in a corner, with his cap over his eyes. He took up the paper again and read it with set teeth:

Sheriff of Brenting County, Brentingville:
Do not proceed further with execution of Prior. Sentence commuted. Documents sent off by tonight's mail registered. Answer that you understand this message.
JOHN DAY, Governor.

Bowen walked up and down the room with knitted brow. He was in no doubt as to what he would do, but he wanted to think over it. The telegraph instrument called to him, and he turned to it, giving the answering click. The message was to himself from the operator at the capital, and it told him he was to forward the sheriff's telegram without delay and report to the office at the capital—a man's life depended on it, the message concluded. Bowen answered that the telegram to the sheriff would be immediately sent.

Taking another telegraph blank, he wrote:

Sheriff of Brenting County, Brentingville:
Proceed with execution of Prior. No reprieve will be sent. Reply if you understand this message.
JOHN DAY, Governor.

It is a pity it cannot be written that Bowen felt some compunction at what he was doing. We like to think that when a man deliberately commits a crime he should hesitate and pay enough deference to the proprieties as to feel at least a temporary regret, even if he goes on with his crime afterward. Bowen's thoughts were upon the dead girl, not on the living man. He roused the dozing telegraph messenger.

"Here," he said, "take this to the jail and find the sheriff. If he is not there, go to his residence. If he is asleep, wake him up. Tell him this wants an answer. Give him a blank, and when he has filled it up bring it to me. Give the message to no one else, mind."

The boy said "Yes, sir" and departed into the night. He returned so quickly that Bowen knew without asking that he had found the sleepless sheriff at the jail. The message to the governor, written in a trembling hand by the sheriff, was:

I understand that the execution is to take place. If you should change your mind, for God's sake telegraph as soon as possible. I shall delay execution until last moment allowed by law.

Bowen did not send that message, but another. He laughed and then checked himself in alarm, for his laugh sounded strange. "I wonder if I am quite sane," he said to himself. "I doubt it."

The night wore slowly on. A man representing a press association came in after 12 and sent a long dispatch. Bowen telegraphed it, taking the chances that the receiver would not communicate with the sender of the reprieve at the capital. He knew how mechanically news of the greatest importance was taken off the wire by men who have automatically been doing that for years. Anyhow all the copper and zinc in the world could not get a message into Brentingville except through him until the day operator came on, and then it would be too late.

The newspaper man, lingering, asked if there would be only one telegrapher on hand after the execution.

"I shall have a lot of stuff to send over, and I want it rushed. Some of the papers may get our specials. I would have brought an operator with me, but we thought there was going to be a reprieve, although the sheriff didn't seem to think so," he added.

"The day operator will be here at 6, I will return as soon as I've had a cup of coffee, and we'll handle all you can write," answered Bowen without looking up from his instrument.

"Thanks. Grim business, isn't it?"

"It is."

"I thought the governor would cave. Didn't you?"

"I didn't know."

"He's a shrewd old villain. He'd have lost next election if he'd reprieved this man. People don't want to see lynching introduced, and a weak kneed governor is Judge Lynch's friend. Well, good night. See you in the morning."

"Good night," said Bowen.

Daylight gradually dimmed the lamps in the telegraph room, and Bowen started and caught his breath as the church bell began to toll.

It was 10 minutes after 6 when Bowen's partner, the day man, came in.

"Well, they've hanged him," he said.

Bowen was fumbling among some papers on his table. He folded two of them and put them in his inside pocket. Then he spoke:

"There will be a newspaper man here in a few moments with a good deal of copy to telegraph. Rush it off as fast as you can, and I'll be back to help before you are tired."

As Bowen walked toward the jail he met the scattered group of those who had been privileged to see the execution. They were discussing capital punishment, and some were yawning, complaining about the unearthly hour chosen for the function they had just beheld. Between the outside gate and the jail door Bowen met the sheriff, who was looking ghastly and sallow in the fresh morning light.

"I have come to give myself up," said Bowen before the official could greet him.

"To give yourself up? What for?"

"For murder, I suppose."

"This is no time for joking, young man," said the sheriff severely.

"Do I look like a humorist? Read that."

First incredulity, then horror, overspread the haggard face of the sheriff as he read and reread the dispatch. He staggered back against the wall, putting up his arm to keep himself from falling.

"Bowen," he gasped. "Do you—do you mean to—to tell me—that this message came for me last night?"

"I do."

"And you—you suppressed it?"

"I did and sent you a false one."

"And I have hanged a reprieved man?"

"You have hanged a murderer—yes."

"My God! My God!" cried the sheriff. He turned his face on his arm against the wall and wept. His nerves were gone. He had been up all night and had never hanged a man before.

Bowen stood there until the spasm was over. The sheriff turned indignantly to him, trying to hide the feeling of shame he felt at giving away, in anger at the witness of it.

"And you come to me, you villain, because I said I would help you if you ever got into a tight place?"

"D—n your tight place!" cried the young man. "I come to you to give myself up. I stand by what I do. I don't squeal. There will be no petitions got up for me. What are you going to do with me?"

"I don't know, Bowen; I don't know," faltered the official, on the point of breaking down. He did not wish to have to hang another man and a friend at that. "I'll have to see the governor. I'll leave by the first train. I don't suppose you'll try to escape?"

"I'll be here when you want me."

So Bowen went back to help the day operator, and the sheriff left by the first train for the capital.

Now a strange thing happened. For the first time within human recollection, the newspapers were unanimous in commending the conduct of the head of the state, the organs of the governor's own party lavishly praising him, the opposition sheets grudgingly admitting that he had more backbone than they had given him credit for. Public opinion, like the cat of the simile, had jumped, and that unmistakably.

"In the name of all that's wonderful, sheriff," said the bewildered governor, "who signed all those petitions? If the papers wanted the man hanged, why in the fiend's name did they not say so before and save me all this worry? Now, how many know of this suppressed dispatch?"

"Well there's you and your subordinates here and"——

"We'll say nothing about it."

"And then there is me and Bowen in Brentingville. That's all."

"Well, Bowen will keep quiet for his own sake, and you won't mention it?"

"Certainly not."

"Then let's all keep quiet. The thing's safe if some of those newspaper fellows don't get after it. It's not on record in the books, and I'll burn all the documents."

And thus it was. Public opinion was once more vindicated. The governor was triumphantly re-elected as a man with some stamina about him.—Robert Barr.

Recipe Never Fails.

Husband (at railway station)—Good-by. Now, are you sure you have everything?

Wife—Y-e-s, I believe so. Mercy, I forgot the molasses candy! Run and get some for baby, quick!

"Won't he keep quiet without molasses candy?"

"Of course, but I want to make sure of having a seat to myself."—Good News.

An Athletic Reform.

Winks—There is likely to be a change in college athletics next year. Exercises which kill will no longer be tolerated.

Jinks—What will be substituted?

Winks—Exercises which only half kill, of course.—New York Weekly.

Remedy For Corns.

A paragraph is going the rounds to the effect that linseed oil is a sure remedy for both hard and soft corns. If they are indurated and very painful, the relief it gives in a short time is most grateful. Bind on a piece of soft rag saturated with the linseed oil and continue to dampen it with the oil every night and morning until the corn can be removed easily and without pain.