

# Holiday

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VOL. 9, NO. 3

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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**PREVIEW**

In April: Carl L. Biemiller looks at Northern New Jersey, John Horne Burns sails Ireland's River Shannon, and Arthur Bartlett roams about Concord and Lexington. While Budd Schulberg gobbles Dave Chasen's food in Hollywood, Debs Myers enjoys the warmth of Will Rogers' Oklahoma home town. Bemelmans tells how to be a prince, and Joseph Wechsberg takes a box at the Paris Opera. There are also: a Natchez Pilgrimage and cocktail party Fashions.



**MARCH COVER**

"I'd become an antiquarian by the time I finished the anniversary cover," writes Artist Robert Geissman. "I browsed through piles of handbills and posters for samples of old lettering. An arms collector was persuaded to lend me his prize, a Kentucky long rifle, complete with brass patch box. The rare Zachary Taylor whisky bottle, circa 1830, came from the safe of an antique shop. For my final touch of authenticity: the stables of Kentucky's famous Calumet Farms."

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Published on the 3rd Wednesday of the month preceding date by The Curtis Publishing Company, Independence Square, Philadelphia 5, Pa. Entered as Second-Class Matter, February 8, 1946, at the Post Office at Philadelphia under the Act of March 3, 1879. Entered as Second-Class Matter at the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada, by Curtis Distributing Company, Ltd., Toronto, Ont., Canada.

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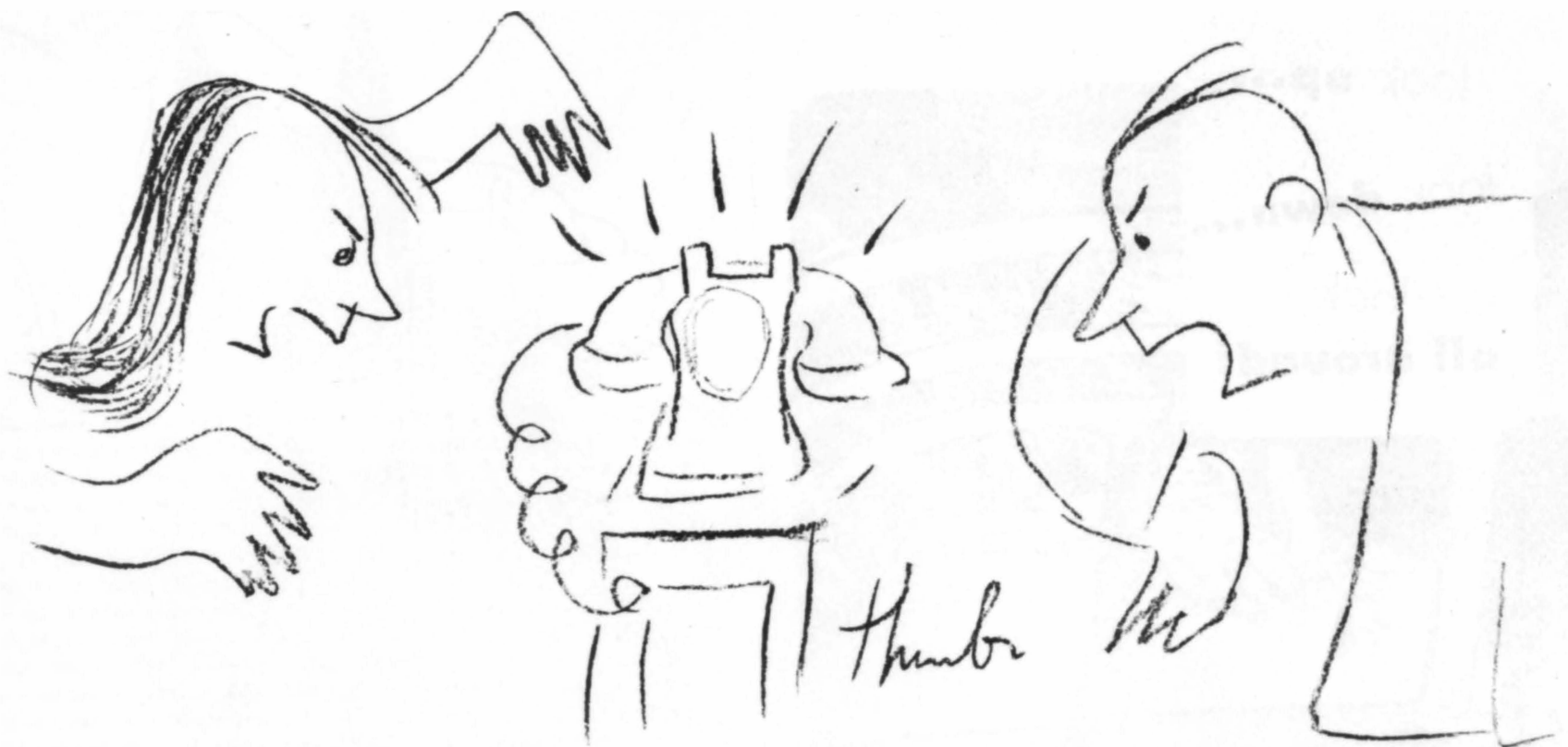
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# THE TELEPHONE AND I

*Some reflections on a complex instrument of communication  
by a man who has often been victimized by inanimate objects.*

by JAMES THURBER

I HAVE reached the age when the strangers I accidentally jostle on sidewalks say, "Sorry, Pop!" instead of "Watch it, Buster!" and the pretty young women I used to help across the perilous streets now snatch me from the path of ten-ton trucks, scold me as if I were their grandpa on one of his bad days, and hurry along with the throng, never giving me another thought. This phenomenon of maturity, this coming of frost and twilight to the autumn rose, would embitter many men, but I take it in my totter. I have learned to embrace middle age, not to wrestle with it, and I accept the considerable difference between forever panting and being constantly short of breath.

The sedentary life imposed by advancing years often leads a man into his past. He sits around the house, going through old scrapbooks and photograph albums, catching glimpses of his younger self, trying to remember the names of the laughing girls in the 1930 snapshots, and arguing with his wife about lost afternoons and forgotten places. One evening, not long ago, with my shawl about my shoulders because of a nasty draught, I got out an album of pictures I had taken with my box Brownie nearly fifteen years ago in Southern France. I came across the strange,

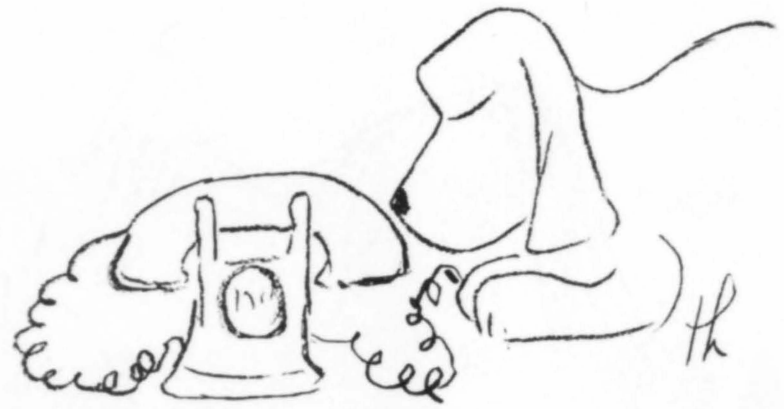
obscure snapshot of the telephone shown in Figure 1, and it whisked me back to the Villa Tamisier, on Cap d'Antibes, not far from Juan les Pins, where my wife and I spent a tranquil winter before the second World War. I remember that remarkable telephone clearly, possibly because, as in the case of difficult women, I never did figure it out.



We had been in the Villa Tamisier nearly two months before I found out that there was a phone in the house. We didn't need a phone, because we didn't know anybody on the Riviera that season, except Olympie and Maria Sementzoff, who worked for us as gardener and cook. Then one night, about two in the morning, I heard a telephone ringing distantly and realized finally that it was somewhere in the villa itself. I stumbled down the stairs in the dark and followed the sound to the closed door of a small closet. Inside was the telephone, on the floor, snarled up in what appeared to be thirty feet of insulated wire. I took up the receiver and said, "Allo?" and a faraway despairing voice asked me in French if I were Monsieur Duronde in Bruxelles. I explained that he not only had the wrong man but the wrong country and hung up.

"What are you doing down there at this hour of the night?" my wife demanded from her bedroom. I told her I was trying to get a telephone off the floor. She came down, and we worked on the thing together, but the instrument was caught in an obstinate intestinal impaction and we had to leave it where it was. We lit cigarettes and studied the remarkable snarl of wire. My wife

ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE Author



finally gave as plausible an explanation as any. She suggested that the owners of the villa, a doctor and his wife who lived in Nice, had probably carried the phone upstairs with them at night to save the bother of a bedroom extension.

"In the end," I put in, "the telephone was gradually imprisoned by the wires, the way an old rowboat is enveloped by morning-glories, and they couldn't get it loose."

My wife took it up from there. "Our landlord, the good doctor, is a fat man," she said, "and obviously couldn't reach the phone, so they had to move away and rent out their villa." I thought this over. "It isn't like the French to be driven from their homes by a lot of wire," I said. She thought that over. "Yes, it is," she said, and we went back to bed.

The next day I managed to get the thing loose, and was taking a time exposure of it with my camera when the ample and benign Maria came into the room. Nothing that I did ever surprised Maria. Once she had found me playing *boules* by myself—*boules*, as Maria well knew, is a game for two or more players.

On another occasion she came upon me tossing centimes at a small round hole in the center of an iron table on the terrace. She also discovered I labored under the childish delusion that the drawings I kept making could be sold for money.

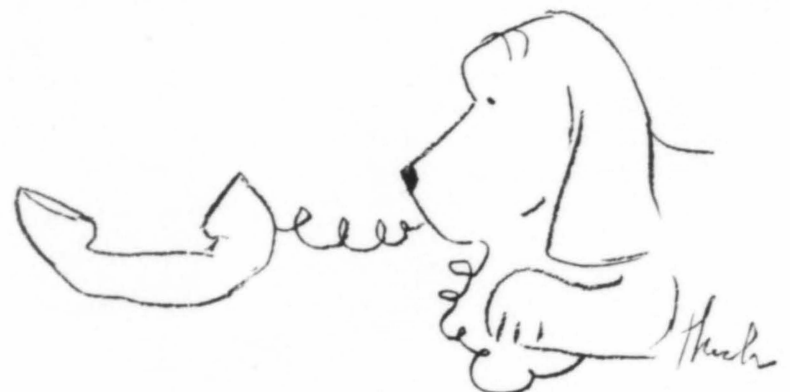
Olympy and Maria must have spent a lot of time whispering in their quarters at night, trying to figure out the strange Americans. One day she asked me, "Are you paid to stay away from America?" That was the solution she and her husband had arrived at: *persona non grata* in the United States because of my peculiar personal habits, I had sought sanctuary among the tolerant people of France.

"You are photographing the tele-

phone?" Maria asked, interested but not astonished. My French has never been much and my explanation of what I was up to must have sounded something like this: "I am with this telephone and my wife last night because a man has telephoned Bruxelles and we are thinking the doctor is not here because he was too fat to answer the phone." Maria never actually backed away from me, but her eyes in my presence became wary, as if she were watching a man juggling knives. "Is the telephone not extraordinary?" I asked her. She plainly thought I had taken leave of my senses. Since I couldn't think of the French words for wire or length or tangle, I was not able to support my own argument. My wife came downstairs to the rescue, but her French is competent only in dealing with problems of the kitchen, and the three of us merely complicated the situation.

"My husband thinks the doctor is taking the telephone upstairs," said Mrs. Thurber. From Maria's expression it was easy to see that she thought I had found the perfect mate. I lost my patience and began to shout in English, of which Maria understands only one word—"no." "What the hell was the phone doing on the floor in all that wire?" I demanded. "*Je vais chercher Olympy*," said Maria, cautiously, but my wife was determined to solve the situation in French on the spot, having just thought of the word for wire. The word for wire is *fil*, which happens to be very similar to the French word *fil*. So Mrs. Thurber, maintaining an air of tranquillity, said calmly to Maria in French, "There are too many girls in the closet." Maria left to get Olympy, but she didn't come back with him. I think he must have said to her, "Let us wait until they quiet down again. They have these spells, but mercifully they get over them."

(Continued on Page 86)





(Continued from Page 84)

Only a few days after the disturbing incident of the telephone, I drove to the movies in Cannes and parked my car on the wrong side of the street, not realizing my mistake until my wife and I came out of the theater. In Cannes, you are supposed to park on one side of the street on even-numbered days of the month, and on the other side on odd-numbered days. We were gratified, but surprised, to find that the windshield of the car had not been posted with an official police summons. I drove back to the Villa Tamisier, eight miles away, over a circuitous route that ended in a secluded nook behind the villa, a private parking lot by no means easy to find.

The next morning, while we were still congratulating ourselves on escaping a ticket, we went out to get into the car, and there, freshly pasted on the windshield, was the police summons with a black X beside "Parking on the even side of a street on an odd-numbered day." We stared at it silently and then my wife said, "*Je vais chercher Maria.*"

Well, we got into another one of those three-cornered confusions. To Maria it seemed perfectly reasonable that our car should have been ticketed a day after the offense. Her analysis of the situation went something like this: "The police saw that yours was an American car and so they waited, perhaps in a doorway, and followed you home on motorcycles. It was necessary to find where you live and then to see whether you may not be diplomats or persons of great importance, who could not be arrested without involving the Cannes police and perhaps even the French government in a delicate embarrassment." She had to repeat this several times before we understood it. "How are they finding I am not important?" I asked her, coldly. This was easy for Maria. "They have records," she said, "and they telephone someone in Paris." Apparently it hadn't taken them too long to discover that a 1935 Ford sedan with the license number F-224 belonged to a person unlikely to involve the French government in a *cause célèbre*. I was smart enough to show up for my punishment at police headquarters at Cannes just after lunch the following day, and an amiable ser-

geant, redolent of wine, larks *en casserole*, and Brie, observing that we were innocents who did not know odd from even, or one day from another, let us off with a jolly rebuke and an exchange of compliments. "Ask him who they telephoned in Paris," my wife whispered. I asked him. "It is five kilometers straight ahead," he replied, jovially. "You can't miss it." I thanked him and turned to my wife. "Does that answer your question?" I asked her. She sighed. "I am losing my mind," she said, simply.

I have had other disturbing experiences with telephones. In 1929 I was living by myself in an apartment in Greenwich Village, and I forgot to pay my bills over a period of several months, so that in the end my electricity and gas were turned off and the telephone company began to hound me. For a while I could get incoming calls, but I couldn't make any outgoing calls. This was a devilish form of psychological persuasion on the part of the great public utility, so much bigger and stronger than I was. If your friends never hear from you, they grow tired of calling up and eventually drift away. I would have paid my bill if the company hadn't suddenly provoked and challenged me. A man called up one day and said, in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, "I am coming over to take out your apparatus." "You and who else?" I said, sharply. The man hung up.

Half an hour later there was an ominous rap on my door. I didn't open it. I knew it was the man who had come to take out my apparatus. Every day for a week there was this same familiar rap on the door and I began to enjoy our little game of cat and mouse. As long as I didn't open the door, no one could take out my apparatus. And then one day, the fellow trapped me. The postman arrived with a special-delivery letter and I recognized his voice and opened the door. It was the postman, all right, but behind him stood a big man in an overcoat and derby, with a black bag in his hand, who slipped past me and into the room with the telephone. He had my apparatus out in less than two minutes. The telephone company and I have become great friends since then, and we often laugh about the old days over our brandy and cigars, the company laughing somewhat more heartily than I do.

You will be glad to know that I later inherited a fortune, married a princess, and now have three lovely telephones in my house.

In 1943 I was living on East 57th Street in New York. There was a telephone in the front hall of the apartment, but none in the bedroom, and we needed one in the bedroom because we couldn't hear the phone at night. When my telephone rings after midnight, it is usually some convivial friend of mine who wants to come over or to sing something to me; but I always answer at night, because it might be my mother, or my madcap niece once again in the hands of the police. During the war years it wasn't easy to have a telephone installed. You practically had to have a doctor's prescription, and, as a matter of fact, I had one, but it had become lost somewhere in the tangle of Washington red tape.

I must have talked a lot about the telephone I had applied for, and perhaps the elevator man told the doorman, and the doorman told the tobacconist on the corner. At any rate, the news got around, and I answered the doorbell of the apartment one day to confront a small husky-voiced man in a black overcoat, who talked out of the corner of his mouth. "You in the market for a phone, Mac?" he asked intimately.

I told him that I was, and to my astonishment he whisked from under his overcoat a black French hand set, complete with a length of cord and ready to be plugged into a wall socket. Now I have been approached in my time by salesmen of pornographic photographs in Havana, purveyors of fealthy pictures in Paris, phony truck drivers with "stolen" silver fox furs or cheap perfume in fancy bottles in New York, and once, in Marseille, a man with a cap pulled down over his eyes offered to let me have a ruby necklace for two hundred francs; but no one, anywhere, had ever flashed a hot telephone on me before.

Somewhat to my horror, I heard myself whispering, "How much?" to the man with the phone. He smiled. "Whatever it's worth to you, Mac," he said. I began to wonder what the statutes had to say about illicit telephone instruments and I asked him where he had got the thing. "I know a guy," he said, quietly. The awful and fantastic thought flitted through my mind that the telephone company was trying to test me, trying to find out if the man who had once refused so stubbornly to have his apparatus out might not be a dangerous risk as a subscriber, in a period when everybody suspected everybody else of being a dangerous risk. But I dismissed this idea as ridiculous. The phone company was much too busy to worry about me.

"Well, what do you say, Mac?" asked the man, impatiently.

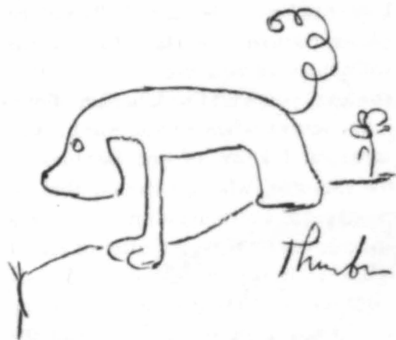
I said, "No, thank you," and shut the door and locked it.

The strangest phone I ever had to deal with was old 8454, which haunted the charming cottage my wife and I occupied in Bermuda last spring. It was

a neurotic instrument, like most of the others on the Fairy Isles, afflicted by fading dial tone, buzzing in the ears, and sudden complete blackouts. We were not on a party line, but almost every time I picked up the receiver I could hear people talking: an embarrassed gentleman negotiating a loan on his insurance policy, a woman making an appointment with her hairdresser, a mother asking her daughter where she had been all night, and other persons engaged in what they fondly believed were private conversations. There was also the curious phenomenon that I called "substitution of identity." I would be talking to Mr. R. J. Matthews and he would turn into a Mrs. Charles R. Schwartz, who had dialed the butcher, reached me, and cut off Mr. Matthews.

One visitor I met in Bermuda told me that whenever he picked up his own receiver he got music. Another gentleman swore that he once dialed a number and got the Jack Benny program, much more clearly than he could get it over his radio.

It was often easier for me to reach the United States over 8454 than to ring the bell in the home of a friend a mile away. This predicament was not unique with me. One day, at the Reefs, I overheard an American businessman telling his companions at the next table how he had reached Hamilton from Paget, two miles away. After dialing the number in vain for an hour, he had finally put through a long-distance call by way of the American mainland, and in a matter of minutes was talking to



his nearby friend over a fifteen-hundred-mile circuit. I could sympathize with him. One day the only number I could get over 8454 was Cornwall, Connecticut 62. The connection was made almost instantaneously, the voice a thousand miles away was clear, and the conversation was marred only by the fitful plaint of a Bermudian colored woman who kept asking if she could speak to Inez.

The literature evoked by the capricious and mischievous Bermuda telephones grows larger by the month. There is the story of the Michigan lady who had a house on Ely's Harbour a few months ago and who kept getting the American consul on the phone when she dialed 1392, the number of the Bermuda Mineral Water Factory. When, on her fourth attempt, she got the consul for the fourth time, she apologized profusely and said she wouldn't try it again. The consul was not only courteous, he was helpful. He asked for her name, her address, and what she

wanted to order from the Bermuda Mineral Water Factory. He then dialed the number of the company and asked that a case of pop be sent to Mrs. Welton, at Bridge House on Ely's Harbour.

Then there is the story of the two sisters and their telephone during an electrical storm in Bermuda two years ago. When there is an electrical storm, the telephones in the Magic Islands sometimes ring, not in little painful tinkles like our own, but in long steady rings, as if the antic finger of providence had twisted the dials. On this night, two years ago, the two sisters found themselves in darkness in their house when a storm came up. They began to amuse themselves by playing word games. Presently one of them went upstairs and was surprised to hear the telephone ringing. She wondered who would be so rash as to use the instrument when lightning was flashing. She picked up the receiver of a bedroom extension and heard a woman's voice say, "Isn't it a terrible night?" They fell into a rather prolonged conversation about the weather and the woman who had gone upstairs suddenly said, "My sister and I are passing the time by playing word games." "Really?" said the other woman. "That's quite a coincidence. My sister and I are playing word games too." The two sisters in the dark house eventually realized that God had rung them up and let them enjoy several pleasant minutes of neighborly conversation.

If you live in Bermuda long enough, and study its telephone system patiently, as if it were a complicated card game, you may learn to outwit the loose ratchets in the central office of the phone company in Hamilton, or the worn cogs, or whatever it may be that connects you with the American diplomatic service when all you want is sarsaparilla. I know of one Bermudian, for example, who discovered that he could reach a certain number by dialing another number. As a matter of fact, I talked to him over dear old 8454 one night last year. The phone began to ring after I had gone to bed. "It's not for us," my wife said. I knew she was right, but the bell kept ringing insistently and I finally went downstairs and took up the receiver. You don't say, "Hello," as we do in America. You say, "What number are you calling?" I gave this customary greeting and the man on the other end sighed and said, "I am calling 8443, but I dialed 8454, which is what you have to do to get 8443." I explained that his scheme hadn't worked this time, that he had dialed 8454 and actually got 8454. He was incredulous at first and then, naturally enough, somewhat bitter, for his carefully worked-out method had failed him. "The system's getting worse, isn't it?" he said, and hung up.

I stood there in the dark a moment, pondering the man's remarkable logic. "What is it now?" my wife called from upstairs. I returned to the bedroom and explained it to her. "System's going to hell," I said. "Fellow just dialed 8454 and got 8454." "Well, what did he want?" she asked. I looked surprised.

"Why, 8443, naturally," I said. "This man has probably spent years working out that permutation. Now he will have to start all over again." "Nonsense," said my wife. "He can probably get 8443 by dialing 8465." She thinks of everything. "If I knew what his number was," I said, "and what number to dial to reach it, I would ——" "Go to sleep," my wife said.

When I was a reporter, from 1920 to 1930, I was sometimes assigned to sto-

ries involving telephone pranksters. I don't know why editors selected me for these jobs, but they always did, and fortunately I have preserved several clippings. Nearly twenty-five years ago, at parties in New York, you were asked to take a card from the deck and then your host would bet you that if you called Dry Dock 1-0469 and asked for a certain doctor, he would tell you what card you were holding. Your host, of course, had to see the card you had drawn, for therein lay the gimmick. Let us say that you held the jack of clubs. Your host, secretly consulting a list of fifty-two cards, each of them followed by the name of a different man, didn't take long to find out that the jack of clubs was Doctor Spencer. You would phone the Dry Dock number and ask for Doctor Spencer, and a man's voice would say, "This is Doctor Spencer. You are holding the Jack of Clubs."

When this pseudo-telepathic gambling game was at its height, I investigated the mystery of Dry Dock 1-0469. It turned out to be the number of one Harry Bienenfeld, a retired cigar manufacturer, living at 90 Avenue D. He had distributed hundreds of the lists of cards-and-doctors, and, during the heyday of his prank, he got as many as three hundred phone calls a day. People would start calling at nine o'clock in the morning, and the remarkable and

tireless Mr. Bienenfeld would answer his phone until three o'clock the following morning, posing as fifty-two different doctors. The deception was doomed to a short life, since you couldn't be fooled more than once if you were reasonably smart, and newspapers and magazines began to expose the gag.

I don't know what became of Mr. Bienenfeld, since there is no longer any such number as Dry Dock 1-0469 and he is not listed any more in the Manhattan directory; but my records show that the cigar man's three hundred calls a day represented only a small fraction of the calls the New York Telephone Company has to deal with on April Fools' Day every year, most of them put in by innocent victims of pranksters who leave memos reading, "Call Mr. Wolf at Fordham 7-2000." This is the number of the Bronx Zoo—the Aquarium also gets its heavy quota of April Fool calls for Mr. Fish—and this recurring joke became a formidable problem for the Zoo and the Aquarium. The phone company has to put in a battery of intercepting operators every year to handle these thousands of calls.

In Bridgewater, Massachusetts, twenty years ago, a gentleman named Paul Revere, a descendant of the famous hero, was bothered so often by waggish phone calls on April eighteenth every year that he had to have his phone disconnected on the anniversary of the celebrated ride. Local comedians would ring him out of bed at midnight, crying, "The British are coming!" or "Wake up and get going!" My clipping about the tribulations of

Paul Revere is dated April 19, 1930. I had a feeling that Mr. Revere, like Harry Bienenfeld, could no longer be reached by phone, but I put a long-distance call through to him the other day, anyway. Just as I had suspected, Paul Revere is no longer listed in the Bridgewater telephone directory. It made me feel old and a little forlorn.

It is only fair to confess that, at least once in my life, a telephone helped me out of a predicament, instead of involving me in one. Ten years ago, Elliott Nugent and I wrote a play called *The Male Animal* which played Baltimore before coming to New York. With the Broadway opening only three days off, we still didn't have a suitable second-act curtain. All we had was a lot of characters on stage, shouting and gesticulating. In the midst of this babble, during a Friday rehearsal, I turned to the producer, Herman Shumlin, who was sitting a few seats away from me in the otherwise deserted auditorium. "It still seems phony to me," I said to him. He looked pleased. "I think you've got it," he said. "I think that's it." I stared at him. "What is?" I demanded. It turned out, of course, that he had misunderstood me and thought I had suggested ringing the phone at the height of the excitement on stage. We tried it that way. In the midst of all the shouting and weeping, in the usually tranquil home of a teacher of English, the phone rang and the colored maid answered and shouted above the bedlam, "Professor Turner's residence!" There was only one drawback. Because of the racket on stage, no one in the audience

could hear the tinkle of the telephone. We solved that by ringing four bells at once off stage.

Speaking of the theater, you will find it hard to remember any play in which a telephone has not figured prominently.

Mr. Bell's invention ably supported the late Laurette Taylor in *The Glass Menagerie*, Frederic March in *Years Ago*, and my friend Mr. Nugent in *The Voice of the Turtle*—who can forget the scene in which Sergeant Paige phoned all the numbers in his little black book, only to find that the girls he had known in civilian life had moved away, or married, or had their apparatus out? I remember a melodrama called *The Last Warning*, in which a telephone served as the murder weapon. A man picked up the receiver and bang!—it shot him to death. And in *Small Miracle* a booth phone played the title role, you might say—that of an instrument miraculously out of order at a critical moment.

Then there was the telephone that hogged a scene on the opening night of a play on Broadway a few years ago. The curtain of the third act went up on an empty stage and a ringing phone. It rang and rang. Apparently some actor had missed his cue. Robert Benchley, who had been dozing quietly in his seat on the

aisle, was aroused at length by the insistent ringing. "Why doesn't somebody answer that?" he said audibly. "I think it's for me." The next day, one of the critics wrote, "The only amusing line in the play was spoken by Bob Benchley who, unhappily, was not in the cast."

One day, in Cornwall, Connecticut, I got up late for breakfast and found a note reading "Call New York Operator 71." I called the long-distance operator in Torrington and listened while she contacted operator 71 and said, "This is Torrington. You were calling Cornwall 62, operator, and it was W. H. The party is ready." As a student of the telephone, I knew that W. H. means "Wasn't Home" and so I cut in on the two operators for the sake of the record. "It happens that I was H, but W. U.," I said—"Wasn't Up." The Torrington operator took it in her crisp stride. "We do not make that distinction, sir," she said.

My telephonic life in the country is reasonably peaceful nowadays, but one night last winter, I answered the phone when it rang at midnight. It was a man and his wife telephoning from St. Louis. "You don't know us," said the husband, "but my wife bet that you would answer the phone yourself and I bet you wouldn't." Then, to my surprise, the distant stranger became suddenly cross. "You ought to have more protection," he snapped and hung up.

I realize that you have been restless for some time now, waiting to tell your own amazing experiences with telephones. All right, go ahead, I'm listening. THE END