

You *May* Telephone From Here

By Algernon Blackwood

She sent the servant to bed at half-past ten, and sat up in the flat alone. "I'll let my cousin in," she explained; "she may be rather late." She read, knitted, began a letter, poked the fire, and examined her husband's photographs on the mantelpiece; but most of the time she looked about her nervously, sometimes going to the door to listen, sometimes lifting the corner of the blind to look out upon the lights of North Kensington struggling with the blackness. The fog was thicker than ever. A rumble of traffic feeling its way floated up to her from below.

But at last the door-bell rang sharply, and she ran to let in the cousin who had promised to spend the two nights with her during her husband's absence in Paris. They kissed. Both began talking at once.

"I thought you were *never* coming, Sybil!"

"The play was out late—and the fog's bad. I sent on my box this afternoon on purpose."

"It came safely; and your room's quite ready. I do hope you'll manage all right without a maid. Oh, I'm *so* glad you've come, though!"

"Foolish little country mouse!"

"Oh, it's not that so much, though I admit that London still terrifies me at night rather; you know this is the first time he's been away—and I suppose—"

"I know, dear; I understand perfectly." The cousin was brisk and cheerful. "You feel lonely, of course." They kissed again. "Just unhook me, will you?" she added, "and I'll get into my dressing-gown, and then we'll be cosy over the fire."

"I saw him off at Victoria at 8.45," said the little wife when the operation was over.

"Newhaven and Dieppe?"

"Yes. He gets to Paris at seven in the morning. He promised to telephone the first thing."

"You expensive little monkey!"

"Why?"

"It's ten shillings for three minutes, or something like that, and you have to go to the G.P.O. or the Mansion House or some such place, I believe."

"But I thought it was the usual long-distance thing direct here to the flat. He never told me all that."

"Probably you didn't give him the chance!"

They laughed, and went on chatting, with feet on the fender and skirts tucked up. The cousin lit her second cigarette. It was after midnight.

"I'm afraid I'm not the least bit sleepy," said the wife apologetically.

"Nor am I, dear. For once the play excited me." She began to describe it vigorously. Half-way through the recital the telephone sounded in the hall. It tinkled faintly, but gave no proper ring.

The other started. "There it is again! It's always doing that—ever since Harry put it in a week ago. I don't quite like it." She spoke in a hushed voice.

The cousin looked at her curiously. "Oh, you mustn't mind that," she laughed with a reassuring manner. "It's a little way they have when the line gets out of order. You're not used to playing the telephone game yet. You should call up the Exchange and complain. Always complain, you know, in this world if you want—"

There it goes again," interrupted her friend nervously. "Oh, I do wish it would stop. It's so like someone standing out there in the hall and trying to talk—"

The cousin jumped up. They went into the hall together, and the experienced one briskly rang up the Exchange and asked if there was anybody trying to "get through." With fine indignation she complained that no one in the flat could sleep for the noise. After a brief conversation she turned, receiver in hand, to her companion.

"The operator says he's very sorry, but, your line's a bit troublesome to-night for some reason. Got mixed, or something. He can't understand it. Advises you to leave the receiver unhooked till the morning. Then it can't possibly ring, you see!"

They left the receiver swinging, and went back to the fire.

"I'm sorry I'm such a timid donkey," the wife said, laughing a little; "but I'm not used to it yet. There was no telephone at the farm, you know." She turned with a sudden start, as though she heard the bell again. "And to-night," she added in a lower voice, though with an obvious effort at self-control, "for some reason or other I feel uncomfortable, rather—excited, queer, I think."

"How? Queer?"

"I don't know exactly; almost as if there was someone else in the flat—someone besides ourselves and the servant, I mean."

The cousin moved abruptly. She switched on the electric lights in the wall beside her.

"Yes; but it's only imagination, *really*," she said with decision. "It's natural enough. It's the fog and the strangeness of London after the loneliness of your farm-life, and your husband being away, and—and all that. Once you analyse these queer feelings they always go—"

"Hark!" exclaimed the wife under her breath. "Wasn't that a step in the passage?" She sat bolt upright, her face pale, her eyes very bright. They listened a moment. The night was utterly still about them.

"Rubbish!" cried the cousin loudly. "It was my foot knocking the fender; like this— look!" She repeated the sound vigorously.

"I do believe it was," the other said, only half convinced. "But it is queer. You know I feel exactly as though someone had come into the flat—quite recently, since *you* came, I mean—just before that tinkling began, in fact."

"Come, come," laughed the cousin, "you'll give us both the jumps. At one o'clock in the morning it's easy to imagine anything. You'll be hearing elephants on the stairs next!" She looked sharply about her. "Let's brew our chocolate and get to bed," she added. "We shall sleep like tops."

"One o'clock already! Then Harry's halfway across by now," said the wife, smiling at her friend's language. "But I'm so glad, oh, so glad, you're here," she added; "and I think it's most awfully sweet of you to give up a comfy big house . . ." They kissed again and laughed. Soon afterwards, having scalded their throats with hot chocolate, they went to bed.

"It simply *can't* ring now!" remarked the cousin triumphantly as they passed the receiver dangling in mid-air.

"That's a relief," her friend said. "I feel less nervous. Really, I'm too ashamed of myself for anything."

"Fog's clearing, too," Sybil added, peering a moment through the narrow window by the front door.

An hour later the little flat was still as the grave. No sound of traffic was heard. Even the tinkling of the telephone seemed a twenty-four hours away, when suddenly—it began again first with little soft tentative noises, very faint, troubled, hurried, buried almost out of hearing inside

the box; then louder and louder, with sharp jerks—finally with a challenging and alarming peal. And the wife, who had kept her door open, without pretence of sleep, heard it from the very beginning. In a moment she found herself in the passage, and Sybil, wakened by her cry, was at her heels. They turned up the lights and stood one another. The hall smelt—as things smell at night—cold, musty . . .

“What’s the matter? You frightened me. I heard you scream—!”

“The telephone’s ringing again—violently,” the wife whispered, pale to the lips. “Don’t you hear it? This time there’s someone there—*really!*”

The cousin stared blankly at her. The laugh choked in her throat. “I hear nothing,” she said defiantly, yet without confidence in her voice. “Besides, the thing’s still disconnected. It *can’t* ring—look!” She pointed to the hanging receiver motionless against the wall. “You’re white as a ghost, though,” she added, coming quickly forward. Her friend moved suddenly to the instrument and picked up the receiver. “It’s someone for me,” she said, with terror in her eyes. “It’s someone who wants to talk to me! Oh, hark! hark how it rings!” Her voice shook. She placed the little disc to her ear and waited while her friend stood by and stared in amazement, uncertain what to do. *She* had heard no ringing!

“You, Harry!” whispered the wife into the telephone, with brief intervals of silence for the replies. “*You?* But how in the world so soon?—Yes, I can just hear, but very faintly. Miles and miles away your voice sounds—What?—A wonderful journey? And sooner than you expected I—*Not* in Paris? Where, then?— Oh! my darling boy—No, I don’t quite hear; I can’t catch it—I don’t understand. . . . The pain of the sea is nothing—is *what?*... You know nothing of *what?*...”

The cousin came boldly up. She took her arm. “But, child, there’s no one there, bless you! You’re dreaming—you’re in fever or something—”

“Hush! For God’s sake, hush!” She held up a hand. In her face and eyes was an expression indescribable—fear, love, bewilderment. Her body swayed a little, leaning against the wall. “Hush! I hear him still; but, oh! miles and miles away—He says—he’s been trying for hours to find me. First he tried my brain direct, and then—then—oh! he says he may not get back again to me—only he can’t understand, can’t explain *why*—the cold, the awful cold, keeps his lips from—Oh!”

She screamed aloud as she flung the receiver down and dropped in a heap upon the floor. “I don’t understand—it’s death, death!” . . .

And the collision in the Channel that night, as they learned in due course, occurred a few minutes after one o’clock; while Harry himself, who remained unconscious for several hours after the boat picked him up, could only remember that his last desire as the wave caught him was an intense wish to communicate with his wife and tell her what had happened. . . . The next thing he knew was opening his eyes in a Dieppe hotel.

And the other curious detail was furnished by the man who came to repair the telephone next day. At the Exchange, he declared, the wire, from midnight till nearly three in the morning, had emitted sparks and flashes of light no one had been able to account for in any usual manner.

“Queer!” said the man to himself, after tinkering and tapping for ten minutes, “but there’s nothing wrong with it at this end. It’s the subscriber, most likely. It usually is!”