

The Mystery of the Phone Call

THE clock and the telephone sounded together and I looked up from one of Wilkie Collins' ghostliest psychologies with a start at the curious medley.

The clock said half-past eleven. What the telephone had to communicate remained to be seen.

"Hello!"

"Oh, John! Is that you, John?" The voice was shrilly nervous, terror-stricken, wholly unfamiliar.

I essayed to reply that my name is not John, but the voice, unheeding, cut me short.

"Oh, John—come quick!" It almost shrieked. "Hurry! Hurry! There's somebody in the next room—some thief. I heard him break in and I'm all alone. Oh, John—he's coming in here. Police! Help! J—O—H—N—"

The last was a wail of abject fear and horror. There came the sound of an oath, a scream broken sharply in two—then silence.

For a moment my brain throbbled with excited, futile queries. Then I rattled the telephone hook and a voice snapped out: "What is it, please?"

"What number did I have just now?"

"I can't tell. They've hung up."

"Find out? A woman is being murdered there. QUICK!"

At once I saw my mistake. Instead of stimulating the operator to intelligent action I confused her utterly. She could only stammer, idiotically: "I can't—I don't know—they've hung up."

"Think hard," I urged. "What number did they call for when you gave them mine?"

"Isn't this Brown 4583?"

"No," I said, "get that number, quick."

"The lines must have crossed, then," said Central perplexedly. "Hold your phone and I'll try."

For five solid minutes she rang Brown 4583, informing me tremulously every 30 seconds that she was trying to get my "party." Just as the case seemed hopeless a faint "hello" came over the line.

"Are you, John?" I bawled, my words tumbling over each other. His reply was unintelligible, but I waited for no confirmation. "Go home at once," I told him. "Get a taxicab. Beat it. Your wife's being killed by burglars."

I could hear him gasp.

"Why—I haven't any wife," he said in stuttering bewilderment. "I'm—the—night-watchman."

"What place is this?"

"Bradley & Jones' law office."

"Is either of them named John?"

"I don't—wait a minute. Yes—John P. Bradley."

"I don't know."

Bang! went my receiver on the hook. My fingers raced through the telephone directory. Bradley, Bradley—yes, there it was: "John P. Bradley, residence, 19—Pacific street."

Should I stop to notify the police? No, enough time had been wasted already. I rushed out, gathering my hat and coat in transit.

Only after an almost empty car was bearing me toward my destination did I realize the difficulties of my task. I was going to rescue a lady from burglars without even a walking-stick for a weapon. Oh, well, I had never gone armed—and out of many trying situations I had always emerged the better for it.

About five minutes' walk brought me to 19—Pacific street. It was in a block where the wealthy and well-to-do mingled in architectural harmony with scarcely a line of demarcation. One might have said the decline was gradual. A huge brown-stone mansion with porte cochere and with carved lions flanking the marble steps, occupied about one-third of the block. No. 19—, on the opposite end, was extremely modest by comparison, but not without the dignity of established financial position.

As I stood there, cogitating, casting a quick glance about me and trying to size up the situation as my friend Sherlock Holmes might have done, I saw that the front door was ever so slightly ajar. A careless and almost successful attempt had been made to shut it, but the latch had caught and held it just beyond the locking point. A thread of light showed dimly at its edges. I pushed it open, softly and entered.

Not without hesitation I advanced stealthily toward the light. The door opened out toward me and I found that I could get a fair view of the interior through the crack between the hinges.

At a table in what was evidently the study sat a large, good-looking man with a young if not youthful

face. He wore an overcoat and one hand was gloved as though he had just come in. There was in his face and manner a befuddled and desperate amazement, a look of urbane intoxication suddenly confronted with a crisis—a shock that is like a slap in the face.

He read and reread, with a silent movement of the lips, a sheet of writing paper. It looked like a woman's note. When he had finished the inner page—reading it at right angles, as one must with such epistles—he would turn back to the beginning and start all over again. And then, with sudden spasmodic force the fingers of his ungloved hand closed over the sheet, crushing it into a ball. His head sank forward on the crook of his arm and something like a sob escaped him. He was quite sober, now.

For a minute or so he remained thus. Then he sprang to his feet and pulled himself together. I could see his jaw set and his hands clench themselves. He walked quite steadily to the buffet and poured himself a glass of liquor. Returning to the table, he rummaged about in the drawers impatiently, found what he sought, and laid it on the table—a revolver.

Next he brought a decanter and glass, which he set down beside the weapon, and resumed his chair. Very deliberately he removed his glove, felt in his left trousers pocket and produced a silver coin. For the first time he spoke.

"Heads for him and tails for me," he cried with a sort of nervous exuberance. "Heads for him and tails for me."

He tossed the coin. It fell with a musical tinkle against the decanter, wobbled a moment, and then fell flat. "Heads," he said. I saw him look at the revolver with a savage relish that seemed to bode ill for some one. He took another drink.

Again he flipped the coin. It fell with a solid thwack and he grimaced a bit as he read its meaning. "Tails!" he exclaimed. "Tails—that's me."

Once more he refilled his glass and gulped it. This time he held the coin on the end of his finger as though loath to let it go. He laid it down finally and picked up the ball of paper. Carefully he straightened out the sheet and reperused it. Once more he picked up the coin.

"Best two out of three," he said with a wry little laugh. "Here goes."

He spun the coin and for an intolerable time it seemed to rotate, dying down gradually in its motion and settling itself with an odd little flap just beyond the muzzle of the revolver. The man did not speak, but I saw from his face the verdict. It was death.

I edged around the door at that and jumped for him just as he got the gun to his head. We scuffled a bit and the bullet went into the ceiling. The noise of it startled us both. His fingers relaxed and I took the gun from him easily enough. Ordinarily he could have thrown me out of the window without much trouble, but the inertia of reaction was upon him. He leaned half listlessly against the mantel and surveyed me in astonishment.

"Who the devil are you?" he asked. "My name is of no consequence," I told him. "My presence I shall try to explain. I assume that you are John Bradley."

"Yes," he said, gravely. "I am John Bradley. But I'm not in the habit of receiving unknown callers at midnight—"

"Nor are you in the habit of attempting suicide, I dare say."

"Whoever you are," he said, "you have saved my life. That it is worthless does not lessen the decency of your action. I thank you—and beg your pardon."

"Whatever I did you are welcome to," I told him. "I came here to rescue a woman in danger—"

His eyes narrowed. "A woman in danger," he repeated slowly. "What are you—an evangelist?"

I stared at him. Was his mind unsettled?

"Well, no matter," he continued, "in any event you're too late."

"Do you mean that she's—dead?" I cried, aghast.

"I wish it might have been that," he answered unsteadily. "Read the letter there on the table. I owe you an explanation, anyhow."

A glance was sufficient. She had left him. She had gone with a friend and "all was over."

"Perhaps," I said—and I rather expected him to hit me for it—"perhaps she wasn't worth it."

"She wasn't to blame," he said gently. "It was my cursed drinking

and neglect of her—that and the other man. He used to love her before she married me."

"If I'd been half a man I'd have held her," he said. "She never cared much for him—and she loved me. But I worked too hard and left them too much alone. I wanted to be rich."

In a sudden paroxysm of anger he picked up the decanter and hurled it into the fireplace. It splintered, musically, into fragments and the liquor sputtered and flared.

"Whatever happens I'm through with that," said John Bradley. "You hear it? So help me God!"

In the meantime I had been thinking. A queer, impossible idea had popped into my head as I thought of the telephone call for aid. I walked over and put a hand on Bradley's shoulder.

"Have you looked through the house?" I asked.

He stared. "Looked through the house? For what?"

"Your wife."

"Why, no," he answered, uncomprehending. "She's gone—gone for good. She's left me. Didn't you read the note?"

"Yes," I said, "but it's barely possible that she was prevented—that she wrote the letter in anticipation of her departure and then—"

"And then—what?" in Heaven's name!"

"Where is the telephone?" I snapped.

"There's one in the corner, behind you," he replied dazedly, "and another in her boudoir, upstairs."

I gripped his arm. "Show me the other phone," I said, excitedly. "There's just a chance—"

"Of what?" he asked, but I did not answer. He led the way into the front hall and switched on the lights. Up the stairway he went, two steps at a time, and I followed close behind—around a turn and through an open door. It was dark there and he struck a match to look for the chandelier switch. But as the tiny flame flared up I heard him cry out and go down on his knees, muttering frantic endearments. I felt around for the switch and found it, flooding the room with a soft radiance that filtered through rose-colored shades.

Flat on the floor lay a woman garbed for the street. Evidently she had swooned from fright or some other emotion, for there was no sign of injury. The room was in disorder. Drawers were pulled out, some of their contents hanging over the edge or tumbled on the floor. A jewel-case lay inverted on the writing desk, as though hastily emptied. Near the door was a small brooch, broken, evidently trampled on.

Bradley was working over his wife with frantic energy, chafing her wrists, loosening her collar and calling her name aloud. I got a glass of water at the washstand and let a small stream trickle on her forehead. Almost immediately her eyelids fluttered and a moment later she was in her husband's arms, sobbing. "Oh, I'm so glad you came. I'm so glad, so glad."

I tried to get away without being seen, but before I reached the door she noticed me and cried out, startled, "Who's that, John? Who's that?"

"A friend of mine," he said soothingly. "He came along—to help."

"We didn't know how many burglars there were, you see," I put in.

"Oh, yes," she said. "You were at John's office when I called up, weren't you? You answered the phone. I thought it didn't sound like John's voice—but I was too frightened."

She lay in an easy chair where John had put her, almost dreamily relaxed. But suddenly a new terror sprang into her eyes. Her glance met her husband's, tensely searching.

"John," she cried, "have you been in the study?"

He did not falter a moment. "No," he said, "I came right up. But Jones had quite an adventure with the burglar down there." He looked hard at me.

"Yes," I said, "we scuffled in the dark and he fired a shot. We broke the decanter and spilled ink all over a letter or something. I hope it wasn't valuable, for it was quite obliterated. I threw it into the fire."

She flashed me a look of keen inquiry, but I was looking at John.

"Probably a bill," he said carelessly. "Well, goodnight, old man. I'll never forget this. Never!"

He held out his hand and I pressed it warmly.

"Good night, Mrs. Bradley," I said. She did not hear me. Her eyes, luminous with tenderness and mute thanksgiving, were fixed upon Bradley.

I was no longer in her scheme of things.—Louis J. Stellmann, in the Argonaut.

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