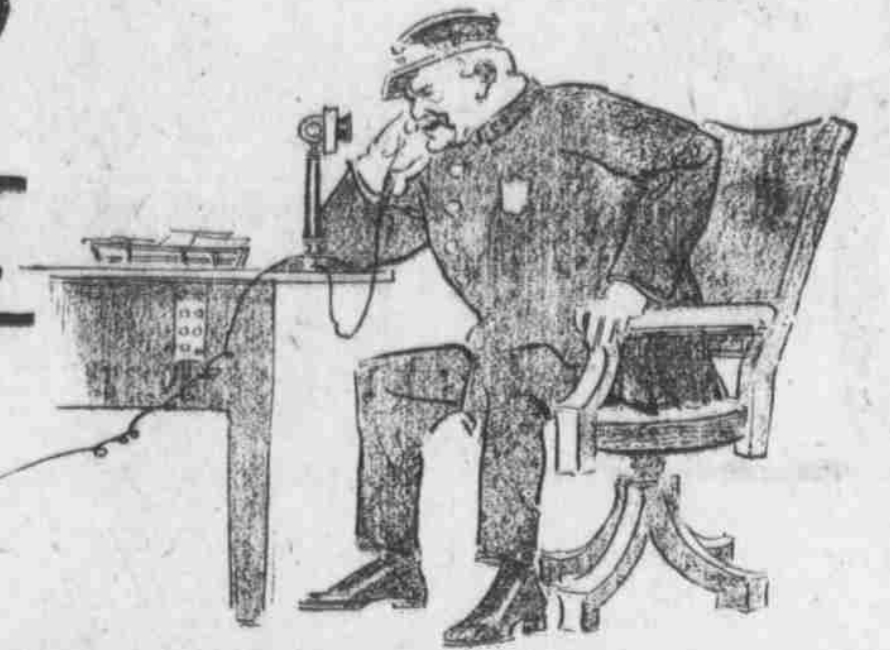


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TRAGEDIES OF THE TELEPHONE



Stories of the Operators Who Sit Like Fate at the Switchboard—The Telephone Girl Who Heard the Wires Hunt Down Her Brother As a Murderer! A Telephone Girl Who Beat a Racing Flood!

“YOU see one of the big central stations like Maine or North is the world—and it's all on the switchboard—good and bad, love stories and death notices, winners and losers—all going on at once.

“And the 'phone girl is a sort of Fate who sees that the right people get each other—though she could often save a lot of trouble if she mixed in.

“Oh, I tell you it's hard not to interfere, sometimes, when you have the whole world under your two hands.”

—From “The Woman.”

BEFORE a switchboard, pulling out one plug, putting in another, answering our “Hello’s,” flinging back a frequent “Busy,” sits Fate.

She bears no resemblance to the beautiful, classic sisters of the distaff and scissors, the three fates whom the ancients believed preside over human affairs. This one may chew gum. She may cling to the enormous, old-fashioned pompadour, or the hideous “rats.” She may speak in surly fashion, even through her nose. But she is destiny incarnate. She may have the deciding vote in many human affairs. If she interferes she may change the current of human existence by simply switching the electric current in another direction.

The telephone girl may seem a commonplace figure to the shortsighted, but around her fingers may be twined the strands of our future. Like a Judge upon the bench, she sits and ponders about our fate and passes sentence. The sentence depends upon whether she decides upon interference or non-interference.

In Dixon, Ill., Miss Rilla Webster came to the office punctually to take charge of the night shift in the main office. She hung up her hat and jacket, fluffed up her hair before the little square mirror and smiled “Good night!” at the girl on the day shift. She answered a call for a young man who wanted to take a girl to a moving picture show. She permitted a young wife to confide in her husband that the baby had a tooth.

She heard a politician invite another to a meeting of a few of the boys just to talk things over. An angry housewife gave the grocer a protracted piece of her mind because he had forgotten her order for brown sugar. All of these Miss Webster heard, but did not consciously hear. Her fingers pulled out the plugs and pushed them in again. She said “Hello” and “Busy” when necessary, and her eyes looked beyond the switchboard. Her thoughts travelled further. Suddenly she sat very straight, and her cheeks went as white as the plastered wall of the exchange room.

“Hello! This is the office of the Chief of Police of Chicago. We’re got a line on your man.”

“On which man? You don’t mean Doc Webster?”

“Be careful about names. Telephone lines leak. Yes. He’s expected at the Polytechnic Hospital at 2 this morning. Can you take the next train?”

“I can get the train, but I’ll have to get the papers first.”

“Get the help of the State’s Attorney. He’ll open shop at night for anything so important.”

“All right, Chief.”

“Wait. Hello, Sheriff!”

“Yes, Chief.”

“Better bring the papers from the Coroner’s office, too. They may be needed. We mustn’t let the fellow give us the slip through some technicality.”

“All right, Chief. If I can get him to his office.”

“Thunder and lightning! Of course you can get him to the office. Use the telephone. Don’t fail to get the



The Stage Has Awakened to the power of the Telephone Girl. This Scene—the Last in “The Woman”—is eclipsed by Real Life Performances Told Here.

train. Want you to assist in the identification. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

The slim, black figure at the switchboard swayed. Her trembling hands fell to her lap and shook there as leaves are tossed in a hollow by a wind. Rilla Webster was but nineteen. Every one said she “looked young for her age.” Now, with drawn white face, she looked ten years older.

“Bzz!” rasped the board.

“Bzz! Bzz!” Like angry bees aswarming.

“B-z-z-z! Bzz! Bz! Bz! Bz! It was the profanity peculiar to the telephone. The girl’s eyes were big and black and wild. She pressed her shaking hands to her temples. What should she do? What should any one do in any instance but her duty? She lifted her hands to the plug.

“That you, Sheriff? Pardon me. You want what? The Coroner’s office?” Her shaking hand was suspended. It seized the plug.

“Yes. The Coroner’s office at home. Yes. There, Mr. Sheriff.”

She sank back in her chair and clasped the hands that were so troublesome.

“O, God!” she breathed. “O, God!”

“Bzz!”

“Yes. The Country Club? Yes. Is the State’s Attorney there? Please get him to the phone at once. The— the Sheriff—

“No, nothing at all, thank you—a slight cold, perhaps. Can you get him to the telephone? Yes, Mr. Sheriff—they’ve sent for him. There he is.”

The work was admirably done. The Sheriff got his papers, made his train, met the plain clothes men from the Police Department, captured Dr. Webster, helped to put him through the third degree and wring from him after five hours the confession of how he killed his wife to avoid a charge of bigamy.

In the excitement that followed in both cities the fact that Rilla Web-

ster, telephone operator, was found in a swoon beside the switchboard almost escaped notice. So did the fact that Rilla Webster was the murderer’s sister.

Miss Webster was ill for two weeks after her brother’s arrest. From her sick bed she told why she had performed a deed as heroically unselfish as that of the Roman Judge Brutus, who sentenced his own son to death

for disobedience to the laws of Rome.

“Yes, it was a terrible experience,” she said. “I would rather have died than gone through it. I wonder that I did not die or go crazy while I sat at the board listening to the men who could hang my brother.”

“But you could have saved him.”

“Yes, I could have tipped him off at his boarding house. I knew the number. I even called Chicago. But when I got Chicago I just couldn’t do you know what saved me, kept me steady, made me do my duty? It was just like a voice whispering over my shoulder, a text I learned at Sunday school. ‘Thou God seest me.’ I knew that if no one else knew it He knew. I am glad. For I did my duty.”

Lena Binckley played the role of Fate splendidly at Austin, Pa. Harry Davis, the engineer, called her:

“The dam is breaking. For God’s sake warn as many as you can.”

low me!” screamed the hello girl, a Paul Revere afoot.

Many heard, and, hearing, followed.

“The dam is broken!” she shrieked, leading on her flying battalion up the hill of safety on North Main street.

When she had reached the top of the hill she turned to look back. “From where I stood,” she said, “the water seemed fifty feet high. There was a big cloud of white spray above it. Houses were tossing about in it. The noise was like thunder.”

All of the group that reached the top of the hill owe their lives to Lena Binckley—Fate at the switchboard.

She had no thought of reward—but her employers, the telephone company, have announced that Lena Binckley will hereafter get double pay—and may hold her job for life, if she wishes.

In a Western city a telephone girl sitting in a telephone room quiet at



Miss Lena Binckley, the Telephone Operator Who Warned the Town of the Austin Flood in Time to Save Many Lives.



Miss Rilla Webster, the Telephone Girl Who Let the Wires Catch Her Brother.



Dr. Webster.

So swift is the mysterious power of electricity that the message had five minutes the start of the great, green, crushing wave moving as a great overwhelming wall from the river upon the town. One second Lena Binckley stopped to think. Then she turned from her switchboard. There was not time to give warning by telephone.

She dashed down the stairs into the street, wildly swinging her hat and screaming: “The dam has broken! Run to the hills! Follow me!”

A few looked stupidly at her, then turned into a store to make a purchase for the evening meal they would never eat.

The green marching wall broke against the store. It rushed over it, crushing it into ruins. “The dam has broken! Run to the hills! Fol-

that midnight hour heard harsh voices. She stared about the empty room.

“I’ll kill you!” shouted a voice thick with anger.

“You dare not touch me, you coward!”—The woman never finished the sentence. There was a scream, a fall.

The telephone operator thrust a plug in and called: “The police station. Hurry, please. Is this the police station? Please send a man to No. 2367 Russell street. A man is killing a woman there. Certainly I know. They had left the receiver off the hook. It was a ‘live line.’”

The police caught the man as he was sinking out of the door carrying a dress suit case, his hat pulled low and his coat collar turned up. He has expiated his crime because a telephone girl, playing fate, broke the rules and interfered.