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THE GHOST AT THE PHONE

By GERTSON SCHAEFFER

The end of the busy day had come at last, and H. Miller Virry found the headache still with him.

All during the rush hours of the day, as he had watched his assignments and ideas develop into stories under the deft work of the reporters, he had waited for this hour.

Away back there, somewhere, never quite added by the thousands of ideas that whirled through the streets of his mind, there had been the one thought that when the day was over he would write a letter.

But about the headache—lately it had never left him. The malady seemed to be seated in the very dome of his head.

Now it was time to write. It was Saturday evening, and he was alone.

A furtive look came into Virry's eyes. He even crossed the room and looked behind a locker door that was standing open. Somehow it did not seem strange to him that he should do this. He wanted to be alone.

He walked over to the police reporter's desk. The typewriter there was the best in the office. MacDonald always kept his machine clean.

The steady hum that rose from the sidewalk told him that it was six o'clock.

The thought of the letter he would write came forward and waved away that other consciousness—that he had not eaten since breakfast—and he seated himself at the typewriter again.

He drummed with his long fingers contemplatively, looked about the room a moment with a nervous glance, and then began writing, using his index fingers only, as they write who are self-taught operators.

"The Town Where You Are Not."

"The Day When I Miss You Most."

"The Girl Whom I Love."

"I Don't Know Where."

"Sweetheart."

That cracking sound made him jump again. He began writing:

"This letter, sweetheart, will surely test your love, for I have so much trouble to put into it that you will hardly be able to read it. I'm hardly able to write it."

He jumped from his chair and hurried to the telephone.

"Hello," he said. "Hello—hello."

He was annoyed, but courteous. He listened a moment.

"Why, I don't want any number. I thought you rang. All right, Central."

He returned to his letter:

"Sometimes I think perhaps you know all about it. Then it seems senseless for me to want to write to you."

"At other times it seems as if you had forgotten all about me. Then I yearn to tell you."

"If you do know, perhaps you can almost look over my shoulder now and see me writing. That wouldn't be senseless, though—would it, miffy?"

"I would be just like talking over old times that we both knew all about, but love to hear each other mention, if you don't know."

He went over to the telephone again.

"Hello," he said in his businesslike manner.

There was always a note of expectancy in Virry's telephone "Hello," the ring of a telephone in a newspaper office may mean a great sensation.

His left hand was on the top of his head, where the ache was heaviest.

"I didn't ring," he heard Central say. A puzzled expression came over his face, and he went back to the typewriter.

"—you would be interested to read this, I thought."

"I've been thinking about you every day. And here it is Saturday night. Saturday nights I am loneliest."

"When I first met you, we used to have our six o'clock Saturday dinners at the cafes, didn't we? And then I would take you home."

"After a while, I used to come to your home every Saturday night. You said you liked that better."

"So many Saturday nights have passed since I last saw you."

He smiled. As he drew away from the desk the noise of his chair on the floor and the sound of his footsteps resounded through the room. Long ago the presses had stopped their vibration, and the building was deserted and dark.

His letter had been written slowly, for it required much thinking—a letter of that sort.

"Hello," he said as he took down the receiver. "Why—why—why?" There was an astonishment in his voice, and his eyes widened almost irrationally.

"This can't be you!—Central, keep off, please."

"Tell me, dear—sweetheart—what's the matter? I don't want a number! Now she's off the line! Quick, Central. Get her for me. I'll give you matinee passes if you do. What's that? No one on the line!—That's strange!—Can't get her? No one to get? You didn't ring?"

Virry hung up the receiver and hurried back to the typewriter, with a smile on his face.

"You have just called me up, but something was the matter with the line. You'll call again, and so I'll go on with the letter and hand it to you as soon as I see you."

"I was writing about the lonely Saturday nights. Somehow I don't seem

so lonely since I began to write tonight.

"I have decided to write, anyhow. Now, as I write, I feel happier—excuse me, Telephone again. Hope it's you."

"Central!" he fairly roared this time.

"That girl is on the line again."

"You can't tell me she isn't. I know her voice.—Yes, dear, this is I, Sweetheart, where are you? Tell me quickly. I'll come right there. Tell me quickly! Hurry, before she shuts us off!"

He spoke so rapidly that his words formed one long, incoherent yell that echoed wildly through the big room.

"Central, I want that number! I want that girl who was talking! God! I must talk to her! Get her! Some one did ring. Didn't I hear it? And I heard her voice. Now, there she is.—Yes, now I can hear you, darling."

"Now, Central, steady a moment until I find out where this girl is. Where, dear? Where? Where? Louder! She's gone, Central! She's gone! She's gone!"

But suddenly he was talking over a dead wire. At the other end, a badly frightened little telephone girl was reporting to the chief operator the strange calls from the fragment of floor.

Virry walked back to the typewriter and wrote:

"It was you again, but I couldn't hear you."

"If I only knew where you were, I'd come to you right away. If I only knew in what direction to go, I'd start out. But perhaps you'll call again, and so I'll go on with my letter."

"There are other nights than Saturdays that are lonely."

"Sunday nights you used to go to the theaters with me. We always had the same pair of seats, you remember."

"How many songs I can remember that you and I have heard together! I Shall Never Forget My First Meeting With You—Remember It?"

"Then there was 'A Woman's Just a Woman, My Boy, but a Good Cigar is a Smoke.' I remember you didn't like the song, until it came to the last verse where it runs, 'A woman's still a woman when a cigar's gone up in smoke'—I don't know about that, though; I can always get another cigar."

"Then there was that song, 'Dearie.' How that word echoed and pulsed and beat through that magnificent chorus, just as it echoes and pulses through my mind!"

"Oh, there were so many songs, so many plays, so many hours, so many events, so many thoughts, so many experiences, so many pleasures! How do you suppose I can write them all down?"

"They are crowding by the thousands up into the front of my brain, demanding a place on this paper—but here you are again. If I don't get you this time I'll—"

The telephone really rang this time. In two bounds he reached it.

"Hello," he said. "Now, Central, be more careful this time. If you only knew how much I want to talk to her—Why, it's I! Why, Virry, the city editor! Keep off the line, sir!"

"Yes, dear, I hear you. I'll talk to you when this man gets off the line. Hurry up and tell me where you are before he bothers us again. I'll come right to you.—The chief? Yes. But keep off the line, chief. I'll talk to you later."

"What am I doing here? It's eleven o'clock! Well, what of that.—Get off the line, sir! By God, get off the line! You've got a story for me? No, I won't come down-stairs—Wait a moment, sweetheart.—You'll send somebody up here? Well, I don't want to be bothered."

A dogged tone was creeping into Virry's voice. Somehow it didn't seem strange that the chief of police should be asking him to come down to the sidewalk.

He was determined to stay at the telephone until he talked with the girl.

The pain in his head suddenly became sharper; he thrust his long fingers through his hair, right over the place where the ache seemed the greatest.—If she could only hear him!

"Sweetheart! Sweetheart!" he shouted frantically. Suddenly he became silent. His eyes turned to one of the doors that opened into the hallway.

Suddenly he rushed toward the door, his arms extended. "Darling!" he cried.

All the longing of his man's heart sounded in that pleading, ecstatic cry. He folded his arms, and embraced—nothing!

His right hand went to the top of his head. He staggered and fell, face forward, against the door. His head struck the glass, which, breaking, made a rattle and crash that echoed and reechoed through the hallways of the great deserted, ten-story building.

Virry fell to the floor, miraculously uncut. But he did not try to rise.

A big policeman carefully broke away the remaining jagged pieces of glass, so that they might not fall on the prostrate form within. Then Hennessy, the little police surgeon, climbed through the aperture.

"Hemorrhage of the brain," he said shortly. "He stopped on the street only last Saturday and told me that his head never stopped aching."

"I told him he was working too hard. But that wasn't it."

"He's never stopped worrying since his girl died."

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DADDY'S EVENING FAIRY TALE

By Mary Graham Donner

THE NIGHTHAWKS.

"Will we be going back to the city this year?" asked Mr. Nighthawk of Ned Nighthawk.

"To be sure," said Ned. "Why not?"

"There is no reason for not going back that I know of," said Mr. Nighthawk. "I just wondered if we were going."

"Ah yes," said Ned. "It would be wrong if we disappointed the family. Besides it would upset their calendar."

"Calendar, calendar, what do you mean?" asked Mr. Nighthawk.

"Why the family which lives in the house which has the roof where we live have told their friends that every year on the 15th of March the Nighthawks had come and nested on their gravel roof and had laid their eggs there too."

"They have said that they know when it is the 15th of March, or just about that time, by the Nighthawks. So we shouldn't upset them."

"Just suppose we didn't arrive until the middle of April, they would think their calendars were all wrong. The calendars are the things which say it is Monday and Tuesday and March the 5th and April the 6th and so on."

"On Their Gravel Roof."

They tell what day it is and what month and what year, you see.

"Well, if we arrived in April, after having always arrived in March, the family would surely have a terrible quarrel with the calendars. They would say to their calendars:

"You are not telling us the truth. We know because of our friends the Nighthawks."

"And the calendars would answer, 'We are right. Your friends, the Nighthawks aren't as bright and smart as you think they are. They are behind hand, late and slow!'

"We wouldn't want the calendars to say such things of us, so we're not only going back to the roof we have been to before, but we're going back in March and will arrive there on or around the 15th."

"Yes," continued Ned Nighthawk, "the family which lives in the house which has the roof where we live, are very fond of us. They say they think we're interesting and they think it is fun to live in the great big city where there are such crowds and so few trees and where still the Nighthawks are loyal and true and come back each year."

"They like it because we are birds and yet we do not insist upon a tree to live in. They're so pleased that we will share their home with them. They like to have us on their gravel roof and they often bring us up goodies to eat too, you know."

"It's only fair to them to go back each year, for when friends like us we should be good to them. There are so many who don't care that we should appreciate those who do!"

"So, he all ready when the early, early spring comes, to go back to the city homes."

"Yes," said Mr. Nighthawk, "I will, and do you suppose Mrs. Nighthawk will like it there?"

"Of course," said Ned Nighthawk, "she will love it. She will proudly lay the two grayish, whitish eggs with the adorable little spots, right on the gravel roof. That will be her nest. She will build no other."

"Our mates aren't fussy about nests and homes and they don't keep their husbands hunting for apartments and houses all the time, I'm glad to say!"

"Aren't we supposed to be like the whip-poor-wills?" asked Mr. Nighthawk. "Haven't they said so themselves?"

"Yes," said Ned, "they've said so and I say so too. But we can easily be told apart. We haven't their rounded tails for one thing. Our tails are forked and across our wings there is a white band."

"Then too our call or song is quite different."

"You know," said Mr. Nighthawk, "I think it is so nice the way the Mrs. Nighthawks dress so simply. We wear our white bands across our tails and our white collars, but they, like nice, modest little birds, wear dull, quiet collars and do not decorate their tails with white!"

"They're a nice lot," said Ned Nighthawk, "and I'm glad I belong to the family of Nighthawks, for not only do we live happily ourselves, but we give the city family a treat, for they love birds and, don't have so many others around."

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