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A Boon to Bores

I

The other day a strange thing happened. I sat down to dinner in my own house without any impertinent and imbecile jackass summoning me from the table to the telephone. The thing, indeed, seemed almost miraculous; you will never convince me that it could have been possible without divine intervention. There, for the first time in years, I wallowed in the luxury of a meal eaten in peace, with no abominable shrilling of a bell to interrupt my engulfing of my victuals, and no choleric conversation with a moron to paralyze my digestion.

Even so, my unaccustomed happiness was not entirely unpolluted. Though the bell never actually rang, I expected it at every moment, and the expectation, at certain of those moments, was almost as bad as the realization. I was uneasy, worried, at strain. It seemed altogether too pleasant to be true. It had never happened before. It has never happened since.

I speak of jackasses and morons, perhaps seeming to lay it on a bit thickly. The truth is that I push politeness to the verge of euphemism. There is in the whole world no more obnoxious and pestiferous idiot, no more villainous enemy of civilized decency and quiet, than the modern telephonomaniac.

Put beside him, all other known varieties of bores and nuisances shrink to what almost seems like amiability. The ox who favors one with unwanted letters, usually asking nonsensical questions, is easily disposed of; the waste-basket was invented by Galileo to entomb his garbage. The ass who drops in at one's office or pulls one's doorbell may be handled almost as readily; janitors know how to deal with him, and he may be circumvented by stout locks and signs reading "Will Return at 6 p.m."

But the numbskull who uses the telephone is almost unbeatable. There is no closed season for him; he rages unimpeded from 8 a.m. until after midnight. Only a private branch exchange can deal with him effectively—and a private branch exchange is a first-rate nuisance on its own account.

II

There are plenty of men, of course, to whom answering the telephone is a necessary part of the day's work, and most of them, I suppose, get used to it. I myself, in the days before I was educated, was the city editor of an afternoon newspaper, and as such had to answer 60 telephone calls every day as a matter of routine, not to mention from 20 to 30 calls not foreseen. It was, generally speaking, unpleasant, but it was not actively annoying, for I had little else to do, and when the last edition went to press my telephone grew silent.

No one bothered me after I got home and stretched out with a book—that is, not unless some extraordinary news broke loose, which was not often. Those were the arcadian days before the development of the modern telephone bore, *i.e.*, before the enormous increase in telephone calls which telephone company treasurer, Rotary Club orators and other such criminals view with such pride. No one with whom I was unacquainted called me up. It had not yet been discovered by stoneheads that the telephone offered them a cheap and convenient means of torturing their betters.

Today the fact is universally known, and the number of such stoneheads seems to increase annually. Now the nuisance begins to take on the proportions of a national pestilence. There are even performers on the long-distance lines—degraded half-wits who call one up from Washington, or Philadelphia, or some other distant place, and force one to wait idiotically while half a dozen operators chatter along the line.

If I live to be a century I'll never get used to long-distance calls, or cease to swear horribly when they are announced. I have received enough of them in my time to make it absolutely sure that I'll go to hell when I die, but in all these years I have not received a single one that was worth waiting for 10 seconds. A mathematical certainty of imbecility seems to hang about them, like that which hangs about special delivery letters.

I receive special delivery letters almost every day; yet in my whole life I have never received one that contained any news that might not have come by ox-cart at one knot an hour. They are the playthings of a special breed of nuisance—the larvae, perhaps, of telephonomaniacs. I never answer a special delivery letter, and after February 1 next I shall never open one.

III

To get rid of the telephone curse is more difficult. More than once I have thought of ordering my telephone out, but that would simply make it difficult for my friends to communicate with me, or for persons to reach me conveniently who have legitimate business with me. Worse, it would deprive me of a simple and cheap means of ordering things from the stores. It is seldom that I use the telephone more than twice a week, but when I need it I need it badly. Again, I have toyed with the notion of having my name taken out of the telephone book, thus making my telephone what is called “silent.” But that would simply cause trouble to my friends—and offer little impediment to the bores. The latter seem to have the numbers of all “silent” telephones. Persons who have such telephones tell me that they are annoyed almost as much as I am.

There remains the scheme of taking the receiver off the hook—a scheme, I confess, that I have often practiced when I had work to do, and was in no mood to listen to donkeys. Unluckily, it is open to all of the objections that lie against the other two plans, and has, in addition, one of its own; it makes the exchange girls swear like sailors (of course inaudibly) and causes them to send a repairman to find out what is wrong. The repairman comes in, jangles the bell for ten minutes, holds long conversations with colleagues somewhere else, and pockmarks the parquet with his spikes. I dislike putting an honest man to so much trouble in such a dishonest manner; it is like hauling a member of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty out of bed at 3 *a.m.* to prescribe a pint of rye for a poker party. To the last one who came to my house I offered my apologies and a bottle of Erbacher 1913. It is almost better to stand the ringing of the telephone bell.

IV

Better, perhaps—but sometimes almost a sheer impossibility. Maybe mine is a special case, but I can only tell my own story. I don't think I am unusually sensitive to noises, or even to more gross interruptions. An old newspaper reporter should certainly be hard-boiled in that department. But it must be obvious that, to do any sort of writing that is based upon reflections as opposed to mere observation, however trivial and erroneous that reflection may be, requires something approaching quiet and peace.

If I start at 9 *a.m.* to compose a treatise upon the Disarmai buffoonery, and am interrupted at 9.10 by a woman who wants to subscribe to some brummagem charity, and at 9.17 by a woman who wants to know if I will read her poetry, and at 9.27 a life insurance solicitor, and at 9.33 by a strange simian who wants to know who publishes this or that book and at 9.41 by a misdirected call for some neighbor, and at 9.50 by another, and ~~u~~ by a third, then it is a bet of at least a hundred to one that I'll have very little on paper by 10 o'clock, and that what is there will be blowsy and puerile stuff. It is simply out of the question to do decent writing under such circumstances—and yet those are circumstances under which most writing has to be done in America today.

I work in a remote part of my house, removed by a flight stairs from the nearest telephone station. This means that every time I am called to the telephone I must go downstairs and then come upstairs again. Why don't I have another extension made to my desk? What a question! Would I be any more comfortable if the infernal machine were directly under my nose—if I had to answer all calls, instead of escaping the many that are now flagged downstairs? If I make any change at all, it will be to order out the second floor extension and put the main telephone in the cellar. If it rings down there, however shrilly, I'll scarcely hear it—and three flights up and down will rid me of all temptation to answer it.

V

So far I indulge in destructive criticism. Now for a brief paragraph of constructive suggestion.

First, I propose that it be made an invariable rule by all telephone users to state their names clearly the moment they are answered. Most of the bores fail to do this now. As a result, I brought to the telephone at least three times a day to talk to unknowns who turn out to be unmitigated nuisances. The prompt mention of the name would make a man polite to his friends; too often today, I fear, I am brusque to persons whom it pains me to offend.

Second suggestion: let every man (and woman) who is not admittedly a pestiferous idiot take a pledge to refrain absolutely from calling up strangers, unless by the nature of their profession, or in some other way, they specifically invite it, and especially to refrain from calling them up at their homes.

Third: let everybody promise to avoid unnecessary calls under all circumstances.

Fourth: let the clergy of the city offer public prayers that famine and pestilence descend upon all who violate the pledge.