

Phoning Arcadia

The first thing that they tell you is that you absolutely must not listen in. Of course, that's the first rule you break. You've got to make sure they're connected at first, and then you've got to make sure the line is clear before you disconnect. You're bound to hear both swell and lousy stuff in the process. And, the more swell or lousy it is, the more you *have* to find out what happens next. It's my first week, and the girls have already shown me how to make two sharp raps of my pencil against the desk so the caller thinks I've switched off.

Working at the Plaza, there's always something sensational going through the boards: calls too early or too late, calls to women who aren't their wives, calls to florists to make good. It's better than any paperback romance.

We're all unmarried and some of us are nearing 25. We really shouldn't giggle about these terribly tacky conversations; we're certainly more desperate ourselves.

Just this morning, though, Miss Lily in 208 had me patch her through to the Arcade. It wasn't even the breakfast hour. Even I know better than to call a man while he's still sleeping off the night before.

When I turned the key to connect, the other operator said, "Whadya want?"

"Miss Lillian Dash for room 103, please."

"Oh, ain't you a polite one. This ain't the Ritz, honey. I'll see if he'll come down to the phone."

Now, I knew then that something wasn't quite right. I flipped up both keys but stayed on.

“Hullo?”

“You darling, darling man!” cooed Miss Lily. “I know I should have waited for you to call me, but I just couldn’t wait!” Everything Miss Lily said was an exclamation.

“Who is this?”

“Oh, you card! Dance the night away with a girl and pretend you don’t know. Why of all the sweet nothings we whispered into each other’s ears, I could tell your voice anywhere.... I simply can’t wait until tonight to see you! Did you get a coffee pot and a shave yet?”

“I’ve got five cents set aside for a bottomless cup. That should wake me.”

“Didn’t you sleep well, darling? After all those Manhattans, I think you’d be sound as a baby. Oh, I did call too early, didn’t I?”

“No, ma’am, it’s just that with the thin walls and chicken wire ceilings, it’s pretty hard to nod off around here. The bed linens are clean and it’s only 50 cents a night, so it’s better than most on this row.”

“Ma’am! Dear, you’re a crack-up! Calling me ma’am after you’ve seen my rouged knees! And, if you don’t care for the Arcade, check in to the Plaza with me Oh, that was a little fresh, wasn’t it? Check into the Astor or the Grand, then.”

I realized my mistake, and bit my lip to keep an audible gasp from the line. The gentleman wasn’t at the Arcade on 35th Street. He was at the Arcade on the Bowery. I’d read in *The New Yorker* that uptown hotels like the Majestic, the Savoy, the Nassau, and the Astor had supplied the names of downtown lodgings, much to the dismay of the hoteliers. Of all the arcades to which I could have misdirected Miss Lily’s call—a

shopping arcade, a shooting gallery, penny amusements, or even a dirty-pictures show—I had routed her to a Bowery flophouse.

“I think you may have the wrong man.”

“I’m certain you’re the right one. Don’t be so modest! You were the best dancer in that gin joint, and you *must* let me show you off to that frightful Millicent tonight. She’s always going on and on about her beau. Well, darling, she’ll just crumple when she sees how handsome you are.”

“I’m not who you think I am.”

“Ooh, how mysterious! Well, dear, I’m sure I’ll see more of your secret side after a few more highballs.”

“I appreciate the invitation, it’s just well, I’ve got to go wash plates and coffee pots at Horn & Hardart’s tonight to earn some flop money. It was nice to make your acquaintance.”

“You stop your teasing. I’m off to buy a lovely green number to match those eyes you said you adored. Perhaps it would be nice to live in a little coldwater flat for awhile instead of just ribbing about it. It’s simply too exhausting getting marcelled and manicured, going to all these parties, having to be gay all the time. Oh, imagine that: me peeling potatoes and hanging laundry in an apron and bare feet!”

“In my experience, ma’am, it only takes a few pennies to unlock life’s charm. And a hard day’s work is the best way to sleep sound.”

Miss Lily cracked up. “You sound so adorably earnest when you talk like that. I’ll just split the sides of my dressing gown if I laugh any harder. Now, go drink some hair o’ the dog and get your shoes shined. You can pick me up at nine.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the man said quietly.

And when Miss Lily had finally abandoned the line, I heard him whisper, “What in the fresh hell was that all about?”

I let out a chirp of laughter.

“Is someone on the line?”

I turned the key and ended the call.

So, at the end of my shift, I’ll smooth the dents from the headset out of my hairdo and apply fresh lip rouge. I’ll put on my green coat with the badger cuffs and my yellow hat. Then I’ll hoof it past the hotels and peep shows to Horn & Hardart’s automat. I’ve got a nickel for a French-drip and a dime for dessert. If I’m lucky, I’ll look through the pie windows and see a certain someone washing dishes. I think I can catch his eye. I’m almost 23, after all. It’s about time I met a gentleman.