

# What Happens when You Pick Up Your TELEPHONE RECEIVER

*It's a Nerve-Racking Task for the "Hello" Girl—She Must Be on the Job Every Minute.*

*On the Day Shift the Girl in a Big Exchange Never Has More Than a Minute or Two to*

*Herself During Work Hours.*

*This Will Tell You What She Does When You Want to Talk Over the Wire.*



By BESSIE KIERNAN.

JUST what happens when you take down the receiver and ask "Central" for a number is a complete mystery to almost all of you. You know that you will get your number in a minute. If you don't there'll be "something doing." But few people know what really happens or have any idea of the complexity of details which are necessary to make a connection.

I often have people say to me, "That's an easy sort of work, sitting on a stool and sticking in a plug or two, and hearing all the interesting things that go on all over the city." But if I can persuade those people to inspect an exchange, or, better yet, get them to see the main office where hundreds of girls answer hundreds of calls in as many minutes, they go away in a different spirit.

One girl said to me just the other day, "I'll never lose my temper again over the phone. Why, I think it is positively marvelous that every other call isn't a mistake. And how we get connections as quickly as we do, with all the things there are to do, I don't see."

The telephone girl has to be right on the job every minute. No girl in a big exchange has more than a minute or two to herself all during her working hours—that is, if she belongs to a day shift.

This speed and ability do not come all at once, either. When I first went to work for the company I was in the training school only a couple of weeks. But that was nearly seven years ago, and now the training covers two or three months. But I will never forget how helpless I felt when I was in front of a real switchboard, in place of the dummy in which I had carelessly stuck plugs, without any real sense of responsibility.

## How You Get Your Number.

Now I will explain to you all that goes on when you call me up and want to get Main 300. You take your receiver off the hook, and that lights a line lamp on my switchboard. I answer with a plug and the light goes out.

"Main 300," you say. Since my board has only incoming calls I call the outgoing board by pushing the proper button and repeat the number that you gave me. In this way you are connected with the trunk line, going to the second operator.

When she finds that Main 300 is not busy she connects that number with the trunk line and then tells me the number of the trunk line used, so that I make the final connection between you and the number you are calling.

You and the man you have called talk, and while you are conversing I am answering a dozen other calls. Suddenly two lights appear on the board. You have both hung up your receivers. I remove the plugs and break the circuit. When I do that the broken connection causes the lamp of the connecting trunk on the outgoing switchboard to light, and the second operator removes the plug



from the trunk line used, and everything is ready for the next call.

If this were to happen eighty times a day or 800, provided all were in direct sequence, so that one call didn't overlap another, it would be absolutely simple. Just a matter of routine and mathematics. But when five and six calls come in at once, when as many exchanges are involved, all during this one call, which has lasted but a couple of minutes, you can see the complications which are liable to ensue.

If the second operator doesn't understand

what I say, if I don't understand what you say, if I confuse it with the number just called, if I make a mistake in calling the trunk number, if she plugs in the wrong number on the board—all of these things are possible—you don't get your number. But you yourself must admit that these mistakes are not frequent. The one mistake which is made in a week, which may be either your fault or mine, is remembered to the exclusion of the hundred other successful connections which you made in that same week.

Now that you know what a lot of things have to be done—and you would be even more confused if you could stand by a board and watch the tangle of connections—don't you think we make pretty good time? Don't you think it just the least bit wonderful you can talk to a man out in Hyde Park from your breakfast table in Wilson avenue, all in the space of half a minute or less?

Of course, when an operator is trained it is more a matter of quickness and habit than anything. But I have to have my wits about me all the time. Carelessness or inattention is fatal.

## A Woman's Scream.

Sometimes awfully exciting things happen. Not so much in the daytime, and now I work on the shift that goes on at 7:30 and comes off at 4:30. But when I was on the evening shift I would remember every once in a while that I was a part of the night watch of the city. I sent police calls, calls for the fire department, and for doctors and nurses. On me and on the girls sitting

Then only a few weeks ago a man tried to commit suicide by gas. Just before he was overcome he repeated and called up Central. "Gas," he just whispered through the telephone. "No. — Indiana avenue." I rang the Edison people and had them send a pulmonologist out there, and they saved him.

You know, we are only allowed certain words and phrases, and when we have to use other than these we call a supervisor to talk to the subscriber. But I remember one time when we were allowed to use another phrase. It was at the time of the stockyards fire, and to every call that came in, in place of saying "Number, please," we all said, without waiting to be asked, "Chief Horan and ten firemen killed." We knew that was what they wanted.

I have heard girls tell stories of the Ironquills fire. The board had been unusually quiet—few calls, little answering—and suddenly, like sparks from a fire, the whole length of the board was ablaze with lights. At one minute every one was calling for the same number.

## Make Good Wives.

Besides being a machine, you see, the telephone operator must have quick, sure judgment, and keen common sense.

They tell us here that we make the best wives, because we never can talk back, because we know how to obey, because we have sweet and gentle voices, and so on. There is really more truth in it than appears on the surface. We recognize the efficiency of discipline, of order, and of routine. We have had practice enough in holding our tongues and keeping our tempers to insure us against temper attacks in our own homes, and we have been taught to think quickly and meet emergencies.

I have four sisters. Two of them are already in the employ of the company, and the other two are going to be operators as soon as they finish school. I have often heard my mother say that if she had twelve girls she would make every one of them telephone operators, for she doesn't think there is any work which is better discipline, and yet more congenial and agreeable. The girls you work with are always nice. You make lots of friends, you have plenty of time to yourself, and you feel yourself a not entirely inconsiderable member of society.

