THE TELEPHONE: A LESSON IN NEIGHBORLINESS.

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BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

The telephone was a surprise. Amanda had thought of it as she had thought of going down to Sunday dinner, or even of getting well—as a vague, delicious impossibility, where one's fancies might play truant and no harm done. The telephone cost $50 a year, and what with the nurse and the doctor's bills and a girl in the kitchen who ran up such extraordinary accounts at the grocer's, Amanda had come to look upon herself as costing more than she was worth.

With Jane's assistance her husband carried her into the front room one morning before he went down town to his work. Jane had issued an edict that the bedroom must be thoroughly cleansed, and Thomas had seconded her with a heartiness surprising in a man, for men as a rule look on all housecleaning as indicative of the weaknesses of the feminine temperament. There was an unusual elation in his face as he stooped to kiss Amanda good-bye, and she wondered at it.

"Now just you shut your eyes and lie quiet," Jane said, tucking her up and talking fast. "And don't you worry if you hear noises. That room's going to have a cleaning that is a cleaning." Jane was not a trained nurse in the conventional sense, which is to say that her training had been gained in sickrooms rather than in hospitals, and supplemented a native good sense with tact which no diploma assures to the possessor. She had come to Amanda at the time of her accident, and Amanda knew that she would never leave her. Friends may grow careless and forgetful. Even the love of the nearest and dearest may cool. But the Janes of the world stand like immovable rocks to which the suffering may cling with confidence when all else is swept away.

There were strange noises in the sickroom that morning. Amanda, closing her eyes obediently, found her sense of hearing preternaturally sharpened. She heard heavy footsteps and the deep-toned voices of men, mingled with the sound of a hammer. "Jane must be having the carpet taken up," she reflected. The thought of so much effort so near, wearied her, and she fell asleep finally with a sense of utter exhaustion. When she awoke the house was restored to its customary quiet, and Jane was going about with her dusting cap awry, singing warsongs under her breath.

When they took her back into her room at night and laid her on the bed, Amanda's eyes turned appreciatively from one spotless corner to another. Then they rested on a glittering something which stood on the low stand beside the bed. She gave a cry and covered her face with her hands.

"It's a little surprise for you, Amanda," Thomas said, patting her hair. "I thought it wouldn't be quite so lonely for you if you had a telephone. It's portable, you see. You can lie there and talk to anybody you know in town. Like it, don't you, Amanda?"

Like it! She felt like a creature let out of prison into the glorious daylight. She had not known how lonely she was before. She caught her husband's hand and held it against her wet cheek, her eyes mistily bright, like stars in a fog.

"I sha'n't dare to do anything out of the way," Thomas went on jocosely. "You can call up the office any time, and if I'm not on duty you'll know it. I expect you'll look after me pretty sharp, eh, dear?" His wife smiled at him with happy confidence, and then her eyes turned to the symbol of her deliverance and rested there. She could hardly sleep that night for joy.

When Thomas came home the next evening Amanda told him that she had had a delicious day. There was a faint color in her cheeks. "I've talked to so many people," she said, "and told them all my number. You see, it won't be in the book for several weeks yet."

Having thus introduced herself to her friends as the possessor of a telephone, Amanda lay back on her pillows and waited for the bell to ring. The sight of the little nickel-plated instrument gave her a delightful sense of communion with her kind. After her accident had become an old story she had been prolific in excuses for her friends. It was so far for Betty Norcross; when you had to come clear across the city and transfer twice, it took the whole afternoon to make a half-hour call. And Alice Henlock had to be so careful when the weather was bad. And what could one expect of Susan Decker with her flock of children around her? But now without exposure, without loss of time, without neglect of any home duties, each of these dear friends and others less intimate could give her a little of the companionship which her soul craved.

The first ringing of the telephone bell was an epoch. The red blood dyed Amanda's white face. Her hand shook as she took down the receiver. Her voice trembled on the conventional "Hello!"

"Hello, Amanda. This is Thomas. I sha'n't be home till late tonight, dear. Clinton is in town and wants me to dine with him at the hotel. Now don't lie awake watching for me, will you?"

"Of course not, you foolish man. And you must have a good time and not worry about me." She spoke with the cheerfulness which she tried to make habitual, but as she hung up the receiver her face looked wan and gray. She did not grudge her husband his little festivity. From the bottom of her unselfish heart she was glad of it. But it did seem hard that the first message on her new telephone should be of this nature.

It was twenty-four hours before the bell rang again. This time a man's deep voice reached Amanda's ears. "Is this the Klein Hardware Company?"

"What?" she gasped, and a dreadful smothering disappointment seemed to take her breath.

"Is this the Klein Hardware Company?" roared the impatient voice.

"No, this is the residence of Mr. Thomas Harvey." There was an irritable grunt at the other end of the line. Amanda hung up the receiver and turned her face to the wall.

The next three weeks were trying ones, with sleepless nights and anxious days. Jane went about the house, her firm lips set in grim lines. Thomas left home morning after morning looking anxious, and called up several times during the day to know how Amanda felt. "Tell him a little easier," Amanda would reply. The doctor telephoned too, in addition to his daily calls, but that was all. Amanda no longer flushed a burning red when the bell rang.

One morning at the grocer's Jane was accosted by a pretty girl. "Mrs. Harvey has had a telephone put in, hasn't she?"

"Yes," replied Jane. The monosyllable was as uncompromising as the click of a mousetrap.

"Doesn't she find it very disturbing?"

"Disturbing!" exclaimed Jane. "Why?" She wheeled on the other with the air of one who has reached the limit of her endurance.

The pretty yellow-haired girl looked surprised. She raised her candid blue eyes, to encounter a glance which would have frightened her if her conscience had not been clear. "I should think that jingling bell would be dreadful if a person were sick," she said.

Jane's bosom heaved. "That depends. If a jingling bell means that folks are thinking about you and that you're not altogether shut out of living because you're shut into the house, you have to be pretty sick to mind it. But if the bell's right there and doesn't ring, because nobody cares whether you're alive or not, you have to be brave to keep from wanting to die."

The girl's pretty pink color deepened. "Do you mean—"

"I mean this," Jane's voice rose sharply. "She's one of the kind that loves people, that loves life. She's interested in everything, from the color they're painting the church down to the last new baby. She's been sick so long now that folks have got tired of coming. That's the truth, but she'd never believe it. There was always something wrong with the weather or the street cars. Now the telephone's there and nobody uses it, and she understands at last, poor soul."

The paper of eggs went through Jane's trembling hands and smashed at her feet. She looked down blankly, then stared across at the wide blue eyes which faced her without flinching.

"Broken," exclaimed Jane. "But then, they're only eggs. It isn't as bad as if they were the heart of the gentlest creature that ever suffered from neglect and forgetfulness."

The next morning the telephone bell rang early. "I guess some one has got the wrong number again," Amanda said to Jane. It was the first bitter speech of all those weary years.

Jane went to the telephone, her face twitching. Then she held the receiver toward her patient. "It's somebody to speak to you," she said briefly.

It was a girl's voice that came over the wire. "Good-morning, Mrs. Harvey. Isn't this a lovely morning? No, this is Helena Weston. I called you up to know if you had heard the latest engagement."

"Engagement? No!" A sudden eagerness crept into Amanda's voice. Thomas never knew about the engagements. He had the curious masculine density toward anything less decisive than weddings, and he sometimes forgot those. "Who is it?" Amanda asked, her voice tremulous.

"Why, Richard Craft and Agnes Waring. Doesn't it seem queer they've never thought of it before, they're such an ideal couple? They are to be married in January and they will live on Fortieth street. I believe his uncle left him a house there, the pretty one with the ivy."

Half an hour later the bell rang again. This time Amanda reached for the receiver herself.

"Good-morning, Amanda Harvey. Yes, this is Susan. You may have read the morning paper, but I don't believe you heard the most important news."

"What is it? The engagement?"

"What engagement?" One who has not been an invalid of years' standing, shut out of the current of life like a chip flung on the bank of a stream, can hardly imagine the delicious thrill Amanda felt as she imparted the bit of news which had just reached her.

Susan Decker was suitably impressed. "They have my blessing, I'm sure. I seems to me an ideal match. But I sha'n't admit that your news is any more important than mine. The baby has a tooth!"

"The dear little thing!" The tenderness in Amanda's voice made itself felt over the intervening miles. The face of the mother at the other end of the wire softened beautifully. "I wish you could see him, Amanda. I'm going to bring him over next spring, when the weather gets warm and settled. He's the best of all my children."

"The last one always is," laughed Amanda. Then she called Thomas up at the office to tell him about the engagement and the baby's new tooth, and Thomas recognized something in her voice which had not been there in the morning and went back to his work with a sense of relief.

A little later the minister's wife called up to know what Amanda thought of a new plan they were considering in regard to the work in the mission bands. And then Mrs. Percival excused herself for her errand, but could Mrs. Harvey give her the recipe for her delicious salmon salad? Mrs. Harvey's cooking days were over, but her favorite recipes were at her tongue's end. She was listening to Betty Norcross' description of a concert she had attended the evening before when Jane slipped out on an errand. And on the corner she met the yellow-haired girl who the day before had wondered if the telephone did not disturb Mrs. Harvey.

Jane stopped and caught her hands. "How did you manage it?"

The girl laughed. "Why, it was easy enough. I have a telephone, and most people have hearts. The trouble is they get buried under an avalanche of thoughtlessness. If you find us forgetting again, stir us up, will you? We don't mean it, only this is such a busy world that lots of things get crowded out."

"I guess I talked kind of rough yesterday," said Jane with compunction. "But you wouldn't blame me if you'd seen her. Today she's another woman." Jane blinked fiercely. "The wind is blowing dirt into my eyes," she said wih an air of challenging anyone to prove a different reason for their moisture. "I must be going along, and if you never did any good in your life before, and never do again, there's one thing that will be set down to your credit the last day."

When Thomas Harvey came up to his wife's room that night he halted on the threshold, almost awestruck. As she lay there her face wore a look of tranquil contentment beyond his understanding. She turned her eyes as he stood waiting, and a smile flashed to meet him.

"Oh, is it you, dear?" said Amanda. "Come in, I want to tell you about my beautiful day."—The Interior.