

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of Direct Wire, by Clee Garson

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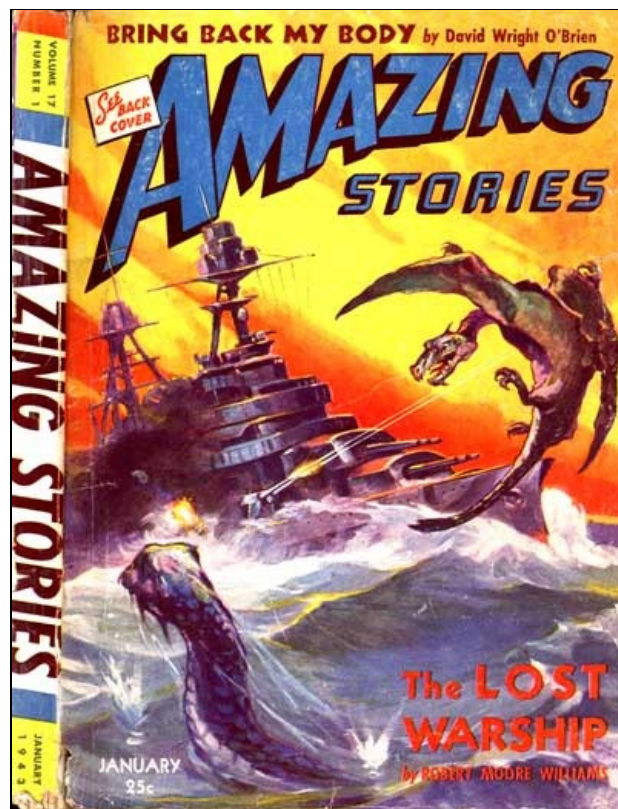
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DIRECT WIRE \*\*\*

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## DIRECT WIRE

by CLEE GARSON

Mort and Mike got strange calls on this phone; they didn't come through Central!



**He had a strange husky voice that made queer chills go up and down your spine**

There is an empty cigar store on the first floor of the loop building in which I keep my office. Formerly it was managed by two of the slickest small time gambling operators who ever booked a bang-tail or banked a game of Hooligan.

There is a small, neatly lettered sign on the door of that unoccupied store now, however, which has caused no end of comment from the former customers of the "cigar store" who had always been all too cheerfully happy to lose their daily dollars there.

The sign reads:

"CLOSED FOR THE DURATION  
Due to our having  
Entered The Armed  
Forces of the U. S.  
GOD BLESS AMERICA  
Mort & Mike"

If you haven't guessed as much by now, the signatures at the bottom of that sign are those of the two former proprietors of the establishment, Mort Robbins and Mike Harrigan.

Now since both Mort and Mike were of military age, and since this nation is at war, it should hardly seem unusual that their former customers and all who knew them would consider their summons to the colors something worthy of great comment. It should hardly seem unusual, that is, unless you happened to know the two, and realized further that they were not drafted, but *voluntarily* enlisted.

Neither was what you could call deeply patriotic, you see. Nor were they the sort to be influenced by such emotional appeals as the beating of drums, the waving of flags, or the playing of brass bands marching along Jackson Boulevard.

"We gotta lick them lice!" Mike constantly proclaimed in regard to Adolf and the Axis, when war discussions came up around the "cigar store." But aside from those loud and perhaps sincere pronouncements, Mike's only contribution to the cause of Victory was the purchase of war bonds which he looked on merely with the cold eye of one seeking a smart investment. And as for his attitude toward the army, Mike best expressed himself with a small embryo ulcer which he kept always on the verge of eruption within twenty-four hours notice to report for a draft board examination. It was rumored that, through a swift, sufficient amount of whisky, Mike could make his embryo ulcer dance angrily for the draft medicos at any time. This none too admirable accomplishment with an ailment not actually serious had kept Mike Harrigan in Class 4 F ever since the last draft registration.

As for Mike's partner, Mort Robbins, the patriotic picture was pretty much the same. Mort was

loudly belligerent toward our enemies in all the "cigar store" discussions, wisely put much of his funds into war bonds, but kept one of the most extensive libraries of medical statements from doctors in existence. All these statements concerned the tragic asthma and hay-fever of one Mort Robbins and went on to declare that he might possibly stop breathing completely should he be placed in the army. The fact that Mort had connived to get these statements and was not really seriously troubled by those two maladies didn't alter the fact that they had resulted so far in keeping him out of khaki.

Consequently, since more than one of their customers knew or suspected their lack of practical patriotism, the appearance of that sign on the door of what had once been their establishment caused quite a considerable flurry of comment for a time.

Naturally, no one could understand what had caused it all. For that, they can't be blamed. I'd never have understood it, if I hadn't accidentally been the one person in the world, outside of Mort and Mike, who knew the true story....

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**O**n the morning that it all began, I was down in the "cigar store," killing time and having a coke and some conversation before going upstairs to the grimly reproachful surroundings of my too neglected office.

Mike Harrigan was the only one behind the counter, and I was the only one on the customer side.

Mike was red headed and freckle necked, a massive chap with a blarney smile and a baby face. He's been in the "cigar store" bookie racket ever since repeal had closed a speakeasy he'd had on Grand Avenue. This morning, however, he was glaring glumly down at a newspaper spread before him atop the glass cigar counter, and scarcely nodded to half my conversational sallies.

"What's eating you, Mike?" I finally demanded. "That ulcer getting well in spite of you?"

Mike ignored the crack. But he looked up from his reading and jabbed a big red freckled thumb down on a column of print in the paper before him.

"That State's Attorney!" Mike snorted indignantly. "He's gonna go too far pretty damn soon!"

"What now?" I grinned. Mike was always indignant over the efforts of the State's Attorney to "ruin an honest man's business" with his crack-downs on small-time handbooks throughout the city. "What's his latest move in the battle against Mike Harrigan?"

"This here story in the paper," Mike declared, "says how the State's Attorney's office is starting to investigate the lists of the telephone company in order to track down any phones used by us bookmakers in our business. It's illegal!" He concluded with the virtuous snort of an indignant taxpayer shocked by the violation of law, smacking his big red-knuckled hand on the counter top to emphasize his disturbance.

"Aha!" I said. "In other words the State's Attorney's office is going to find their way into this handbook of yours by the direct approach, eh? It'll take time for them, won't it, to go over the entire telephone lists?"

"You never can tell," Mike predicted gloomily. "They might nail us all," he snapped his big fingers, "like that."

I glanced over at the telephone booth in the corner of the store. Its folding door was open, and the ever-present "Out Of Order" sign was suspended from a cord around the mouthpiece. Over that phone Mike and Mort conducted the bulk of their horse booking business. Through it they kept in touch with a central gambling syndicate service which provided day-long racing results, odds and other essential data to numerous other such small establishments around the city. Through it, also, they took in a nice business of telephone bets from wagerers too busy to get in to make them in person. The never-missing "Out of Order" sign was to prevent customers from using the telephone for out-going calls which might interfere with business. The telephone was, of course, not at all out of order.

"Maybe," I suggested cheerfully, taking my eyes from the telephone booth, "they'll snatch out your phone on you. Then where'll you be?"

Mike smacked his open palm against his broad brow.

"My God," he exclaimed, "don't say no such things!"

I gulped the rest of my coke, lit another cigarette, shrugged cheerfully, and started for the door. I turned before leaving.

"Cheer up," I said. "This will probably blow over. And if it doesn't, there's always the army."

---

**M**ike glared and started to answer. And at that moment the telephone in the booth began to ring. He started for it, and I started out the door again, running headlong into Mort Robbins.

"Good morning, good morning, chumly!" Mort exclaimed cheerfully when we had untangled ourselves. "What's new with you?"

Mort is short, slightly on the plump side, with straight, dark hair, a round, beaming face, and a penchant for flamboyantly colored sport shirts.

"Nothing's new with me," I told him, "but plenty seems to be new with Mike. He's cursing the State's Attorney's office again."

Mort frowned.

"Whatcha mean? What's on the fire now? I didn't read the morning rags yet."

Briefly, I told him about the news story which had excited his partner. He nodded, thought a moment, then grinned.

"They can't do that," he said. "It's illegal."

"Tell Mike, if that's so," I said. "He's working himself into a boil."

Mort hadn't heard me. He was frowning thoughtfully again.

"Or can they?" he wondered aloud. "Where's that news story?"

I pointed to the paper on the counter and he stepped over to it. I started to leave again, but at that moment the telephone booth in the corner shook from side to side and Mike stepped out, face red with wrath.

"I'd like to get my hands on that guy, the wisenheimer!" he growled. "Hah! Practical jokes, eh?"

Again I stopped at the door.

"What's wrong this time?" I demanded. "Or is it still the State's Attorney you're frothing about?"

"Some guy," Mike thundered explosively, "just called to say he wanted to talk to Hitler and Mussolini. Wise guy, hah, the louse!"

"Hitler and Mussolini?" I demanded. "Who was it?"

"Wouldn't I like to know," Mike exclaimed redly. "Wouldn't I just like to know!" He made a grasping gesture with his two big fists, indicating what he would do to the party if he did know.

Mort had put down the newspaper and had been listening to Mike's explosion.

"Don't bust your buttons, Mike," Mort advised. "It's probably just one of our customers having a gag."

"Bum gag, I say. If they wanta gag whyn't they gag funny?" Mike snorted angrily. "Talk to Hitler and Mussolini, eh? Huh!"

And at that juncture, the telephone rang again. Mort looked up, then looked at me and winked. He turned to Mike, who'd started wrathfully for the booth.

"Hold it, chumly," Mort said. "I'll answer this one. If it's the joker again I can handle him better than you can."

---

**M**ort walked nonchalantly over to the booth, took down the receiver, and turned to wink again at me.

"Hello," Mort said.

Obviously the voice on the other end of the wire said something. Mort grinned.

"They ain't here," Mort said, grinning more widely. "No. Not either of 'em. Adolf sleeps late and don't get down until noon. Benito is out having himself a milkshake. Who'll I tell 'em called? Huh? What's that? You call back? But who'll I tell 'em called? Huh? Gab—Gabby? What?"

Mort put the receiver back on the hook and turned back to us, stepping out of the booth.

"The joker said to tell Adolf and Benito he'd call back later. I didn't get his name, but it sounded like Gabby. Smart joe, this Gabby."

Mike was glaring. "Gabby, eh? Gabby, Gabby, Gabby," he scratched his red head frowningly. "Who do I know named Gabby?"

"Skip it," Mort advised smilingly. "It wouldn't be the right monicker, anyway."

Mike muttered dourly, moving back behind the counter. Suddenly he stopped.

"You see the morning paper?" he asked his partner in sudden recollection. "You see about that louse State's Att—"

"Yeah, I read it," Mort cut him off. "It'll blow over, even if they get away with it. But they might not even get away with it. It's illegal."

Mike beamed for the first time since I'd seen him that morning. Obviously he was pleased to have his own legal judgment upheld by his partner.

"You think so? That's what I thought." He turned to me. "Isn't that what I thought?" he demanded.

"Did you call for the morning line check on the tracks yet?" Mort asked, changing the subject.

Mike shook his head. "I was waiting for a few phone bets to come in, first," he said.

"How many come in so far?" Mort asked.

Mike suddenly looked at his wrist watch and swore. "None!" he exclaimed. "None and it's already after ten!"

Mort looked alarmed. "You mean the phone ain't rang with a bet since you been down?"

"Only time the phone rung was with that practical joker, twicet. You heard 'em," Mike declared.

"But by this time we generally have a couple dozen bets in from the phones!" Mort exclaimed. "This is bad. Whatcha think goes?"

"Goes?" Mike exclaimed indignantly. "How should I know what goes?"

Mort suddenly clapped his palm to his brow. "Maybe it's got somethin' to do with that news story!"

"About the State's Attorney gonna check the phone lists?" Mike demanded.

"Yeah."

Mike thought this over. "No," he decided. "Couldn't be. Not so soon, yet. Tomorrow, maybe, but not so soon."

Mort calmed down a little. "You're right there," he said. "It wouldn't be so soon."

"Maybe this is a bad day," I broke in. "Maybe your customers just aren't betting this morning."

Mort and Mike looked at me as if I were crazy, which possibly I was. Two dozen steady horse players don't all stop at once, if ever.

Mike was as sorely troubled as Mort.

"We got at least couple dozen bets across the counter already this morning," he said. "But no phone bets."

"Maybe the damn thing is *actually* out of order," Mort groaned, glancing at the telephone.

"Then how did we get them two calls from the joker?" Mike demanded. "No. That phone ain't no more outta order than I am."

"You're right. I forgot those calls," Mort acknowledged.

---

**A**nd at that moment the telephone rang again. Mort looked at Mike. Mike looked at Mort. Both wet their lips.

"Ordinary days that joker might be funny," Mort said. "But now I'm thinking this isn't an ordinary day. I'm thinking it's not as funny as I first thought."

He crossed to the telephone booth, jerked the receiver from the hook, and bellowed into the mouthpiece.

"Hello!"

There was a brief pause in which someone said something to him from the other end of the wire.

"Listen!" Mort suddenly exploded. "Nothing is funny three times, wise guy. I wish you would take your Hitler-Mussolini gag and—" at which point he described what he wanted the caller to do with the gag. Then, slamming the receiver back into the hook, Mort stormed out of the booth.

"Same guy?" Mike demanded, his veins bulging in his thick, freckled neck.

"Same guy," Mort said grimly. His lips were tight. "He asked if we could get Hitler and Musso to the phone in a hurry. He said the connection was getting weaker and weaker, and he was afraid it wouldn't hold out much longer."

"The connection?" I broke in, puzzled.

Mort looked on the verge of apoplexy. "The connection from where he was calling to earth, the wise guy said!" he exploded. "If we could only trace that call I'd break that no-good's neck!"

Mike and Mort evidently took turns acting as sobering influence on each other.

"Now we don't wanta get too riled," Mike pointed out with surprising sense. "The gag artist prob'ly wants we should get mad like this. We'll forget 'em. I'll call for the morning line and the odd changes for the first races."

Mort drummed his fingers on the cigar showcase, cooling himself off. Mike marched over to the telephone booth and wedged himself inside. With one big red finger, he dialed a number rapidly after he took the telephone from the hook. But he only half completed his dialing. It broke off as he uttered a choking curse.

"Listen you!" Mike suddenly bellowed, the echoes in the booth almost knocking it over. "Get the hell offa this line! Howdja get on in the first place?"

Mort stopped drumming his fingers and glanced startledly at the booth. Crimson began to return to his face.

"What's up?" he shouted. He started toward the booth. I followed him. We could hear Mike spluttering incoherently inside. Then there was an ear-splitting racket as the big bookie smashed the receiver back into the hook and turned purple faced toward us.

"The gag artist!" he raged. "The same damn wise guy. The Hitler-Mussolini smart aleck. He was waitin' on the line. He hadn't hung up. He told me he hadda wait on the line, cause he didn't dare break off the connection. He said it was too hard to make inna first place. He said he hoped we didn't mind if he waited until we got Adolf and Benito on the wire fer him!"

---

**B**y now Mort was spluttering, and this time neither partner seemed to have a calming effect on the other. They were both raging, boiling mad.

"I'll call the cops!" Mike bellowed. "That's what I'll do!" He began to pace up and down. "I'll have that guy electrocuted!"

"I'm going out," Mort stormed, "and get the operator onna 'nother phone. I'll report that so-and-so, and they'll trace him down through the telephone company!"

He started for the door. Mike grabbed his arm.

"Waita minute!" he exclaimed. "We can't do that!"

Mort tore his arm from his partner's grasp. "What's stopping us?" he demanded.

"The State's Attorney's office!" Mike groaned. "Maybe it's a trap set by them skunks from the State's Attorney's office. Maybe it's the start of their telephone tracing of bookmakers!"

Sickly, Mort turned back. His face was still flushed, but three fourths of his steam was gone.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "And if so, what a helluva note this is!"

I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

"Look," I said. "I have an idea. If it's a joker, perhaps I can talk him out of it better than you boys. You'll need that wire today, and the joker might just be drunk and obstinate enough to hang on all day long to spite you. Maybe he knows you won't dare report it. I'm not steamed up; maybe I'll reason with him better because I'm not. You want me to?"

Mort and Mike gave me grateful glances.

"You get ridda that wise guy," Mike said, "and we'll never ferget it!"

"Go to it, chumly," Mort said, "and if you lose that louse, we'll make it up to you!"

I went over to the booth and, stepping inside, took the receiver from the hook. I had a jovial, let's-be-friends opener all ready.

"Hello, pal," I said amiably.

The voice that came to my ears was distinctly unlike what I'd expected. I don't quite know *how* or *why* it sounded so strange and eerie, but it did. It was a man's voice, coming over the wire the way long distance calls used to sound before they got transmission technique down pat.

"Hello there," said the voice. "Have they arrived yet?"

It wasn't the voice of a drunk. And if it were that of a practical joker, the poker-faced quality of it was perfect acting. It sounded earnestly, eagerly serious.

"You mean Adolf and Benito?" I asked. I was willing to play ball for a few minutes if it brought results. Besides, I was curious.

"Yes."

"Why do you want to talk to them?" I asked.

"I don't want to talk to them. My boss does," the voice answered.

"Then put your boss on," I said. "I'll talk to him."

"You are neither Hitler nor Mussolini," the voice replied. "He wishes to speak only to them. He's very busy. Too busy to waste time in idle conversation. Please fetch Hitler and Mussolini to the wire."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I have already covered that ground with the other parties I spoke to before you," the voice said. "Please hurry and bring Adolf and Benito to the phone. This connection is getting progressively worse. It can't last much longer. We spent several years getting it through, you know."

"Did you now?" I asked politely.

"Yes we did," the voice answered stiffly. Then, annoyed: "*Must* you waste this precious time? Please bring Hitler and Mussolini to the telephone as quickly as possible."

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There was a fuzzy crackling over the wire. Like a ship-to-shore connection.

"Listen, pal," I said. "This joke is costing a couple of guys some lucrative trade. You are tying up a telephone they need badly in their business, or didn't you know that?"

"That can't be helped," the voice said stiffly.

"Be a good sport and get off the wire," I said.

"I have no intention of doing that until my boss has talked to Hitler and Mussolini," the voice said coldly. I knew a positive statement when I heard one. I hung up, clambered out of the booth, spread my hands expressively to Mike and Mort who stood there eagerly waiting for some good word.

"No soap," I said. "I don't think you got a joker on there, and I'd swear you haven't got a drunk."

"What have we got, then," Mike demanded. "A smart copper waiting to trap us?"

I shook my head. "I think you got a loony," I said. "But don't quote me." I started toward the door. "I got work to do, gents, but I'll look in again a little later. Hope you get rid of your pest."

"We'd better," Mike moaned dismally.

"Brother," Mort declared, pulling his hair and making a sincerely distraught face, "you're not kidding!"

I looked at the telephone booth and shook my head. "Somebody is," I told them....

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For perhaps three hours I was able to concentrate on my work, with the telephone booth distraction cropping up only about every fifteen minutes or so to give me the fidgets.

At the end of that time, a little before two o'clock, I finally covered up my reproachful typewriter and, on the excuse that I wanted a coke, left the office to go down and see how the boys were doing with the determined loony on their telephone.

The "cigar store" was crowded with the usual early-afternoon hang-arounders when I walked in. Mort and Mike, each behind a dice board, were accommodating trusting suckers who had somehow gotten the mistaken idea that Hooligan was a game you beat every other time.

Mike, looking up, noticed my entrance first. He signaled to me, muttered an excuse to the dice roller at his board, and came quickly around the counter. He took me by the arm and steered me out into the building lobby.

"Listen, pal," he half-whispered, "fer gawdsakes don't say anything about the jerk on the telephone. Mort and me ain't told anyone, fer fear of the ribbing we'd get, plus the kick in the pants it would give our regular betting business over the counter."

"You mean the guy's still on the telephone?" I demanded.

Mike nodded a little sickly. "We can't get him off. And since we ain't letting on to no one about the phone being fritzed that way, every time he rings, we pretend we're getting an odd change, or some scratches or result. Mort an' me have been running our legs off, using a telephone next door to get our prices and results and such dope from the syndicate. But don't let on. We ain't told no one!"

"Okay," I promised. "I'll keep mum. But who in the hell do you suppose it is?"

Mike lowered his voice even more, looking furtively around the building lobby.

"Confidentially, although we don't dare draw attention to our joint since the State's Attorney is telephone prowling, Mort and me decided you was right. It must be a loony. All we can do is wait

until he gets tired and gets off."

I nodded. "That's about all you can do," I agreed. "Does he still want to talk to Hitler and Mussolini?"

Mike nodded disgustedly. "Worse than ever. Calling every twenty minutes now. Mort and me is going crazy answering them calls and pretending they ain't nothing but syndicate results."

"I don't blame you," I said. "I would, too." Mike went back into the store and behind the dice board. I took a coke out of the cooler and uncapped it on the side of the machine.

Mort sent me a message in his glance, and I nodded reassuringly to him.

"I don't know anything," I said.

Mort grinned a sick, grateful sort of grin, and went back to the task of taking quarters from his customers. Taking my time with my cigarette, I finished my coke. Then the telephone rang, as I'd been waiting for it to do.

Mort dashed to the booth, closed the door as he entered, and for several flushed minutes appeared to be talking into the phone and writing something on a scratch pad. But I knew it was an act from the pained expression on his face. I knew that the loony was babbling away again and that Mort was having to listen for the sake of the pose.

When at last he hung up, he emerged mopping his face with a gaily colored handkerchief. The look he shot me was confirmation enough that the loony was still on the wire.

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Unable to feel too sorry for the boys, I concealed a grin behind a yawn, nodded to them both, and left the place. Upstairs once more in my office I got back into a rather muggy stream of work on which I found difficulty concentrating.

For some reason I couldn't at first explain to myself, I kept thinking about the telephone loony of Mike and Mort's. Not because of the ironically ridiculous turmoil it threw them into, but for some other reason far more subtle, but which I was unable to put my finger on.

The thing amused me, puzzled me, and yet, somehow was beginning to trouble me. Not through any great sympathy for Mike or Mort, of course. It will be a cold day when my heart bleeds for bookmakers. But something or other *was* growing more and more bothersome. I thought about it a while, then shoved it out of my mind and got back to work.

I was able to grind along for a couple of hours without having it come back into my mind. And when it popped up again, I shoved it away once more just as quickly. I had to get that work out, and I knew I wouldn't if I stewed any longer over the telephone loony who was quite probably still playing hob with Mike and Mort at that moment.

It was a little after five o'clock, five-fifteen, to be exact, when—work or no work—the thing hit me. Bang! Like that I knew what'd been in the back of my mind.

How in the name of blazes had the telephone loony been able to stay on that wire so indefinitely? Why hadn't the operator broken in to end the connection each time Mort or Mike hung up? It seemed logical that she would have done so. The loony couldn't have just held onto the telephone and been right on tap the moment Mort or Mike picked up the hook. The loony could have called them, of course, but it would have been impossible for him to be on hand every time they picked up the telephone when it hadn't been ringing!

I left my typewriter, not even bothering to remove the page in it, and hurried out of the office. Downstairs I found the "cigar store" completely deserted except for Mike and Mort. The day's races were over, and dice customers who were willing enough to roll cubes in office time, had headed homeward.

"Brother," Mort greeted me, "you were right and how!"

"About the loony—" I began.

"That's right," Mort said. "He was as loony a loony as I've ever heard of. We finally got rid of him."

"Got rid of him?" I blurted the question.

"Yeah," Mort nodded. "And I hope for good. He just faded off, about half an hour after his voice began to get dimmer and dimmer, and that was that."

"But—" I began.

"And wait'll you hear who that bug thought he was."

"Gabby who?" I asked.

"Gabby, nuts. I messed it up the first time. He thought he was Gabriel, the *Angel* Gabriel, no less!" Mort exclaimed, tapping the side of his head.



"The Angel Gabriel?" I echoed.

Mort nodded. "And guess who he was calling for?"

"Don't tell me," I said.

"That's right," Mort declared. "He said he was God's secretary, Gabriel, calling from Heaven for his boss. He said his boss wanted to talk to Hitler and Mussolini!"

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I blinked. "And what was God going to tell those lice?"

"To take it on the lam, or else!" Mike broke in.

"No fooling?"

"So help me!" Mort swore. "What a loony. He went on to say—this fake Angel Gabriel—that his boss just wanted to tell those two jerks, Adolf and Benito, that enough was enough and they were dead ducks for sure."

"What made this Gabriel from the nut house get so confidential all of a sudden?" I demanded. "He wouldn't tell his business at all at first."

"This'll kill you," Mort said. "The connection, like I say, kept getting fainter and fainter, and our goofy Gabriel said it was fading off and that we'd have to hand the message on to Hitler and Mussolini for his boss, if we couldn't bring the two jerks to the phone to hear it in person."

"Did he bother to explain," I asked, "why he didn't call Adolf and Benito directly, if his boss wanted to tell them off?"

"So help me," Mort declared, "he did. He said that with the war all over our globe like it is, there was a lot of space interference everywhere preventin' communication. He said he couldn't be choosy, and had to use any wire he could get through to. It happened to be ours. Can you beat it?"

I shook my head slowly. "No," I said, "I can't. But what trick could he have used to stay on the phone indefinitely, connected right to your wire, even after you hung up on him each time?" And then, briefly, I explained the rest of my puzzle over that little item.

"If you can figure that out," I concluded, "we'll have to admit that, loony or not, he was nothing less than a mad genius."

Mort shrugged. "I'm no telephone man," he said, "but there must be some explana—" His sentence stopped abruptly, and he and Mike seemed to be looking over my shoulder.

I turned, to see an overall clad chap carrying a canvas toolbag just stepping through the door. He smiled cheerfully at the three of us.

"I'm the man from the telephone company," he said amiably. "I got here a little earlier today, missed you last night. Had to have the night elevator operator let me into your store. Hope you weren't too inconvenienced today."

"What's it all about?" Mort demanded. "What do you mean? You know about the loony?"

The telephone man had stopped by the booth. He was opening his tool bag. He looked up.

"Loony? No, I'm sorry, I don't know anything about any loony."

"Who called himself the Angel Gabriel?" Mike broke in.

The telephone man smiled up at us in genial bewilderment.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said, "I don't quite get the drift of all this. All I know is that I was in here last night to disconnect your telephone temporarily, and I'm back again tonight to return it to service. I saw your "Out of Order" sign there, so I thought you'd expected me and knew all about it."

---

Mort stepped forward. His face a curious picture of bewilderment and disbelief, he asked:

"Wait a minute! You mean to say this telephone hasn't been connected all day today?"

The telephone man nodded. "That's right. But I'm putting it back in order now."

"We got calls over that phone today!" Mike asserted vigorously. "It couldn't have been disconnected."

The telephone man chuckled. "Good joke. You couldn't have received a call over this telephone. It would have been utterly impossible. It was completely disconnected." He went on tool sorting.

Mike was looking at Mort. Mort was looking at the telephone man. I was looking at all three, and

the telephone man was unconcernedly taking out wires from his bag.

"You—you aren't kidding?" Mort's voice came choked. "This was really disconnected?"

The telephone man shoved the booth a little to one side, grabbed some wires then visible beneath the booth, and pulled them forth. They were all neatly severed, with the ends taped.

Mike and Mort were staring at the severed ends of the wires, then at one another.

"Mike," said Mort, "I think it is a good idea we should get drunk."

"My old lady," said Mike, "used to believe in this sort of stuff. Maybe she wasn't such a dope."

Mort nodded. "My old man, too."

Neither said a word to me. Neither spoke to the telephone man. They just walked out, arm in arm, never looking back once, even at the cash register.

I understand they got drunk that night. But I understand Mike kept his ulcer carefully under the explosive line, so that he passed the enlistment exams the following morning. Mort left his medical statements home, and of course a direct exam showed him nicely suited for the army. They were inducted by noon that day, and on their way to camp by dinner time.

They left that sign on the door. The sign that puzzled so very many people, even to the "God Bless America" on it. For Mike and Mort were as little known for their religious leanings as they'd been for their patriotic urgings.

Relatives of the two, I am told, disposed of the store's stock and equipment. Mort didn't discuss any of that in the short note he left for me before leaving with Mike.

"Dear Chum:

Of course when you get a message like we got, and are told to pass it along personally to the two jerks it was intended for, there's nothing else you can do. We'll see that it gets to Adolf and Benito—for Gabriel's boss.

Mort & Mike."

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