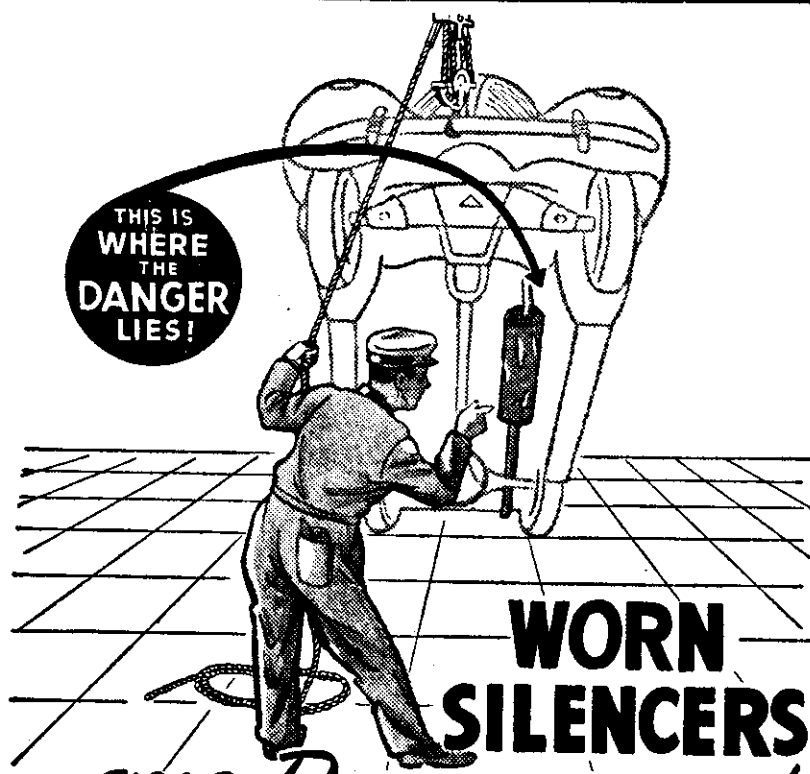


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## AMID THE PARTY LINES

(Written for "The  
Listener" by  
"DUKIE")



OUR country postmistress's holidays were due and there was no one to relieve her, so, in a weak moment (I am inclined at odd times to allow my better nature to come uppermost while I do "good turns") I agreed to take over her duties while she was away.

"It is quite easy," she airily told me from the height of her several years' experience. "You'll manage quite well," as I doubtfully shook my head. Too late I remembered that our local telephone exchange is attached to the post office also. If I had thought about that first, I should most certainly have refused to be kind. How could I, who was scared of any telephone not automatic, and who, ever since I had come to this small country district, had begged someone else to do my telephoning for me whenever it was necessary to use that dread instrument, complicated as it was by party lines and special rings, manage a whole switch-board of party lines?

"I can't do it," I wailed.

However, all the other women were busy with cows, babies, husbands, and so on, so I was not released from my promise.

I had a week in which to learn all the details of the office—to learn what goes on behind the counter when someone airily asks for a postal note, a money order, stamps, letter cards; wishes to deposit money—or withdraw it; wishes to pay a rural delivery fee or telephone account; wishes to send a telegram or, worse still, a money-order telegram; desires to post a parcel to the other ends of the earth, or would like to send a cable on a long journey.

In fact, I am sure I had to learn as much (very nearly) as the postmasters in our big towns know—and all in one week.

My brain whirled and at night I dreamed of balance sheets, statements for the period, payments of all kinds, figures and coins, stamps and letters. I awakened weary with sorting all these things into their correct pigeonholes, and endeavouring to remember how all the written work must be set out. And there was the telephone—nameless small plug holes, plugs and cords that might mean anything—but to me usually meant a complicated mess. I put the wrong plugs in the wrong holes, mixed up conversations, cut others off short, rang the wrong number of rings and so brought people to their 'phones who were not wanted at all. I frequently forgot to see if party lines were working between themselves and heard some very

choice words as the result of ringing in someone's ear!

The postmistress bore with me patiently in all matters except my telephone language.

When told by an angry voice that "You cut me off and I hadn't finished talking," I would run my fingers through my hair, search for the missing plug, and mutter distractedly, "Oh, did I? Well, wait a tick and I'll see what I can do!"

When confronted with the problem of putting a toll call through to a party line on which two farmers' wives were having a heart-to-heart talk I gasped, "What do I do?"

"You must get them off the line," my teacher told me firmly.

"Hey, you two! Get off the line," I yelled.

They did; and with much concentration I got my plugs in safely. But the postmistress was obviously upset.

"What's the matter?" I wanted to know.

"You can't talk to people like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you did just then."

"What's wrong with that? You said I had to get them off the line."

"You must say, 'Line wanted for a toll call, please,' and be polite. You mustn't yell and be abrupt."

\* \* \*

FAR too soon the week was up and the postmistress departed, still smilingly telling me, "You'll be all right."

Nine o'clock next morning found me with a bag of unsorted mail deposited by a departing service car, all the farmers (or as nearly all as made no difference) ringing madly at their end of their telephones and the village people already queuing up for their mail.

I banged the date stamp, threw letters into pigeon holes, dashed into the telephone operator's room—a mere partition at the end of the office—dashed to the counter to give out mail, sorted more mail, answered more 'phones, sold stamps and postal notes, issued money orders and receipts, and then answered more 'phones, and, in spite of my curtness, everyone wanted me to pause to discuss the weather, or more.

\* \* \*

FOR a short time in the afternoon my work abated slightly—that was until the children came from school, wanting more mail, more stamps and bringing letters from their mothers with all kinds of odd requests.