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The Whistle

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

*The story of a strident siren that brought a whole city to the verge of madness.
—a bizarre extravaganza*

POLICE COMMISSIONER GOD-FREY grimly picked up the ringing telephone-set from his desk.

"If this is another call about that damn whistle," he announced, "I believe I shall go cocoo."

Then he lifted the receiver from its hook, and placed it to his ear.

"Hello," said he. "Police Commissioner speaking."

"Now, Mr. Commissioner," said a high-pitched female voice over the wire, "can't you do something about that whistle? You see——"

Slam went the receiver! He saw, all right. Then he rang for his secretary.

"Miss Burns," he directed crisply, when she arrived, "will you please go out to our telephone desk just as fast as you can travel, and tell the phone girl to ring me herself immediately, and *not* to give me back that outside call which I just hung up on. Do you get me? Then toddle!"

Miss Burns toddled.

In a minute the commissioner's phone rang again. Again he answered it. But this time it was not the raucous voice of the previous call.

Instead he heard, in sweet musical tones, "This is the phone girl, Commissioner. And I understood your orders all right, not to put any more calls through to you about the whistle. But that last call was the Mayor's wife, so I thought——"

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Try and get her back again for me, like a good girl!"

"Here she is now," said the sweet voice.

Then again the strident female accents, "Mr. Commissioner, they cut us off. This is Mrs. Ransome, wife of Mayor Ransome, you know. Can't you do something to stop that awful whistle?"

"What awful whistle?" he inquired, sparring for time.

"Haven't you heard it?" asked Mrs. Ransome in surprize. Then, "But I suppose you are too far downtown. It's driving us all crazy up in the residential section. It's been blowing steadily all morning, and it sounds as though it was slightly off the pitch, or something. A horrible, grating sound. Isn't there a law against factories and factory-whistles in residential districts? I thought we had a zoning ordinance, or something."

"What direction is it in?" he inquired.

"It's just in the direction of my sewing-room windows," she replied. "Let's see. That's away from downtown, so it must be north. Yes, I'm sure it's due north."

"Very well, Madam," he promised. "I'll put detectives on it at once, and have it stopped. It's an outrage!"

"Thank you so much," she murmured. "Good-bye."

And she hung up. So did he. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

It was indeed an outrage. All day long his telephone had been kept ringing with complaints about that confounded whistle—complaints from frantic women, women who became more and more frantic as the day wore on.

Finally the Commissioner had put a stop-order on all such calls. He could



"On the curb sat a man, with his feet in the gutter and both hands to his ears. A disheveled woman ran by, screaming, pursued by a policeman."

hear the whistle himself through the open windows of the City Hall. It was an annoying, nerve-racking sort of a whistle, but it hadn't really gotten on his nerves so much as had all these women who had kept phoning him about it.

Undoubtedly some factory-siren had become stuck. Its owners were in the best position of any one to fix it, and undoubtedly were taking the proper steps. It might stop any moment now. So what business was it of his to interfere?

That is to say, what business was it of his until the Mayor's wife butted in? Her interest in the whistle altered the situation in an instant, for Commissioner Godfrey's job depended upon his remaining in the good graces of Mayor Ransome.

So the Commissioner rang for the Chief of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Captain Atwater. That official promptly reported.

"Atwater," demanded Mr. Godfrey, "what have you done toward locating that awful whistle?"

"Nothing much, sir," replied the Captain, with a grin. "All stations were instructed, early this morning, to have all patrolmen report whether or not the whistle was on his beat. All reported that it was not, so I dropped the matter. Why?"

"Atwater," asserted the Commissioner, solemnly, "this has become serious. The Mayor's wife——"

"Hell!" interrupted the other, suddenly becoming interested.

"Yes," continued Godfrey. "The old vixen herself got after me. She just phoned. If we don't stop that whistle at once, you and I had better start out to look for another job."

"I have it!" exclaimed the bureau chief, brightening, "We'll have each station locate it by compass, and then we'll plot all the lines on a map."

"Bully!" exclaimed the Commissioner, ringing for his secretary.

AS MISS BURNS entered, he fired at her, "Take this, rush. Telephonic orders to all stations. The sergeant in charge will get out on the station-house roof at once with a compass, note the exact direction of that damn whistle—strike out the word 'damn', Miss Burns—of that whistle, and phone the direction to the Commissioner personally at City Hall. End

of order. And tell 'em to make it snappy. And, Miss Burns, as soon as you've typed that and given it to the phone girl, bring me in the police map. You know the one I mean, the big map out of the directory pasted on a sheet of cardboard, with all the stations on it in red. Now toddle!"

Miss Burns toddled.

"We'll need a protractor," asserted Atwater.

"A what?"

"A protractor. One of those things you measure angles with."

"We'll have to make one then," replied the Commissioner. "Anyhow, they won't be reporting by angles, will they? It'll be north and south, and east-south-west, and all that sort of rot, won't it?"

"I suppose so," agreed the Captain. "Let's make one of them that way, then."

So the two officials were hard at work trying to remember the points of the compass, and put them down on paper, when Miss Burns returned with the map. Fortunately there was an elaborate and beautifully drawn compass in the lower right-hand corner of the city map; so the two men traced it onto a sheet of thin paper. Then they got out a pencil and a long ruler, and stood ready.

Pretty soon the first report came in, "The whistle is due east of Station 6."

So they drew a line on the map, due east from Station 6.

Scarcely had they done this, when Station 8 reported that the whistle was about northwest of there. That line was likewise drawn.

"Aha!" exclaimed the Commissioner. "The lines cross exactly at Jones's soap factory, in District 7. The dirty pup! He headed the citizen's committee against Mayor Ransome in the last election. Just wait till I send a squad over from Station 7, and put Mr. Jones in the cooler for indecent disturbance!"

He picked up the phone to call Station 7, but there was an incoming call on the wire: "Station 9 reports that the whistle is southeast."

"Plot it down, Atwater," commanded Commissioner Godfrey.

Atwater did so. The new line crossed each of the other two, several blocks away from the Jones factory.

"Um!" said the Commissioner, pursing up his lips. "Not so good!"

So, instead of calling Station 7 and directing the arrest of Mr. Jones, he called Station 9 back again.

"Sergeant," said he, "Commissioner speaking. Try that direction again. You're pretty rotten."

The two men waited nervously for a few moments. Through the open windows they could distinctly hear that awful off-pitch whistle. Newsboys began crying extras about the whistle, in the streets outside.

Then the sergeant at Station 9 phoned apologetically, "I guess we were all wet, Chief. The whistle is due *northeast*."

Atwater plotted that direction, then exclaimed, "My God, sir! Worse, and more of it! It doesn't cross the other two lines at all now!"

Commissioner Godfrey was just about to call Station 9 a third time, and give the sergeant there a real dressing-down, when he was interrupted by the rapidly successive reports from practically all the other stations.

As fast as these reports came in, Atwater drew the lines on the map.

Finally there was a lull in the incoming calls, and the Commissioner turned to view the handiwork of his assistant. Then he gasped. The lines went every which way, all over the map. None except the original two came anywhere near the Jones soap factory.

For a few moments, the two men

stared speechless at the map. They weren't even thinking. They were merely staring with the same dumb paralysis of fear which affects a stupid student in an examination. They were worrying about the problem, rather than thinking about it.

At last, the Commissioner broke the silence.

"We *must* think!" said he, determinedly.

"A good idea," assented the other, hurriedly.

Godfrey glared at him.

Then, "I have it!" exclaimed Atwater, "I remember reading once in the Sunday paper, in an article on sounds, that the human ears can't tell whether a sound is in front or behind. A man, trying to locate a sound, turns his head until the sound comes either directly in front of him, or directly behind him."

"Well, what good is that going to do us?" asked the Commissioner.

"It's going to solve our problem, that's what it's going to do," replied the other, confidently. "We'll run all our lines just the opposite way from each station too. This will give us a point through which one line, either the forward one or the backward one, from each station, will pass. Come on! Let's go!"

Quickly the lines on the map were extended backward. But still the helter-skelter! There was hardly a ward of the city that did not have at least one intersection of lines in it. Any one of these intersections might be the true location of the whistle. Thus the whistle might be almost anywhere in the big city.

And still its awful screech resounded through the open windows, and still the newsboys cried their extras in the streets below.

There was just one ray of sunshine to the whole situation: two more of the lines

passed very close to old Jones's factory.

Miss Burns stuck her head through the door.

"The Mayor's wife is on the phone again," she announced. "What shall I say?"

The Commissioner passed his hand across his worried brow.

"Tell her to go jump in the lake!" he exclaimed. Then, "No, no! Tell her that I'm out with Captain Atwater. Tell her that we've located the whistle, approximately; and hope to have it stopped very soon now."

"Very well, sir," replied the girl, and withdrew.

Commissioner Godfrey seized the phone and called Station 7.

"Sergeant," he bellowed, "send a squad over to the Jones factory on the double-quick. Tell them to stop that whistle at once. And if that old fool Jones is there himself, arrest him as a suspicious character, or a public nuisance, or something. And phone me as soon as you get back. Step on it!"

Then turning to Atwater, he announced, "As soon as we get that whistle stopped, the sergeants who reported the wrong directions are going to catch hell!"

MISS BURNS entered with an assortment of afternoon papers. The two men pounced on them. The main news sections were chiefly devoted to the whistle. There were several columns of statements as to the direction from which the sound appeared to come. These directions, if plotted on a map, would have been even more helter-skelter than the lines already plotted in the Commissioner's office.

"I guess our sergeants aren't so crazy, after all," asserted Atwater.

The telephone rang. It was Station 7 reporting, "The whistle isn't at the Jones

factory, sir. Their boiler is shut down, so it couldn't be them."

"Hell!" exclaimed the Commissioner. "Mrs. Ransome will be calling up again in a few minutes. Let's beat it out to lunch before she does."

So the two men left the office together. When they reached the steps of City Hall, the wail of the whistle first really began to get under their skins. Its sound seemed to permeate the atmosphere, to be omnipresent, coming from no particular direction. No wonder the police sergeants had had difficulty in locating it!

The sound just barely missed having the same effect on the two officials as biting the tines of a fork, or the scratching of a gritty chalk on a blackboard. They could easily imagine its effect on persons whose ears were attuned to a slightly different pitch than theirs.

On the curb in front of them sat a man, with his feet in the gutter and both hands to his ears, rocking to and fro, and moaning softly. A disheveled woman rushed by, screaming, pursued by a policeman. A full ambulance dashed down the street, adding the clangor of its gong to the general confusion.

As the Commissioner and his assistant walked across the sidewalk to the waiting police car, they passed an old man, who was chewing his finger-nails and muttering to himself.

"My God!" exclaimed the Commissioner. "If this keeps up, half the city will be loony before night. And here was I worrying about my own troubles!"

The trip to the club was difficult. Traffic had become disorganized. The drivers were nervous and frantic, and the little whistles of the traffic cops seemed to blend soundlessly with the all-pervasive larger sound.

Even during the short time that the two officials were at lunch, affairs had become

noticeably worse. On their way back to City Hall, they noticed that a larger percentage of the autoists and pedestrians were acting erratically. They even saw one traffic cop suddenly put his hands to his ears, leave his post, and run frantically up the street like a hunted animal.

BY THE time they reached City Hall again, they both were in a mood for drastic action.

"What do you do in cases like this, anyhow?" demanded Commissioner Godfrey.

"I call up the university," replied the bureau chief. "Let's see. What department would know about this? When we had that last murder mystery, you remember, the dead body with no cause of death, I called up the professor of anatomy. And when——"

"Never mind what you did once before!" bellowed Godfrey. "What are you going to do now? What do I have you for, anyhow?"

"Let's see," mused Captain Atwater. "The trouble is a sound. I'll call the professor of sound. That ought to be in the physics department, oughtn't it?"

"Search me," replied the Commissioner, handing over the phone. "Hop to it!"

Captain Atwater got the university, and soon arranged for Professor Long, the great physicist, author of *Long on Sound*, to come right over to headquarters.

Then the two men read the latest papers, and listened to the whistle. Miss Burns entered.

Said she, "The Mayor's wife is on the phone again, sir. She says that the whistle didn't stop, as you said it would; and what are you going to do about it?"

A grim calmness settled over the Commissioner.

"Tell her," he replied, "that Captain Atwater and I are still out, and that you will give me her message when we return."

The girl withdrew, but in a moment was back to announce Professor Long.

The professor was a keen, forceful-looking, rather youngish man, not at all the comic-paper professorial type.

Yes, he had heard the whistle. Who hadn't? No, he had no theories about it. It hadn't bothered *him* any. But if any one wished it investigated——"

"The Mayor's wife wants it investigated—and stopped!" bellowed Godfrey.

"What has been done already?" asked Doctor Long, calmly.

So they told him, and showed him the map.

"Um," said he.

Then he went into action. He phoned the Armory, roused the non-com in charge, inquired the name and office telephone number of the commanding officer of the local Anti-Aircraft Company, phoned him, and had him assemble the men of his sound-ranging unit post-haste. In a surprizingly short time, they began to drift in to headquarters. They were enthusiastic at this opportunity to put their training to some practical use.

The young lieutenant in command explained the apparatus to the Commissioner. They had three sets of instruments. These could be placed at three strategic points throughout the city. Each would give exactly the direction of the sound from that spot, to the nearest degree. The triangle of error, where the three lines intersected, would be almost negligibly small, and easily adjusted.

"Where are your three sets of apparatus?" asked the Commissioner.

"Right here outside City Hall, sir, mounted on three army trucks," replied the young lieutenant.

"Who draws the lines on the maps?"

"My plotting-squad, sir. They could work right here, sir, on your map."

"Very well," said the Commissioner.

"Go to it! Set up your instruments in front of Stations 6, 8 and 9, and phone in your results to here from those stations."

THE young army lieutenant gave the necessary orders, and all of his men departed, except the plotting-squad and himself.

Commissioner Godfrey phoned instructions to the three police stations to co-operate. Then they waited, while that awful whistle still shrieked outside.

In a very few minutes, the three directions came in over the wire, and were duly plotted on the map.

But the three lines didn't intersect at all. Instead, they diverged away from the common center.

"Run them backward," suggested the Commissioner, gazing longingly at the spot on the map which marked the location of the Jones soap factory.

But Professor Long interposed, "No, that isn't possible with a sound-ranger. They aren't like human ears. A sound-ranger gives the *actual* direction."

And the young army lieutenant nodded assent.

Then said he, "Perhaps the whistle is running round all over town, and my three squads didn't take their readings simultaneously. May I, sir?"

He indicated the phone. The Commissioner nodded. Anything to keep the line busy, so that Mayor Ransome's wife couldn't call up.

So the young army officer phoned each of his three instrument squads, calibrated their watches to his, and ordered them to range on the whistle at exactly five minutes past.

They did so. And their results, when plotted this time, again diverged, but in three different directions from before.

Every one looked glum, except Professor Long, whose face suddenly brightened.

"I have an idea!" he exclaimed.

Every one else brightened.

"But," he continued, "I can't tell you what it is until I try it out."

Every one's face fell.

"I'm going home," announced the Commissioner heavily. "My home phone has a secret number, and so the Mayor's wife can't reach me there. Atwater, tell Miss Burns to tell all callers that I'm out with you, working on the case. And then you'd better scatter too. Good-bye, gentlemen. Thank you all for *trying* to help me."

There was almost a sneer in that word "trying."

"May I have that number, Mr. Commissioner?" asked the professor. "I may have something to report."

Godfrey scribbled a number on a card, and handed it over. Then he and the professor left. The others tried the sound-ranging several times more, but the direction-lines remained practically the same as the last time, and totally failed to converge.

Finally they gave it up, and disbanded.

THE whistle continued to grate on the nerves of the now-frantic city. The evening papers reported more and more mental cases admitted to the hospitals, and a general exodus of those who had, or could afford, transportation.

Practically every evening paper carried an editorial, petulantly demanding action by the city government.

Commissioner Godfrey—risking getting Mrs. Ransome on the phone—called up Mayor Ransome. For some time, over the phone, they discussed how best to reply to these newspaper broadsides. The whistle was beginning to get on even *their* iron nerves. They felt the impending downfall of their administration, if they did not act quickly and properly.

Finally they issued a brief joint statement, challenging the newspapers to locate the whistle themselves, if they were so smart; and promising to suppress it, and to inflict dire penalties upon the perpetrator, the very moment that any one would tell them where to find it. But lest this retort be considered to constitute merely passing the buck, they added that the best scientific mind in the city, namely, Professor Long of the University, author of *Long on Sound*, had been employed on the case.

This statement silenced the newspapers, although it did not silence the whistle. And it had another effect.

Shortly after the extras, containing this statement, were on the street, the Commissioner's phone rang.

When he answered the call, a strange voice informed him, "This is the Whistle speaking."

Indignantly he slammed down the receiver. Wasn't the situation bad enough, without practical jokers butting in?"

But his caller was persistent. Again the phone rang, and again came the message, "This is the Whistle."

Commissioner Godfrey called the chief operator, identified himself, and directed that if that call came again, it was to be traced, and Chief Inspector Atwater be notified, rush. Then Godfrey phoned Atwater to stand ready to rush a motorcycle policeman to arrest the person who dared to trifle with this serious situation.

The call came again, and Godfrey let the man talk, so as to give the telephone company plenty of time to trace the connection, and to give Atwater plenty of time to make the arrest.

"This is the Whistle," said the voice. "I am much displeased that you have put Professor Long on my trail. Unless you recall him at once, I shall not be responsible for the outcome."

Just to humor the man, and hold him on the line as long as possible, Godfrey asked, "And if we recall the professor, will you stop your infernal noise?"

"All in due time," replied the voice. "The city has not yet been reduced to quite the abject terror that is necessary to my purposes. When the time is ripe, I shall phone you again and make a proposition to you."

Commissioner Godfrey argued with the man, and strung him along on every possible pretext, for the hope was slowly dawning on the Commissioner that perhaps this man might actually have something to do with the whistle after all, and that through his arrest they might get a clue as to the location of the whistle.

But finally the man, after giving another warning as to Professor Long, rang off.

Instantly the Commissioner called the chief operator of the telephone company.

"Did you trace that call and notify Atwater?" he eagerly inquired.

"No call was reported here," replied the phone official. "Just a moment. I will investigate and call you back. Hang up, please."

So Godfrey hung up, and waited impatiently.

In a moment the chief operator reported, "The girl on your switchboard says that no call has been put through to you in the past half-hour."

The Commissioner stormed and argued, but it was no use. The official stuck to his story. So all that could be done was to caution him to be more careful next time.

Commissioner Godfrey was not given much leisure to ponder on this latest development, for his phone rang again. This time it was Professor Long. His voice was vibrant with excitement.

"I've got them!" he panted. "But they

nearly got me. I know what the Whistle is now. It's a most diabolical plot against the city, on the part of some desperate and brilliant criminals. I can stop it, and I'm going to. But it may cost me my life. It's got to be handled alone and single-handed."

"Where are you?" interrupted the Commissioner.

"If I told you, you'd interfere," replied the professor. "Good-bye."

And he hung up.

Frantically the Commissioner rang the chief operator.

"Did you trace the call this time?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the official, "and I notified Atwater. His motorcycle cop is on the way there already."

Then he gave Godfrey the location, a drug-store on the outskirts of the city. The Commissioner hurried there in his own car.

He found Atwater already in charge, questioning the druggist, and all other occupants of the store, and every one in the immediate neighborhood. Operatives were combing the surrounding streets. But, although Professor Long had been seen in the drug-store, no further traces of him could be found.

At last the excitement died down. All the operatives came in. Every one who could possibly give any information had been interviewed, without results. A lull descended over the group of policemen and police officials.

And then the Commissioner made a great discovery.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "The Whistle has stopped!"

So it had. The Administration was saved.

But no trace of Professor Long was ever found.