

The voice

Mrs Mary Harter, a rich widow¹, lives in a big house with her nephew, Charles. He has convinced her to buy a wireless² to keep her company.

It was about three months after the wireless had been installed that the first eerie³ thing happened. Charles was absent for a bridge party.

The programme for that evening was a ballad⁴ concert. A well-known soprano was singing “Annie Laurie”, and in the middle of “Annie Laurie” a strange thing happened. There was a sudden break, the music ceased for a moment, the buzzing, clicking noise continued and then that too died away. There was dead silence, and then very faintly a low buzzing sound was heard.

Mrs Harter got the impression that the machine was tuned in to somewhere very far away, and then clearly and distinctly a voice spoke, a man’s voice with a faint Irish accent.

“*Mary – can you hear me, Mary? It is Patrick speaking... I am coming for you soon. You will be ready, won’t you, Mary?*”

Then, almost immediately, the strains⁵ of “Annie Laurie” once more filled the room.

Mrs Harter sat rigid in her chair, her hands clenched on each arm in it. Had she been dreaming? Patrick! Patrick’s voice! Patrick’s voice, in this very room, speaking to her. No, it must be a dream, a hallucination perhaps. She must just have dropped off to sleep for a minute or two.

A curious thing to have dreamed – that her dead husband’s voice should speak to her over the ether⁶. It frightened her just a little. What were the words he had said?

“*I am coming for you soon, Mary. You will be ready, won’t you?*”

Was it, could it be a premonition? Cardiac weakness. Her heart. After all, she was getting on in years.

“It’s a warning – that’s what it is”, said Mrs Harter, rising slowly and painfully from her chair.

She said nothing of her experience to anyone, but for the next day or two she was thoughtful and a little preoccupied.

And then came the second occasion. Again she was alone in the room. The wireless, which had been playing an orchestral selection, died away with the same suddenness as before. Again there was silence, the sense of distance, and finally Patrick’s voice, not as it had been in life – but a voice rarefied, far away, with a strange unearthly quality. “*Patrick speaking to you, Mary. I will be coming for you very soon now...*”

Then click, buzz, and the orchestral selection was in full swing again⁷.

Mrs Harter glanced at the clock. No, she had not been asleep this time. Awake and in full possession of her faculties, she had heard Patrick’s voice speaking.

Agatha CHRISTIE, *Wireless* (1925), in ***The Hound of Death and Other Stories*** (1933)

Nicknamed “the Queen of Crime”, **Agatha Christie** (1890-1976) is the world’s best-known mystery writer. Her eighty novels and short story collections have sold over a billion copies in the English language and another billion in forty-five foreign languages. Her world-famous heroes are Belgian detective Hercules Poirot and Miss Jane Marple. She also wrote a volume of supernatural stories: *The Hound of Death and Other Stories*, published in 1933.

¹. widow: veuve

². wireless (obs.): radio

³. eerie: sinistre

⁴. ballad: romance (musique)

⁵. strains: mélodie

⁶. over the ether: sur les ondes

⁷. be in full swing again: reprendre de plus belle

Questions

1. How did Mrs Harter react the first and second time she heard Patrick's voice? Why?
2. What makes this story frightening?
3. Give your own explanation of what happened.

Translation

4. Translate the passage from "*Mary – can you hear me, Mary?...*" (l. 13) to "...*won't you Mary?" (l. 14).*

Creative writing

5. Continue this mystery story. (150-200 words)

In spite of her age – she was getting on for 78 – Janet Blakeley stepped briskly into the first-class carriage to Pemberton. It was 11pm and fortunately there was only one other passenger in the compartment: a man in his early forties who was lying on the seat snoring noisily. "Good," she thought, "I won't have to talk!"

She sat down silently, took Julian's letter out of her handbag and started reading it for the umpteenth time. All of a sudden, she felt ill-at-ease and raised her eyes...

