

THE VISUAL TELEPHONE

By Charlton King

I'm rather glad to see that Edison's going to have another show," said the Commonplace Man, looking up from his paper.

"He's been rather out of it lately, hasn't he?" queried the Cynic. "Which is strange, seeing that people used to imagine that the faculty for invention was a close monopoly of the great Anglo-Saxon family. The discovery by mere aliens of the X-rays, wireless telegraphy, and radium, has rather exploded a theory which, whatever else might have been said for it, had the merit of being comfortably insular. What?"

"The foreigner is sometimes capable of putting out a solitary invention, I grant you," said the Enthusiast. "But what of that? Edison has a whole string of them to his credit."

His eyes kindling, he began to enumerate the list on his fingers. "There was the electric light," he said, "the kinetoscope, the telephone, the —"

"The phonograph!" broke in the Cynic, with a bitter sneer. "That marvellous instrument which has brought a surfeit of music into the homes of the humble!"

"Say rather," the Enthusiast returned impressively, "the instrument which has enabled the clarion voice of a Gladstone to reverberate down the ages!"

The Cynic laughed. "My dear fellow," he said, "when you talk like that, it makes me feel there ought to be a phonograph handy to receive your own utterances. Still, I prefer to regard it as a musical entertainer on Suburbia's lower slopes."

"I've been seriously thinking about

getting one," said the Commonplace Man.

"Mind you choose one of the smaller, quieter kinds," counselled the Enthusiast.

"Not so," said the Cynic. "That would be arrant selfishness. He who lays in a low-pressure phonograph benefits only his own household; but he who buys its enlarged, trumpet-tongued edition, the gramophone, is a benefactor to the whole street and a part of the next. Let others participate in your pleasures, and your own enjoyment of them becomes all the keener. I am a convert, you see, to the communal idea with regard to phonographs. They should be as 'free' as our baths are free, our libraries, and our schools."

"Haven't we had enough of them?" inquired the Commonplace Man, plaintively.

"Enough of the phonograph?" replied the Cynic, promptly. "I quite agree. We've had more than enough of it, although it's only been before the world for a matter of ten years or so. But what about this latest scheme of Edison's?"

The Enthusiast, grasping the Commonplace Man's paper, read as follows:—

"Mr. Edison hopes soon to invent a telephone which will carry not only sound, but sight—that is, it will bring, not only the human voice along the wire, but the image of the speaker as well. It may yet be that we shall sit by our own firesides and see our kin across the sea, that we shall be 'switched on' from our drawing-rooms to be present at some great battlefield, and that the streets of all the world's capitals will be familiar to those who never leave their London."

"Well, that beats all," was the Commonplace Man's commentary, but the Cynic only muttered, "Worse and worse."

"Why worse?" asked the Enthusiast, impatiently.

"Give me time, and I might love the phonograph with all its faults, but *this* never!" the Cynic replied.

"But consider its possibilities, man," the Enthusiast protested.

"That's just what I am doing," was the Cynic's sorrowful response. "Here is one of them. Suppose one has to transact business with some prolix, boresome, unspeakable fellow, one is always careful, under the present *régime*, to impress him with the fact that the telephone is a highly convenient and absurdly accessible mode of communication. This avoids a personal contact which could not be otherwise than distasteful. But now Edison's perverted ingenuity would rob us of this blessed security, and we shall not only have the piping, ungrammatical voice of the fellow transmitted along the wires, but his dull, vacuous face will be projected at us as well."

"Pure misanthropy," said the Enthusiast.

"Nay, only partial," the Cynic replied, "which, paradoxical though it sounds, always constitutes the truest practical philanthropy, for that involves, above all things, a method of selection. Surely you don't believe that the love of the philanthropist, however abounding it may be, embraces every prig and bore who seeks his friendship or taps his bounty?"

"This is all very relevant to visual telephony!" sneered the Enthusiast.

"It's not so remote from the subject as you fancy," the Cynic replied, with great seriousness. "I observe the newspaper man there speaks of 'our kin across the sea.' While I admire his novelty of phrasing, I can't agree that the flashing of instantaneous photographs across the wires would be a beneficial thing either for Englishmen or Colonists. It might, indeed, tend to snap rather than to strengthen the links of Empire."

"What unredeemed nonsense!" the

Enthusiast retorted. "Little Englandism in its most naked and shameless condition."

"Now, don't try to crush me with a party shibboleth," the Cynic cried, with reproach in his voice. "Take the trouble to understand my point of view, and you will discover that I am the soundest of patriots, the very biggest of Big Englanders. For what, after all, is the main object of the cult of Imperialism? What, but to keep the straggling masses of the Empire together. And, how can this be effected if, every time the Englishman is rung up to receive a message over the Antipodean cable, he actually *sees* the Australian who happens to be speaking to him?"

The Commonplace Man sniffed contemptuously. "Even if it were possible to telephone to Australia," he said, "which, of course, it isn't, I don't understand how the visualisation of the speaker could have the effect you pretend to foresee."

"Don't you," said the Cynic, patiently. "Then let me explain. All Englishmen have an impression of what the Australian is like, or what he ought to be like. Clad in picturesque red shirt and slouched wide-brimmed hat, he is usually discovered sitting listlessly over a bush fire. That yearning, pensive look in his eyes tells you clearly enough that his thoughts are stealing back to the dear homeland—the little English village, the weathered farmstead, the ivy-covered church tower. It is a highly-sentimentalised picture, and not entirely devoid of the romantic element, but an Australian friend of mine assures me that it hasn't the advantage of being true in the slightest particular. The red-shirted Australian has no more tangible existence than the comic rustic of melodrama."

"Let's have the truth, then," growled the Enthusiast.

"I assure you, my friend," the Cynic replied, "the truth isn't always so desirable. Illusions have a greater value than you perceive. It is only the rash man who attempts to dispel them."

"But it may be that the real Australian," said the Commonplace Man, "is

a much finer product than our sentimental conception of him."

"Undoubtedly he is," said the Cynic, "but that is hardly the point. It is not the quality of the Australian that we are discussing, but the dangers that might attend the too sudden dissipation of an insular illusion. That kind of thing wants doing very gradually."

"Setting the Colonies aside, I suppose you'll admit that the visual telephone has what I may call its domestic advantages?" timidly ventured the Commonplace Man.

The Cynic laughed outright. "Domestic!" he cried. "With that awful word you expose the very worst side of Mr. Edison's last wonder. Can't you see? At present, when a friend calls at one's office and suggests a night of—well, relaxation, it is so easy to

telephone to an expectant spouse that so often successful excuse for one's absence which is based upon the high pressure of our modern commercial system. The tedium in the voice convinces by adding the needed touch of verisimilitude. But when not only one's words, but one's lineaments, are shot over the wires into the domestic fastness, who but a consummate actor could conceal the look of elation, the sense of pleasure anticipated, the—"

The Commonplace Man shuddered. "I see what you mean," he said.

"In spite of your trivial arguments," the Enthusiast remarked decisively, "the sight telephone has some excellent features about it."

"I fear you'll discover some 'features' in it which are not exactly excellent when it's in actual operation," was the Cynic's final rejoinder.

