

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

DECEMBER 1961

Volume 10 Number 12

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Cover: LLOYD BIRMINGHAM

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

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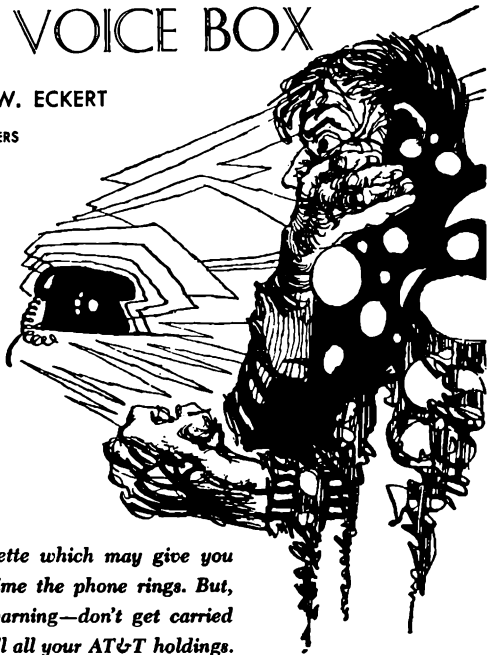


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THE VOICE BOX

By ALLAN W. ECKERT

Illustrator SUMMERS



A grim vignette which may give you pause next time the phone rings. But, a word of warning—don't get carried away and sell all your AT&T holdings.

WHAT marvelous blood-chiller might have run from the quill pen of Edgar Allen Poe, master of the macabre, could he but have witnessed the advent of the unassuming little instrument which sits poised in Pandoric innocence in the dim light across the room from me? Certainly he,

if anyone, would have recognized and delighted in its cleverness and in its amoebic reproduction and widespread dispersal until now only a fortunate few lie beyond its reach. Ironically and unfortunately, however, Mr. Poe succumbed a score and seven years before its creation.

I speak, of course, of my telephone—that horrid little robot perched in plastic nonchalance atop the scarred table near the far wall to my left, its pock-marked orifice ever eager to thrust with equal calm upon my cringing ear a hideous diatribe, a vengeful threat, a crimson epitaph.

What dark reward was given the erudite Alexander G. Bell for foisting upon an unsuspecting humanity this insufferable little box with its strident voice and malevolent capabilities? Closed doors cannot hamper its reach, nor spans of great sea. Neither airplanes nor automobiles nor even vessels are safe from those inquisitive fingers.

True, there are many who remain cloddishly insensitive to its demands and dissertations and ultimate horror, but surely these souls are of a dullard lot who no more fear its demoniacal potentialities than does the moronically masticating cow fear the man who fattens her for eventual slaughter. But I digress.

Unlike Mr. Poe's diabolical devices which cut or burnt, crushed or entombed, this beastly thing attacks the brain. Slowly it dissolves defensive barriers and eases its loathsome way into the very depths of intellect, seeking out its weaknesses and then slowly, inexorably eating away at the very core of being.

SURELY not I alone of this vast humanity understand the peril! Granted, it has taken years for me to fully comprehend; but even so, now that I do in fact recognize this danger, it is so vividly apparent that certainly there must have been others before me who became cognizant of it. Why have they remained mute? Why were we left unwarned?

Gently it began its dreadful cycle; at first camouflaging itself as a herald of good tidings and bringing close those dear voices we know. Yet, in retrospect, it becomes clear that those utterances were only travesties. It is our joy at their seemingly familiar sound which so beclouds our sensibilities to the calculating brittleness from which they are constructed. No! These are not the voices of beloved friends and relations. These are merely the cunning, ventriloquistic efforts of a devilish machine to destroy the gates of caution and permit the gradual erosion of the mind.

And soon enough the gentleness fades and the crackling words bring grief and depression and hatred, but by now the conditioning is completed. At its grating voice we rush to answer, our audient canals stimulated like the salivary glands of Ivan Pavlov's poor starving dogs when the bell was rung. Are we such

blind fools that not until so late do we see it; that not until we have become powerless to resist do we make such attempt?

It watches, sure now of eventual victory. From across the room I sense its larynx swell with shrill ebullency and involuntarily my muscles bunch and cord to send me in answer to its summons . . . but there is only a deep, laughing silence. Like a sleek, shiny feline, this damnable instrument plays with me. And I—no longer a man but a quivering rodent—I weep silently and copiously and my very pores join in with great tears until I sit bathed in vile perspiration and I detect an odor and that odor is my fear.

THE DOOR is so near! Only a dozen feet across this musty carpeting it stares blankly at me while a small, dark insect zig-zags across its broad, paint-flaked cheek. Beyond that portal there may be hope for me; on this side there is none. A strange somnambulism grips me and I rise, exulting inwardly as courageous legs carry my craven husk away from that terrible, poised thing on the table.

My trembling hand moistly surrounds the tarnished brass knob and then . . . dear God! . . . the jangling commences. Long, loud, with incessant discordancy it rebounds from the

door and drives me deep into my gloomy chamber. I grip the thin black neck of the telephone and squeeze tightly as I raise it, in desperate attempt to throttle that maddening ring.

Swiftly then, unerringly, the receiver thrusts to my ear, dragging behind it my clenched, unwilling hand. It presses ever more tightly to my head and a desperate, horrible sound fills the room. It is the sound of my own scream. And, behind it can be heard the persistent, jubilant ring of a telephone.

* * *

In the bubbleless, oppressive room a man plays the tight beam of his small flashlight over the figure on the floor. He is the coroner and the coroner is a competent man. He has seen many bodies and they no longer move him to emotion..

The two detectives nearby watch carelessly as the pathologist turns the head of the corpse so that the side which has been resting unnaturally on the dingy carpet can be seen. Suddenly he grunts and directs the beam to the spot where an ear should be, but there is none. He straightens then, snapping out the light, and in the dimness his pallid features reflect the hall light through the open door and he sways slightly.

"My God!" he whispers hoarsely. "His skull—it's . . . it's empty!"

THE END