

The Pleasure Telephone.

BY ARTHUR MEE.



REAMS are fulfilled very rapidly in these days, but even Mr. Bellamy himself would doubtless have been amazed to know that one of his most daring predictions is on the eve of realization. Mr. Bellamy, in that remarkably prophetic book, "Looking Backward," wrote, ten years ago, of a young man who was amazed by hearing charming music in a room in which there was neither musician nor instrument, and who was still further surprised to be told that the music was supplied "on the co-operative principle." The reply of his hostess is so absolutely prophetic that it is worth quoting here:—

"'Wait a moment, please,' said Edith; 'I want to have you listen to this waltz before you ask any questions. I think it is perfectly charming,' and as she spoke the sound of violins filled the room with witchery of summer night. When this had also ceased, she said: 'There is nothing in the least mysterious about the music, as you seem to imagine. We have simply carried the idea of labour-saving by co-operation into our musical service as into everything else. There are a number of music-rooms in the city, perfectly adapted acoustically to the different sorts of music. These halls are connected by telephone with all the houses of the city whose people care to pay the small fee, and there are none, you may be sure, who do not. The corps of musicians attached to each hall is so large that, although no individual performer, or group of performers, has more than a brief part, each day's programme lasts through the twenty-four hours. There are on that card for to-day, as you will see if you observe closely, distinct programmes of

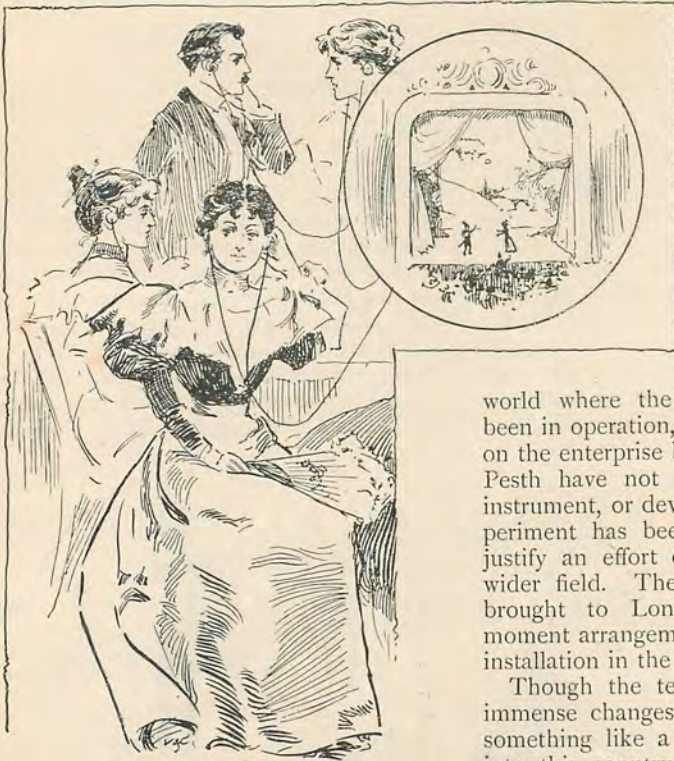
four of these concerts, each of a different order of music from the others, being now simultaneously performed, and any one of the four pieces now going on that you prefer you can hear by merely pressing the button which will connect your house wire with the hall where it is being rendered. The programmes are so co-ordinated that the pieces at any one time simultaneously proceeding in the different halls usually offer a choice, not



THE AFTERNOON CONCERT.

only between instrumental and vocal, and between different sorts of instruments, but also between different motives, from grave to gay, so that all tastes and moods can be suited.'

It is probable that before the dawn of the twentieth century this prophetic picture will have been surpassed in actual fact, and the telephone will be a quite indispensable element in English social life. But it will be a much more comprehensive and effective instrument than the telephone as we know it



THE OPERA AT HOME.

at present, and the likelihood is that it will be fitted in our houses just as gas or electricity is now. It will be so cheap that not to have it would be absurd, and it will be so entertaining and useful that it will make life happier all round, and bring the pleasures of society to the doors of the artisan's cottage.

That, indeed, will be the unique feature of the Pleasure Telephone. It will make millions merry who have never been merry before, and will democratize, if we may so write, many of the social luxuries of the rich. Those who object to the environment of the stage will be able to enjoy the theatre at home; and the fashionable concert will be looked forward to as eagerly by the poor as by their wealthy neighbours. The humblest cottage will be in immediate contact with the city, and the "private wire" will make all classes kin.

The honour of pioneering this revolution does not belong to England or America. The inventor of the Pleasure Telephone is a native of Hungary, where, for two years, he has been demonstrating the soundness of his invention with great success. The capital of the Hungarian Empire is the only place in the

world where the Pleasure Telephone has been in operation, and the restrictions placed on the enterprise by the authorities of Budapesth have not tended to popularize the instrument, or develop it fairly. But the experiment has been sufficiently successful to justify an effort on a wider scale and in a wider field. The new telephone is to be brought to London, and at the present moment arrangements are being made for its installation in the Metropolis.

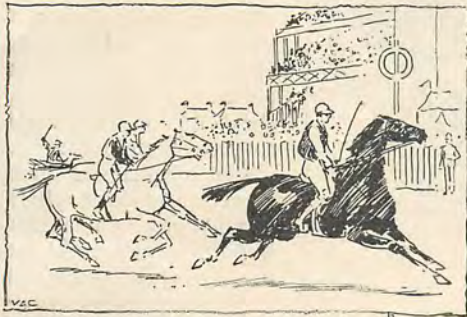
Though the telephone is likely to effect immense changes, and will no doubt create something like a sensation when introduced into this country, its installation is really a very simple thing. Indeed, the whole ramifications of the Pleasure Telephone—carrying business and pleasure into the homes of



THE STOCK-BROKER.

thousands, and making next-door neighbours, as it were, of strangers who have never met—will be conducted in one single room by one single man. The power of resistance of the telephone is said to be enormous, and the inventor has declared that it would be possible with its aid for one man's voice to be heard simultaneously by the whole six million inhabitants of London. All that is necessary is a central office, from which the whole of London—if not the whole of England—might be supplied with a constant flow of news and pleasure all day long.

It is proposed that the present telephone machinery shall be largely used in connection



with the Pleasure Telephone, the only addition necessary being a new main wire, with which each subscriber will be connected. The wire now in use in Buda-Pesth is 168 miles long, and carries sound as distinctly at the extreme end as an ordinary private wire in this country. There are 6,000 persons dependent on the wire, but, unlike our own telephone, a stoppage at one station—"station" signifying a subscriber's house—does not affect the main wire, and the rest of the subscribers are not interfered with.

Each subscriber has a time-table of the various items which will be telephoned during the day. Beginning as early as half-past eight in the morning, every hour is amply provided for as long as there is anything going on in the city. At half-past eight the subscriber is given the substance of the principal telegrams received throughout the night, which are condensed so as to be delivered in a quarter of an hour. Only the main facts are given, such as generally satisfy the average man thus early in the day, but in case any of the news is sensational the fresh telegrams are transmitted as they arrive later

on. After this foreign matter comes the news of the capital, with a programme of the day's events, and at nine o'clock news of an official nature is given. A little later—after a pause for breakfast—follows a concise review of the principal papers, with the substance of the leading articles. This lasts half an hour, and is followed by reports on the opening of the stock and corn exchanges.

The subscriber who is not interested in these matters has only to put down his receivers and wait a few minutes for the local news, the theatrical, art, or science notices, or the ecclesiastical intelligence. Next come the latest foreign, provincial, and sporting information, and all kinds of society and political matter.

The morning having been devoted to an exhaustive study of all the papers, the afternoon is spent mainly in keeping subscribers up to date concerning current events, which are frequently dispatched within a few minutes of the actual occurrence. Parliamentary reports are given at brief intervals, and the speech of a Minister is often transmitted throughout the capital while the Minister is still speaking. In London, for instance, under this system, the substance of the Budget speech would be known in thousands of houses before the Chancellor of the Exchequer had sat down, and it would be quite possible to acquaint every subscriber with the result of an important division five minutes after the figures were

announced in the House. The same with the result of an exciting election. And this news not only comes with extraordinary promptness, but it is brought to one's own fireside, without the trouble of running into the street for the paper.

But the name of the telephone—its full description is the "News and Entertainment Telephone"—implies that the instrument is not monopolized by news. Perhaps the most popular feature of it is its connection with the theatres, concert halls, and the hundred and one other places of amusement in the city. It is not necessary that sound should be conveyed directly into the telephone. The transmitter has only to be within sound of the



"ALL THE WINNERS."



CRICKET NEWS AT THE CLUB.

singer to carry the song along the scores of miles of wire. By special arrangement, the great concerts in the Hungarian capital are sometimes listened to throughout the whole of the empire, or even beyond its borders. A song sung in Buda-Pesth has been heard with remarkable distinctness in Berlin and other great cities, and there seems to be no limit to possibility in this direction. At night the subscriber is taken round the theatres, each being visited in turn, and weary folk may allow themselves to be lulled to sleep by the strains of some pretty melody sung a hundred miles away.

So popular has the Pleasure Telephone become in Buda-Pesth that it has found its way into every public place of importance. There is not a public building in the

capital where it is not in operation, and even the churches have not objected to it, as our illustrations show. The preacher of Buda-Pesth no longer reckons his hearers by the state of the pews, but by the number of telephone subscribers. It may be objected, perhaps, that religious worship by telephone is not calculated to inspire reverence or inculcate virtue; but, at any rate, the system is an inestimable boon to the aged and infirm, the patients in hospitals, and the women who are unable to leave their houses. A single hospital in Buda-Pesth has over thirty installations, which carry brightness and cheer into the lives of the lonely sick.

No hotel in the capital can afford to be without the instrument, which has become, in fact, practically indispensable, and is found not



"HALF-TIME."

emergency signal, by which all subscribers are "rung up" on the receipt of any special news.

Though the communication between the central office and the subscribers is really very simple, it necessitates an enormous amount of preparatory labour. In many ways, the routine of the office resembles that of a newspaper, there being a staff of law, police, parliamentary, and news reporters, all of whom hand in their "copy" to the editor. The whole of the matter to be sent through is approved by the editor before it can be handed over to the "speaker," who speaks it into the instrument. The "speaker" must, of course, possess a strong, clear voice, and in order that the message may be perfectly distinct, no single speaker is on duty



FIRESIDE SERMONS.

only in private houses and hospitals, but in doctors' waiting-rooms, barbers' shops, coffee-houses, clubs, and business offices of all kinds. Waiting is never tedious in Buda-Pesth: there is always something to interest the waiter. Half the trifling irritations of life disappear under the soothing influence of this universal distributor of pleasure.

It may be urged against the Pleasure Telephone that the subscriber has either to keep the receiver at his ears all day long, or miss half the news, but that objection is answered by the existence of the programme. Everything is transmitted in strict accordance with the programme, so that each subscriber knows exactly when his interesting items are coming. But lest important items of news should be missed, a summary of all the news is given at noon and again in the evening. There is also an ingenious



THE COURTS.

more than two hours at a time.

The most wonderful feature of the Pleasure Telephone is its cheapness. So trivial is the outlay connected with it that the charge to subscribers is only a penny a day, or 30s. a year — ridiculously cheap when compared with the cost of the ordinary telephone. There are two receivers for each subscriber, to render the message more distinctly, each receiver being about the size of a watch. They are attached to long cords, so that they may be moved to any part of the room. So anxious are the telephonists for the comfort of the subscribers, that the two receivers can be attached to a light spring arrangement which holds them firmly over the ears, thus relieving the hands, and making it possible to walk about or lie down while listening to what is going on in the city. It is perhaps unnecessary to mention that subscribers can only hear through



SUNDAY IN THE HOSPITAL.

the telephone and not speak back in return. The telephone is, of course, non-political, all controversial news being imparted with strict impartiality. Original articles of general interest are sometimes read, with occasional short stories.

There are, of course, unlimited possibilities in the new telephone. It is quite possible that concert managers and theatrical proprietors will object to the instrument. But the probability is much the other way. The newspapers of Buda-Pesth persistently boycotted the invention on its introduction, but they recognise now that, instead of being taken as a substitute for the newspaper, its effect is to whet the appetite of the public for details of events announced briefly through the telephone. The theatres, too, realize that to give the public a snatch or two from a favourite opera gratis has not, in the long run, an adverse effect on the receipts, and they in-



THE MARRIAGE SERVICE AT HOME.

variably support the instrument. Should the worst come to the worst, however, it is always possible to organize concerts and entertainments in the editorial office; and for an insignificant outlay on the part of each subscriber, it would not be by any means an impossible or unprofitable thing for the proprietors of the telephone to organize a concert, at which the cream of British vocalists should sing. Mr. Bellamy's prediction of a central hall of music with a

football field, which will keep us acquainted minute by minute with the whereabouts of the ball and the prospects of the teams. There is, indeed, no element in our social life which will be unprovided for, and if, as it is said to be not unlikely in the near future—the principle of sight is applied to the telephone as well as that of sound, earth will be in truth a paradise, and distance will lose its enchantment by being abolished altogether.

Where finality is to be reached in this matter is not known. Nothing that has been



THE CHILDREN'S LECTURE.

twenty-four hours' programme is by no means impossible of realization. Patti and Paderewski may yet entertain us in our own drawing-rooms, and the luxuries of princes may be at the command of us all.

Who knows but that in time we may sit in our arm-chairs listening to the speeches of Her Majesty's Ministers, or allow ourselves to be soothed into blissful unconsciousness by a Parliamentary debate on bimetallism? There would be, at any rate, one blessing in this—the problem of the Ladies' Grille would be solved for ever. Then in the cricket season we shall follow our favourite wielders of the willow without risking cold or sunstroke, and all the unpleasantness of winter travelling will be avoided in the football season by the fixing of a telephone on the

tried yet has failed, and it is confidently stated that a single wire would carry the same sound over the whole United Kingdom, if not beyond the seas. Whether this claim is exaggerated or not, time alone will prove; but at any rate the Pleasure Telephone opens out a vista of infinite charm which few prophets of to-day have dreamed of, and who dare to say that in twenty years the electric miracle will not bring all the corners of the earth to our own fireside?