

Excerpt from A Peep Into the 20th Century
[chapt. 19, pp 108-110]

"It would be strange indeed if so readily controlled an agent as electricity, an Ariel before whom time and space seem to vanish, did not cross the threshold of our homes and enter into our household life. We find in fact that the adoption of electrical household appliances is daily becoming more widespread, here adding a utility, and there an ornament, until in the near future we may anticipate a period when its presence in the homestead will be indispensable...."

Weber looked thoughtful. The article in the magazine was illustrated: an electrical bell, an Edison telephone, a plan for wiring the house for the various appliances. When Snow passed the magazine to him he would look the drawing over carefully, pushing out his lips, nod, then pass it back still nodding, as if lost in working something out.

"The pressure of a finger on a button brings two strips of metal into contact and completes a circuit, forming as it were an electrical endless chain from the battery through the wires, the bell..."

"...completes the circuit."

"Exactly." And as for the strength to do the work: "In that case it's your electromagnet--the coiled wire we discussed?--which intensifies magnetic power sufficiently to lift the hammer that strikes the bell or, when a servant is required (I am not speaking of my household, Rupert), to release the room shutter in the annunciator system." Perhaps, with permission, Snow would bring in some material and together they could construct a simple buzzer.

The two methods: "Edison's requires a little intensification of

power for home use. Westinghouse must use a transformer somewhere outside of the house to make the electricity safe inside. The latter is steadier, stronger, but perhaps not as safe."

"I get that now." He nodded. "I'm the one completes the circuit in there, ain't I?"

"A switch will do that. When the electrodes are fixed to your skin you will be part of an existing, still incomplete circuit, and the closed switch will complete it."

"I get that."

He was interested in Edison and listened closely when Snow spoke of him. The Wizard. He learned for the first time that Edison had been a witness at the hearings on his own case in the previous summer.

"So was Mr. Kennelly a witness who wrote this interesting article. He's Edison's chief electrician."

But the Wizard...He wanted to know if Edison had mentioned him by name at the hearings.

"I imagine he did. I am sure of it."

"And they were asking if this electric would work on me?"

"Edison knows that it will work very well indeed. Nobody of any standing in the field doubts it. Your lawyers say they do, but that is a legal attitude, not a scientific one."

The thoughtful nod from Weber.

"...There will be thermostats to regulate and maintain household temperatures--even in summer, using ice-cooled air.

"According to Kennelly, there is a house near Greenwich, Connecticut, that has used ice-cooled air for the past two summers. You don't need that down here, do you, Rupert?" It was an interesting article, done in homely terms. Snow had already talked about the adventures of electrical science applied--

stringing telegraph wires, the terrible rigors of laying a submarine cable to Europe, the complex telephone networks, city lighting, and tram systems, and the rest; he had described the great dynamos, the motors, and the motors' colossal work....Now here in the article were the homely things, the plans for them like road maps or spiders' webs in boxes on the page. Snow waited, smiling, and Weber, as he had expected he would, joked: "I would break in and start that burglar alarm."

They sat side by side on the bunk to avoid passing the book back and forth, Weber looking over the chaplain's shoulder. "Who's that?"--a woodcut that showed a young man listening to an Edison phonograph: a tube grew from it and branched into the young man's ears; his lips were parted, eyes blind with listening.

"I don't think it's intended to be anyone in particular."

"The way they have him wired to it...I thought that was for the electrical execution--they would kill him with that box."

McDade had emerged and was observing them.

The author, Kennelly, recommended electricity in the billiard room to avoid soot and oil marring the baize, and suggested electric veranda lamps that would shine "heedless of the wind." "...A very pretty effect can be also produced in conservatories, by suspending lamps of different colors half-hidden in the foliage."

The day watch snorted, and Snow came back amiably, "Never mind, Keeper. We are all right, I think, aren't we, Rupert?"