

Seeing Things

FAIR EXCHANGE

HE HAD done it the year before with the spring of a clock. By wire from one room to another he had managed to transmit a twanging sound. Then on March 10, 1876 (oh, noteworthy date which our children often make regrettable), Alexander Graham Bell took the next step forward. Also by wire he at last succeeded in sending his own voice from one room to another. He was able to cajole his little contraption into conveying a single sentence.

The sentence was full of urgency and business, and as brief as all of us think other people's phone calls should be. "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." That was all. No hellos, no goodbyes, no talk about the weather, no chitchat, no gossip—the perfect, if abandoned, model for all subsequent conversations transmitted by such means. But the telephone was here to stay, adding to the blessings of mankind and the problems of parents. If its coming has caused the world to shrink, it has also diminished the chances fathers and mothers might have of talking to their friends, once their young reach the age when they, too, discover the telephone.

It is we, the parents, who speed this discovery. For our vanity we pay heavily. Moreover, we deserve to. When they, the children, are what the garment-makers and the whimsy-manufacturers refer to as tiny tots (whose heads are as yet undersized for telephonic needs), we think it cute to lift them on our laps, to hold the receiver first to their ears, then to cup the mouthpiece to their lips, nudging them all the while into terrified talk with Granny or Grandpop, with Uncle P. or Cousin Joe.

We do this wreathed in smiles, but prodding arduously, prompting anxiously, on feast days or on anniversaries when long distance has annihilated geography. We do this when such epigrams as "Mewwy Chwistmas, Gwanny!" or "T'se fine. Is you?" travel a thousand miles, demanding the services of how many linemen, operators, and technicians Walter Gifford only knows. Little do we realize that, by having done this, we have undone ourselves.

In contemporary life the mastery of the telephone is a proof of the approach of age. Like the first tooth, the last diaper, and the formula no longer needed; like those great mo-

ments when rolling over is transformed into crawling and crawling into perilous steps; like those releasing days when shoelaces and neckties can at last be tied and handkerchiefs used with accuracy; like those genuine occasions when the scooter succeeds the velocipede and the bicycle ousts the scooter; when parents' freezing arms are replaced by waterwings and waterwings by breast strokes; or when playschool turns into dayschool, and short pants into long, the full uninhibited employment of the telephone comes as a milepost on the difficult path to growing up.

"He is very good at the telephone," we say of a seven-year-old, meaning that he can take messages with as much accuracy as the operator of a hotel switchboard. Although this may be true, all things considered it is the most niggardly of praise. The stubborn fact is, however, that the children we go to such pains to initiate soon take over.

At breakfast or after school hours and during the whole of their vacations when they are home, they cannot be pried away from the telephone. A receiver becomes their third ear; a mouthpiece, their extra lip. Where formerly they functioned as ventriloquists' dummies for our guiding whispers ("Say, 'How are you, Grandpop?'"; "Say, 'Thanks for the present'"; "Say, 'Love to Granny'"; "Say, 'I had a very nice time'"), they blossom suddenly into filibusterers. They could not talk with more relish, at greater length, about less on the phone if they were adults. Before you can say Alexander Graham Bell, they own the controlling stock in the household's installation.

Who can speak of other homes except by instinct, knowing that every family is, to a certain extent, all families? I know only that in my own apartment, where I happen to work

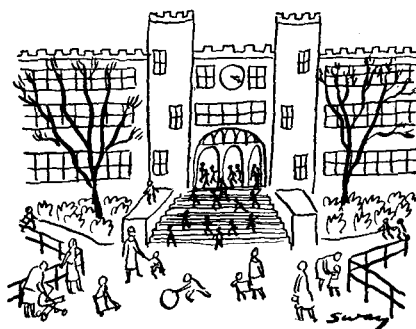
as well as live, the telephone becomes for me increasingly an object tantalizing but untouchable. I want to use it. I need to do so. Sometimes I am even hopeful enough to imagine that other people may want to call me on business or personal matters. But I am losing the agility necessary to get there first and the strength required to tug the receiver away from hands which grow daily in power.

I used to think that among poetry's least attractive images is the one in the June-day passage in "The Vision of Sir Launfal" when "Heaven tries earth if it be in tune, / And over it softly her warm ear lays." Of late, however, that line has taken on a new meaning for me. Let my sons be near a telephone and they cannot resist over it softly their warm ears laying, apparently to discover if it be in tune. From the number of calls they receive I gather their friends are possessed of ears no less inquisitive.

MY YOUNGER boy, being seven, is not yet an habitual dialer. Even so, he has his fun with the telephone. It ranks high among his toys. Our mounting bills indicate that he has a train-dispatcher's interest in time. Not time as it remains stationary on his battered and unwound alarm clock. No, time as it is considerably vocalized by the Telephone Company for those without sundials or watches. He never tires of the voices, melodious or metallic, which merely by dialing ME 7-1212 can be provoked into announcing, "When you hear the signal," etc. What is far worse from the point of the family budget, he has long since learned that he can get the same results by trying HUSBAND or NERVOUS. Luckily, his interest in the weather has not as yet become as great as his interest in time, and WE 6-1212 has not taken its place among his private numbers.

He has his serious uses for the phone—birthday parties, motion-picture dates, and occasional, very abrupt conversations with his contemporaries. These consist mainly of "Yes," "No," "Why," "Sure," and "When." As a rule, in spite of all admonitions they end with the replaced receiver serving as a substitute for a more courtly "Goodbye."

With a sinking heart, of recent weeks I have noticed that his monosyllables are giving way to sentences of Jamesian length. This is an expensive sign. So is the rather secret official business which he has been conducting, evidently without fear of tapped wires. I have in mind the summoning of the gang he is at present organizing. I haven't meant to eavesdrop, but since the conversations have taken place in my study it has



been hard for me not to do so. I gather from his excited tones that a class-mate named Ralph, who lives ten blocks away, is the leader of the "foe." How many followers Ralph has, I have no way of guessing. For his sake and theirs I hope they are numerous, because I do know they are being opposed by a band which, as inventoried, consists of three spies, seven fighters, one first-aid man, seven inventors, and three generals, with my son serving as supreme commander. It's all a little confusing since seven members of this fearsome force are called John.

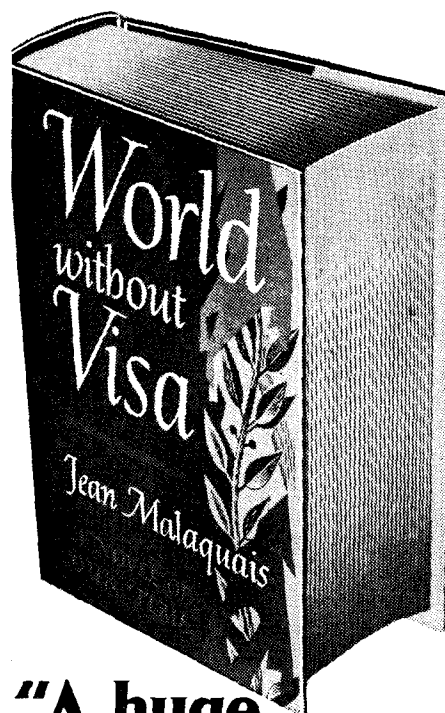
My eleven-year-old boy has, like his friends, reached years of greater communication on the telephone. They call each other incessantly at all hours on matters which, to them, are never trivial. Subjects as imperative as tomorrow's homework; who has mumps, measles, or appendicitis; who got what prize from what cereal; who listened to which radio program; who has read what comic; who has heard from Charlie Atlas; or how much fishing tackle or bicycle equipment has arrived from Sears-Roebuck — all these are topics of interminable interest which keep me and the wires burning.

Youngsters do not salute each other on the phone the way their elders do

or, for that matter, the way their elders would like them to. I can't help shuddering when I hear my older son greet a friend with a curt, "Hello, whadda ya want?" Nothing more than that, though the friend may have nothing more unfriendly on his mind than to invite him for a week end or to a birthday party. I shudder with equal violence when, instead of mustering a "Thanks," he says, "Well, so long. I'm listening to Henry Morgan."

I surmise that, when no favorite programs are on the air, young boys deem it a point of honor not to hang up first. Manifestly, the telephone to them is just another form of the out-staring game. Even if one has weakened and said goodbye, both keep the receiver up to see which surrenders by hanging up first. This can be trying if, as an adult, you are waiting for an important long-distance call.

IF MR. BELL'S invention is a source of pleasure to growups, on rainy afternoons it can, to pre-teenagers, be the most productive joke-factory they know. What delights can equal those to be had from ringing any number, made up or chosen at random, and pretending (in a treble and amidst giggles that could fool no one except yourself) to be a representa-



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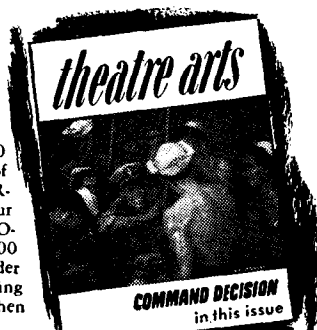
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tive of the water company calling to warn the lady of the house that an acute water shortage is expected and that she had better fill reserve buckets and put them in her bathtub. Or bothering some unsuspecting stranger to say that the department of sanitation is looking for him. Or falling back on the old, old gag and calling some unknown man to ask him if he smokes, in order to reply, "Isn't that funny? Many men smoke but Fu-Man-Chu." (Catch?) Or, more delectable still, telephoning Charlie's house, pretending to be Alfred, and asking Charlie please to come up at once; then ringing Alfred, using Charlie's name, and urging him to come right over. To the young, apparently, such antics are among life's foremost joys. They are jokes which never exhaust themselves. They only exhaust adults.

MY WIFE and I already sense that, so far as our telephone is concerned, we are fighting a losing battle. What we are now surviving are, of course, only preliminary skirmishes. Our telephone will not be entirely lost to us until, one inevitable afternoon, we hear one of our boys, in an unreliable voice, whisper "dearest" or "darling" into our phone.

We may regret it when our young have sprouted to the point where our telephones become theirs. But let any of us hear their voices when, from a friend's house, they are calling us at home, or we are long-distancing from a journey, and all is forgiven. No letters, however eloquent, can say what their young voices say merely by being heard. When they speak unprompted; when the talk is at last two-way; when the interchange of ideas and interests is genuine, then Bell becomes our hero, and all those bills sent in by his company dwindle into insignificance.

JOHN MASON BROWN.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Browning: "Incident of the French Camp." 2. Carroll: "Jabberwocky." 3. Coleridge: "Ancient Mariner." 4. D'Arcy: "The Face on the Floor." 5. Eugene Field: "Little Boy Blue." 6. James Fields: "Ballad of the Tempest." 7. Harte: "The Society upon the Stanislaus." 8. Holmes: "The Last Leaf." 9. Hood: "The Song of the Shirt." 10. Hunt: "The Glove and the Lions." 11. Jeffers: "Roan Stallion." 12. Keats: "The Eve of St. Agnes." 13. Longfellow: "Excelsior." 14. Moore: "A Visit from St. Nicholas." 15. Noyes: "The Highwayman." 16. Scott: "Lochinvar." 17. Service: "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." 18. Edward R. Sill: "The Fool's Prayer." 19. Tennyson: "The Lady of Shalott." 20. Rose H. Thorpe: "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight."

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ALMANAC FOR SUMMER READING

(Continued from page 13)

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DAYS WITHOUT TIME. By Edwin Way Teale. *Dodd, Mead.*

Mr. Teale continues the delightful reflections which mingle natural his-

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The author of the hilariously amusing and somewhat wacky "The Lonely Carrot" here writes a Christmas story dealing with the same sort of people who made his earlier novel so entertaining.

AN AFFAIR OF STATE. By Pat Frank. *Lippincott.*

An engrossing and clever novel which tells the tale of a young American member of the State Department's foreign service, assigned to Budapest—a book which does not pull its punches.

FICTION

(Continued from page 16)

Miss Robertson's first book, "St. Malachy's Court," was, I understand, a series of vignettes of Dublin slum children, and was very well received in Ireland because of its humor, realism, and sincere compassion. Miss Robertson would have been well advised to stick to this more static mode of character presentation.

Remembered Boyhood

MY UNCLE AND MISS ELIZABETH. By Robert Parrish. *New York: The Beechhurst Press.* 1948. 221 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RICHARD B. GEHMAN

THE ARMS of Marcel Proust are long, and his hands are strangling more often than caressing. The Master has taken hold of Mr. Parrish's prose, squeezed it unmercifully, and left it spread out before us in a book so tedious as to be almost meaningless.

This becomes doubly regrettable when the subject matter of the book is examined. Mr. Parrish writes of his uncle, a strength- and -health fiend with an outlook that combines the worst characteristics of Bernarr Macfadden and, say, Thomas J. Watson, without the success of either. The uncle's relationships with his young nephew, the narrator, and with Mr. Farrer, the roomer, as well as with Mr. Farrer's paramour, a nebulous lady named Miss Elizabeth, and an equally vague professor, constitute the fabric of this series of weakly connected reminiscences. In the hands of one less committed, some of the incidents might have come out as comedy; as Mr. Parrish relates them,

they become interesting only for their curious lack of vitality and freshness: it is difficult to see why he thought them worth the bother.

Mr. Parrish is committed to Proustian prose: to such an extent, in fact, that his writing at times reaches the level of unintentional parody. To Mr. Parrish's credit, however, it must be said that he has an eye ever on the lookout for the original image, and great sensitivity to color and to nature. But again his strange, twisted manner of expressing himself mars what pleasure his prose might evoke. Thus what set out to be a nostalgic record of a boy's memory of the Twenties and Thirties in Iowa and Illinois has become only a document of incredible confusion.

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