The Phonograph Bewitched

By H. F. W. Tatham

A few years ago, there lived in a back street of an old country town in the West of England an old man. He was a strange, bent, wrinkled creature, who looked, when he came out-of-doors, like an owl in the daylight, and was an object of ridicule to most of the boys in his quarter of the town. But by dint of hard work, added to a good natural capacity, he had attained great skill as a mechanician. Indeed, he made his living almost entirely by odd jobs of mending machines and other articles, often succeeding in cases where famous and experienced workmen had declared repair to be impossible.

During the best years of his life he had been greatly attracted by the inventions of Edison, more especially by the phonograph and similar contrivances. The uncanny reproduction of the human voice appealed to his imagination as much as the skilful workmanship to his intellect, and it was supposed in the town that he was devising some new form of the machine, from which great results were expected, though some threw doubt upon the report. However, it was true enough, and on the night of the first of November 189- the machine was nearing completion. The old man sat in the back room of his house, and was lovingly putting the finishing touches to his work. It was quite different from the ordinary kind of phonograph, though it is needless to say in what the difference lay. But somehow the old man was not satisfied. ‘I wish—I wish—’ he said to himself; and just then something tapped at the window. Rising up, he went to it and looked out. But he could see nothing; the moonlight lay in white strips on the yard behind, and there was really nothing there. But there had certainly been a tapping, and there was no branch or anything hanging loose that could have caused it. It must have been fancy; so at least he told himself, as he went back to the table and his work, and presently he fell to wishing again. And again something tapped at the window, so loudly and unmistakably that he could not believe his eyes when again he saw that the yard was empty. But empty it was, and there was no use in staring out into it. So once again to work; and this time he put the last finishing touches to the machine. Then he sat for a while and stared at it; and then, again, ‘I wish—I wish—’ he said; and with that there came such a loud tapping that the window shook and rattled, and the old man ran to it and flung it wide.

Was it fancy, or did something brush past him into the room? He never knew, I think; certainly he never told any one; for the next morning he was found sitting in the chair by the table quite dead, with such an odd smile on his face; and the finished phonograph stood beside him.

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The old man did not leave much money, and his stock of instruments, materials, machines, etc., was quickly sold up and the proceeds divided among his heirs, who were in no way inclined to continue the business. The phonograph passed into the hands of a schoolmaster. This schoolmaster thought it would be a very interesting thing if he took the phonograph into the room where he held his class, so that an impression of the sounds might be taken and then reproduced afterwards for the amusement of himself and his friends. But there was a peculiarity about the phonograph on which he did not reckon.

The schoolmaster was a man who prided himself on the manner in which he enlivened, for instance, a long and dull construing-lesson with remarks on some topic more or less closely—sometimes very remotely—connected with the subject in hand. So much was he addicted to this that sometimes, led away by his own fluency and the plentiful supply of general knowledge he possessed, he found the hour had almost slipped away before he was aware of it, and some of the regular lesson had to be omitted or hastily construed by himself—not altogether to the sorrow of the boys in his class.

On this occasion he took in the phonograph, and placed it in a position favourable for recording the sounds uttered in the room. He laid himself out to be more than usually interesting—indeed, his description of the various kinds of torpedoes in use in modern navies, which arose out of the account of the ramming of a ship in the battle of Salamis, was wonderful, he thought, in its clearness and grasp of facts. It was not till just before the end of school that he noticed that the ten hardest lines of the lesson remained unconstrued, and hastily (but, as he thought, remarkably clearly and idiomatically) translated them to the division himself.

He stayed behind after dismissing the boys and turned on the phonograph to reproduce the lesson. Of course he expected to hear the lesson reproduced—the slow and stammering construing of the boys— his own ironical comments—the fluent English that he substituted for their bald renderings—finally his eloquent and scientific discourse on the use of the torpedo in modern warfare. But what he really heard was quite different.

All that he had thought the important part was reproduced in a low and hurried voice, through which, now and again, broke loud remarks either quite disconnected with the lesson—referring, in fact; to engagements and appointments of an athletic or social nature—or connected with it in a way that was singularly painful to the hearer; for instance, questions as to the place, or the correct rendering of words in the part of the lesson yet unconstrued, or suggestions made in a friendly spirit to help out a comrade in a difficulty. One remark in particular cut the hearer to the heart. It was a suggestion made to a boy whose intelligent questions had often gratified him that he should get ‘old So-and-so to jaw about something’ for the rest of school, so as to avoid the construing of the harder part of the lesson. He was grieved to think how well the artifice had succeeded.

In fact, it was only too plain that the phonograph, perhaps owing to its peculiar construction, but more likely through the influence of the thing that had come in through the mechanician’s window on that November night, recorded remarks in a most contradictory manner—bringing out in a loud tone those which the speaker meant to be low, and *vice versa.* The mechanism was unusually complicated, and the schoolmaster, examining it and poking about the handles and screws that he saw, was surprised on touching one to hear a loud whirring sound that lasted for a few seconds and then ceased. He did not realise that he had made a startling change in the machine by this, and, after taking out and obliterating the record of the school just past, he carried the machine back to his house. On going in, for some reason or other it was necessary for him to enter one of the boys’ rooms and speak to the owner, and putting down the phonograph he stayed there for a while, and then, as often happens, when he went out he left it behind him on the table. Moreover, oddly enough, he seemed to forget its existence from that time forward; but it is said that after that day his talk in school was less discursive in character.

The boy in whose room the phonograph was left was the captain of the eleven, and otherwise an important personage. It was not long before he noticed the phonograph, and, being of a mechanical turn, saw how to set it going; and it struck him that it would be amusing to place it so that it would record the conversation of some friends who were shortly coming to see him.

The friends presently arrived, and were very courteous in their conversation, laughing at all the captain's jokes, and otherwise showing a great desire to ingratiate themselves with him. It is true that they were boys who were candidates for the eleven. All the same, flattery is pleasant even when the motive is not altogether unguessable, and the captain was gratified. By and by the friends took their leave, and the captain, when they had gone, turned on the mechanism to reproduce the conversation. But the words that came out made him sit up very straight and turn very red, and finally kick the phonograph across the room, so that it lay buzzing feebly in a corner and finally became silent.

For this was the kind of remark that came clearly from the machine. 'What rot it is to have to sit here and listen to the jokes a silly ass like B. chooses to make, and all because he can put me in the eleven I or not if he likes!' 'Besides, he is really not much good himself' 'He is awfully bad,' said another voice. 'It is a pity he did not leave last half; he's been here much too long, and C. would have made a much better captain.' And much more to a like effect.

Now it was plain, though the captain did not know it, that the turning of that handle had made a change in the machine. It now took no notice of spoken remarks, but recorded thoughts only; and these thoughts were often quite at variance with the words that were heard by the ear.

I do not know if the two boys who had just left the room got into the eleven or not; let us hope that the captain went by their merits, and felt no grudge against them for their thoughts. Our business is to follow the adventures of the phonograph.

It was all bent and apparently hopelessly damaged by the kick and the fall into the corner of the room, and the captain was only too anxious to be rid of it. So he was glad enough when his fag took it away. The fag was an odd, awkward boy, very shy and reticent, solitary in his habits, with no gifts for work or for play; unpopular, unattractive, sometimes unhappy; even, the other boys said, a little mad. He also had some turn for mechanics, and he poked the phonograph about till it was more or less in working order; but its fall in the corner of the room had had an effect on it, which we shall presently see.

Now the boy in whose possession it was had the habit that many solitary and eccentric people have of talking to himself when alone, apparently in quite long conversations, with pauses for the answers, uttered, not clearly and distinctly, but in a low voice, of which the words could not be distinguished through walls or doors, and accordingly baffled the curiosity of his neighbours. But, when they learnt of the existence of the machine in his room, they thought that they now had an opportunity of hearing what the remarks really were; so they watched their opportunity, and left the machine ready to take the record. Then, after a long enough interval, getting the owner out of the room on some pretext, they carried the phonograph away.

It was some time before the experiment was over. But of the four boys who listened to it only one was then left, and, as he rejoined his comrades who had stolen from the room one by one, he seemed strangely moved. It was not only that instead of the broken mumblings they had expected, the boy's voice had come out clear and true; it was not only that the words he spoke had a beauty all their own and a sense that they could but half appreciate; it was not only that the words somehow or other were not afterwards to be recalled; but there was another voice that spoke with him. It was a voice that may speak to all, but not to most in words audible to the outward ear, and the words were words such as never man spake, and the sound was as the sound of many waters; Moses on the mount, when the cloud came down in darkness and the voice of the trumpet waxed exceeding loud; Elijah in the wilderness, when after the fire came a still small voice; St. John in the barren Isle of Patmos in the Spirit on the Lord's Day—those had heard it;

and now it was heard once more, as it talked with the despised boy whom his companions called mad.

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As for the phonograph, it would record nothing more after that, and was sold for old metal. ‘Useless things, those phonographs,’ said a customer in a shop where it lay neglected and dirty in a corner; ‘none of them ever did any good. What use has that thing ever been in the world? None, I would wager a good deal.’

But the phonograph knew better.