THE EVOLUTION OF THE MOTION PICTURE

VI—LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE WITH THOMAS A. EDISON

An Exclusive Interview With the Master Inventor
The Sixth of a Series of Articles on the Motion Picture

By FREDERICK JAMES SMITH

THOMAS ALVA EDISON is one of the great men of all time. Since the dawn of history mankind has largely found fame in four fields of labor: war, literature, political intrigue, and invention. Yet the inventor stands pre-eminent. His perfected creations mean actual forward steps of utility for all the world.

Out in his laboratory at West Orange, N. J., Mr. Edison is daily laboring. The sixty-six years of his life have been devoted to humanity. To his genius are due the perfected duplex and quadruplex telegraph, the incandescent electric light, the fundamental systems of generating, regulating, distributing and measuring electric current for light, heat and power, the telephone transmitter, the phonograph, the motion picture and a host of other useful inventions. Not content, he still works for the sheer joy of it—delving into the future and transforming his dreams into realities.

Mr. Edison is a man of dynamic energy and dominant personality. His face is strong and vigorous. One forgets his silvery hair in the power of his eyes. Reflected there, beneath the heavy, overhanging half-gray eyebrows, is the meditating thought of the dreamer coupled with the shrewd insight of the doer. There is a strong note of preoccupation in his glance. He is aloof from the whirl of the present. When he walks he moves hurriedly, as if to guard against the loss of a single moment.

Yet there was no trace of hurry about the master inventor—the only man to equal Napoleon in making every second count—as he greeted me, leaned back comfortably in his chair, selected a long cigar and lighted it. Mr. Edison is rather deaf and so I had previously prepared a few questions generally outlining my interview. The inventor perused them and, when he had concluded, smoked thoughtfully for a few moments.

"I like to have questions," he said. "I haven't time for long interviews." Mr. Edison spoke with finality, yet he smiled at the same moment.

"Better photography, better actors and better technique in the studios, as well as the combination of manufacturers to prevent the marketing of objectionable pictures through censorship, have been the great advance strides in motion pictures," Mr. Edison began.

He gazed for a moment into the circling clouds of cigar smoke.

"The moving picture will endure as long as poor people exist," the inventor continued. "It fills the same want in the lives of the masses that the five-cent trolley car filled. The motion picture fits into their income. The workers deserve and must have more amusement than the richer folk, who are able to afford the regular theater and other expensive pleasures."

Mr. Edison firmly believes that the film is a mighty lever for good. "The motion picture is the great educator of the poorer people. It incites their imagination by bringing the whole world before their eyes. It sets spectators thinking and raises their standard of living."

The inventor smoked on silently, as if mentally weighing the future.

"The next steps of advancement will center about better photography, with less flicker, the production of multiple reel screen dramas, colored pictures and possibly stereoscopic films with the effect of actual depth.

"We do not know yet how to attain the stereoscopic effect. I have no less than four suggestions a day from all parts of America, but not yet have I found one process which is practical.

"I have long been working on a method to secure photography in all natural colors in their right value." The wizard drew from his pocket a small strip of film—upon which a scene was reproduced in the tints of nature—and handed it to me.

"It is raw yet," Mr. Edison commented, "but it proves the possibility of color photography. We can take sixteen pictures a second. The Lumiere process requires several seconds for one picture. It is quite a technical feat to get motion photography in perfect coloring. Our Mr. Powrie has devoted five years to it and it is going to come. Then, with the stereoscopic effect, perfected talking pictures capable of operatic reproduction, and the elimination of the flicker, we shall have the whole thing.

THOMAS A. EDISON.

"All these improvements are very difficult. Still, there is nothing in reason but can be done. The things we cannot do are those of which we are ignorant. We will know more next year—for each year we advance."

"Do you think," I ventured to ask, "that the talking picture will displace the silent photoplay?"

"I do not think so," quickly responded Mr. Edison. "Both will be used. The talking picture, when perfected, will provide the poorer people with that other branch of entertainment, singing and music. We will see and hear little operettas, impossible with silent pictures."

"What is your estimation of the future educational value of pictures?" I asked.

"Books," declared the inventor with decision, "will soon be obsolete in the public schools. Scholars will be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed inside of ten years.

"We have been working for some time on the school pictures. We have been studying and reproducing the life of the fly, mosquito, silk weaving moth, brown moth, gypsy moth, butterflies, scale and various other insects, as well as chemical chrystallization. It proves conclusively the worth of motion pictures in chemistry, physics and other branches of study, making the scientific truths, difficult to understand from text books, plain and clear to children.

"I do not think every home will have its own projecting machine, although the wealthier people will possess them, no doubt. The cheapness of film entertainment is due to its popularity among the many. The expenses per capita are extremely small. In a home the cost would be very great. The future will see motion pictures more or less in the home, while in clubs, in theaters and in motion picture houses they will be most popular.

"The motion picture is destined to develop some of the most wonderful players in the world. The talking pictures demand and require good acting. The greatest evil I find lies in the poor voice accent of players. I have tried innumerable voices and the average of

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poor articulation is unbelievable. We seem to hear all vowel sounds and no consonants.

"Of the total volume in the voice, the vowel sound has 90 per cent. and the consonant 10 per cent. The average actor raises the vowel to 150 per cent and drops the consonant to about 3 per cent. Bad accent spoils many an actor.

"It has, in fact, reached such a point that the public is required to draw upon its imagination for half the spoken dialogue in stage productions. I recall when I was a telegraph operator that I often could only catch one out of three words sent over the wire. I could get the sense of the message then, but it is a poor proposition when this percentage enters acting.

"We had an actress here the other day who sang a solo. When we reproduced the song upon our phonograph it was impossible to understand a single word. We hear of the demand for operas in English, yet no one could sing them in pure English. It seems to me that there is little difference in what tongue they are sung. We cannot understand them anyway. The vocalists might as well use Choctaw. Indeed, the Hawaiian language would be far more musical.

"My advice to young singers who wish to spoil their voices is to cross the water. The impression that European instruction in vocalism is necessary is a complete mistake. To many it spells the ruin of a good voice. The best singers are in America and in England. This country is a land of fine voices. Unfortunately, most of the really good singers are in private life and they have no desire to go upon the stage. That is my conclusion after a great number of tests."

Mr. Edison took me upstairs in the laboratory to the music room. We made the trip in an old freight elevator. For the first time Mr. Edison noted the extreme heat (the mercury was in the 90s). "Rather warm," he remarked.

The inventor had me sit in a chair facing his new disc phonograph, which he has been perfecting for three years. He himself took a chair close to the machine. Then he motioned his assistant to start the first selection, a flute, 'cello, violin and harp reproduction of "Kathleen Mavourneen."

That, at least to me, was the most impressive moment of the interview. With his shoulders bent forward and hands clasped, Mr. Edison listened while the plaintive pathos of the melody throbbed as if from the instrument strings. Never before had I fully realized the power of Rodin's marvelous figure in marble, The Thinker. Here was the same mental tensity, the same brooding concentration of thought.

A slow smile lighted the inventor's face as the song ended. Other records followed. Finally Mr. Edison showed me his vast record cabinets of vocal reproductions. "We have now over 1,200 voices recorded," he explained. "Every opera and concert singer of England and the Continent is represented and the records hold the voices of the favorites of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Prague, Berlin, Buda-Pesth, Munich, Florence, Genoa, Paris, Madrid, Monte Carlo, Naples, Milan, Barcelona, and of some 500 London singers. There is a scale and a song from each vocalist—a thorough voice trial.

"When we first started recording grand opera we thought that the trouble which marred the resultant records was due to the phonograph. We know now that the trouble lies with the voice. The phonograph has taught me that fame and reputation in grand opera, supposed to rest upon a great voice, really is dependant upon the vocalist's personality, the theatrical environment, and the power and skill of dramatic rendition. The voice has little to do with its possessor's fame. Less, for instance, than press agentry.

"In five years we will produce operetta in perfected talking pictures almost if not better than the original. We will have better artists, we will rehearse longer, and we will give the full volume of the melodies. It will offer the poor a show for their money and, when you please them, you win a mighty clientele.

"The five-cent business is a tremendous one. I found that true with the trolley car. I financed the first trolley and built all the machinery. We were afraid it wouldn't pay, basing our expectations upon the horse car traffic. But we were surprised. We gave high speed where slow movement had sufficed before, along with better cars. Yet we could not understand at first where all the business came from. The extra traffic established the success of the trolley. The horse car had been too slow. That was the secret.

"In the years to come — and the years are not far off, although there are many who will doubt my prophecy—the technique of the picture will be so perfect that the great actors and actresses will live in their own homes, while their picture reproductions will travel and spread their art. This will come because the screen productions will be so much better than a performance of traveling players, which must naturally be affected by varying conditions.

"It will pay to rehearse the dramas for three months previous to a performance before the camera. Rehearsal is everything. Then duplication of the finally perfect performance will be unlimited. The motion picture reproductions will travel while the actors are preparing a new drama. So the picture will revolutionize education and the drama."

Mr. Edison led the way down a winding stairway to his office. Outside a small electric runabout waited. Securing his hat and concluding his interview with a few personal words, the inventor climbed into the car. The smile which the phonographic melody had won still lighted Mr. Edison's face. It was easy to see that his thoughts were back in the music room with his newest perfected creation. A moment more and the machine had passed from sight through the arched gateway.

I thought again of the master inventor's words:

"There is nothing in reason but can be done."

UNIVERSAL FILMS

Leo, the Indian (Imp, July 5).—Leo is a mischievous boy, who is led astray into the clutches of a gang of thieves, who, finding he has no money about him, tatoo his face. In fear of punishment, Leo dresses himself as an expected strange guest from India, and presents himself to his parents. Some horseplay of the wildest order follows, the situation being brought to a close by the arrival of the real guest, who is a gentleman of refinement, and who objects to Leo's impersonation of him. The thing is a farce of the most conventional and trivial order. Were it not for the lively grimaces and action generally of the actor who animates Leo, the film would be worth little. It is a half-reel subject. K.

Fun in Film (Imp, July 5).—Hy. Mayer, the amiable artist of the New York *Times*, is herewith presented in a trick picture, posing for his own active pencil. The illusion is excellent, while his variety of subjects ranging from Oom Paul, and an East Side gangster, to Bryan and T. R., is vastly amusing. The photography is excellent. A split reel with Leo, the Indian. K.

In the Night (Eclair, July 6).—A gentleman going away from home one evening, misses his train, and returns to find that his wife is about to admit another man to the house. He compels her to let the man in that he may assure himself of her infidelity. But what is his surprise—and relief—to find that the man is an adventurer who holds, for purposes of blackmail, a letter from the wife, in which she admits forging her husband's name to a check that he might be saved misery. The husband snatches the documents from the intruder, and drives him out. Husband and wife are reconciled. A wholly theatrical piece of business, tricky, and melodramatic, but quite legitimate in that it is animated and forceful and has uplift. Mr. Francis as the adventurer is excellent. The actor and actress playing husband and wife are entirely capable. On the same reel with How Diamonds Are Made. K.

How Diamonds Are Made (Eclair, July 6).—Occupying the latter half of the reel with In the Night, this conducts the spectator through the various stages of the Moisan process of making artificial diamonds. The jewels are of precisely the same quality as the genuine stones, however, the difference being that they are made in Man's laboratory, whereas the others come from Nature's. The method is merely one of subjecting ordinary carbon to tremendous heat, compressing it, and then refining it through the agency of various chemicals. But after all the labor, the result is of no practical use, for the diamonds are almost microscopic. The film is excellently handled and worthy of the best attention. K.

A Shifting Fortune (Victor, July 4).—Jim owns the farm adjoining the one on which lives the girl he loves. The hired man on Jim's farm and the one on hers quarrel regularly over who owns the troublesome stones in the fields, and throw them back and forth over the line. At this time they rest in her field. A mining engineer who boards at her house, and who loves her, stumbles over some of these stones, and discovers that they contain copper. Without mentioning his find, he buys up the mortgage on the place, and bids the girl marry him or move off with her people. She goes—over to Jim's. And when a promoter comes to see about developing the copper deposit, he discovers that the deposit is on Jim's place, and goes to him to make a glittering proposition. So Jim, with prospects of great wealth, marries the girl. The central situation is quite a little time in getting under way, but it is sound. It is a good film on a clever, if not altogether original idea. It is unfortunate that the opening scenes should drag somewhat because the love interest is not firmly knit with the central story of the shifting fortune. The acting, particularly of the girl and of Jim, is good. K.

True Chivalry (Crystal, July 8).—Alison and Morgan, two hotheaded old Southerners, are political rivals and Alison refuses to allow Morgan's son to court his daughter. But love will have its way. Alison catches young Morgan in his daughter's room preparatory to an elopement. He forces an immediate duel on the young man, fires hastily, and is at the mercy of his opponent. But Morgan refuses to fire. Then the old man says that the only way to avoid scandal is for them to marry at once, and this being entirely to the taste of the couple, the ceremony is gone through with dispatch. The fathers, meeting on the occasion, become reconciled. The idea of this is ancient enough, but it is well put together and carried through with a vim that makes it thoroughly entertaining. The acting is satisfactory. K.

Jane Marries (Imp, July 3).—A miserable, albeit good-looking young man with a hang-over, is informed by a lawyer that according to the terms of his late aunt's will, he must be married by four o'clock that afternoon or forfeit the estate. He sees a sweet young lady in the park attacked by a ruffian. In his successful fight to save her, he is stabbed. The young lady visits him at the hospital where he is taken, and learns of his predicament. So she brings a minister to his bedside and is wedded to him. He does not see her face. When he recovers, he secures an introduction to her, falls in love with her, and is about to retire in the belief that it is hopeless, when his father-in-law introduces him to his own wife. The circumstance of the wedding will not bear very close examination, for it has not even the reasonable unreasonableness of farce. The action of the young lady in arranging the marriage looks more like a piece of strategy on her part to get the young man's money than one to do him a good turn. Much is lost by not telling when the young man receives the letter about the will, showing just how brief is the time in which he must marry. Girl, young man, and father were excellently played. K.