

The Kinetoscope of Time

By Brander Matthews

As the twelfth stroke of the bell in the tower at the corner tolled forth slowly, the midnight wind blew chill down the deserted avenue, and swept it clear of all belated wayfarers. The bare trees in the thin strip of park clashed their lifeless branches; the river far below slipped along silently. There was no moon, and the stars were shrouded. It was a black night. Yet far in the distance there was a gleam of cheerful light which lured me on and on. I could not have said why it was that I had ventured forth at that hour on such a night. It seemed to me as though the yellow glimmer I beheld afar off was the goal of my excursion. Something within whispered to me then that I need go no farther when once I had come to the spot whence the soft glare proceeded.

The pall of darkness was so dense that I could not see the sparse houses I chanced to pass, nor did I know where I was any more. I urged forward blindly, walking towards the light, which was all that broke the blackness before me; its faint illumination seemed to me somehow to be kindly, inviting, irresistible. At last I came to a halt in front of a building I had never before seen, although I thought myself well acquainted with that part of the city. It was a circular edifice, or so it seemed to me then; and I judged that it had but a single story, or two, at the most. The door stood open to the street; and it was from this that the light was cast. So dim was this illumination now I had come to it that I marvelled I could have seen it at all afar off as I was when first I caught sight of it.

While I stood at the portal of the unsuspected edifice, peering doubtfully within, wondering to what end I had been led thither, and hesitating as to my next step, I felt again the impulse to go forward. At that moment tiny darts of fire, as it were, glowed at the end of the hall that opened before me, and they ran together rapidly and joined in liquid lines and then faded as suddenly as they had come—but not too soon for me to read the simple legend they had written in the air—an invitation to me, so I interpreted it, to go forward again, to enter the building, and to see for myself why I had been enticed there.

Without hesitation I obeyed. I walked through the doorway, and I became conscious that the door had closed behind me as I pressed forward. The passage was narrow and but faintly lighted; it bent to the right with a circular sweep as though it skirted the inner circumference of the building; still curving, it sank by a gentle gradient; and then it rose again and turned almost at right angles. Pushing ahead resolutely, although in not a little doubt as to the meaning of my adventure, I thrust aside a heavy curtain, soft to the hand. Then I found myself just inside a large circular hall. Letting the hangings fall behind me, I took three or four irresolute paces which brought me almost to the centre of the room. I saw that the walls were continuously draped with the heavy folds of the same soft velvet, so that I could not even guess where it was I had entered. The rotunda was bare of all furniture; there was no table in it, no chair, no sofa; nor was anything hanging from the ceiling or against the curtained walls. All that the room contained was a set of four curiously shaped narrow stands, placed over against one another at the corners of what might be a square drawn within the circle of the hall. These narrow stands were close to the curtains; they were perhaps a foot wide, each of them, or it might be a little more:

they were twice or three times as long as they were wide; and they reached a height of possibly three or four feet.

Going towards one of these stands to examine it more curiously, I discovered that there were two projections from the top, resembling eye-pieces, as though inviting the beholder to gaze into the inside of the stand. Then I thought I heard a faint metallic click above my head. Raising my eyes swiftly, I read a few words written, as it were, against the dark velvet of the heavy curtains in dots of flame that flowed one into the other and melted away in a moment. When this mysterious legend had faded absolutely, I could not recall the words I had read in the fitful and flitting letters of fire, and yet I retained the meaning of the message; and I understood that if I chose to peer through the eye-pieces I should see a succession of strange dances.

To gaze upon dancing was not what I had gone forth to do, but I saw no reason why I should not do so, as I was thus strangely bidden. I lowered my head until my eyes were close to the two openings at the top of the stand. I looked into blackness at first, and yet I thought that I could detect a mystic commotion of the invisible particles at which I was staring. I made no doubt that, if I waited, in due season the promise would be fulfilled. After a period of expectancy which I could not measure, infinitesimal sparks darted hither and thither, and there was a slight crackling sound. I concentrated my attention on what I was about to see; and in a moment more I was rewarded.

The darkness took shape and robed itself in color; and there arose out of it a spacious banquet-hall, where many guests sat at supper. I could not make out whether they were Romans or Orientals; the structure itself had a Latin solidity, but the decorations were Eastern in their glowing gorgeousness. The hall was illumined by hanging lamps, by the light of which I tried to decide whether the ruler who sat in the seat of honor was a Roman or an Oriental. The beautiful woman beside him struck me as Eastern beyond all question. While I gazed intently he turned to her and proffered a request. She smiled acquiescence, and there was a flash of anticipated triumph in her eye as she beckoned to a menial and sent him forth with a message. A movement as of expectancy ran around the tables where the guests sat at meat. The attendants opened wide the portals and a young girl came forward. She was perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age, but in the East women ripen young, and her beauty was indisputable. She had large, deep eyes and a full mouth; and there was a chain of silver and golden coins twisted into her coppery hair. She was so like to the woman who sat beside the ruler that I did not doubt them to be mother and daughter. At a word from the elder the younger began to dance; and her dance was Oriental, slow at first, but holding every eye with its sensual fascination. The girl was a mistress of the art; and not a man in the room withdrew his gaze from her till she made an end and stood motionless before the ruler. He said a few words I could not hear, and then the daughter turned to the mother for guidance; and again I caught the flash of triumph in the elder woman's eye and on her face the suggestion of a hatred about to be glutted. And then the light faded and the darkness settled down on the scene and I saw no more.

I did not raise my head from the stand, for I felt sure that this was not all I was to behold; and in a few moments there was again a faint scintillation. In time the light was strong enough for me to perceive the irregular flames of a huge bonfire burning in an old square of some mediæval city. It was evening, and yet a throng of men and women and children made an oval about the fire and about a slim girl who had spread a Persian

carpet on the rough stones of the broad street. She was a brunette, with dense black hair; she wore a striped skirt, and a jacket braided with gold had slipped from her bare shoulders. She held a tambourine in her hand and she was twisting and turning in cadence to her own song. Then she went to one side where stood a white goat with gilded horns and put down her tambourine and took up two swords; and with these in her hands she resumed her dance. A man in the throng, a man of scant thirty-five, but already bald, a man of stalwart frame, fixed hot eyes upon her; and from time to time a smile and a sigh met on his lips, but the smile was more dolorous than the sigh. And as the gypsy girl ceased her joyous gyrations, the bonfire died out, and darkness fell on the scene again, and I could no longer see anything.

Again I waited, and after an interval no longer than the other there came a faint glow that grew until I saw clearly as in the morning sun the glade of a forest through which a brook rippled. A sad-faced woman sat on a stone by the side of the streamlet; her gray garments set off the strange ornament in the fashion of a single letter of the alphabet that was embroidered in gold and in scarlet over her heart. Visible at some distance was a little girl, like a bright-apparelled vision, in a sunbeam, which fell down upon her through an arch of boughs. The ray quivered to and fro, making her figure dim or distinct, now like a real child, now like a child's spirit, as the splendor came and went. With violets and anemones and columbines the little girl had decorated her hair. The mother looked at the child and the child danced and sparkled and prattled airily along the course of the streamlet, which kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but melancholy. Then the mother raised her head as though her ears had detected the approach of some one through the wood. But before I could see who this newcomer might be, once more the darkness settled down upon the scene.

This time I knew the interval between the succeeding visions and I waited without impatience; and in due season I found myself gazing at a picture as different as might be from any I had yet beheld.

In the broad parlor of a house that seemed to be spacious, a middle-aged lady, of an appearance at once austere and kindly, was looking at a smiling gentleman who was coming towards her pulling along a little negro girl about eight or nine years of age. She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round, shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. She was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; and altogether there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance. The severe old maid examined this strange creature in dismay and then directed a glance of inquiry at the gentleman in white. He smiled again and gave a signal to the little negro girl. Whereupon the black eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and apparently she began to sing, keeping time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time; and finally, turning a somersault or two, she came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes. The elderly lady stood silent, perfectly paralyzed with amazement, while the smiling gentleman in white was amused at her astonishment.

Once more the vision faded. And when, after the same interval, the darkness began to disappear again, even while everything was dim and indistinct I knew that the scene was

shifted from the South to the North. I saw a room comfortably furnished, with a fire smouldering in a porcelain stove. In a corner stood a stripped Christmas-tree, with its candles burned out. Against the wall between the two doors was a piano, on which a man was playing—a man who twisted his head now and again to look over his shoulder, sometimes at another and younger man standing by the stove, sometimes at a young woman who was dancing alone in the centre of the room. This young woman had draped herself in a long parti-colored shawl and she held a tambourine in her hand. There was in her eyes a look of fear, as of one conscious of an impending misfortune. As I gazed she danced more and more wildly. The man standing by the porcelain stove was apparently making suggestions, to which she paid no heed. At last her hair broke loose and fell over her shoulders; and even this she did not notice, going on with her dancing as though it were a matter of life and death. Then one of the doors opened and another woman stood on the threshold. The man at the piano ceased playing and left the instrument. The dancer paused unwillingly, and looked pleadingly up into the face of the younger man as he came forward and put his arm around her.

And then once more the light died away and I found myself peering into a void blackness. This time, though I waited long, there were no crackling sparks announcing another inexplicable vision. I peered intently into the stand, but I saw nothing. At last I raised my head and looked about me. Then on the hangings over another of the four stands, over the one opposite to that into which I had been looking, there appeared another message, the letters melting one into another in lines of liquid light; and this told me that in the other stand I could, if I chose, gaze upon combats as memorable as the delectable dances I had been beholding.

I made no hesitation, but crossed the room and took my place before the other stand and began at once to look through the projecting eye-pieces. No sooner had I taken this position than the dots of fire darted across the depth into which I was gazing; and then there came a full clear light as of a cloudless sky, and I saw the walls of an ancient city. At the gates of the city there stood a young man, and toward him there ran a warrior, brandishing a spear, while the bronze of his helmet and his armor gleamed in the sunlight. And trembling seized the young man and he fled in fear; and the warrior darted after him, trusting in his swift feet. Valiant was the flier, but far mightier he who fleetingly pursued him. At last the young man took heart and made a stand against the warrior. They faced each other in fight. The warrior hurled his spear and it went over the young man's head. And the young man then hurled his spear in turn and it struck fair upon the centre of the warrior's shield. Then the young man drew his sharp sword that by his flank hung great and strong. But by some magic the warrior had recovered his spear; and as the young man came forward he hurled it again, and it drove through the neck of the young man at the joint of his armor, and he fell in the dust. After that the sun was darkened; and in a moment more I was looking into an empty blackness.

When again the light returned it was once more with the full blaze of mid-day that the scene was illumined, and the glare of the sun was reflected from the burning sands of the desert. Two or three palms arose near a well, and there two horsemen faced each other warily. One was a Christian knight in a coat of linked mail, over which he wore a surcoat of embroidered cloth, much frayed and bearing more than once the arms of the wearer—a couchant leopard. The other was a Saracen, who was circling swiftly about the knight of the leopard. The crusader suddenly seized the mace which hung at his saddle-bow, and

with a strong hand and unerring aim sent it crashing against the head of his foe, who raised his buckler of rhinoceros-hide in time to save his life, though the force of the blow bore him from the saddle. The knight spurred his steed forward, but the Saracen leaped into his seat again without touching the stirrup. While the Christian recovered his mace, the infidel withdrew to a little distance and strung the short bow he carried at his back. Then he circled about his foe, whose armor stood him in good stead, until the seventh shaft apparently found a less perfect part, and the Christian dropped heavily from his horse. But the dismounted Oriental found himself suddenly in the grasp of the European, who had recourse to this artifice to bring his enemy within his reach. The Saracen was saved again by his agility; and loosing his sword-belt, which the knight had grasped, he mounted his watching horse. He had lost his sword and his arrows and his turban, and these disadvantages seemed to incline him for a truce. He approached the Christian with his right hand extended, but no longer in a menacing attitude. What the result of this proffer of a parley might be I could not observe, for the figures became indistinct, as though a cloud had settled down on them; and in a few seconds more all was blank before me. When the next scene grew slowly into view I thought for a moment it might be a continuation of the preceding, for the country I beheld was also soaking in the hot sunlight of the South, and there was also a mounted knight in armor. A second glance undeceived me. This knight was old and thin and worn, and his armor was broken and pieced, and his helmet was but a barber's basin, and his steed was a pitiful skeleton. His countenance was sorrowful indeed, but there was that in his manner which would stop any man from denying his nobility. His eye was fired with a high purpose and a lofty resolve. In the distance before him were a group of windmills waving their arms in the air, and the knight urged forward his wretched horse as though to charge them. Upon an ass behind him was a fellow of the baser sort, a genial, simple follower, seemingly serving him as his squire. As the knight pricked forward his sorry steed and couched his lance, the attendant apparently appealed to him, and tried to explain, and even ventured on expostulation. But the knight gave no heed to the protests of the squire, who shook his head and dutifully followed his master. What the issue of this unequal combat was to be I could not see, for the inexorable veil of darkness fell swiftly.

Even after the stray sparks had again flitted through the blackness into which I was gazing daylight did not return, and it was with difficulty I was able at last to make out a vague street in a mediæval city doubtfully outlined by the hidden moon. From a window high above the stones there came a faint glimmer. Under this window stood a soldier worn with the wars, who carried himself as though glad now to be at home again. He seemed to hear approaching feet, and line withdrew into the shadow as two others advanced. One of these was a handsome youth with an eager face, in which spirituality and sensuality contended. The other was older, of an uncertain age, and his expression was mocking and evil; he carried some sort of musical instrument, and to this he seemed to sing while the younger man looked up at the window. The soldier came forward angrily and dashed the instrument to the ground with his sword. Then the newcomers drew also, and the elder guarded while the younger thrust. There were a few swift passes, and then the younger of the two lunged fiercely, and the soldier fell back on the stones wounded to the death. Without a glance behind them, the two who had withstood his onslaught withdrew, as the window above opened and a fair-haired girl leaned forth.

Then nothing was visible, until after an interval the light once more returned and I saw a sadder scene than any yet. In a hollow of the bare mountains a little knot of men in dark-blue uniforms were centred about their commander, whose long locks floated from beneath his broad hat. Around this small band of no more than a score of soldiers, thousands of red Indians were raging, with exultant hate in their eyes. The bodies of dead comrades lay in narrowing circles about the thinning group of blue-coats. The red men were picking off their few surviving foes, one by one; and the white men could do nothing, for their cartridges were all gone. They stood at bay, valiant and defiant, despite their many wounds; but the line of their implacable foemen was drawn tighter and tighter about them, and one after another they fell forward dying or dead, until at last only the long-haired commander was left, sore wounded but unconquered in spirit.

When this picture of strong men facing death fearlessly was at last dissolved into darkness like the others that had gone before, I had an inward monition that it was the last that would be shown me; and so it was, for although I kept my place at the stand for two or three minutes more, no warning sparks dispersed the opaque depth.

When I raised my head from the eye-pieces, I became conscious that I was not alone. Almost in the centre of the circular hall stood a middle-aged man of distinguished appearance, whose eyes were fixed upon me. I wondered who he was, and whence he had come, and how he had entered, and what it might be that he wished with me. I caught a glimpse of a smile that lurked vaguely on his lips. Neither this smile nor the expression of his eyes was forbidding, though both were uncanny and inexplicable. He seemed to be conscious of a remoteness which would render futile any effort of his towards friendliness.

How long we stood thus staring the one at the other I do not know. My heart beat heavily and my tongue refused to move when at last I tried to break the silence.

Then he spoke, and his voice was low and strong and sweet.

“You are welcome,” he began, and I noted that the accent was slightly foreign, Italian perhaps, or it might be French. “I am glad always to show the visions I have under my control to those who will appreciate them.”

I tried to stammer forth a few words of thanks and of praise for what I had seen.

“Did you recognize the strange scenes shown to you by these two instruments?” he asked, after bowing gently in acknowledgment of my awkward compliments.

Then I plucked up courage and made bold to express to him the surprise I had felt, not only at the marvellous vividness with which the actions had been repeated before my eyes, like life itself in form and in color and in motion, but also at the startling fact that some of the things I had been shown were true and some were false. Some of them had happened actually to real men and women of flesh and blood, while others were but bits of vain imagining of those who tell tales as an art and as a means of livelihood.

I expressed myself as best I could, clumsily, no doubt; but he listened patiently and with the smile of toleration on his lips.

“Yes,” he answered, “I understand your surprise that the facts and the fictions are mingled together in these visions of mine as though there was little to choose between them. You are not the first to wonder or to express that wonder; and the rest of them were young like you. When you are as old as I am—when you have lived as long as I—when you have seen as much of life as I—then you will know, as I know, that fact is often

inferior to fiction, and that it is often also one and the same thing; for what might have been is often quite as true as what actually was?”

I did not know what to say in answer to this, and so I said nothing.

“What would you say to me,” he went on—and now it seemed to me that his smile suggested rather pitying condescension than kindly toleration—“what would you say to me, if I were to tell you that I myself have seen all the many visions unrolled before you in these instruments? What would you say, if I declared that I had gazed on the dances of Salome and of Esmeralda? that I had beheld the combat of Achilles and Hector and the mounted fight of Saladin and the Knight of the Leopard?”

“You are not Time himself?” I asked in amaze.

He laughed lightly, and without bitterness or mockery.

“No,” he answered, promptly, “I am not Time himself. And why should you think so? Have I a scythe? Have an hour-glass? Have I a forelock? Do I look so very old, then?”

I examined him more carefully to answer this last question, and the more I scrutinized him the more difficult I found it to declare his age. At first I had thought him to be forty, perhaps, or of a certainty less than fifty. But now, though his hair was black, though his eye was bright, though his step was firm, though his gestures were free and sweeping, I had my doubts; and I thought I could perceive, one after another, many impalpable signs of extreme old age.

Then, all at once, he grew restive under my fixed gaze.

“But it is not about me that we need to waste time now,” he said, impatiently. “You have seen what two of my instruments contain; would you like now to examine the contents of the other two?”

I answered in the affirmative.

“The two you have looked into are gratuitous,” he continued. “For what you beheld in them there is no charge. But a sight of the visions in the other two or in either one of them must be paid for. So far, you are welcome as my guest; but if you wish to see any more you must pay the price.”

I asked what the charge was, as I thrust my hand into my pocket to be certain that I had my purse with me.

He saw my gesture, and he smiled once more.

“The visions I can set before you in those two instruments you have not yet looked into are visions of your own life,” he said. “In that stand there,” and he indicated one behind my back, “you can see five of the most important episodes of your past.”

I withdrew my hand from my pocket. “I thank you,” I said, “but I know my own past, and I have no wish to see it again, however cheap the spectacle.”

“Then you will be more interested in the fourth of my instruments,” he said, as he waved his thin, delicate hand towards the stand which stood in front of me. “In this you can see your future!”

I made an involuntary step forward; and then, at a second thought, I shrank back again.

“The price of this is not high,” he continued, “and it is not payable in money.”

“How, then, should I buy it?” I asked, doubtfully.

“In life!” he answered, gravely. “The vision of life must be paid for in life itself. For every ten years of the future which I may unroll before you here, you must assign me a year of life — twelve months—to do with as I will.”

Strange as it seems to me now, I did not doubt that he could do as he declared. I hesitated, and then I fixed my resolve.

“Thank you,” I said, and I saw that he was awaiting my decision eagerly. “Thank you again for what I have already seen and for what you proffer me. But my past I have lived once, and there is no need to turn over again the leaves of that dead record. And the future I must face as best I may, the more bravely, I think, that I do not know what it holds in store for me.”

“The price is low,” he urged.

“It must be lower still,” I answered; “it might be nothing at all, and I should still decline. I cannot afford to be impatient now and to borrow knowledge of the future. I shall know all in good time.”

He seemed not a little disappointed as I said this.

Then he made a final appeal: “Would you not wish to know even the matter of your end?”

“No,” I answered. “That is no temptation to me, for whatever it may be I must find fortitude to undergo it somehow, whether I am to pass away in my sleep in my bed, or whether I shall have to withstand the chances of battle and murder and sudden death.”

“That is your last word?” he inquired.

“I thank you again for what I have seen,” I responded, bowing again; “but my decision is final.”

“Then I will detain you no longer,” he said, haughtily, and he walked towards the circling curtains and swept two of them aside. They draped themselves back, and I saw before me an opening like that through which I had entered.

I followed him, and the curtains dropped behind me as I passed into the insufficiently illuminated passage beyond. I thought that the mysterious being with whom I had been conversing had preceded me, but before I had gone twenty paces I found that I was alone. I pushed ahead, and my path twisted and turned on itself and rose and fell irregularly like that by means of which I had made my way into the unknown edifice. At last I picked my steps down winding stairs, and at the foot I saw the outline of a door. I pushed it back, and I found myself in the open air.

I was in a broad street, and over my head an electric light suddenly flared out and whitewashed the pavement at my feet. At the corner a train of the elevated railroad rushed by with a clattering roar and a trailing plume of white steam. Then a cable-car clanged past with incessant bangs upon its gong. Thus it was that I came back to the world of actuality.

I turned to get my bearings, that I might find my way home again. I was standing almost in front of a shop, the windows of which were filled with framed engravings.

One of these caught my eye, and I confess that I was surprised. It was a portrait of a man—it was a portrait of the man with whom I had been talking.

I went close to the window, that I might see it better. The electric light emphasized the lines of the high-bred face, with its sombre searching eyes and the air of old-world breeding. There could be no doubt whatever that the original of this portrait was the man from whom I had just parted. By the costume I knew that the original had lived in the last century; and the legend beneath the head, engraved in a flowing script, asserted this to be a likeness of “*Monsieur le Comte de Cagliostro.*”