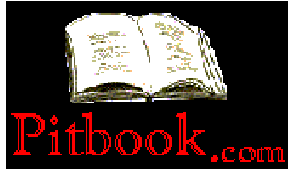

April 2001

From the London times of 1904

Mark TWAIN

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Chicago, April 1, 1904

I resume by cable-telephone where I left off yesterday. For many hours, now, this vast city, along with the rest of the globe, of course, has talked of nothing but the extraordinary episode mentioned in my last report. In accord with your instructions, I will now trace the romance from its beginnings down to the culmination of yesterday, or today; call it which you like. By odd chance, I was a personal actor in part of this drama myself. The opening scene plays in Vienna.

Date, 1:00 a.m., March 31, 1898. I had spent the evening at a social entertainment. About midnight, I went away, in company with the miliary attaches of the British, Italian, and American embassies, to finish with a late smoke. This function had been appointed to take place in the house of Lieutenant Hillyer, the third attache mentioned above. When we arrived there we found several visitors in the room: young Szczepanik (pronounced, approximately, *Zepa*nnik); Mr. K., his financial backer; Mr. W., the latter's secretary; and Lieutenant Clayton of the United States army. War was at that time threatening between Spain and our country, and Lieutenant Clayton had been sent to Europe on military business. I was well acquainted with young Szczepanik

and his two friends, and I knew Mr. Clayton slightly. I had met him at West Point years before, when he was a cadet. He had the reputation of being an able officer, and also of being quick-tempered and plain-spoken.

This smoking-party had been gathered together partly for business: to consider the availability of the telelectroscope for military service. It sounds oddly enough now, but at that time the invention was not taken seriously by anyone except its inventor. Even his financial supporter regarded it merely as a curious and interesting toy. Indeed, he was so convinced of this that he had actually postponed its use by the general world to the end of the dying century by granting a two years' exclusive lease of it to a syndicate whose intent was to exploit it at the Paris World's Fair.

When we entered the smoking-room we found Lieutenant Clayton and Szczepanik engaged in a warm talk over the telelectroscope in the German tongue. Clayton was saying:

"Well, you know my opinion of it, anyway!" And he brought his fist down with emphasis upon the table.

"And I do not value it," retorted the young inventor, with provokingly calm tone and manner.

Clayton turned to Mr. K., and said:

"I cannot see why you are wasting money on this toy. The day will never come when it will do a farthing's worth of real service for any human being."

"That may be; yes, that may be; still, I have put the

money in it, and am content. I think, myself, that it is only a toy, but Szczepanik claims more for it, and I know him well enough to believe that he can see farther than I, either with his telelectroscope or without it."

The soft answer did not cool Clayton down; it seemed only to irritate him more; and he repeated and emphasized his conviction that the invention would never do any man a farthing's worth of real service. He even made it a "brass" farthing, this time. Then he laid an English farthing on the table, and added:

"Take that, Mr. K., and put it away; and if ever the telelectroscope does any man an actual service, mind, a real service, please mail it to me as a reminder, and I will take back what I have been saying. Will you?"

"I will." And Mr. K. put the coin in his pocket.

A demonstration of an early prototype videophone.

Mr. Clayton now turned toward Szczepanik, and began a taunt, a taunt which did not reach a finish; Szczepanik interrupted it with a hardy retort, and followed this with a blow. There was a brisk fight for a moment; then the attaches separated the men.

The scene now changes to Chicago. Time, the autumn of 1901. As soon as the Paris contract released the telelectroscope, it was delivered to public use, and was soon connected with the telephonic systems of the whole world. The improved "limitless-distance" telephone was presently introduced, and the daily doings of the globe made visible to everybody, and audibly discussable, too,

by witnesses separated by any number of leagues.

By and by Szczepanik arrived in Chicago, and, unfortunately, Clayton (now captain) happened to be transferred there as well at about the same time. The two men resumed the Viennese quarrel of 1898. On three different occasions they quarreled, and were separated by witnesses. Then came an interval of two months, during which Szczepanik was not seen by any of his friends, and it was at first supposed that he had gone off on a sightseeing tour and would soon be heard from. But no word came from him. Then it was supposed that he had returned to Europe.

Still, time drifted on, and he was not heard from. Nobody was troubled, for he was like most inventors and other kinds of poets, and went and came capriciously, and often without notice.

Now comes the tragedy. On the 29th of December, in a dark and unused compartment of the cellar under Captain Clayton's house, a corpse was discovered by one of Clayton's maid-servants.

Though unrecognizable due to its violent demise and subsequent deterioration, the body's height and build matched that of Szczepanik.

Clayton was arrested, indicted, and brought to trial, charged with Szczepanik's murder. The evidence against him was damning. Clayton admitted this himself. He said that a reasonable man could not examine this testimony with a dispassionate mind and not be convinced by it; yet

the man would be in error, nevertheless. Clayton swore that he did not commit the murder, and that he had nothing to do with it. His feeble and far-fetched explanation, that an unknown murderer must have somehow sneaked the body of his equally unknown victim into the vacant house before Clayton purchased it, fell on deaf ears.

As your readers will remember, he was condemned to death. He had numerous and powerful friends, and they worked hard to save him, for none of them doubted the truth of his assertion. I did what little I could to help, for I had long since become a close friend of his, and thought it was not in his character to inveigle an enemy into a corner and assassinate him. During 1902 and 1903 he was several times reprieved by the governor; he was reprieved once more in the beginning of the present year, and the execution-day postponed to March 31.

The governor's situation has been embarrassing, from the day of the condemnation, because of the fact that Clayton's wife is the governor's niece. The marriage took place in 1899, when Clayton was 34 and the girl 23, and has been a happy one. There is one child, a little girl three years old. Pity for the poor mother and child kept the mouths of grumblers closed at first; but this could not last forever, for in America politics has a hand in everything, and by and by the governor's political opponents began to call attention to his delay in allowing the law to take its course. These hints have grown more and more frequent,

and more and more pronounced. Naturally his own party grew nervous. Its leaders began to visit Springfield and hold long private conferences with him. He was now between two fires. On the one hand, his niece was imploring him to pardon her husband; on the other were the leaders, insisting that he stand to his plain duty as chief magistrate of the State, and place no further bar to Clayton's execution. Duty won in the struggle, and the governor gave his word that he would not again respite the condemned man. This was two weeks ago. Mrs. Clayton now said:

"Now that you have given your word, my last hope is gone, for I know you will never go back on it. But you have done your best for John, and I have no reproaches for you. You love him, and you love me, and we both know that if you could honorably save him, you would. I will go to him now, and be what help I can, and get what comfort I may out of the few days left to us before the night comes which will have no end for me in life. You will be with me that day? You will not let me bear it alone?"

"I will take you to him myself, poor child, and be near you to the last."

By the governor's command, Clayton was now allowed every indulgence he might ask for which could interest his mind and soften the hardships of his imprisonment. His wife and child spent the days with him; I was his companion by night. He was removed from the narrow cell which he had occupied during such a dreary stretch of

time, and given the chief warden's roomy and comfortable quarters. His mind was always busy with the catastrophe of his life, and with the slaughtered inventor, and he now took the fancy that he would like to have the telelectroscope and divert his mind with it. He had his wish. The connection was made with the international telephone-station, and day by day, and night by night, he called up one corner of the globe after another, and looked upon its life, and studied its strange sights, and spoke with its people, and realized that by grace of this marvelous instrument he was almost as free as the birds of the air, although a prisoner under lock and bars. He seldom spoke to me, and I never interrupted him when he was absorbed in his amusement. I sat in his parlor and read and smoked, and the nights were very quiet and reposefully sociable, and I found them pleasant. Now and then I would hear him say, "Give me Yedo"; next, "Give me Hong Kong"; next, "Give me Melbourne." And I smoked on, and read in comfort, while he wandered about the remote underworld, where the sun was shining in the sky, and the people were at their daily work. Sometimes the talk that came from those far regions through the microphone attachment interested me, and I listened.

Yesterday, I keep calling it yesterday, which is quite natural, for certain reasons, the instrument remained unused, and that, also, was natural, for it was the eve of the execution-day. It was spent in tears and lamentations and farewells. The governor and the wife and child

remained until a quarter past 11 at night, and the scenes I witnessed were pitiful to see.

The execution was to take place at four in the morning. A little after 11 a sound of hammering began, and there was a glare of light outside, and the child cried out, "What is that, papa?" and ran to the window before she could be stopped, and clapped her small hands, and said: "Oh, come and see, mama, such a pretty thing they are making!" The mother knew-and fainted. It was the gallows!

She was carried away to her lodging, poor woman, and Clayton and I were alone, alone, and thinking, brooding, dreaming. We might have been statues, we sat so motionless and still. It was a wild night, for winter was come again for a moment, after the habit of this region in early spring. The sky was starless and black, and a strong wind was blowing from the lake. The silence in the room was so deep that all outside sounds seemed exaggerated by contrast with it. These sounds were fitting ones; they harmonized with the situation and the conditions: the boom and thunder of sudden storm gusts among the roofs and chimneys, then the dying down into moanings and wailings about the eaves and angles; now and then a gnashing and lashing rush of sleet along the windowpanes; and always the muffled and uncanny hammering of the gallows-builders in the courtyard. After an age of this, another sound, far off, and coming smothered and faint through the riot of the tempest, a bell

tolling 12! Another age, and it tolled again. By and by, again. A dreary, long interval after this, then the spectral sound floated to us once more, one, two, three; and this time we caught our breath: 60 minutes of life left!

Clayton rose, and stood by the window, and looked up into the black sky, and listened to the thrashing sleet and the piping wind; then he said: "That a dying man's last of Earth should be, this!" After a little he said: "I must see the sun again, the sun!" and the next moment he was feverishly calling: "China! Give me China, Peking!"

I was strangely stirred, and said to myself" "To think that it is a mere human being who does this unimaginable miracle, turns winter into summer, night into day, storm into calm, gives the freedom of the great globe to a prisoner in his cell, and the sun in his naked splendor to a man dying in Egyptian darkness!"

I was listening.

"What light! What brilliancy! What radiance!... This is Peking?"

"Yes."

"The time?"

"Midafternoon."

"What is the great crowd for, and in such gorgeous costumes? What masses and masses of rich color and barbaric magnificence! And how they flash and glow and burn in the flooding sunlight! What is the occasion of it all?"

"The coronation of our new emperor."

"But I thought that was to take place yesterday."

"This is yesterday, to you."

"Certainly it is. But my mind is confused, these days; there are reasons for it.... Is this the beginning of the procession?"

"Oh, no; it began to move an hour ago."

"Is there much more of it still to come?"

"Two hours. Why do you sigh?"

"Because I should like to see it all."

"And why can't you?"

"I have to go, presently."

"You have an engagement?"

After a pause, softly: "Yes." After another pause: "Who are these in the splendid pavilion?"

"The imperial family, and visiting royalties from here and there and yonder about Earth."

"And who are those in the adjoining pavilions to the right and left?"

"Ambassadors and their families and suites to the right; unofficial foreignors to the left."

"If you will be so good, I..."

Boom! That distant bell again, tolling the half-hour faintly through the tempest of wind and sleet.

The door opened, and the governor and the mother and child entered, the woman in widow's weeds! She fell upon her husband's breast in a passion of sobs, and I, I could not stay; I could not bear it. I went into the bedchamber, and closed the door. I sat there waiting, waiting, waiting,

and listening to the rattling sashes and the blustering of the storm. After what seemed a long, long time, I heard a rustle and movement in the parlor, and knew that the clergyman and the sheriff and the guard were come. There was some low-voiced talking; then a hush; then a prayer, with a sound of sobbing; presently, footfalls, the departure for the gallows; then the child's happy voice: "Don't cry now, mama, when we've got papa again, and taking him home."

The door closed; they were gone. I was ashamed: I was the only friend of the dying man that had no spirit, no courage. I stepped into the room, and said I would be a man and would follow. But we are made as we are made, and we cannot help it. I did not go.

I fidgeted about the room nervously, and presently went to the window, and softly raised it, drawn by that dread fascination which the terrible and the awful exert, and looked down upon the courtyard. By the garish light of the electric lamps I saw the little group of privileged witnesses, the wife crying on her uncle's breast, the condemned man standing on the scaffold with the halter around his neck, his arms strapped to his body, the black cap on his head, the sheriff at his side with his hand on the drop, the clergyman in front of him with bare head and his book in his hand.

"I am the resurrection and the life"

I turned away. I could not listen; I could not look. I did not know whither to go or what to do.

Mechanically, and without knowing it, I put my eye to that strange instrument, and there was Peking and the procession! The next moment I was leaning out the window, gasping suffocating, trying to speak, but dumb from the very imminence of the necessity of speaking. The preacher could speak, but I, who had such need of words.

"And may God have mercy upon your soul. Amen."

The sheriff drew down the black cap, and laid his hand upon the lever. I got my voice.

"Stop, for God's sake! The man is innocent. Come here and see Szczepanik face to face!"

Hardly three minutes later the governor had my place at the window, and was saying:

"Strike off his bonds and set him free!"

Three minutes later all were in the parlor again. The reader will imagine the scene; I have no need to describe it. It was a sort of mad orgy of joy.

A messenger carried word to Szczepanik in the pavilion, and one could see the distressed amazement dawn in his face as he listened to the tale. Then he came to his end of the line, and talked with Clayton and the governor and the others; and the wife poured out her gratitude upon him for saving her husband's life, and in her deep thankfulness she kissed him at 12,000 miles' range.

The telelectroscopes of the globe were put to service now, and for many hours the kings and queens of many

realms (with here and there a reporter) talked with Szczepanik, and praised him; and the few scientific societies which had not already made him an honorary member conferred that grace upon him.

How had he come to disappear from among us? It was easily explained. He had not grown used to being world-famous, and had been forced to break away from the lionizing that was robbing him of all privacy and repose. So he grew a beard, put on colored glasses, disguised himself a little in other ways, then took a fictitious name, and went off to wander about the earth in peace.

As for the corpse, Clayton's "feeble" and "far-fetched" explanation must in fact have been correct. The body's resemblance to Szczepanik and discovery after the inventor's disappearance were nothing more than extremely unlucky coincidences.

Such is the tale of the drama which began with an inconsequential quarrel in Vienna in the spring of 1898, and came near ending as a tragedy in the spring of 1904.

Chicago, April 5, 1904

Today, by a clipper of the Electric Line, and the latter's Electric Railway connections, arrived an envelope from Vienna, for Captain Clayton, containing an English farthing. The receiver of it was a good deal moved. He called up Vienna, and stood face to face with Mr. K., and said:

"I do not need to say anything; you can see it all in my face. My wife has the farthing. She will keep it always."

Mark Twain