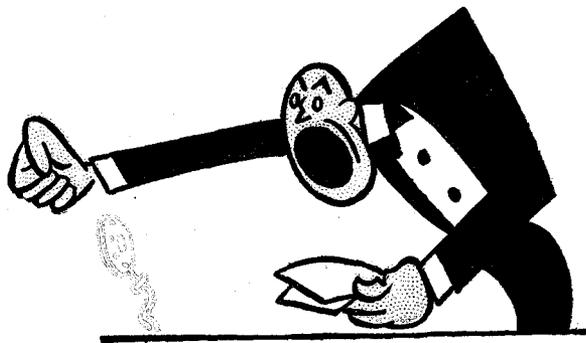


# RADIO — A Blessing or a Curse?



*Drawings by Julian de Miskey*

by **JACK WOODFORD**

**D**O YOU REMEMBER, a few years ago, how we all felt a vague sort of elation when the wonder of radio came to our attention? Ah, at last, we said, here is something . . . something . . . we were not quite sure what. Something overwhelming that was going to broaden American life and culture. Something that was going to bring peace on earth and good will to men. Something that was going to do everything but change the actual physical outline of North America. Do you think I exaggerate? Get out the papers of a few years back and read the editorials.

And now we know definitely what we have got in radio — just another disintegrating toy. Just another medium — like the newspapers, the magazines, the billboards, and the mail box — for advertisers to use in pestering us. A blatant signboard erected in the living room to bring us news of miraculous oil burners, fuel-saving motor cars, cigar lighters that always light. Formerly, despite the movies, the automobile, the correspondence course, and the appalling necessity most of us feel for working at two or three jobs in order to be considered successful, we still had some leisure time. But radio, God's great gift to man, eliminated that last dangerous chance for Satan to find mischief for idle hands. There is now very little danger that Americans will resort to the vice of thinking.

I am writing this article on a memorable day which marks a change in radio broadcasting. Heretofore we have had operating throughout the country a great many small and more or less independent radio broadcasting stations. Some of these didn't even advertise. They had the conservative notion that the very fact that the station was owned by the "So and So Can Company" or the "This and That Shoe Company" was advertising enough. They had no ambition other than to furnish a radio programme of music, enlivened by an occasional prize fight or an Eddy Guest poem. The new Radio Commission has stepped in and put an end to this un-American practice of using broadcasting stations for purposes other than advertising. It closed some stations, took time away from others, and generally "bettered" things. Yesterday one heard snatches of music and a variety of innocuous junk coming in from the various stations in the vicinity. To-day, tuning in on any station in the country, there is nothing to be heard but advertising. The radio has been made safe for democracy — almost.

The Radio Commission, however, will be content with nothing short of perfection. There are already four large "chains" of broadcasters. These chains operate by hooking together dozens of broadcasting stations throughout the country, so that one high-pressure salesman, yapping into a single micro-

phone, can send his message to millions. I predict that before the commission calls its task well done, there will be no broadcasting save chain broadcasting, and probably not over half a dozen safe, and sanely subsidized, chains.

The marvel of science which was to bring us new points of view, new conceptions of life, has degenerated in most homes into a mere excuse for failing to entertain. Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt, who used to make a feint at conversation by repeating to each other and their guests the ideas which they had gleaned from the editorials in the morning paper, now no longer go to that trouble. Bridge is too much of an exertion. It is not necessary even to serve ice cream and cake. All the modern host needs is his sixteen-tube Super-sophistication and a ration of gin. The guests sit around the radio and sip watered gin and listen to so-called music interspersed with long lists of the bargains to be had at Whosit's Department Store by those who get down early in the morning. If they are feeling particularly loquacious, they nod to each other. Thus dies the art of conversation. Thus rises the wonder of the century — Radio!

It would not be so bad if the listeners were taking in something even slightly informing. But I have searched the ether hopelessly trying to find something with some sense in it being broadcast somewhere. I have heard only the rattle and bang of incredibly frightful "jazz" music, played so similarly that it is impossible to tell one piece from another. Listened to for a time, it all becomes a prolonged jungle beat, monotonous and meaningless. During the political campaign I heard Mr. Hoover calling himself the Messiah and Governor Smith calling himself the Redeemer, as they read speeches



written for them by "ghost writers." For my patience in listening to "News Flashes," I have gleaned information concerning the thug who slew a cop, the man who scattered his votes in every precinct, the organist who eloped with his sister-in-law, the man who bit a dog.

No doubt if the gods of the monthly book

clubs left off arguing over whether Cabell is a moron or a genius and gave their minds to the matter, they would have little trouble in choosing the fifty most intelligent men in the United States. Probably they would eventually decide upon just about the same fifty men that ordinary people like you and me would pick.



Why is it, do you suppose, that such men are never heard upon the air? Instead of hearing the pick of the country's brains, we hear potential Presidents explaining how it is possible for them to be both wet and dry, both conservative and liberal, both for and against every issue before the "sover'n 'merican" voters of this splendid nation. And so it will always be. The hypothetical fifty men on our list have no interest in talking to a radio audience, for the obvious reason that a radio audience which enjoys what it is now getting would not know what such men were talking about, nor be interested if they did.

And yet we believed that radio was about to set up a new culture in America. Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, presidential timber, Aimee Semple McPherson, the Sunshine Boys, all of them crying aloud — that is the culture which the radio is bringing to America. That sort of thing is the radio's fodder, and it will continue to be radio fodder until the loud speaker follows the iron deer into blessed oblivion. New culture indeed. New nothing! Just the same old brum-magem, with the single difference that it is brought to the home and delivered like certified milk.

I am not a reformer. I have no "constructive" blather to offer. Far from proposing a scheme for making radio broadcasting bigger and better, or for giving it a shave and a haircut, my only suggestion is that advertising agencies go on killing it. I predict that in two years, at the present rate of advertising exploitation which the radio is suffering, it will be as dead as a Democrat. We can dig a grave for it, alongside the handsome mound now occupied by "Business Ethics," and put up a

headstone over both graves inscribed "Killed by Advertising." Probably in another five or ten years we can dig another grave in the same lot for Television.

Although I am looking around for a buyer for my own radio set, I must admit that I have heard really beautiful music over the radio. But the beautiful things are too rare and the horrors too frequent. Even when something beautiful is offered, it is usually spoiled by being mixed up with trash. To hear some old chorine, no longer fit for the boards, rattle off "Chloe" in a voice that is a born companion for a musical saw, and to have her rendition followed by an announcer trying to sell his hearers oil burners, is fair enough. But to have the performances of the various good symphony orchestras followed by an epilogue containing a message for the country's mothers, to wit: "Don't reach for a bon bon and grow fat; smoke a Lucky instead" — is like watching a nude and trembling virgin being dragged into a store window for the purpose of attracting a crowd to which bath salts will be sold.

And the communized loud speakers! Never has such a curse descended upon America. Stores with loud speakers sticking out through their transoms, blaring into the streets . . . restaurants with radios that go night and day . . . dentists' offices where the rasp of the drill is welcome relief from the clatter of the loud speaker . . . barber shops where chamber music, rendered by the Midwest Battery Boys or the Baldwin Locomotive Works Trio, goes with a shave.

Anyone not knowing America, knowing nothing of radio, knowing nothing of our national temperament, would conclude, seeing these loud speakers stuck up everywhere, that some tremendous message of vital import was being given to the citizenry. If he could not understand the English language — and had no idea what we use the language for, principally

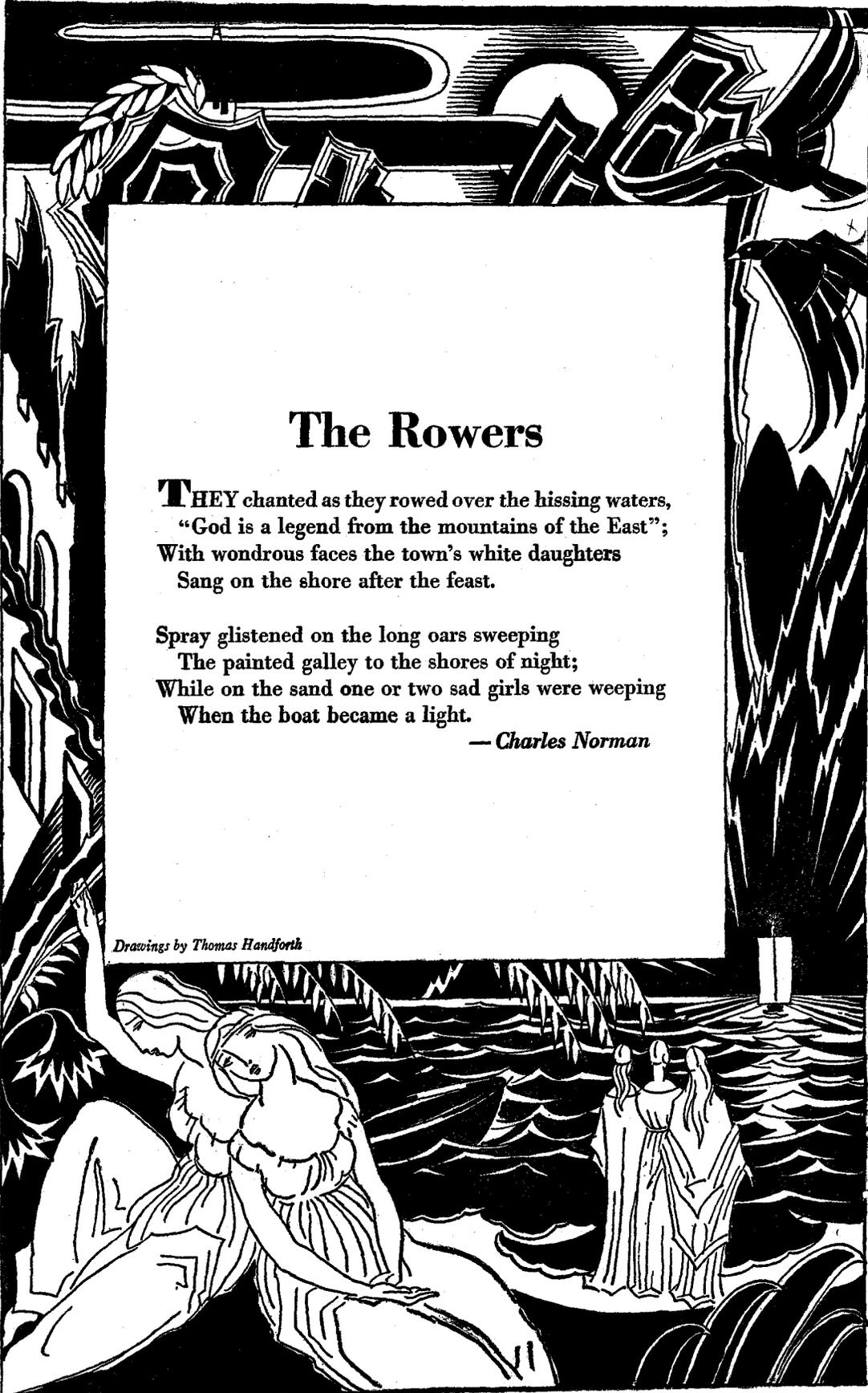
— he would expect to see a great change come over the ordinary run of folks after this vital message had been blared forth everywhere day after day, week after week. And, indeed, it would be possible for a change to be effected. Americans — at least ninety per cent of them — spend the larger part of their waking hours snatching dollars from each other, making each other extremely uncomfortable in doing so, and rushing through their short lifetimes hell-bent to arrive somewhere with a fist full of money. A stranger watching their expressions would conclude that they had a straight tip to the effect that if they could only accumulate a million somehow they could purchase an immortality surrounded by oceans of good wine, platoons of willing women, a perfect climate, and free motion pictures.

Give fifty of the right type of men the microphone for a year and they would take those haunted, worried expressions from the faces of their countrymen. They would induce many of them to cultivate the voluptuous joys of leisure. Indeed, I venture to say that the clear, slow reading of just one essay before every microphone in America would work a small miracle — but probably make business bad for chain stores. I should be ever so much interested in knowing just what the effect would be of reading Emerson's "Apology for Idlers" from every radio station in America.

But, alas, there is absolutely no hope of such things being fed to the radio audience. The radio — as long as it lasts (and I predict that its life will be short) — will be dedicated, just as are the newspapers, to teaching Americans that there is but one morality — the slave morality of the Gospels; but one government — the government of Dollar Democracy; and that any attempt to inject new points of view into national thinking is not only a gesture toward the messier forms of anarchy, but also a direct slap at the Holy Ghost.

**Next month GENERAL HARBORD will defend radio.**





## The Rowers

**T**HEY chanted as they rowed over the hissing waters,  
“God is a legend from the mountains of the East”;  
With wondrous faces the town’s white daughters  
Sang on the shore after the feast.

Spray glistened on the long oars sweeping  
The painted galley to the shores of night;  
While on the sand one or two sad girls were weeping  
When the boat became a light.

— Charles Norman

*Drawings by Thomas Handforth*