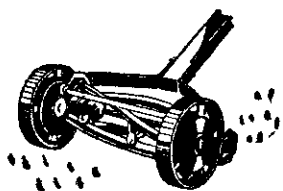


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# HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A VOICE TALKING?

Written for "The Listener" by B. HEYMANN

LET us do justice to the radio serials. They represent a novel, one might almost say a revolutionary, form of the theatrical arts. Formerly we had to employ our eyes in order to see, our ears to hear. Often they worked simultaneously and in conjunction. But both had their allotted task. The radio serial or "feature" has caused us to develop a new organ which might be called the Optical Ear. We hear because we are supposed to hear but also because we are supposed to see. The process is an enlargement of the experience which many people have had at some time, that of meeting a person by telephone. We form a mental picture based on the sound of a voice. Needless to say we are often rather disillusioned when we compare that mental picture with the genuine article. Listening to a radio serial means exactly that: forming mental pictures based on Voices. I once heard the remark made with reference to a radio heroine: "I like the look of her voice."

Naturally, the Optical Ear needs some assistance. People in the "features" have to keep talking continuously, and it is hardly possible for one of them to be all by himself. There must be someone at least in an adjacent part of the house or flat whom he can tell what he is doing so that we may know: "George, what are you doing in the living room all by yourself?" "I'm reading the paper, Em; I've lit the fire and you can bring in tea as soon as you are ready." If nobody is in hearing distance the telephone will ring, and we will hear (and see) it this way. If somebody wants to put up curtains in the kitchen, somebody else must stand and watch him (and perhaps hand him an occasional hammer) and tell him that the curtains are either straight or crooked and that they are indeed of a very pretty chintz (or muslin). If somebody gets a present the whole family has to gather around and admire it in all its details; and letters, of course, must be read aloud. But as a whole the details are left to us. When a man says to a girl (with subdued passion in his voice) "Sweetheart, you look so beautiful to-night!" it is for us to decide in which way we want her to look beautiful, and the colour of her hair or eyes is rarely mentioned. Thus Voices become independent personalities, and our Optical Ears are left to deal with them at their discretion.

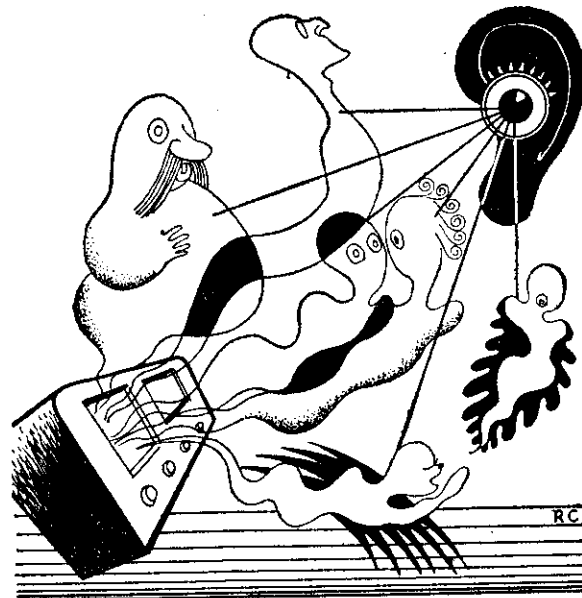
\* \* \*

HOWEVER, this new organ of ours may not be very long-lived. If prophecies come true we shall have television sets in every house, and that would be the end of it. We shall then go through a similar experience, acoustically, as (optically) the "talkie"

brought to us. I think I shall regret this just as I regretted the decline of the silent film. I shall miss seeing Voices walking about, peeling the potatoes or doing a bit of shopping, Voices clinging to each other or hunting one another, Voices with blue eyes, ginger hair, or walrus moustaches, Voices looking vulgar or refined, decent or malicious, calm or passionate. Therefore it is just as well to enjoy this peculiar type of performance while it lasts.

There is much to enjoy, plenty to give us food for thought. Why, for one thing, does every single character involved in a "feature" display such stupidity at one time or another that it may only be called imbecility? I recall one feature incident which serves as a perfect illustration: A Beautiful Girl had found a bag containing emeralds of Tremendous Value hidden behind a tile in the fireplace of her Greenwich Village apartment. Her fiancé was present at the discovery, a man whom we had every reason to regard as intelligent—so far. Yet, although certain incidents (in previous instalments) indicated clearly that there was something fishy about this find, that, indeed, there was a danger looming in the background, he let her go away with the emeralds in the dark of night and unescorted. I mention the Looming Danger only to prove that I did not expect too much of his or her intelligence. I should not have minded if their mere commonsense had told them that emeralds of tremendous value are not ordinarily placed behind tiles in fireplaces in Greenwich Village apartments.

However, the Beautiful Girl goes out into the night all by herself and, in spite of everything, reaches the next instalment and her destination safely, namely, the Park Avenue flat of her employer, who happens to be a Rich Millionaire and Very Clever. He is clever enough to recognise the tremendous value of the emeralds and decides to lock them into his safe. While he is thus engaged, the telephone rings and an Unknown Friend asks for the Beautiful Girl and informs her (at half-past one in the morning!) that another (known) friend is desperately ill in hospital and wishes to see her immediately. This she tells the Butler (because the Rich Millionaire is still busy with his safe), and off she goes. Of course we know all the time that she is going to be kidnapped in the next instalment, and so does the Rich Millionaire when the Butler tells him. So he is not to be



"... Voices clinging to each other or hunting one another, Voices with walrus moustaches ..."

blamed for the kidnapping, but only the Beautiful Girl herself. She might have known that nobody knew where she was at that time of night, unless he had been hidden in her (Greenwich Village) apartment when she found the emeralds, or standing in a dark doorway when she hailed the taxi to take her to her employer's (Park Avenue) flat; in short, the Looming Danger in person.

\* \* \*

BUT what I do blame the Rich Millionaire for is that he locked the emeralds into his safe instead of ringing up the police, and I blame the so-called intelligent fiancé for the same thing. The only person who behaved sensibly at this juncture was the Butler, but then he had no chance to do otherwise, and he will get his opportunity to be silly later on.

This is only an example of what I call the inherent imbecility of radio feature characters. Where there is a Beautiful Girl there is always at least one Other Man. Now, as far as I know, the distribution of the sexes in almost every part of the world is such that two girls (even if beautiful) are more likely to be rivals for the attentions of one man than the other way round. If the radio features decide on a different constellation, again there must be a reason. At first I was inclined to think that they have more young men available at the studios than girls, or that they get them at a lower fee. But on second thoughts I have come to the conclusion that it might have something to do with the audience. Since the serials to which I listen are "Morning Features" and probably listened to by a majority of females, the One-Girl-Two-Men arrangement may be considered as of greater appeal. There can be little doubt that this particular audience will prefer to see the heroine pursued by two jealous lions on her lonely stride across the desert (or along Broadway) to watching half-a-dozen girls cackling like hens around a strutting rooster.

\* \* \*

AS I have mentioned, I am conversant only with the "Morning Features." Those of the afternoon coincide with

(continued on next page)



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