

NOT AT HOME:

We Are Listening

PERCY HASTINGS put down his newspaper, leaned back in his seat, and turned to me with the air of a man who wants to talk. We had an hour or so ahead of us in the train, and I had a good book, but Percy is a nice chap, so extraordinarily considerate of others that one hates to hurt his feelings in any way.

"I suppose you've noticed," he said, "that visitors often interfere with one's listening to radio programmes?"

With memories of callers and telephone rings during news sessions in the war, I replied that I had.

"Well, I have given this subject a good deal of consideration." Percy is a dapper man, precise in speech. "I wonder if anything can be done about it."

"You don't suggest asking the Government to act, do you?"

"Not at all. Not at all," Percy spoke quite seriously. "But I have made some investigations, and the results are sociologically quite interesting. It started with an evening call I made on the Talbots. I know them pretty well, and I drop in occasionally. I heard the radio going as I knocked, but I could not distinguish what they were listening to. They turned it off as I came into the living room. I said I hoped I wasn't disturbing them, and they replied not at all. They didn't tell me what the item was, but I noticed the set was on the local station. We had a talk: I stayed about an hour. They were friendly, of course, but I couldn't help noticing a feeling of constraint. Indeed, turning round suddenly, I caught one of the girls with a scowl on her face. She's such a



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nice girl, too. Next morning I nearly missed my bus. I was on the end of the queue, and just in front of me was Talbot; he didn't see me come up. I didn't catch what the man with him said, but I did hear Talbot's reply. 'No, worse luck; we had to turn it off for a visitor.' So I looked up the previous evening's programme, and I found that just as I entered the Talbots' room a serial was beginning entitled *The Tootsey-Wootsey Twins*. Do you know it?"

"Slightly."

"Well, I was interested to see what 'The Tootsey-Wootsey Twins' was like, so I listened to the next instalment. It was dreadful, just dreadful! I couldn't understand well-educated people like the Talbots listening to such vulgar trash."

"Pardon the cliché," I put in, "but don't you think you live in rather a rarefied atmosphere?"

"I? My dear fellow, I pride myself on having very wide tastes. But one must draw the line somewhere."

"Yes, but where? Do you remember *The Japanese House-boy*?"

"Faintly. It was even more terrible stuff than *The Tootsey-Wootsey Twins*, wasn't it?"

"Well, quite a number of well-educated people listened to Frank Watanabe and his circle. I knew a couple who read philosophy, followed world affairs closely, and cultivated the best music, yet they never missed Frank if they could help it."

"Dear me, is that so? But I shouldn't be surprised. For this little experience with the Talbots led me to make some discreet enquiries. I found that Grace Talbot, the girl who scowled when I was there, actually gave as a reason for not going to a party, that she wanted to listen to *The Tootsey-Wootsey Twins*. I may say Grace is a University student."

"H'm. Might depend on the party. And you wouldn't deny the poor child a little relief from the strain of study, would you?"

PERCY ignored the question. Possibly he thought it frivolous. He went on in that slow measured way of his, and I judged he was enjoying himself. "This led me to make a careful survey of the radio likes of a number of my friends. It was quite an interesting piece of research, especially as I was resolved that it should be done in such a way as not to arouse suspicion. I didn't want anyone to know I was doing such a thing on a considerable scale. I made some curious discoveries. My friends didn't always like the things I thought they would like, though I must say I didn't come across such a bad case as *The Tootsey-Wootsey Twins*. Some of the listeners had better taste than I thought."

"I have always reckoned it a difficult job to pick out the sheep from the goats," I murmured.

"Eventually I was able to produce quite a time-table of listening hours. I found that I had probably been an unwelcome visitor at other homes besides the Talbots. There are the Jenkinses. I sometimes look in on Sunday afternoons for a talk. Jenkinson has made a close study of juvenile delinquency. I found that the Jenkinsons were in the habit of listening to good music at the time I called, so I have shifted to another hour."

"You're quite sure that hour is clear?" I asked.



"Get the cricket result!" I hissed

"So far as I know, but it is really rather difficult. I hate to be an intruder. That's why I have made out a time-table. I have drawn up a week's listening periods of the people I'm accustomed to call on, and I try to avoid these hours. Here it is." He fished out a large folded sheet from his breast pocket and handed it to me.

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It was what I might have expected from Percy. He is extremely methodical. He has the same sort of pass on for graphs and card-indexes and filing that some people have for stamps, or pigeons, or first editions. Some of his business associates say he organises his office so efficiently that he's always losing things. His radio sheet was a thing like a school time-table, beautifully ruled and typed. It showed how a number of families were occupied with radio during the evenings and Sunday afternoon for a week. Every evening was well broken into.

"Do you follow that?" I asked.

"Yes, and I'm glad to think it has helped some people to enjoy their radio free from interruptions. Do you think I can do anything further about it?"

"You might get *The Listener* to issue special time-table forms for readers to fill in and send round their friends. Or a person might indicate his particular times on his visiting card: 'Mr. James Anstruther, 10 Piccadilly Crescent, Wellington. Not at home Tuesday evenings, which is 2YA's classical time. Or a general warning: 'Not at home during wrestling broadcasts.'"

I thought there was a good deal in Hastings's solicitude for his friends. Some weeks later there was the last day of the third Test Match in Australia. Would England play out time and make a draw of it? I hadn't time to get the result in the early part of the evening; I decided to wait for the close of play summary at 9.10. Just before 9.10 the telephone rang. It was Hastings. He wanted my advice on a matter that required a good deal of explanation. Desperately I put a hand over the mouthpiece and called to my wife. "Get the cricket result!" I hissed. "You know—the radio—the Test Match!" Then I heard Percy ask, "Anything wrong your end? I hope I haven't disturbed you." "Not at all," I said. "It was only the electric kettle boiling over, and I was asking my wife to turn it off."

I couldn't hurt his feelings. I think now there is still more to be said for his attitude.