

# ALAS, POOR YORICK!

(By Airmail — Special to  
"The Listener")

JANUARY 15

THE news of Tommy Handley's sudden death was received in England with widespread sorrow. It was probably wider and more deeply felt than anyone on the other side of the world can imagine who has not heard *ITMA* on the spot (only a few hours removed from the news with which it was always topically linked), and realised how close it was to the hearts of millions of people. In fact, *ITMA* had lately gone off a little, but it had lost none of the affection of its listeners. The truly faithful were those who, far from swearing that they never missed an *ITMA*, were fond enough of it to turn it off altogether if the first few minutes fell flat, rather than persevere and hear it drag as sometimes it had to do. For you could always tell by the first few minutes whether the weekly script-conference had gone off in high spirits, or whether it had been a labour. If you were weak-willed and only left *ITMA*

on for the sake of hearing the Colonel or Mona Lott you were left deflated—especially if you had been rash enough to turn it on in the presence of friends who were not of the faithful.

One of the reasons why *ITMA* had this continued hold on the affection of its listeners was that it had been a relief and an escape in the worst years of the war; and one clings to a friend who helped at a time of worry.

But it could never have achieved that status of friend-in-need without some unusual qualities, and of these Handley's own genius was probably the first. As Sir William Haley, Director General of the BBC, said in a rather mournful little memorial programme which took the place of the last announced *ITMA*, "He had that rare gift which few are born with and most never acquire, of being able to broadcast sincerity."

There were many, of course, on whom his heartiness and vitality jarred, and who had no taste for Ted Kavanagh's puns or his allusive humour. But it would be hard to think of many other people in England at present whose death would be received so sadly.

THE *Manchester Guardian*, which referred to his death in four different places in its issue of the following day, headed its sub-leader, "The Man who was Thursday." He was also Saturday lunchtime, or Sunday afternoon, if you missed the first repeat as well as the actual performance on Thursday at 8.30.

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"*ITMA* spans an age," said the Director-General in his appreciation—its title originally referred to Hitler. The programme was started in 1939 under the name *It's That Man Again*, and changed to the initials-title when initials-words began to spread like weeds over the pages of the daily paper. Handley himself gave it the abbreviated name. Then Handley became a great personage (head of the Office of Twerps, for instance), was pursued by enemy agents (such as Funf), evacuated to Foaming-in-the-Mouth, and all the time satirised rules and regulations and pricked the bubble of other people's inflated dignity wherever he went. Jack Train (Colonel Chinstrap) was in it from the beginning, and was the only member of the original cast who was there at the end, apart from Handley himself. The scripts were written from beginning to end by Ted Kavanagh, and the production was all done by Francis Worsley—who writes

a short history of "A world of your own" in this week's *New Statesman and Nation*.

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HANDLEY himself was a modest and kindly fellow who had worked the hard way on the music halls, and had a big reputation before *ITMA* was thought of. He was Murgatroyd (or was it Winterbottom?) with Ronald Frankau. He was not rich, because he had never earned a high figure until there were also high taxes. But latterly he lived for *ITMA*, and always refused to do anything that would overdraw his energies. Anyone who ever saw *ITMA* in the studio could see that there was something more than ordinary professional co-operation animating the cast. They were good friends, and they all loved Handley.

On the Thursday after his death they went to the funeral in the afternoon and in the evening they gathered in the studio from which the very first *ITMA* was broadcast (at Maida Vale) to hear the Director-General's appreciation, followed by a programme of some of *ITMA*'s music and songs. None of the characters were heard, but some of the singers had to sing their snappy songs like old troupers. Then the narrator (John Snagge, chief Home Service announcer) proposed a toast to *ITMA*,

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