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Landscape with Ruins

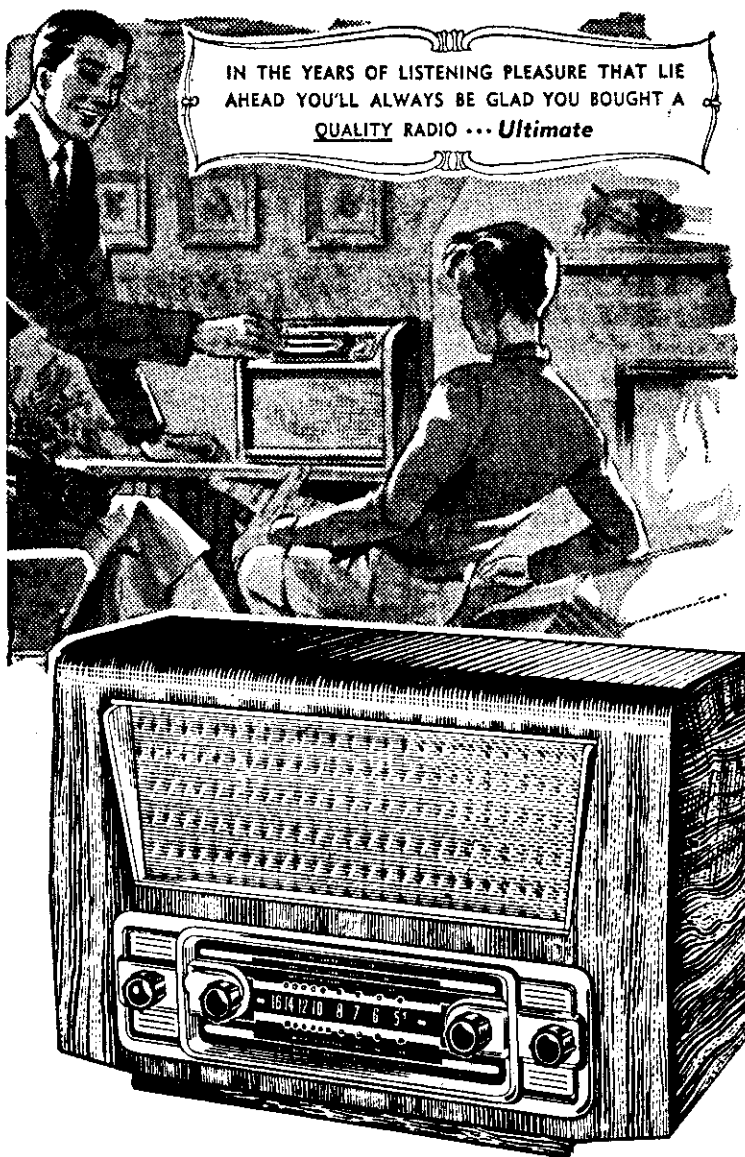
ON a recent Saturday night a BBC prize-winning production, *The Streets of Pompeii*, was broadcast from Station 2YC. It was written by Henry Reed, a poet with a sensitive understanding of what radio can do. In a way that would have been impossible on television, where visual images keep attention at the surface of the mind, it drew listeners into a partnership of thought and feeling. The sounds of voices came and went, reaching into the past to a buried terror, and tracing a pattern of lives that became real for the imagination.

Time is not to be isolated; we cannot know or feel it, apart from what is being experienced at any given moment. But the idea of time, and of the immense and silent landscapes of history in which time's work is done, can arouse feelings that may be expressed, imperfectly, in poetry and music. There are moments in this play when the awareness of time is almost as heavy as a sultry afternoon. It is evoked by contrasts between the responses of four groups of people who spend a long summer's day among the ruins of Pompeii, and by a suggested contrast between the streets and houses in their present emptiness and in the days when life pulsed through them. An additional "character" is a lizard whose comments, appropriately sensual, recur like a theme for an oboe: "Warm—warm under belly—good—can wriggle?—yes—good—can sleep?—careful!—skip!" A talking lizard on a screen would not do; but a lizard that is merely a voice, and a voice kept as flat as a paving stone, helps to fill out the impression of antiquity. The ruined town is sometimes empty of people; but the lizards are always there, squatting in the sun or sliding for the safe darkness, and always have been.

Among the visitors are two young Italians, Attilio and Francesca, who have met for the first time, and are falling in love. The

idyll that develops between them is the poet's commentary on life's power of renewal, emphasised poignantly by the dead houses and the signs of destruction. There is even a suggestion that their love could "that slaughterous past atone." But this, perhaps, is a belief too comfortable to survive the flash-back to Pompeii on a day in 97 A.D. when Vesuvius opened and the black clouds came down. On that day, too, lovers were meeting, and like Attilio and Francesca could see only a sunlit future. Old agonies do not die; they can be awakened in the minds of people who have lived long enough to know what hurts may be inflicted on flesh and spirit.

It does not matter, for the aroused imagination, how long ago the hurts were suffered. Things have happened in the world that are hard to think of, though think of them we must; and the hardest of these are not the accidents of nature, but the deliberate cruelties of men. Perhaps it was this thought which made the poet fix his hopes on the young lovers. The city around them had been ruined by the mountain; and although nature in convulsion is terrible, there is no malice, no anger—only a blind commotion. Yet man in every situation is always himself: if nature supplies no motives, he will find his own. In the big scene of the play, when hot ash is cascading into the streets, the Romans are people like ourselves, struggling to save their treasures, and capable of hatred even while the air is full of death. The cruellest sounds are the crying of an abandoned baby and the weak calling of an old man in an empty house. It is a relief to be back with the young lovers in the warm afternoon, and to remember that the thin voices faded into silence nearly 1900 years ago. What has happened is already a dream. But it is a dream out of history, and in history there is much repetition of themes. Who can say what the future holds for Attilio and Francesca?



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