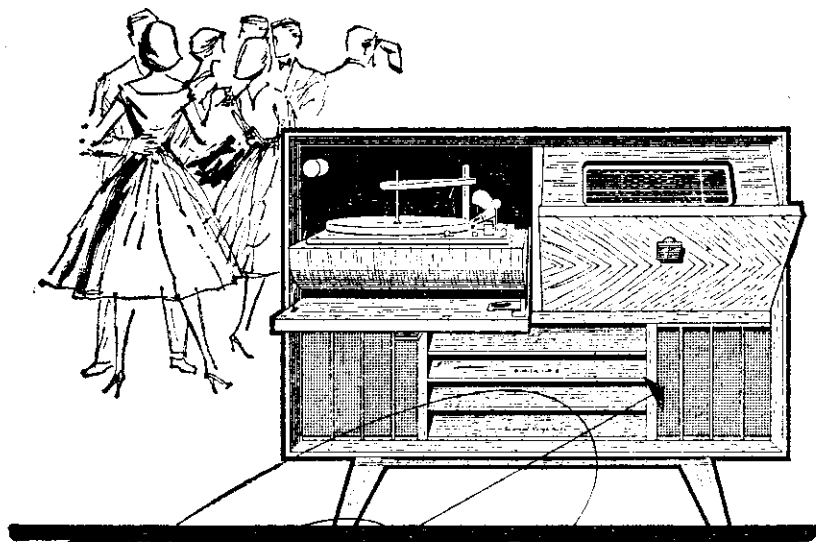


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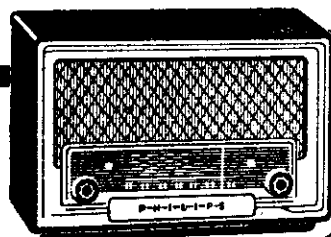
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Editorial and Business Offices: Hope Gibbons Building, Inglewood Place, Wellington, C.1.  
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## The Road to Delphi

**G**HOSTS are a little out of fashion nowadays, and oracles are even lower in public esteem. Fortune-telling is so much frowned upon that there are laws against it: the palmist and crystal-gazer, operating in shabby back rooms, have been hunted into Court so often that the dubious trade has fallen into decay. In the welfare state, too, elderly women have less need to find ways of earning an odd half-crown. Yet the customers might still be there, if the wise women could be found. Are we really as rational as we profess to be? Astrology may have become merely an entertainment since newspapers discovered that it could build circulation, but it is odd that so many people should find amusement in noting that Tuesday in a certain week is a fortunate day for a new enterprise, or that on Wednesday they should be careful with dark strangers. And is it safe to decide that a hunger for prophecy among the simple-minded is nothing more than the last vapours of superstition that will disappear for ever as we move further into the sunlight of a scientific age?

These are perhaps not the right thoughts to come from a glance into the distant past. A BBC feature, *The Pythoness* (see page 3) may stimulate quite a different mood in some listeners. And yet the past and the present are never really separated. There are people among us who are as avid for prophecy as the pagans of Greece, though instead of consulting the pythia they find their clues in sacred books and ancient monuments. And it is not necessary to belong to strange cults before the attraction of the irrational can be felt. Sensible people are interested when a rumour passes among them of predictions about men and affairs that are being fulfilled with a curious exactness. They are not always able to say precisely who made the prediction, but the stories lose none of their drama because the source is hidden. These are old compulsions (it may be said) that continue to shake us now and then because

man grows up slowly. A few more centuries of rational living (the Bomb permitting), and the race will finally be rid of such nonsense. But a question remains unanswered. Is the interest in prophecy, and in the supernatural experience which surrounds it, an aberration, a falling from scientific grace as it were; or does it come from a side of human nature which needs reassurance and authority beyond the reach of reason, and which will continue to need them in a world that—in spite of all the scientists can do and say—remains obstinately mysterious?

The answer may not be given by *The Pythoness*, but listeners will find that the question has taken a sharper interest. Much that is dismissed today as superstition begins to look different when a jolt to the imagination brings it closer. For superstition is no more than decayed beliefs and practices that were once vital; and the beliefs to which we return in the BBC feature—themselves the product of a long evolution—sustained a society that in some ways was more civilised than our own. Plato was a rational thinker who was also a poet: the two faculties which in this age are so often separate and irreconcilable were in him united happily; and Plato, like Socrates before him, did not despise divination. Minds that are moulded today in scientific attitudes may lose the earlier response to poetry, but poetry does not disappear from human experience, though those who share it begin to look like strangers. And sometimes men of this generation, not simple-minded or superstitious, can feel the power without understanding it when they pause at what remains of ancient Delphi. "In such places," writes Rex Warner in *Views of Attica*, "one is aware of existences that are not recognised by our philosophies." And again: "Here, as at Eleusis, it seems to me that we have to acknowledge our ignorance of forces which were once, and may always be, powerful." Forces—yes; but the Greeks called them gods. —M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 16, 1957.