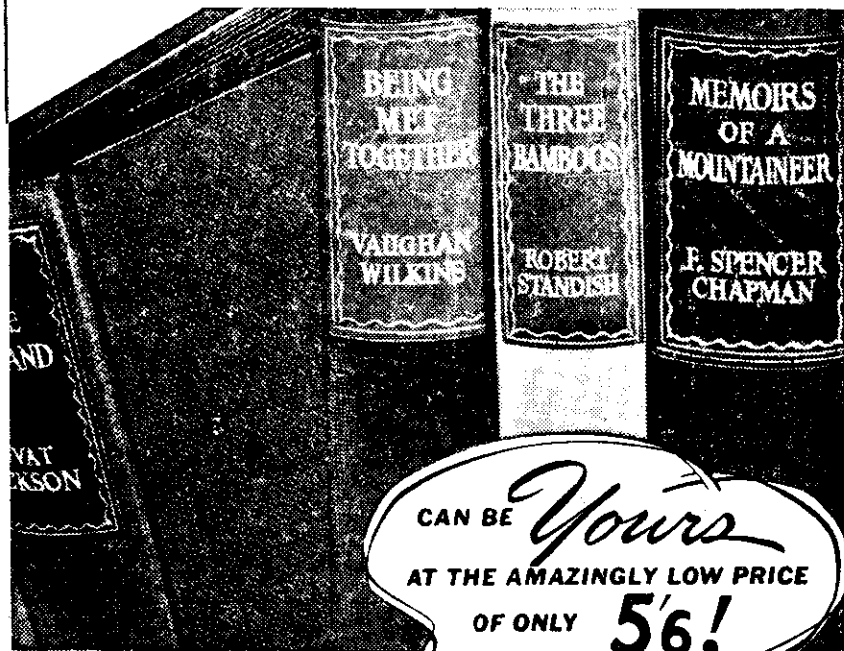


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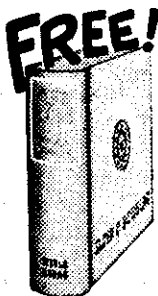
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A World Wired for Sound

A POPULAR song once informed us that "the best things in life are free," a sentimental statement which, like most of its kind, would not bear close examination. We are finding that, even when we are within reach of "free" enjoyments, we are not permitted to have them without interference. Some people like to impose their own pleasures or habits on their neighbours, and since the invention of radio they have acquired a wider range for thoughtless or selfish behaviour. Most of us have suffered from the person who likes his receiving set to be tuned loudly enough to cover an entire neighbourhood. And we cannot always escape from the nuisance by leaving home: there are times when it seems as if the whole world were "wired for sound." It was inevitable that the invention should be brought into the service of authorities who have to deal with large numbers of people. We have become used to loudspeakers through which a voice breathes intimately into our ears a message about the impending departure of a train. We have learned to hear and obey the voice which draws us into a railway dining room, tells us—gently and smoothly, as is proper in the treatment of children—to pick up a tray, guides us through the complicated process of receiving plates, cutlery and food, and turns us loose, laden and a little dazed, to find a seat at a table and do our eating without assistance. We are not surprised when a loudspeaker opens upon us at the gangway of a steamer express or in the waiting room at an airport. And if we are experienced travellers we can hear with composure the voice of a reception clerk throwing our names, grossly amplified, into a hotel restaurant or lounge. These are among the amenities of the age, for which no doubt we should be thankful, since they save time for somebody, and are needed for the

orderly treatment of crowds. But the habit is full of dangerous possibilities. Is it necessary, for instance, that a great voice should come brazenly from a racecourse into countryside or suburbs which contain many people who would prefer the subdued and unassisted murmur of a summer afternoon? Even worse is the pursuit of pedestrians by traffic officers in cars fitted with radio equipment—a way of causing public humiliation which now, happily, is used less frequently than in the past. We have reached a point where sound can become a torment if it is not properly controlled. The *New Yorker*, which keeps a careful eye on social symptoms in the United States, complained recently about the use of background music on a railway station and in a hospital. "We don't think," said the journal, "that Grand Central should produce any sound, any noise, except the noises and sounds incidental to train arrival and departure: the noise of destinations." We have not come to this stage in New Zealand, though there are people who would like us to be in it. Most of us have now encountered the proud owner of a portable receiving set who carries it, blaring at full volume, on to beaches where the murmur of the sea is obliged to compete with Spike Jones and his City Slickers, or into places where the voices of the Andrews Sisters, agreeable though they may be in other circumstances, are less to be preferred than the sound of birds and the voices of children. Radio has opened for us new opportunities and a source of wonder and delight, and perhaps it was to be expected that we should at first be extremists in our treatment of an obliging servant. But the amenity has ceased to be a novelty; we should now be learning to use it carefully, both for our own enjoyment and for the protection of our collective nerves. Too much noise can make men mad.