

Microphone Crash!

"Unintentional" Broadcasts That Enliven the Programme for British Listeners

Special to the "Record"

by

E. M. DORKIN

AFTER sifting a basketful of radio news clippings collected over the last couple of years, I've come to the conclusion that New Zealand is a pretty dull place for a listener who likes an occasional bombshell with his uplift talks and his chamber music.

As far as I can make out the only shocks New Zealand listeners get are the mild and gentlemanly ones occasioned by tangled terminology—such as comprise the grains in the "Record's" Pepperpot every week. By and large one approaches the New Zealand radio with confidence it will drop no brickbats in mixed company.

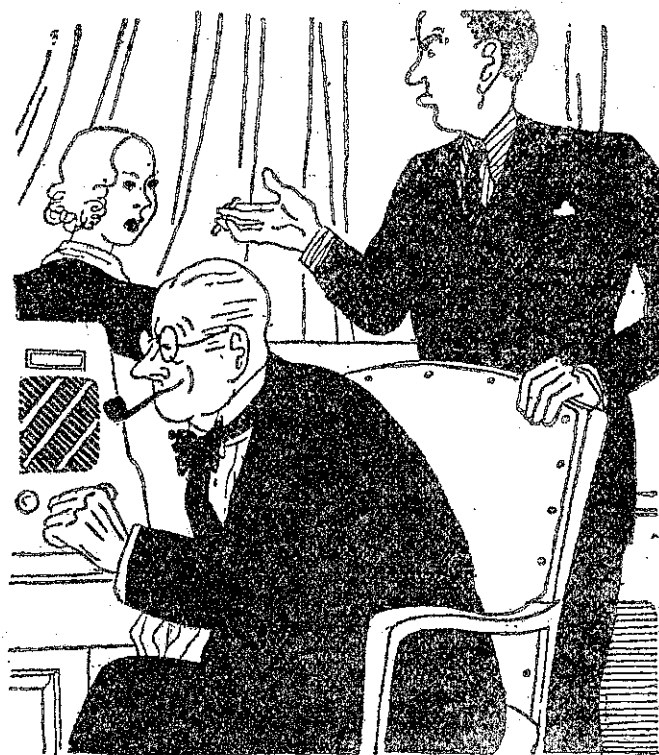
There is liable to be more spice in other parts of the world. English newspapers inform us that there has been another epidemic of "microphone crashing" at the BBC. And every time someone crashes the microphone, or some technical error occurs to perpetrate one of those rare, unintentional broadcasts, thousands of listeners go into a telephone frenzy. Their voices are shrill with a delight that is often tinged with malice. They have caught out the BBC—the enormously self-satisfied, snooty BBC!

Every now and then, it seems, despite all that can be done to eliminate the chance of error, some awful swear-word booms from the loudspeakers of a thousand homes. Sometimes it is a fragment of mysterious conversation that creeps into a string quartet programme. Sometimes it is the strident voice of a crank "microphone crasher" who has tricked an outside announcer and bawled a few words of propaganda on his pet subject. Sometimes the "error" is deliberately engineered.

Cut Up by BBC

PROBABLY the most famous of those premeditated incidents occurred a few years ago when the BBC was broadcasting a series of talks on "Modern Industry and the National Character." Broadcasting House has always been notorious for its strict censorship of script—sometimes so strict that the speaker's meaning is completely obliterated. On this occasion a young industrial worker named William Ferrie had suffered the savage blue pencil in ominous quiet, rehearsed his expurgated talk in the studio, but when he went to the microphone said:—

"Last week a big employer of labour, Sir Herbert Austin, gave a talk, and I have been invited to say what I think about the British worker. I am a working man myself, but what I wanted to tell you has been so censored and altered and cut up by the BBC that I consider it impossible for me to give a talk without its being a travesty of the British working class."



One approaches the New Zealand radio set with confidence it will drop no brickbats in mixed company.

Before he got any further he was faded out. Gramophone records were substituted.

Historic "Crash"

IN the same year microphone crashing reached a new high level. On several occasions anti-Fascist propaganda was shouted into BBC microphones in cabarets and dance halls. On one occasion a girl and her escort rose from her table in a fashionable Strand restaurant and walked up to the band. While she was asking the conductor to play an item, the man grabbed the "mike" and shouted a protest against a Fascist demonstration scheduled in Hyde Park the next Sunday.

Last year the most famous microphone crash of history will probably be recalled by readers. Twenty-three-year-old Tom Webb described Coronation Night for millions of listeners, having calmly walked into the microphone box when the announcer was a minute or two late in arriving. The young adventurer climbed to the top of one of the official stands and when confronted by the glassed-in cubicle was inspired to his historic "crash" on the spur of the moment. BBC engineers detected an unfamiliar note in the voice after a few minutes, and faded him out—but not before he had had the thrill of his life.

Mechanical and electrical freaks have caused listeners almost as many shocks and laughs as scheming (or confused) human beings.

Not long ago London listeners in a small area heard nightly a girlish voice making such remarks as, "Of course I still love you!" and "Yes, darling, I promise!" As variant, sometimes another voice would say: "Your wife has just given birth to a daughter and both are doing well."

For a few nights it was amusing, but after that listeners became irritated and rang Broadcasting House. The studios staunchly denied that any such nonsense was being broadcast, and when the Post Office was consulted to clear up the mystery it was found that an electrical freak was inducing telephone conversations from a nearby nursing home on to the harassed listeners' sets!

(Continued on page 31.)