



ON THE NOSE

BY

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Of this First Edition of
"On the Nose"
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This is Copy No. *21*.

. . . "At 8 o'clock
(very sharp!) . . .
he lays his finger
on his nose—"



It was 7:20 and pouring rain was a gauze of liquid gold at the front door of the Broadcasting Building. Easy to imagine that it was raining everywhere; the whole earth sluiced in that drench and darkness. But that evening the mind was open to larger distances. I was

to hear voices at the beginning of their career, to say good-bye to them as they left on long journeys. Unimaginably swift those words and music would transcend the heavy little rain-storm that scoured our toy metropolis of towers; would pierce wind and murk, tingle unguessed over clear Alleghany ridges or sleety pastures of New England; tone and syllable, in the very breath of creation, passing at once to snowbound farmhouses of Illinois and soft airs of Florida patios. Even past the farthest actual reception those voices would travel on, a volley of whispers into regardless void. Eternity and Infinity played with by experimenting children, parcelled and sent to market by humanity's one universal measure—Time.

7:24—In the brilliantly lit studio is that delicious feeling of imminence. I look at my watch and feel more important for doing so. I am aware of Time, the immortal reality; it flows

like a tide, rising evenly through every inlet of consciousness. But Time here is nothing merely divine or metaphysical. It is definite merchandise, available in precious standardized parcels. Here it is to be mixed with Words and Music and delivered into varying areas of Space. The extent of the Space and the quality of the Sound are subject to human control. But the Time is absolute. It costs money; we take it seriously. How much is Time worth in 1930? I can tell you exactly. Half an hour of evening, relayed over 37 jobbing stations (a National network) costs \$4,435.94.

7:27—The brokers in this Time Exchange are too busy—and too happy—to pause to philosophize. But they are aware of the enormous romance of their trading. They are selling Eternity on margin and show it in their mien. The station announcer wears a dinner coat. He has earphones on his head. He is talking through his phone to

some distant arbiter of ether who has a large container of Time and Space ready to hand to him. Into that parcel of receptivity he is to pour a half hour of program. This is a practical world, and the representative of the purchaser of that parcel is here to see that the goods are duly transmitted.

7:28—The announcer's voice is very formal as the moment approaches. He is no longer just a friendly gentleman in a dinner coat; he is attorney for magnitudes. "Three-quarters of a minute . . . Stand by, please . . . Quiet . . ." A little green light sparkles on his board. "You are listening to Station WEAJ in New York." Ken Fickett, the program announcer, with a glance at his left (or Hamilton) wrist, takes the word. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen . . . the new price basis for Socony Special plus Ethyl." None of that familiar Hullo folksy sort of stuff. We represent the seller and we are talking to several million possible cus-

tomers. Follows a little dialogue between a service station and a lady customer—Ethyl herself, I imagined. It is very brief, and listened to faithfully, I imagine, because the customers know there is entertainment to come. And then Arthur Allen and others go into one of those little Soconyland Sketches, based on episodes of New England history.

7:40—In the control room, behind a glass window, sit the masters of the event. An electric clock is above the instrument board. A young engineer sits with his hand on a vernier knob; he seems to be regulating the outgo of sound according to the flicker of a rheostat needle which trembles continually. On either side of him sits a sort of umpire with a time schedule. Every item of the program has been rehearsed for time and checked to the second by stop-watch, but each performance varies slightly; it is the umpire's duty to signal the director,

through the glass window, if the running time is ahead or behind. You can almost hear the whetstone sharpening Father Time's scythe. The little green, yellow and lilac lights on the board mean something, no doubt, but it is the unflinching minute on which these referees concentrate. Elapsed time is scribbled on the schedule as against rehearsal time. Now we are a minute behind schedule and they are making little cuts here and there in the dialogue to come through on the tick. The sketch ends at 7:58.30. Then just the briefest commercial reprise to remind you that this wasn't all just for fun. 7:59.51 the plugging is over. The director waves his watch; the station announcer taps his little gong eight times. Some other station "takes it away;" all that vast area of Human Attention is handed over to some other studio where a customer has already contracted for it. The announcers look at each other, and Fickett lays his



“WABC,—where Julia Sanderson and Frank Crumit were singing ballads woven most cunningly into some humorous dialogue.”

finger on his nose with quiet satisfaction. "Right on the Nose" is broadcasting argot for getting the program done 100 per cent on Time.

8:10—Off through the rain to another station — WABC — where Julia Sanderson and Frank Crumit were singing ballads woven most cunningly into some humorous dialogue in honor of the Blackstone Cigar. With the easy impartiality of the mere spectator I could look through the control window into that beautiful studio decorated by Cleon Throckmorton with maps in pale cream and blue and sound-absorbent walls of shredded wheat texture; I could watch Julia, in her leaf-flecked dress with little gold frills and a pert green hat, swaying slightly as she sings.

But the others in that little pilot house were intent on technicality. There was one exciting instant when apparently something went wrong. There were faces of anxiety, and they

pantomimed wildly to the director. He gcsured hastily to the performers, who retreated a little from the mike. The young scientist sitting with his watch recorded the episode thus in his Production Report: "At 8:20.40 control phoned there were hits and at 8:21.15 we got one bad one." It was suggested that someone in the studio had tripped on the cable running from the mike. I wondered if it might have been Julia's lively little foot, unconsciously tapping time to the song she was singing with such gusto. At 8:27.50 the musical program ended; then the announcer's "signature," affectionately reminding the gallery gods of wave-length that that particular cigar is mild and fragrant; and at 8:29.32 "take her away." Roy Durstine, pioneer student of the art of ether advertisement, gayly shot his left (or Hamilton) cuff. "Right on the nose, this baby." Julia and Frank and their cigar were off the air, and instantly a different voice remarked,

“This is the True Romance Hour.”
Aye, indeed!

Now it is 8:50 and back at WJZ they are getting ready for the Johnson & Johnson melodrama—one of those very bloodthirsty and comic little playlets that suggest the advisability of absorbent cotton and bandages and surgical supplies. The orchestra is trying out preliminary strains; the director is upsetting piles of folding chairs for thunder effect; the heroine gets behind a curtain to practice a muted scream. The big kettle-drum behind the curtain gives the effect of distant explosion. Water sloshed about in a tin wash-boiler conveys the sound of a rowboat; a whip slashed on a soft cushion is a revolver shot; a table knife wrapped with tape and slapped against a book is the smack of a bullet hitting a wall. An alarm clock close to the mike is the ticking bomb; the key turned in a ten-cent padlock gives the snick of locking handcuffs. In the control room a listen-



**“Water sloshed about in
a tin wash-boiler conveys
the sound of a rowboat.”**

ing jury with earphones and alert faces approves these tests. The announcer practices his apparently so casual "Good evening, everybody," saying it over and over until the high command is satisfied. The director's watch is in his hand. 8:59, the announcer puts on his earphones. "One minute to go," he says. "Half minute. Stand by." There is a last clearing of throats among the actors. "This is Station WJZ in New York. . . ."

The little melodrama is amusing, but in the control room the Parcæ are soberly vigilant. They preside at the actual weaving of this web of Time, Space and Sound. They watch it in process, second by second. At 9:15 they tell me we are ahead of schedule: the director is signaled to give a repeat on the chorus of the next number. This takes up the slack so accurately that at 9:24.30 we are only ten seconds off. The second hand on my Hamilton goes steadily round. All the jury have wrist

watches; the continual consultation of them makes a curious flicker of arm gestures in the little room, almost like tentative pugilism. I slip for a moment into the Main Control: a mysterious place of black panels with beads of colored light, galvanometers and amplifiers. Strange deep words, solemn utterances about I don't know what, proceed from several loud speakers. Apparently smoking is allowed here, and I am about to light up when I am told that the Happy Wonder Bakers are on the air. I hurry back to hear a number of gentlemen carolling blithely about the joys of the bakery. In the old nursery rhymes the jolly miller did his own singing; now he hires George Gershwin's tunes to do it for him.

9:55—It is imparted, in a tone of some solemnity, that the Westinghouse Salute is preparing. I wonder what this can be: I find myself upstairs in the grand salon, a vast studio like a



"I hurry back to hear
a number of gentlemen
carolling blithely about
the joys of the bakery."

modernist cathedral. The lights are great clusters of frosted glass cylinders. A whole symphony orchestra is tuning up. The director wears a dinner jacket and his watch lives in his hand. On one dais stands the musical conductor; on another sits in a sacerdotal chair a tall, dark gentleman with a script. He looks uneasy and has a lozenge in his

mouth. It is Pedro de Cordoba, who for his fine voice and trained elocution is to read ceremonial litany. In front of him is a row of ladies in rich evening gowns; behind these a row of men in dinner jackets. I suppose them to be social guests. It is all very impressive; what is going to be saluted? But the zero moment approaches. The director warns us not to crackle papers. It is 9:59.39. A liquid gong sounds somewhere, rather like a Buddhist temple. From a raised altar at the rear of the great hall I hear some pontiff say with deep solemnity, "This is Station WJZ in New York." Crash! I am almost lifted from my seat by the explosion of music. The whole orchestra, with enormous violence, has burst into overture.

Then, rising from his seat and laying his lozenge carefully on the seat of his chair, Mr. de Cordoba advances to the mike. He is to intone the text of this most genuine of all relig-

ions, man's worship of Big Business—

“Tonight, Westinghouse salutes the great Petroleum and Natural Gas industries of all the world . . . Refiners, pipe line workers, tank wagon drivers, and filling station attendants busy every moment of the day and most of the night . . . to keep the vast flow of lubricants moving . . . the wheels of industry turn rhythmically and smoothly on cushions of oil and grease whereon friction vainly seeks a foothold.”

And to celebrate the downfall of friction, the ladies and gentlemen in evening dress burst full-throated into Bizet's *Agnus Dei*.

I sit in amazement through this half-hour service. Here is a religion with real passion in it, America paying homage to what it understands. The president of the American Petroleum Institute speaks for four minutes. They sing *The Jewels of the Madonna*, *Toreador* and the *Nutcracker Suite*.

The director stealthily studies his watch; Mr. de Cordoba's voice gravely recites the ritual. I remind myself that it's some time since the oil was changed in the old Studebaker. Now it is 10:27. A final orchestral flurry, the announcer's closing "signature" . . . it's 10:29.50 . . . and we are through. The director makes his pious little symbolic gesture. He lays his finger on his nose.

Like Cinderella's coach and horses the whole fairy tale has vanished. The hand of the clock has Taken Us Away. Ladies and gentlemen in evening dress, musicians with their bulky instruments, announcers and directors and comedians, we find ourselves out on the rainy street. That great flexible bubble of Time and Sound, iridescent with oil and amperes, has floated off forever into Space. How far did it go, trembling through the impalpable? I look at my watch. Hamilton tells me I can just catch the 11:09—right On the Nose.

