

CHAPTER ONE THE FIRST BROADCAST

On October 18, 193*, the weather in Paris was marvelous, and numerous groups lingered along the boulevards in the early afternoon to yield themselves lazily to the caresses of autumn.

At the Place de l'Opéra a great crowd had gathered before the perfected loudspeaker which had just been installed there for the benefit of the public. Its powerful voice dominated the clamors of the traffic which rolled unceasingly past like a triumphal parade.

The loudspeaker, with a clarity and tone that delighted the assembled public, was reproducing the sounds of a cleverly assembled concert in which eight educated dogs, three elephants and a dozen parrots were performing a rendition of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. The eight dogs were in London; the three elephants were in Calcutta, where one of them was tooting a trombone, the second a bassoon, and the third an oboe especially constructed for this gigantic and rather unusual performer. The dozen parrots sang (if one could call it that) from Buenos Aires; and everything had been arranged by the world radio commission so that all the different members of this extraordinary choir could be heard by wireless enthusiasts in any part of the universe.

As a matter of fact, the reception was all one could hope for. The elephant oboe player had just finished a solo, executed with deafening virtuosity, when all at once the thread of the animal concert was broken, to be replaced by an absolutely insupportable sound of frying.

"Well!" remarked someone, "what's going on? I don't seem to be able to understand the words anymore."

People laughed, imagining that the disagreeable sounds were part of the program.

A blonde *midinette*,¹ declared gaily:

"I know what it is; they've tuned in on some pigs asking for their soup."

"It's extraordinarily well imitated," affirmed a young radio enthusiast in a tone of conviction.

Suddenly, the sound of frying ceased, and after a few seconds of incomprehensible silence, a voice came from the loudspeaker, a sharp, dry, tearing voice, but so clear that every syllable enunciated was heard.

"*Listen!*" said the voice. "*Listen! The world is coming to an end!*"

A burst of laughter greeted this announcement. The first speaker cried:

"Is that all?"

A serious-looking gentleman shrugged his shoulders. "Wait. A new publicity trick," he explained.

But the voice in the loudspeaker began anew, trembling with vibrations of hate and anger:

"Listen! I, whom you do not know and who hate and despise all of you, announce that I have found a method of annihilating mankind and destroying the world! Listen! In an hour the world will be destroyed! In an hour, do you hear? Nothing will exist anymore, neither you nor the Earth that supports you! I am the master of unknown forces and of waves possessing an infinite power of destruction. I am the master, the only master of the universe! And I desire that the universe shall perish."

The only result of this emphatic speech was to raise an even greater hilarity.

"Too bad," shouted the joker, "that I didn't know about it three days ago. It would have saved me paying my rent."

A tall young man who was tranquilly lighting a cigarette chipped in:

"—And with me getting married next week!"

And the *midinette* added:

"The radio's a bore today—just when the animal concert was going so well, too! Somebody ought to call up about it."

The general opinion seemed to be that some practical joker was amusing himself at the expense of the crowd. But the crowd did not go away; everyone waited for the words that would show what the clever speaker was advertising. The cloudless sky held an autumn sun so warm that everyone felt amused and indulgent; at certain times of year it takes very little to please Parisians. The loudspeaker began again:

¹ A Parisian salesgirl. (Ed.)

"I hate humanity and I have condemned it. All human beings are criminals; they injure themselves, they kill each other, they deserve to be punished. I, who speak to you, I, against whom you can do nothing, I, who can do everything, am going to precipitate all of you back into the nothingness from which you should never have emerged! I am going to give you a proof of my power. You see what time it is? Look at your watches; in ten minutes the Sun will disappear; the shadows will cover the whole Earth and become thicker and thicker; no light at all will be able to shine in the night that I create..."

"Listen! Listen! In 20 minutes a glacial cold will replace the present warmth. Your limbs will be paralyzed and then you will begin to believe what I tell you. I hate you, all of you, you living people, who, in an instant, will be nothing but so many corpses. Your bodies will not fall to dust—they will be annihilated! Have you never thought what it would be like—not to exist? Well, you have 50 minutes to prepare yourselves for it."

A frightful laugh, amplified by the loudspeaker, sent a tremor through the crowd. The voice continued:

"I hate you. I wish your agony could last for centuries. But in 50 minutes no living thing will exist anymore."

The voice fell silent; a silence filled almost with agony. But the clear laughter of the *midinette* dissipated the general sensation of terror.

"I have it!" she said. "It's an ad for a fur company! If it weren't so warm, I'd take my 30,000 francs and buy me a moleskin."

The serious gentleman added:

"The joke is in bad taste. Why don't the police do something about it?"

Nevertheless he pulled out his watch and glanced at it, an action imitated by the major portion of the hearers of this unlikely discourse. Then, as though in spite of himself, he looked at the sky.

Not a cloud! The benevolent Sun shone down on them, reassuring and magnificent. Decidedly, the *midinette's* idea was the most likely explanation of this unexpected and ultra-modern method of getting people's attention.

All the same, in this crowd which remained so skeptical and so little moved, there was one person who seemed to take this incredible announcement hurled on the ether, apparently by some melancholy joker, at its face value. It was a young man of some 22 years, who wore the smock and cap of a Parisian laborer. His thin, serious face bore an expression of the keenest attention, as making play with his elbows, he worked as close as possible to the loudspeaker and waited to hear it again. But no one paid any attention to the growing surprise and fright that spread over his visage.

The Place de l'Opéra was black with people, and hurrying crowds of the curious overflowed down the boulevards, filling the Rue de la Paix as far as the Place Vendôme, flowing down the Rue Auber and into the Rue du Quatre-Septembre, growing larger every second through all the streets where one could hear the voice of the loudspeaker. The clever merchandiser who had thought of this scheme to advertise his wares, had certainly attained his object. He must have been a clever psychologist to thus play on idle dolts with a display of superior doltery.

Meanwhile, a good many of the strollers, thinking the show was over and that the interrupted concert would hardly be resumed, began to go their separate ways when the loudspeaker began again.

"*Watch!*" clamored the gigantic voice, "*watch the Sun! It is going to darken, and in two minutes the cold will begin.*"

At these words, the young workman made desperate efforts to get away. He succeeded in escaping from the crowd, got around the Opera House, and raced as fast as his legs would carry him down the Rue Auber. It was time; there was a terrible surge among the mass of people and cries of fright rose from all sides. A sinister shadow, like that of an eclipse, spread rapidly from west to east, hiding the Sun and then spreading rapidly across the heavens to plunge the whole city into a nightmare dream. And in every direction, propagated by terror with the speed of an electric current, the news that a frightful and inevitable catastrophe was upon the world spread through the city, invading every district, racing down every darkened street.

In the sudden obscurity there was the wildest disorder. As the voice had predicted, it was impossible to light either electricity or gas; and in the crisis produced by this abnormal night, no one thought of taking steps to insure order and quiet movement—not that any such steps would have been of the slightest use.

In that wild crowd of men and women who had suddenly become the prey of an inexpressible horror, nobody had the cool-headedness even to think of the supernatural individual who had boasted of being able to destroy the world and who seemed in a fair way to do it. Everyone thought of the horror; no one of its author.

Was the unknown really going to realize his terrible prediction? And in destroying the Earth and all its living beings, would he not destroy himself as well? Was the same thing happening all over the world as in Paris? So many problems, so many questions—and no one able to answer them, all were incapable of intelligent thought. The movement in the streets and boulevards was completely halted, an agonized silence weighed down the crowd, as everyone heard only the oppressed breathing of his neighbor.

Suddenly cries of despair broke forth, heart-rending appeals, wails, shouts of rage and the dumb sound of blows, revealing the combats for life the dark concealed. It was for anyone who could to make his way through the crowd by main strength, to find his way through the opaque black toward his home, there to exchange a last farewell with his family before plunging into nothingness. The prediction was being realized; a brief and final agony was beginning for the human species, brief, but so terrible that seconds seemed to last for centuries.

Once more the voice of the loudspeaker rose above the crowd, sarcastic and insulting:

“Everything I promised you is really going to happen... Now prepare for the cold! The polar cold, which you would not be able to resist even if I should renounce the joy of destroying the Earth and all its inhabitants. In a few minutes, in 30 minutes at most, there will be no more people alive.”

And in fact it was as though an icy blanket fell suddenly upon Paris. Then, after a few seconds the cold was accentuated, it became so bitter that no one among the victims of the diabolic unknown had even the strength to shiver. In an absolute silence, like that of the tomb, in a night as profound as that of the sepulcher, the loudspeaker counted the last moments of the world, before it should be re-absorbed in the infinite,

“Still ten minutes more!...Five minutes more!”

Near the loudspeaker a single soft voice rose in a sobbing plea:

“My God!”

As though the prayer had been heard, the enemy of the world cried from the loudspeaker:

“Two minutes more—and the world will be destroyed.”