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THE ECONOMIC TEST

I have always been supercilious about the side-lines of my profession, ^{as a writer} Take broadcasting. When it came to carrying over what I had to say from the press to the air it looked easy - write it - talk it off. It had been easy the few times I had gone on the air, always for a cause - ten minutes, fifteen minutes, telling the world its duty about the woman in industry, child labor, the alien with all man's hands against him in this land of the free. I had always put it over well enough to receive generous thanks from the sponsors of the causes. I had always gone from the studio after the experience in a comfortable glow of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency.

And then came along an invitation to speak two minutes - three hundred words and - "what fee would you expect?"

Never before had anybody hinted to me that there was money for me in broadcasting. I was scared. I might be good enough for a donation to a cause but was I good enough for a fee. I doubted it. I delayed my reply but they seemed really to want me. One day a charming, coaxing voice called me up in the country.

"Only three hundred words" - "two minutes" -
 "something dear to your heart." "How much would you expect?"

"Young woman," I said severely, "I don't know how to say anything dear to my heart or otherwise in three hundred words. It always takes me three thousand. To put a thing of any value in three hundred words go to a master of the craft - not a working journalist."

But the coaxing, wheedling voice persisted.

"Well," I said ungraciously, "I'll accept if you will give me my price." And I set one which I thought was too much for them but not too much for me if I was to say anything in three hundred words. ^I was right in both cases.

But the price did not daunt the owner of that persuasive voice. Promptly and cheerfully she said she would see what she could do about it. The best she could do was to halve my figure.

I have never ceased to wonder at my own susceptibility to flattery. I always end by agreeing if I am sufficiently wheedled. I was now and said, "Yes."

My suspicion that an economic test was a different thing from a charity test was soon realized. It seems that I was not to speak on "just anything dear to my heart." It must be a something of which my sponsor approved, dear or not to me.

"Won't you please submit three or four suggestions?"

I took a day off and did it. If a thing strikes fire with an editor on or off the air you hear from it right away. If it does not you can be sure he has his doubts. He did in this case. However, what I had sent in seemed to merit a contract. Nothing to do now but put one of my suggestions into three hundred words.

I was wrong. A chatty sketch of my life was wanted. The last thing in the world I can do is to be chatty about my life. Ungraciously I set down certain hard facts - age - fifty years of work - confession that I do not smoke cigarettes - that I read detective yarns - do other things that did not seem to have any bearing on speaking on the air.

But my charming voice came back bubbling. "Just what they wanted." "Now, wouldn't I tell them how it feels to be at work at my age."

Nothing to do but give another morning. Measured by time given I had already earned that fee twice over. In an aggravated tone I spoke into my dictaphone a thousand or so words on the theme in which they pretended to be so deeply interested.

This time there was no delay. I had struck fire. "Just what we wanted." "Three hundred words - two minutes."

Putting a thousand into three hundred is real work. I grimly tackled it, stuck to it until by my watch I could read my piece exactly within the time - two seconds to spare in case of accident.

When you talk for a cause you drop in before you go on and have your voice tested, read your piece and go out with a pleased sense of your generosity. I had supposed my two minutes meant that and nothing more. Again I was wrong. Orders came:-

"You are to be at the studio at ten o'clock for rehearsal. You will go on soon after eleven; you will be back in the afternoon at three for the Pacific Coast."

That meant a whole working day. I told myself I would do nothing of the kind, that I would slip in a little before eleven o'clock, give them time for a voice test, do my piece and go home. But my conscience began to trouble me. I had signed a contract. That meant taking orders. It said ten o'clock. There was probably some reason for it. At any rate I was there before ten and thankful enough I was for I had not crossed the threshold before I realized that being late would have stamped me contemptuously as nothing but an amateur.

There was nothing of the amateur about this gathering. I have always been impressed with the difference in tempo, sparkle, the toss of the head, the look of the back between those working on a real job and on a made job. The moment I entered the room I knew these people considered themselves on a real job. There were forty or more of them - the orchestra, perhaps twenty standing around talking - a half dozen more or less pretty girls, though for what purpose I could not guess - a distinguished

looking baritone - a body of important and worried looking inspectors, broadcasters.

Fascinated, I watched the animated confusion crystalize into a pattern. A sign from somewhere - I did not see where - and they flowed into their places. The microphones were the magnets drawing them - microphones obviously suited to the needs of what each person or group of persons had to offer. Tall, gangling ones for the orchestra - marvelous how they pick up and blend all those instruments. Others suited to the height of announcers, boradcasters, to the soloists, a group of pretty dark and light heads which went into a huddle around a singer's instrument. They crooned an accompaniment to his song. As for the speakers, like myself, we sat in state at a table, very comfortable, the announcer on the other side of the voice transmitter. Very different indeed from the first time I went on the air for somebody's cause - fifteen or more years ago over in Newark. You found your way there at night through a dark and forbidding warehouse; you stood before a big round platter which both mystified and antagonized you. But nothing of that sort now - here you sat intimately and quietly, and at once curiously enough had the feel of the radio's real audience. You know that it is not a million people as they bombastically tell you. No, your radio audience is two or three or a half dozen sitting before the fire or around the living room table, sewing, knitting, looking over the paper,

stopping long enough to listen when you drop in. Very informal and the more deeply one realizes this the better his voice, I fancy.

At ten o'clock exactly the rehearsal began. And then I saw why a rehearsal. We ran over our time by something like five minutes. That five minutes had to be cut out of a program of perhaps a dozen numbers, each item of which had beforehand been given its exact time. It came out literally second by second - ten seconds here, thirty there, a minute somewhere perhaps. The pleasant speeches of the head announcer probably suffered most. I had come within my time. Everybody sacrificed without complaint, probably sympathizing with the harrowed, anxious responsible time heads - everybody but me, I had two seconds to contribute.

The rehearsal and editing over something very amusing happened in the minutes left. - a general pepping up process, a preparation for the public performance. The group broke away, stretched their legs and arms, cut pigeon wings, chucked a pretty girl under the chin. That is, everybody did save the harrowed ones making sure the cutting of their scripts were clear enough to read. They were tuning themselves for the performance. And they were interested in each other's performances. Before I realized it I was being twinkled at by members of the orchestra - friendly smiles. "Your first time here, isn't it? Good luck to you old girl."

The bosses came around and patted me on the shoulder -
"You'll do all right."

And then we went on. I could have gone home I suppose at the end of my reading but I was too interested and went instead into the visitors' box and through the big window watched these colleagues, for so I now called them, put through their work and come out on the second. I felt as if I had been victor in a race; I realized I had been taking part in one of the most perfected mechanisms, mechanically perfected, and yes humanly perfected, which is quite another matter that has come my way. For here were seventy or so people, many of them temperamental artists submitting themselves to the plan of the whole and getting so much fun out of it.

No use to tell me that I must be back before three - I was there twenty minutes before. All I wanted now was to be sure I was earning that fee, that I was worthy of a place with this highly specialized mechanism. All the self-complacency of giving for nothing had gone out of me. For it had been substituted the self-respect of earning. I was no longer an amateur; I was a professional; I had stood the economic test.