"Ah, my little hat, I have at last found the girl to wear you."
Madame Gabrielle walked gayly back to the girl who was seated before an oval mirror.
"Here, Mademoiselle, is the hat!" she announced with a note of triumph in her voice.
The girl turned to look at the hat before Madame fitted it on her head.
"Oh, Madame Gabrielle. It—It's beautiful!" she gasped.
"It is one of my newest creations. Youth and Spring inspired me to create it, and now I've found the only person who could possibly wear it. That is you, Mademoiselle."
Madame carefully fitted the pink hat over the short dark curls of the young girl. The girl excitedly reached for the hand mirror on the table near her. She viewed herself from all the angles that the mirrors would permit.
"It's absolutely beautiful! It's out of this world! I've never seen such a hat. And I'm sure that Don will like it."
"Oui, Mademoiselle, it is perfect on you. Perfect!"
The excited girl got up from the chair and viewed herself in the full-length mirror. Suddenly she began to giggle.
"Something is wrong, Mademoiselle?" asked Madame Gabrielle with a troubled expression on her face.
"Oh, no. Nothing is wrong."
"Ah, I am relieved, Mademoiselle."
The dark girl continued, "I was just thinking. When Don wants to tease me, he calls me 'Angel Cake.' And now I'll be his 'Angel Cake' with Pink Frosting."
"Oui, Mademoiselle, Pink Frosting."

"Shush,"—The New Password
Kenneth Hopkins

Estimates of the intelligence of the average American range from very low to a little higher than very low, depending upon the amount of cynicism or the rosiness of the rose-colored glasses of the person computing the averages. These surveys may be well founded or they may be final semester theses knocked out by advanced students in pursuit of masters' degrees in psychology. In either case, and in direct and naive opposition to these averages, I am sometimes quite well impressed that the average American is rather intelligent and strives to keep himself well informed.
Although I have never made a study, complete with notes, conclusions, et cetera, of the species, I have been exposed to rather continuous contacts with a substantial number of its members; and have, therefore, formed certain opinions. I have heard Americans in general conversation which, for the most part, showed a good degree of learning. I have heard them discuss politics, and, with minor, noisy exceptions, noted reasonably astute reasoning. I have been eclipsed by them in bridge games and other active sports wherein they showed outstanding shrewdness. Other examples too numerous to mention have also left me with a high regard for the American mind. Other examples, that is, except one.

Why it is that a half dozen or so of the above mentioned supposedly intelligent people display such a total miscarriage of mental processes when they come into the presence of an active television set is a phenomenon worthy of investigation. It seems that activities of the brain are suspended with the initial glimmer of the test pattern. Perhaps it is a form of vacuum tube hypnosis. Or maybe it is a psychological block in awe of science. It might, in specific cases, be the product of an advanced case of worry as to how the next payment for the set is to be made. Whatever the cause might be, the effect is remarkably complete.

As evidence of the mental lethargy which overtakes those who indulge in this tube gazing, I merely ask that persons who differ analyze the depth of the conversations of people so engaged. If the audience is typical and the television set is on for about two hours, the chances are good that the total conversation may be recorded on a half sheet of paper in shorthand if the recorder can find or originate symbols to cover sundry unconventionalities encountered in getting the set properly tuned.

Television programs tend to vary from wrestling and quiz shows on to the higher level of film productions of ten or fifteen years back. The wrestling matches involve either two men, two women, or one man and a curly-headed individual of undeterminable sex; the quiz shows shower fortunes on stupid people for stupid answers to stupid questions; and the aged films bring back from the grave outmoded styles of dress and not so outmoded melodrama.

The exchange of words among the persons viewing this new transmission of art runs the gamut from "Ooph!" expelled at the fall of a wrestler, to "Grant is buried in Grant's tomb," presented in aid of the distressed studio contestant, to a sort of tortured silence toward the antique film. These comments would not be considered brilliant from any source, but they seem especially lacking when brought forth by persons who at other times are capable of long discussions of at least a semi-serious nature on varieties of subjects.

My initiation into the video-polluted sanctum of the home of a friend of mine was instructive to say the least. I entered the room
and saw a group of faces dully peering at the screen, the room’s sole source of light. The scene was reminiscent of a seance or some other form of black magic. After making certain that the coffee table was not about to float up off the floor and relate the memoirs of my great aunt Sadie, I groped my way to a chair.

I stupidly broke forth with, “So this is television. Great thing. I predict that it will go a long way.”

I was greeted by the host with, “Shush.—Godfrey.—Good.”

I naively came forth with another complete sentence, “Oh, yes,—Godfrey,—I get the biggest charge from his morning radio programs.”

The gentleman in the chair nearest the set criticized my comment briefly, “Harrumph!”

Blundering on, I said, “Godfrey has one of the most spontaneous senses of humor that I have heard in a long time.”

The hostess came over and said, as she handed me a cup of an undistinguishable liquid, “Coffee.” I rather think that the offer was fundamentally based on the theory that it is well nigh impossible for a person to talk with the rim of a coffee cup between his teeth.

My usual brevity of etiquette gave way this once and I effused, “Oh, thank you very much. There’s nothing like a spot of coffee as a bracer-upper.” I sipped. “Very good. I’ll bet you made this with your own two little hands.”

The hostess, probably disgruntled by the failure of her cloture, said, “Yes, and a percolator.”

Sensing the embryo of a subtle wit, I decided to offer encouragement. I chortled and said, “Good comeback. Maybe someday you’ll replace Godfrey.”

The gentleman nearest the screen came up with his second comment of the evening, “Speaking of replacing Godfrey,—” he tapered off with inarticulate mumblings significant only in their threatening inflections.

It was obvious that I was losing ground. The host, evidently fearful for his gate receipts, turned and repeated, “Shush.—Godfrey.—Good.”

It was slowly becoming evident to me that this group had lost its conversational turn. I sat in morose silence and looked at Godfrey.

Some fifteen minutes later as I was busily engaged in balancing the empty coffee cup on my knee, another victim was ushered into the room. He stood in the doorway adjusting his pupils for about a minute and then, spotting me, ambled over and seated himself.

“Hopkins, old boy! How is everything with you?”

I said, “Shush.—Godfrey.—Good.”

Probably the true significance of television’s grip on the American mind is not fully realized in all its ramifications. For years politicians have talked themselves red in the noses championing the
contents of the first ten amendments to the Constitution. They prattle incessantly on the absolute necessity of maintaining freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom to trade cheap cigars for votes. School children in this country since the beginning of the nineteenth century have devoted tons of paper to themes dedicated to the importance of these freedoms. Even the man on the street is capable of imposing the wrath of these rights on the local constable if he is placed in detention for drunken driving and not given opportunity to communicate with his barrister.

All these freedoms are waved threadbare time after time, and still no one has come to the rescue of the American freedom of thought from this devious miscarriage of science called television.

The public’s total acceptance of the harmless frivolities now appearing on the video screens of the country shows that television could be turned into a weapon of unequaled potentiality for the dissemination of propaganda. In proportion it would reduce the late Adolph Hitler’s system of geopolitics to less significance than a Republican presidential campaign. He who would rule television would rule the nation.

It is to be hoped that officials of our national government, which is usually a little costive in accepting new techniques, will arouse themselves to the importance of the situation before some undemocratic movement seizes the opportunity and dramatizes the Marxist theory, soap opera style, in half the living rooms of the country. I believe that present day television programs would suffer very little if Gorgeous George were replaced by a weekly reading of the Gettysburg address or by a Town Meeting of the Photo-electric Cell.

As an aid toward directing the power of television toward socially democratic goals, it might be advisable for some astute political scientists to design a department of television, to be placed alongside those of agriculture, interior, commerce, et cetera. Since one department, more or less, is hardly noticeable, the plan would probably gain acceptance in an election year. In its simplest form the new department would, of course, have a head Secretary. Going lower down the scale there might be an Under Secretary for each television channel and appointments for special secretaries for wrestling, political speeches, cowboy shows, and so on down to the Secretary in charge of “John’s Other Wife.”

Regardless of the form, it is becoming increasingly evident that some effort must be made to place television’s power of persuasion in the proper hands. Any instrument capable of gaining such vast control over the attention of a modern, intelligent population, must be recognized as a major propaganda tool and dealt with accordingly. Never let it be said that our country, which has bulldozed its way through a series of great wars, was finally laid low by a household appliance.