

Chapter Four

AMERICA CONVALESCENT

THE Big Red Scare was slowly—very slowly—dying.
What killed it?

The realization, for one thing, that there had never been any sufficient cause for such a panic as had convulsed the country. The localization of Communism in Europe, for another thing: when Germany and other European nations failed to be engulfed by the Bolshevist tide, the idea of its sweeping irresistibly across the Atlantic became a little less plausible. It was a fact, too, that radicalism was noticeably ebbing in the United States. The Fighting Quaker's inquisitorial methods, whatever one may think of them, had at least had the practical effect of scaring many Reds into a pale pinkness. By 1921 the A. F. of L. leaders were leaning over backward in their effort to appear as conservative as Judge Gary, college professors were canceling their subscriptions to liberal magazines on the ground that they could not afford to let such literature be seen on their tables, and the social reformers of a year or two before were tiring of what seemed a thankless and hopeless fight. There was also, perhaps, a perceptible loss of enthusiasm for governmental action against the Reds on the part of the growing company of the wets, who were acquiring a belated concern for personal liberty and a new distrust of federal snoopers. Yet there was another cause more important, perhaps, than any of these. The temper of the aftermath of war was at last giving way to the temper of peace. Like an overworked business man beginning his vacation, the country had had to go through a period of restlessness and irritabil-

ity, but was finally learning how to relax and amuse itself once more.

A sense of disillusionment remained; like the suddenly liberated vacationist, the country felt that it ought to be enjoying itself more than it was, and that life was futile and nothing mattered much. But in the meantime it might as well play—follow the crowd, take up the new toys that were amusing the crowd, go in for the new fads, savor the amusing scandals and trivialities of life. By 1921 the new toys and fads and scandals were forthcoming, and the country seized upon them feverishly.

§ 2

First of all was the radio, which was destined ultimately to alter the daily habits of Americans as profoundly as anything that the decade produced.

The first broadcasting station had been opened in East Pittsburgh on November 2, 1920—a date which school children may some day have to learn—to carry the Harding-Cox election returns. This was station KDKA, operated by the Westinghouse Company. For a time, however, this new revolution in communication and public entertainment made slow headway. Auditors were few. Amateur wireless operators objected to the stream of music—mostly from phonograph records—which issued from the Westinghouse station and interfered with their important business. When a real orchestra was substituted for the records, the resonance of the room in which the players sat spoiled the effect. The orchestra was placed out-of-doors, in a tent on the roof—and the tent blew away. The tent was thereupon pitched in a big room indoors, and not until then was it discovered that the cloth hangings which subsequently became standard in broadcasting studios would adequately muffle the sound.

Experiment proceeded, however; other radio stations were opened, market reports were thrown on the air, Dr. Van Etten of Pittsburgh permitted the services at Calvary Church to be broadcasted, the University of Wisconsin gave radio concerts, and politicians spouted into the strange instruments and wondered if anybody was really listening. Yet when Dempsey fought Carpentier in July, 1921, and three men at the ringside told the story of the slaughter into telephone transmitters to be relayed by air to eighty points throughout the country, their enterprise was reported in an obscure corner of the *New York Times* as an achievement in "wireless telephony"; and when the Unknown Soldier was buried at Arlington Cemetery the following November, crowds packed into Madison Square Garden in New York and the Auditorium in San Francisco to hear the speeches issue from huge amplifiers, and few in those crowds had any idea that soon they could hear all the orations they wanted without stirring from the easy-chair in the living-room. The great awakening had not yet come.

That winter, however—the winter of 1921-22—it came with a rush. Soon everybody was talking, not about wireless telephony, but about radio. A San Francisco paper described the discovery that millions were making: "There is radio music in the air, every night, everywhere. Anybody can hear it at home on a receiving set, which any boy can put up in an hour." In February President Harding had an outfit installed in his study, and the Dixmoor Golf Club announced that it would install a "telephone" to enable golfers to hear church services. In April, passengers on a Lackawanna train heard a radio concert, and Lieutenant Maynard broke all records for modernizing Christianity by broadcasting an Easter sermon from an airplane. Newspapers brought out radio sections and thousands of hitherto utterly unmechanical people puzzled over articles about regenerative circuits, sodion tubes, Grimes reflex circuits, crystal detectors, and

neurodynes. In the Ziegfeld "Follies of 1922" the popularity of "My Rambler Rose" was rivaled by that of a song about a man who hoped his love might hear him as she was "listening on the radio." And every other man you met on the street buttonholed you to tell you how he had sat up until two o'clock the night before, with earphones clamped to his head, and had actually *heard Havana!* How could one bother about the Red Menace if one was facing such momentous questions as how to construct a loop aërial?

In the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* for the years 1919-21, in which were listed all the magazine articles appearing during those years, there were two columns of references to articles on Radicals and Radicalism and less than a quarter of a column of references to articles on Radio. In the *Readers' Guide* for 1922-24, by contrast, the section on Radicals and Radicalism shrank to half a column and the section on Radio swelled to nineteen columns. In that change there is an index to something more than periodical literature.

§ 3

Sport, too, had become an American obsession. When Jack Kearns persuaded Tex Rickard to bring together Dempsey and the worn-out but engaging Georges Carpentier at Boyle's Thirty Acres in Jersey City in 1921, the public responded as they had never before responded in the history of the country. Nearly seventy-five thousand people paid over a million and a half dollars—over three times as much as the Dempsey-Willard fight had brought in—to see the debonair Frenchman flattened in the fourth round, and the metropolitan papers, not content with a few columns in the sporting section, devoted page after page the next day to every conceivable detail of the fight. It was the first of the huge million-dollar bouts of the decade. Babe Ruth

raised his home-run record to fifty-nine, and the 1921 World's Series broke records for gate receipts and attendance. Sport-hungry crowds who had never dreamed of taking a college-entrance examination swarmed to college football games, watched Captain Malcolm Aldrich of Yale and George Owen of Harvard, and devoured hundreds of columns of dopesters' gossip about Penn State and Pittsburgh and Iowa and the "praying Colonels" of Centre College. Racing had taken on a new lease of life with the unparalleled success of Man o' War in 1920. Tennis clubs were multiplying, and business men were discovering by the hundreds of thousands that a par-four hole was the best place to be in conference. There were food-fads, too, as well as sport-fads: such was the sudden and overwhelming craze for Eskimo Pie that in three months the price of cocoa beans on the New York market rose 50 per cent.

Another new American institution caught the public eye during the summer of 1921—the bathing beauty. In early July a Costume and Beauty Show was held at Washington's bathing beach on the Potomac, and the prize-winners were so little touched by the influence of Mack Sennett and his moving-picture bathers that they wore tunic bathing-suits, hats over their long curls, and long stockings—all but one, who daringly rolled her stockings below her knees. In early September Atlantic City held its first Beauty Pageant—a similar show, but with a difference. "For the time being, the censor ban on bare knees and skin-tight bathing suits was suspended," wrote an astonished reporter, "and thousands of spectators gasped as they applauded the girls." Miss Washington was declared the most beautiful girl of the cities of America, the one-piece suit became overnight the orthodox wear for bathing beauties (though taffetas and sateens remained good enough for genuine sea-going bathers for a season or two to come), promoters of seashore resorts began

to plan new contests, and the rotogravure and tabloid editors faced a future bright with promise.

The tabloids, indeed, were booming—and not without effect. There was more than coincidence in the fact that as they rose, radicalism fell. They presented American life not as a political and economic struggle, but as a three-ring circus of sport, crime, and sex, and in varying degrees the other papers followed their lead under the pressure of competition. Workmen forgot to be class-conscious as they gloated over pictures of Miss Scranton on the Boardwalk and followed the Stillman case and the Arbuckle case and studied the racing dope about Morvich.

Readers with perceptibly higher brows, too, had their diversions from the affairs of the day. Though their heads still reeled from *The Education of Henry Adams*, they were wading manfully through paleontology as revealed in the *Outline of History* (and getting bogged, most of them, somewhere near the section on Genghis Khan). They were asking one another whether America was truly as ugly as Sinclair Lewis made it in *Main Street* and Tahiti truly as enchanting as Frederick O'Brien made it in *White Shadows of the South Seas*; they were learning about hot love in hot places from *The Sheik*, and lapping up Mrs. Asquith's gossip of the British ruling classes, and having a good old-fashioned cry over *If Winter Comes*.

Further diversions were on the way, too. If there had been any doubt, after the radio craze struck the country, that the American people were learning to enjoy such diversions with headlong unanimity, the events of 1922 and 1923 dispelled it. On the 16th of September, 1922, the murder of the decade took place: The Reverend Edward Wheeler Hall and Mrs. James Mills, the choir leader in his church, were found shot to death on an abandoned farm near New Brunswick, New Jersey. The Hall-Mills case had all the

elements needed to satisfy an exacting public taste for the sensational. It was better than the Elwell case of June, 1920. It was grisly, it was dramatic (the bodies being laid side by side as if to emphasize an unhallowed union), it involved wealth and respectability, it had just the right amount of sex interest—and in addition it took place close to the great metropolitan nerve-center of the American press. It was an illiterate American who did not shortly become acquainted with DeRussey's Lane, the crab-apple tree, the pig woman and her mule, the precise mental condition of Willie Stevens, and the gossip of the choir members.

§ 4

By this time, too, a new game was beginning its conquest of the country. In the first year or two after the war, Joseph P. Babcock, Soochow representative of the Standard Oil Company, had become interested in the Chinese game of Mah Jong and had codified and simplified the rules for the use of Americans. Two brothers named White had introduced it to the English-speaking clubs of Shanghai, where it became popular. It was brought to the United States, and won such immediate favor that W. A. Hammond, a San Francisco lumber merchant, was encouraged to import sets on an ambitious scale. By September, 1922, he had already imported fifty thousand dollars' worth. A big campaign of advertising, with free lessons and exhibitions, pushed the game, and within the next year the Mah Jong craze had become so universal that Chinese makers of sets could no longer keep up with the demand and American manufacture was in full swing. By 1923, people who were beginning to take their radio sets for granted now simply left them turned on while they "broke the wall" and called "pung" or "chow" and wielded the Ming box and talked learnedly of

bamboos, flowers, seasons, South Wind, and Red Dragon. The wealthy bought five-hundred-dollar sets; dozens of manufacturers leaped into the business; a Mah Jong League of America was formed; there was fierce debate as to what rules to play by, what system of scoring to use, and what constituted a "limit hand"; and the correct dinner party wound up with every one setting up ivory and bamboo tiles on green baize tables.

Even before Mah Jong reached its climax, however, Emil Coué had arrived in America, preceded by an efficient ballyhoo; in the early months of 1923 the little dried-up Frenchman from Nancy was suddenly the most-talked-of person in the country. Coué Institutes were established, and audiences who thronged to hear the master speak were hushed into awesome quiet as he repeated, himself, the formula which was already on everybody's lips: "Day by day in every way I am getting better and better." A few weeks later there was a new national thrill as the news of the finding of the tomb of King Tut-Ankh-Amen, cabled all the way from Egypt, overshadowed the news of the Radical trials and Ku-Klux Klan scandals, and dress manufacturers began to plan for a season of Egyptian styles. Finally, the country presently found still a new obsession—in the form of a song: a phrase picked up from an Italian fruit-vender and used some time before this as a "gag-line" by Tad Dorgan, the cartoonist, was worked into verse, put to music which drew liberally from the "Hallelujah Chorus" and "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls" and "Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party," was tried out in a Long Island roadhouse, and then was brought to New York, where it quickly superseded "Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean" in popular acclaim. Before long "Yes, We Have No Bananas" had penetrated to the remotest farmhouse in the remotest county.

Though the super-patriots still raged and federal agents

still pursued the nimble Communists and an avowed Socialist was still regarded with as much enthusiasm as a leper, and the Ku-Klux Klan still grew, the Big Red Scare was dying. There were too many other things to think about.

Perhaps, though, there was still another reason for the passing of the Red Menace. Another Menace was endangering the land—and one which could not possibly be attributed to the machinations of Moscow. The younger generation was on the rampage, as we shall presently see.

§ 5

Only one dispute, during the rest of the Post-war Decade, drew the old line of 1919 and 1920 between liberal and conservative throughout the nation.

At the height of the Big Red Scare—in April, 1920—there had taken place at South Braintree, Massachusetts, a crime so unimportant that it was not even mentioned in the *New York Times* of the following day—or, for that matter, of the whole following year. It was the sort of crime which was taking place constantly all over the country. A paymaster and his guard, carrying two boxes containing the pay-roll of a shoe factory, were killed by two men with pistols, who thereupon leaped into an automobile which drew up at the curb, and drove away across the railroad tracks. Two weeks later a couple of Italian radicals were arrested as the murderers, and a year later—at about the time when the Washington bathing beauties were straightening their long stockings to be photographed and David Sarnoff was supervising the reporting of the Dempsey-Carpentier fight by “wireless telephone”—the Italians were tried before Judge Webster Thayer and a jury and found guilty. The trial attracted a little attention, but not much. A few months later, however, people from Maine to California began to ask what this

Sacco-Vanzetti case was all about. For a very remarkable thing had happened.

Three men in a bleak Boston office—a Spanish carpenter, a Jewish youth from New York, and an Italian newspaper man—had been writing industriously about the two Italians to the radicals and the radical press of France and Italy and Spain and other countries in Europe and Central and South America. The result: A bomb exploded in Ambassador Herrick's house in Paris. Twenty people were killed by another bomb in a Paris Sacco-Vanzetti demonstration. Crowds menaced the American Embassy in Rome. There was an attempt to bomb the home of the Consul-General at Lisbon. There was a general strike and an attempt to boycott American goods at Montevideo. The case was discussed in the radical press of Algiers, Porto Rico, and Mexico. Under the circumstances it could not very well help becoming a *cause célèbre* in the United States.

But bombings and boycotts, though they attracted attention to the case, could never have aroused widespread public sympathy for Sacco and Vanzetti. What aroused it, as the case dragged on year after year and one appeal after another was denied, was the demeanor of the men themselves. Vanzetti in particular was clearly a remarkable man—an intellectual of noble character, a philosophical anarchist of a type which it seemed impossible to associate with a pay-roll murder. New evidence made the guilt of the men seem still more doubtful. When, in 1927—seven long years after the murder—Judge Thayer stubbornly denied the last appeal and pronounced the sentence of death, public opinion forced Governor Fuller of Massachusetts to review the case and consider pardoning Sacco and Vanzetti. The Governor named as an advisory committee to make a further study of the case, President Lowell of Harvard, President Stratton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Judge

Robert Grant—all men respected by the community. A few weeks later the committee reported: they believed Sacco and Vanzetti to be guilty. There was no pardon. On the night of August 22, 1927, these two men who had gathered about their cause the hopes and fears of millions throughout the world were sent to the electric chair.

Whether they were actually guilty or not will probably never be definitely determined—though no one can read their speeches to the court and their letters without doubting if justice was done. The record of the case was of vast length and full of technicalities, it was discussed *ex-parte* by vehement propagandists on both sides, and the division of public opinion on the case was largely a division between those who thought radicals ought to be strung up on general principles and those who thought that the test of a country's civilization lay in the scrupulousness with which it protected the rights of minorities. The passions of the early days of the decade were revived as pickets marched before the Boston State House, calling on the Governor to release Sacco and Vanzetti, and the Boston police—whose strike not eight years before had put Calvin Coolidge in the White House which he now occupied—arrested the pickets and bore them off to the lock-up.

The bull market was now in full swing, the labor movement was enfeebled, prosperity had given radicalism what seemed to be its *coup de grâce*—but still the predicament of these two simple Italians had the power briefly to recall the days of Mitchell Palmer's Red raids and to arouse fears and hatreds long since quieted. People who had almost forgotten whether they were conservatives or liberals found themselves in bitter argument once more, and friendships were disrupted over the identification of Sacco's cap or the value of Captain Proctor's testimony about the fatal bullet. But only briefly. The headlines screamed that Sacco and Van-

zetti had been executed, and men read them with a shiver, and wondered, perhaps, if this thing which had been done with such awful finality were the just deserts of crime or a hideous mistake—and glanced at another column to find where Lindbergh was flying today, and whipped open the paper to the financial page. . . . What was General Motors doing?