

A Real Radical

By MARSHALL CRANE

ABOUT twenty years ago it was my great privilege to be a member of one of the craziest little groups of genial, jovial crackpots that ever lived. We talked. The Depression, just a couple of years old, was an ideal subject of discussion for amateur economists, sociologists, and statesmen, and Repeal had recently made available at a dime a glass a perfect lubricant for the vocal chords which was also an infallible source of inspiration. I doubt if even the New Deal cooked up as many, or as cockeyed, plans for saving mankind as we did. And certainly it didn't have as much fun.

I recall one get-together of these great minds particularly. We were all gathered around a table at our regular meeting place, and after the waiter had taken care of the opening exercises the debate was very warm. As I look back it seems to me that many men have languished in dungeons and salt-mines for expressing ideas which were less extreme than some that were voiced that evening.

But even the hottest firebrands burn low in time, and as the evening wore on the argument slowed down, and at last the forum fell silent. After a moment or two the oldest member stirred in his chair and chuckled. He had been listening, not talking, throughout the evening.

"All finished so soon?" he asked. "My, my! What'll the world do! Hm. All this talk 'minds me of one time when I was young, younger'n you boys." We settled ourselves to listen.

"It was one night after supper. I happened to drop in on the feller next door for somethin' or other. Maybe just a little conversation about nothin' in pertickler. Him and his wife was settin' in the kitchen when I breezed in. She got up and did the honors—told me how glad she was to see me, and commenced askin' me how everybody else in the community was. After a couple of minutes of this I noticed that Henry wasn't sayin' nothin'. Kind of unnatural for him. Usually he could talk your ear off.

"What's wrong with the old man?" I asked her. "Don't he love me any more?"

"Oh, don't pay no mind to him," she says, laughin'. "He's got a headache, I reckon."

"I 'lowed he must have the mullygrubs somewhere, or he wouldn't have a headache."

"He'll be all right," she says. "We was settin' here, same as always, till about a half hour ago, when a moskeeter flew in somehow. Must be a hole in a screen someplace. Well, that danged insect kept singin' around and singin' around, out of sight or out of reach, fit to drive

a body crazy. Finally it got tired and lit on Henry's ear, and he hauled off and hit it a good one—smack! Killed the moskeeter deader'n pork, but he nigh to knocked himself out too. When he stopped cussin', I told him the pesky thing never would of got in in the first place if he'd make a top for the rain barrel, like I ast him, two weeks ago. He's been mad at me ever since."

"Well, boys," continued the old man, "it just occurred to me that if a lots of folks would quit gabbin' about public works programs, and unemployment policies, and social insurance, and government ownership, and planned economies, and all the other crazy ideas for swattin' the moskeeter, and just give a little thought to putting' a cover on the rain barrel, why, we might begin to get some place in this country."