XX

Battle of Pitcairn Island

IN DECEMBER of 1936 a Gloucester fishing schooner, the *Yankee,* dropped anchor at lonely Pitcairn Island in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. Among those who debarked for a visit was Alan Eurich, radio operator of the New England fishing vessel.

Eurich was chiefly interested in visiting Andrew Young, who ran the island's tiny one-man radio station. The American radio operator had been in communication with Young, who was a direct descendant of the Edward Young who had deserted with the mutinous crew in the famous sea chronicle.

Young's was probably the most primitive "official" radio station in the world. He kept in touch with the outside world by means of equipment, long since outmoded, that the British Marconi Company sent him in 1930. They also sent him information on the use of the equipment and a Morse code guide-book.

Eurich was fascinated by what he saw in the dimly lighted shack where Young sat signaling to ships that passed within a thousand miles of the island. Often the signal was a prelude to a conversation with a passing vessel in which the Pitcairn operator, on behalf of the islanders, offered to trade rare fruits for clothing and foodstuffs. Sometimes Young would not particularize and on behalf of his associates would ask the radio operator of a ship with which he had established contact to request the captain to name the "necessities" he was willing to trade for those exotic fruits found only in a few other places in the world, and for Pitcairn curios and mementos.

Of course there was no electricity on the island and Young operated his radio unit by means of a gasoline-driven power-

generator. Naturally there was also no gasoline on the island, and for several years the Pitcairn Islander nursed along a huge supply—huge at least in terms of the amount needed to keep so small a radio operation functioning—that the British Marconi Company shipped him when they originally sent him his radio equipment.

After a few years Young's gasoline supply started running low, and he appealed for more by radio. His appeal was heeded when it was arranged some months later to have a freighter put in at the little island that had been visited by so few ships in its entire history. While in communication with the radio operator of a passing ship, regarding his gasoline problem Young learned all about dry storage batteries and arranged to have a supply of these sent him on the same vessel that was carrying his gasoline.

Once again when Young's gasoline had run low and his batteries needed recharging he kept going as a result of a wholly unanticipated stroke of luck. The organizers of a transpacific seaplane flight looked at the map and decided it would be a good idea to use Pitcairn as a stopping-off place. It would lend color to the enterprise, they thought, and be helpful in a publicity way. The Nordhoff and Hall novel *Mutiny on the Bounty* was a worldwide best-seller (the movie had not yet been produced) and Pitcairn Island had captured the popular imagination.

I don't know what route the backers of this flight had planned, but evidently they felt Pitcairn would also be valuable as a base and, consequently, they shipped a big supply of gasoline to the island. Later, when the flight was called off, Young inherited the flyers' supply of fuel, which kept him going for a long time.

When this supply dwindled, Young returned to his batteries and sent an appeal for more gasoline. None was forthcoming after a series of appeals covering many months and he hit upon the idea of appealing for new batteries. When this elicited no response, he got in communication with a ship bound for New Zealand and was persuasive enough—(he asked

the captain to communicate with the British Marconi Company before turning him down)—to get the ship's master to stop off and pick up his batteries, have them recharged and return them to the island. In all this entailed a journey of 3800 miles.

It was a great day when the ship bearing the batteries was sighted and islanders rowed out in boats laden with fruits and curios which was the only compensation they could offer. Contact with the outer world had now become a habit and they were always ready to reward richly—according to their way of thinking—anyone that helped them maintain their only means of swift communication.

Sometimes they had a chance to put letters on ships, but these occasions were few and far between, and there was no telling how many months would elapse before these letters would reach their destination. One such letter was seven months in transit, and the reply was not delivered until ten months later when the recipient was able to locate a ship that would stop at Pitcairn Island "some time within the next year if convenient."

This gave me a graphic picture of what it must mean to be isolated on a tiny island in the middle of the South Pacific that was almost as effectually removed from the ways of modern life as the dwellers, if any, on some planet whose distance from the earth is casually measured by those nonchalant astronomers in terms of millions of miles. There is nothing tragic in their remoteness from so-called "civilization," but, as I thought more than once, it must be tough when a good doctor could save a life and there is no way of summoning quick medical aid.

Alan Eurich was thrilled as he stood by and watched Andrew Young converse with the radio operators of ships that were three or four hundred miles away, and he was positively excited when Young let him put on his head-gear so that he could listen to a radio program that originated in a California station some 4500 miles away.

All this made a lasting impression on Eurich. To him An-

drew Young, seated at his old-fashioned transmitter and keeping Pitcairn Island in touch with the outside world, was one of the most picturesque and dramatic figures in radio.

When the *Yankee* returned to Gloucester, Eurich wrote the story of Andrew Young for *QST,* the radio-amateur magazine, which is the bible of so many "hams." It was an excellent job of reporting in which he told, among other things, how under the tutelage of Young, practically all of the two hundred inhabitants of the island had learned the Morse code as a convenient means of inter-island communication. He told how Young had read about flashlights in a magazine someone had sent him and how he had acquired a supply of them in return for a boatload of Pitcairn fruits, and how stirring it was at night to look around and see dwellers in different parts of the island expertly signaling each other by means of these little pocket electric lights.

Without trying to make a heroic figure of Young and merely by recording the quiet little drama as he saw it, Eurich had succeeded in writing one of those minor masterpieces of simplicity that the reader finds unforgettable. To him Pitcairn Island's call letters—PITC—had become the symbol of radio as a romantic adventure and in effect he said so.

Perhaps because there was no striving for that quality of "punch" that editors so frequently scream for, the article in *QST,* which almost succeeded in making a character of the antiquated equipment for which Young seemed to have the same feeling that an equestrian has for a favorite mount, packed an unmistakable wallop. It attracted much attention and resulted in a good deal of laudatory discussion among hams (some of whom made a point of telling one another about it by radio).

In Providence, R. I., Lewis Bellem, Jr., a radio engineer who was an active ham on the side, read Alan Eurich's article and got an idea. He discussed it with a good friend, Granville P. Lindley, with whom he was associated in the manufacture of radio equipment. He felt sure that Lindley was the right type of man to approach, for you had to have

the love of far-away places in your make-up to appreciate this idea, and Lindley had served as chief electrician on one of Admiral Byrd's expeditions to the icy no man's land of the Antarctic.

When Lindley expressed his enthusiastic approval, he and Bellem decided to get busy and enlist the necessary support to put the idea in effect. Briefly, it consisted of appealing to American radio manufacturers for donations of the different parts needed to build a modern transmitter, which they then planned to present to Andrew Young and his fellow Pitcairn Islanders. This was to be the gift of American radiomen in appreciation of Young's feat in pulling his remote and almost mythical little speck in the Pacific into the sphere of radio communication by means of equipment that was almost primitive.

The two men—Bellem, who was chief engineer, and Lindley, who was chief electrician—decided to seek the aid of the head of the organization that employed them,—F. C. Henrikson, President of the Coto-Coil Company.

Henrikson quickly endorsed the idea, promised full co-operation and encouraged Bellem and Lindley to get their drive under way as soon as they found it convenient to do so. He directed them to help themselves to any of their own company's equipment that they needed and to devote as much time as was necessary to seeking the co-operation of the manufacturers of the other essential parts of the costly modern transmitter it was planned to present to Pitcairn Island.

The manufacturers of radio equipment, whose contribution of this or that special part was needed, responded to the call, and not long after Bellem first got his idea from Eurich's article the powerful up-to-the-minute transmitter, which was to supplant Young's obsolete equipment, was pledged.

Henrikson personally underwrote the trip to Pitcairn Island that Bellem and Lindley would have to make to see that the transmitter was properly installed and to instruct Young in its use. Arrangements were made for the two experts to sail on a Panama Pacific liner after the line agreed to stop the

ship at the Island to enable Bellem and Lindley to install the equipment and to pick them up on a stipulated date after they had done their job.

Early in January of 1938 Bellem and Lindley called at my office to tell me about their plan. The motion-picture version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* had just been released and had scored a big hit. Pitcairn Island was now known to millions of people, in addition to those who already knew about it, and the suggestion of the two technicians that we do some broadcasts from the island could not have been timelier.

We were glad to pay for these broadcasts, not only because they were a good investment, but for the additional reason that Lindley and Bellem were bound to run into unexpected expenses and the money we agreed to pay for the sustaining programs—plus the return from the sale of any of the broadcasts to a commercial sponsor—would help finance a worthy undertaking.

Arrangements whereby Lindley and Bellem would broadcast for us from Pitcairn were quickly concluded. It developed that, to be completely on the safe side, they would need some additional equipment, and this we donated after placing our research and engineering departments at their disposal and determining what would be best.

We were helping ourselves as well as the gift-transmitter project, for NBC in California would be able to conduct tests that would yield useful information about the specially constructed Pitcairn equipment and we would also have established a contact that would prove helpful if Pitcairn Island, directly or indirectly, figured in an important news story.

Memoranda in our Pitcairn files remind me of some amusing sidelights. Bellem, whose spare-time activities as a radio amateur are mentioned earlier, was carrying on a short-wave conversation one day with a brother ham. (With not many exceptions, radio engineers—including many whose professionalism is too much for me except when engineering problems of an elementary nature are discussed—are enthusiastic "amateurs.") Later that day Arthur Feldman, then of our Boston

news staff and now attached to News and Special Events in New York, sent me a wire informing me of a short-wave "two-way" he had just picked up about a forthcoming expedition to Pitcairn, and urged me to investigate and get in on it if it proved authentic.

The call letters of the person informing his brother ham that he was planning a trip to the remote little British possession, needless to say, proved to be Bellem's. When I told our Boston man that the Pitcairn expedition was all sewed up for NBC he was flabbergasted.

This little sidelight, by the way, typifies the alertness of our men in translating—or trying to translate—any promising information they receive into possible broadcasts.

In radio we find ourselves eternally looking into the future. We are no more forward-looking than most other industries, but ours changes even more rapidly than a majority of the others, so, with an eye to television, I made sure that Bellem and Lindley would bring back a movie record of their experience.

We seldom take anything for granted in radio. Where anything is involved that necessitates our securing governmental permission to make a broadcast possible we do not think of the program as an actuality until official consent has been secured. Somehow it never occurred to us that we would run into any official red tape in connection with broadcasting from Pitcairn Island.

In fact, I expected—naively, I now realize—that the British would do some diplomatic equivalent of planting a kiss on the combined Bellem-Lindley-NBC brow. Surely they would appreciate our efforts to assure dependable communication between the Empire and its least accessible outpost by means of modern equipment that would supplant the technological jalopy, still referred to as a transmitter, by means of which Great Britain occasionally went through the motions of determining that Pitcairn Island had not been washed into the Pacific.

Since it was not difficult to see the hand of officialdom in

the British Marconi Company's original presentation of the equipment that brought the call letters PITC into the radio world, we could be pardoned for thinking that superior equipment would be welcomed. No such luck. The minute you try to give something to Great Britain you are under suspicion,—sometimes under even worse suspicion than if you try to *take* something from Great Britain. The British feel that the fellow who has tried to take something from them has at least declared himself. His motives are known. But the blighters who are trying to *give* something—what are *they* up to?

The burning question now, therefore, was: what are Lindley, Bellem and NBC up to? Were we participants in an anti-British plot who were using this transmitter as an excuse to spy on Pitcairn Island and learn the secrets of its defenses? Were we diagramming and charting and mapping the place? Whence this sudden interest in Pitcairn Island and its lowly inhabitants? What, to repeat, were we up to? Declare yourselves, Messrs. Lindley and Bellem and Schechter. Don't hold anything back! For Scotland Yard will get you if you don't watch out.

I love tea, English muffins, Shakespeare, London bobbies, *The Mikado,* Bass' Ale, the odes of Keats and Shelley, Worcestershire sauce, Mr. Pickwick, Guinness' Stout, *Pinafore,* Rupert Brooke, fish and chips, *The Pirates of Penzance,* A. E. Housman, Beatrice Lillie, roast beef at Simpson's, Byron, *Iolanthe,* Mr. Micawber and the thousands of distillers whose "by special appointment to His Majesty the King" I have seen heralded on practically every scotch bottle-label I have ever read, but—and this is a big "but"—I hate red tape, especially the British variety with its annoying smugness.

Perhaps the tense should be changed. It would be more appropriate to say, How those British could annoy me in the days when they went in for red tape! For since the outbreak of the Second World War most British red tape has disappeared and the British are easy to deal with.

In fact, one of the few things on the asset side of the war

ledger I can think of is the virtual disappearance of official British stuffiness. There are still restrictions, but most of these are the ordinary precautions of a nation in a grim fight for survival and cannot be classified as red tape.

I casually radioed Fred Bate, our London representative, to see that the proper officials instructed R. E. Christian, Chief Magistrate of Pitcairn Island, to approve the installation of the new radio transmitter. Despite all my experience with British red tape I did not expect any difficulty.

If the British had wanted to give away Pitcairn I doubt if there would have been any takers. In fact, the new transmitter would make the little Pacific outpost worth owning, so I momentarily expected a reply informing me that Bellem, Lindley and I would one day be enshrined as Empire saints and would we be good enough to stipulate the window in Westminster Abbey on which we wanted our likenesses reproduced.

It developed that we had not made our purpose sufficiently clear, so we defined it all over again for the benefit of the British Colonial authorities. We told them how the plan for presenting the transmitter had originated, how that had led to the plan for broadcasting, etc., etc.

It developed that the proper procedure—it sounded a bit Gilbertian but who are we to ignore advice from the right sources?—was to describe for the benefit of the proper officials in London our "plans and purposes," with plenty of information about Bellem and Lindley and "those behind them," after which we were to request the Colonial office to request the Western Pacific High Commissioner at Suva, Fiji, to request someone else to grant station PITC a new frequency and new call letters which would make it possible for us to contact Bellem and Lindley from an NBC California station.

A few pages back I mentioned that usually we took nothing for granted. We had in this case, for Bellem and Lindley had reached Pitcairn Island when we were still trying to unravel the official red tape that had been wound around this venture until it was like a leg in a well-wrapped spiral puttee.

There was much cabling back and forth. We kept firing messages at the High Commissioner in Fiji and the Colonial Secretary in London and getting inconclusive replies. Hams were listening in on our conversations with our London office and, in an effort to be helpful, were relaying all sorts of messages that merely added to the general confusion.

We finally got word from the British Consulate that the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific Islands had granted "a temporary provisional license" permitting Andrew Young to operate the new equipment. One of the "provisions" was that the apparatus was to be presented not to the man Bellem and Lindley had set out to honor, but to the British Government.

There were many other conditions and stipulations, including one to the effect that communication with passing vessels would be restricted to "matters of interest to the island," whatever that meant. This applied not only to messages from Pitcairn Island to ships but from ships to the island, meaning that to live up to the requirements of the "provisions," Andrew Young would have to know before taking a message whether it involved "a matter of interest to the island." This, of course, added mind-reading to the qualifications necessary for a radio operator.

It was all a mess, though naturally any protest I made would be confined to the silly regulations affecting broadcasts. Bellem and Lindley were the donors of the transmitter and any protests about the equipment going to the British Government instead of to Andrew Young would have to come from them.

I telephoned the British Colonial office in London and said some undignified things to the first person I could reach who knew what it was all about. What I said was nasty and to the point. I've never straightened out a tangled foreign red-tape situation except by the use of well-chosen verbal brickbats.

Diplomacy is a long-winded ineffectual business at best, and at so many dollars per minute on the transoceanic tele-

phone, it runs into money. It's much simpler to reserve diplomacy for inexpensive local calls.

Brashness finally got results in my battle to put Pitcairn on the air. The decision of the High Commissioner was amended to read: "In view of the circumstances of this whole expedition, as a special concession, the Chief Magistrate at Pitcairn Island has been empowered to approve three short-wave broadcasts of not more than ten minutes each, to be confined strictly to non-political subjects, with no reference whatsoever to matters of government or administration."

This enabled us to go ahead, and we made our announcement of the forthcoming broadcasts from the island. The response from the public was gratifying. Here are some highlights indicative of the public's interest, as taken from our mail-response records:

1. There were 846 letters from stamp collectors requesting us to have Bellem and Lindley send them letters from the island. A word of greeting on a sheet of paper would be sufficient, or, if they didn't have the time, they could simply mail a blank sheet of paper in an envelope. Stamp collectors are evidently accustomed to paying their way, for each letter contained money, which we returned, of course. If we ever fall for the soft impeachments of the persuasive stamp collector we will have set a precedent and will have to start a Philatelic Division. But these people were interested in what we were doing and that was reassuring.

2. There were 417 letters from people who belonged to Pitcairn Island clubs. A small percentage of these knew people on the island and wanted to converse with them when we established the two-way broadcasting we announced as a feature of our programs from the island.

One of these letters was from the mayor of a town in the Southwest who said in part:

"I have been representing a small group of Pitcairn Islanders, in the United States, for more than twenty years,"

he wrote. "I keep in communication with them by mail, although this is not very satisfactory because there are no regular schedules to the island. I also occasionally receive a wireless message via passing steamers and amateur stations; and once in a while I get a wireless message through to them.

"When communication is opened I should like to have a few minutes on one of your programs, if this can be arranged."

Judging from the rest of the letter this man actually knew people on the island, but for several reasons we were unable to accommodate him.

3. There were thirty-seven letters from hams claiming we had made mistakes in our announcements over the air and in the newspapers about the forthcoming broadcasts from Pitcairn Island. Most of these pointed out what they declared to be technical errors in our description of the obsolete transmitter used for years by Andrew Young. Four of our critics claimed to have been in communication with him at one time or another—(one, a former ship's wireless operator, said he had talked with Young via short-wave from his ship when it was passing the island)—and insisted that their knowledge of the Pitcairn operator's equipment was based on questions they had asked him about it.

4. There were 1,003 letters from people who said that since we had been unable to give the exact dates of the broadcasts they feared they might miss them. What they had read and heard about Pitcairn Island had fascinated them and they didn't want to run the risk of missing these broadcasts. Would we be good enough to notify them of the exact dates when they were fixed?

5. And finally there were sixty-two letters requesting that we put some specific resident of Pitcairn on our programs from the island when we got around to organizing them. One of the most interesting of these letters follows:

83 Ivy Street
Brookline, Mass.
February 12, 1938

NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY,
Radio City, New York, N. Y.

GENTLEMEN:—

I understand that you have sent, or are sending, men to Pitcairn Island, to set up a broadcasting station there and plan to send out interviews with people on the island; and I am writing to tell you how greatly interested I am in this proposed program.

It has so happened that I have had a lifelong interest in Pitcairn Island, and have corresponded for many years with one of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers living there. When I was a small boy an aunt of mine, Mrs. Adelia Talpey, whose husband was a sea-captain, visited the island with her husband on two of his voyages; and on one of these visits a baby girl by the name of McCoy,—a descendant of the mutineer of that name,—was baptized and named for my aunt. As the baby grew up a correspondence was carried on between them till my aunt's death; after which it was for many years kept up by my mother, and afterwards by other members of my family. This namesake of my aunt's is now Mrs. Edgar Christian, having married a descendant of Fletcher Christian, the leader of the mutiny, and usually goes by the name of Ada in the island, instead of by my aunt's name, Adelia.

The scores of letters that I and other members of my family have received from her show her to be an unusually intelligent person, and considering the limited opportunities she has had, a remarkably well educated one, whose acquaintance anyone might consider an honor; and it is largely with the object of trying to induce you to include her among those whose interviews you broadcast that I am writing you now.

However, I feel sure that I would not be the only one who would be interested to hear her speak, as I know of several other persons who have corresponded

with her,—some of them through introductions of my own. She also has, if I am not mistaken, a sister who is at present a schoolteacher living in Connecticut, and who would of course be interested in hearing her speak. In addition to this there are, I feel sure, quite a large number of people who would recognize her name from having seen it in an article written by Dorothy Brandon and published in *Maclean's Magazine* of January 1, 1935. Miss Brandon was one of the passengers on the schooner *Yankee* on one of the voyages when a stop was made at Pitcairn Island, and in her account of her visit she says:—

"It fell to my lot to be the guest of Ada and Edgar Christian;—pillars of the community and direct descendants of McCoy and Fletcher of *Bounty* fame. I was asked to call them by their given names, because there are so few surnames on the island; so Ada and Edgar they were from the start.

"Ada, a woman about fifty years old, had one of the calmest faces I had ever seen. She had a gentle, refined manner, and though her advantages had been very limited, I found her to be a lady in every sense of the word. She never raised her voice once during my visit; she executed her domestic duties with the greatest of ease and her every thought was for my comfort. In Ada Christian I felt that I had made a real friend, though in all probability I shall never see her again."

Trusting that you will find it possible to give us an opportunity to hear Mrs. Christian's voice over the radio, and wishing you every succcess in your enterprising venture, I am

Very cordially yours,

DEXTER CARLETON WASHBURN.

There was great excitement among the islanders as Bellem and Lindley, arriving at Pitcairn, supervised the ferrying of their heavy equipment from the Panama Pacific liner to the island by means of small boats.

Andrew Young, who seldom left the little shanty that became known to the radio world as Station PITC, was on

shore to greet them and to express his appreciation of the recognition his efforts were receiving.

Assembling the new transmitter was a complicated engineering job that would take about three weeks, so we did not expect to hear from Bellem and Lindley for at least that length of time. When it was assembled we would conduct a series of tests to determine at which hour we could get the best transmission. Our tests satisfactorily concluded, we would stage the first of the broadcasts from the island.

It developed, by the way, that the late Richard Edgar Christian, Chief Magistrate of the Island, and a direct descendant of Fletcher Christian, was both happy and unhappy about the plan for the broadcasts. The erection of the transmitter was almost completed and still he had received no official word authorizing these broadcasts.

We had received our okay but Christian's was slow in coming. Oddly enough, when it finally came it was not transmitted by the official British Government wireless. It came through shortly after Bellem and Lindley had completed their job of assembling the new transmitter and was received over it by short-wave from the British Consul in New York. A couple of amateurs assisted in relaying it through to Bellem, who was operating the Pitcairn Island transmitter until Andrew Young became thoroughly acquainted with it. Thus one of my most exasperating red-tape experiences wound up on an unorthodox note.

Young, by the way, was rendered speechless by the powerful new equipment. He had read about such transmitters in radio magazines but not in his wildest dreams had he ever hoped to operate one. Despite his enthusiasm over the new equipment, however, he seemed a little sad about discarding the primitive transmitter that he seemed to regard as a pal. He kept it around quite a while where he could look at it.

After all the officials had been satisfied and all the necessary authorizations given, I got busy working out the kind of program I wanted for the first broadcast. We were all set technically, for Bellem and Lindley, clever engineers, had

done a fine job of assembling and testing the new transmitter. They would need all the help I could give them in connection with the actual broadcasts, for, after all, program-building was something new to them.

They were most co-operative in helping me put together the kind of program I wanted, which called for native singers, native music,—(an odd combination of what they had heard and improvised)—and brief talks by the Chief Magistrate, Radio Operator Young, and the two engineers themselves. The speechifying was to be informal, with emphasis on certain human-interest values which I defined. There was to be a strict minimum of such stultifying platitudes as "on this historic occasion," "this red-letter day in radio annals," "a landmark to which future chroniclers of radio will give due recognition," etc. Radio audiences have suffered through too much of that tripe.

Our first broadcast took place on the night of April 6, 1938, and was a success.

We went to work on a second program in which we planned to feature Vreder Carlton Young, then the oldest living descendant of the original *Bounty* mutineers. At eighty-nine this oldster, reputed to be the most colorful story-teller on the island, was in good health, and we planned to give him a five-minute spot if it developed that his voice was good enough. The old boy was said to possess an infectious gusto that made his fair to middling stories seem good and his good stories great.

We mentioned the Pitcairn octogenarian in an announcement of our forthcoming second broadcast from the island. The announcement caught the eye of Bob Ripley of *Believe It or Not* fame, and Bob put in a bid for Vreder Carlton Young as a feature of one of his broadcasts. Somehow the old man got lost in the shuffle—(my records do not show how this happened or why)—but Ripley wanted a Pitcairn Island program just the same and we finally consummated the arrangements, after taking the matter up with Bellem and Lindley and getting their approval.

Ripley's show was a commercial program and the sponsors (from whom Bellem and Lindley would derive their compensation for this particular program) insisted on a rehearsal. Poor Bellem nearly went crazy finding the type of material Ripley wanted and then taking down, word for word, the six-and-one-half-minute talk based on his material that was prepared in New York by the script-writer for the *Believe It or Not* program. This talk he was to deliver himself.

It is safe to say that the try-out of Bellem's talk broke all records for long-distance rehearsing for a radio appearance. The rehearsal went off well and the Ripley show featuring Bellem's talk from Pitcairn Island was scheduled for April 26. The engineer did a first-rate job and stirred up a lot of enthusiastic comment in radio circles.

The only criticism we had of the program involved the unnaturalness of Bellem's repeating the phrase "believe it or not" as frequently as Bob Ripley wanted it used. The script-writer, overpowered by the romantic hocus-pocus of the occasion, outdid himself in the use of lyrical passages and never was glamour made to seem more glamourous or nostalgia more nostalgic. Writers of poetic travel leaflets who thought they had cornered the market in terminology heavy with the fragrance of the heavenly blooms of far-away Garden Spots must have turned green—and all the other colors in the spectrum—with envy.

Here is a passage from this splendid prose poem that made such an emphatic hit:

> . . . The Southern Cross has taken its place in the heavens to watch over this South Sea Island paradise. Soon the moon steals over St. Paul's Peak, to silhouette pandanus "palms" and majestic coconut trees against the sky of cold, silvery radiance, and from one of the island homes amid such a setting of tropical splendor comes the music of an antiquated phonograph, reproducing the strains of some almost forgotten melody. Truly the music breaks the island stillness, as if wafted on the exotic aroma of the countless blooms of the

frangipani trees. And so too ends the day for the stranger so fortunate as to be accorded the privilege of tarrying amid the grandeur of rock-bound Pitcairn. And with these few remarks, Bob, let's get on with the show.

I am sure if our positions were reversed, and you were here, you could uncover no end of unusual oddities in this unique community. Believe it or not, I am grateful that the opportunity did not come to you first. One's first impression of Pitcairn concerns the type and construction of all the island homes. Setting on innumerable stilts of knotty timber, their rough-hewn unpainted appearance attracts more than passing attention. Inquiry brings out the fact that each house is fabricated from native trees, felled on the mountainside.

These are dragged down to the village, placed on high racks, and ripped into rough boards with huge pith-saws. Believe it or not, etc.

No "color" broadcast within my memory had elicited a finer response, believe it or not. It was gratifying—because it showed that this was no mere long-distance stunt—to learn from the letter response that the general public was as enthusiastic as the hams everywhere who now eagerly followed everything that involved Pitcairn. And when you can score simultaneously with the average listener and a specialist like the radio amateur, you've got something, believe it or not. At least that's what my hypercritical associates tell me, b.i. or n.

On April 29th we put on the last of the three broadcasts from the island that we were permitted under our agreement with the British Government. It was a great farewell party, featured by Bellam's presentation of the transmitter. This was not repetition, either, as I recall the matter. The first time he gave it to the islanders; this time he gave it to the British Government.

It was a wonderful leave-taking,—sentimental, tearful, human. Bellem and Lindley had gone over big, and the

islanders were cut up over their impending departure. Some of the natives actually wept, so it was only natural that some real emotion got into the broadcast,—and that never hurt a program. Radio audiences get plenty of stage tears in soap operas; they seldom hear anything like the good cry several of the islanders had for themselves as they said goodbye over the air-waves to their benefactors.

We expected this to be our last broadcast from Pitcairn for a long time, but a strange set of circumstances contrived to put the island back in the headlines in July of the same year. A story was headlined all over the United States—and picked up by the press in many foreign countries, for lonely little Pitcairn's fame was now worldwide—telling of a typhoid epidemic on the island.

No one seems to know for sure how the story got out. Some newspaper people trace it to reports picked up and relayed by radio amateurs. Those who advanced this theory seemed at a loss to know where the hams—whose reports are reliable more frequently than not—got their information. But the fact remains that the British Government quickly spiked the story. They had investigated the report, they announced, and had discovered it to be wholly without foundation.

Some thought the British were covering up. But the British, with characteristic forthrightness—a virtue more important than red-tape is a vice—repeated their denial, pointing out they were compelled to do this to discourage those who were talking about organizing a committee to send a rescue ship which would carry doctors, nurses, medical supplies and food to the "stricken." They would not and could not permit well-meaning people to spend money on a mission of mercy designed to fight a non-existent epidemic.

Regardless of the facts, Pitcairn was once more in the news in a big way and I again applied to the British Government's Western Pacific High Commissioner for permission to do a broadcast from the island. I pointed out that the best way to kill the false reports would be to interview Andrew Young, have him discuss the "epidemic" (about which he undoubt-

edly knew by now as a result of the many times it had figured in news broadcasts), and, if possible, explain the origin of this queer scare story.

The British liked my suggestion and promptly authorized me to go ahead. In London the papers were still featuring the story of the epidemic, with all the trimmings that had got into American papers and news broadcasts, including ours: food shortage, no medical supplies, etc. So the British also okayed my suggestion that we short-wave the program to London for rebroadcast in England.

Mrs. Dorothy Hall of Springfield, Long Island, for years one of the country's leading radio amateurs, had been in constant communication with Andrew Young for weeks prior to the epidemic story. It struck me that novelty would be added to the basic news value of the story if we staged a conversation between Mrs. Hall and Andrew Young, rebroadcasting this "two-way" on a coast-to-coast hook-up.

Young got his permission to go on the air for us simultaneously with the receipt of our authorizations to stage the broadcast. Mrs. Hall graciously agreed to let us set up facilities for doing the relay from the radio room of her residence, so we were all set.

The broadcast took place on July 27, 1938, and despite interference and the indistinctness of Young's replies to Mrs. Hall's questions in the opening minutes, the program had dramatic value and what is known in the trade as "listener interest."

I can cite programs of ours that were flops because of interference or fuzziness. In this case, fortuitously, our efforts early in the broadcast to elicit information merely lent suspense. Not till we reached the two-thirds mark did we get definite assurances from Young that there was no epidemic on the island. In fact, a friend joshingly accused me of deliberately holding up Young's denial until the end. "You operated," he said, "on the ancient principle of the acrobat who heightens the effect of a difficult stunt by first failing twice."

Young finally got through to us with a good informal

report on health conditions on the island. There had been only one recent case of illness on the island,—a girl who was recuperating from bronchitis. She had seemed so ill when she first took to her bed that they were worried about her. She acted suspiciously like someone else who had come down with a bad case of pneumonia. A ship was passing fairly close to the island and Chief Magistrate Christian had ordered the radio operator to appeal to the ship's captain to stop at Pitcairn and put off the ship's doctor.

The message was sent and the captain of the passing vessel agreed to put in at the island. The ship's doctor was picked up by Pitcairn oarsmen who rowed him to shore and rushed him to the patient's side.

"Bronchitis," the doctor had said, "she'll be all right in three weeks if you watch her carefully." He left some medicine and returned to his ship.

Soon after the doctor's departure the rumors of the typhoid epidemic started.

Who started them? No one knows. It's still a mystery.

Be that as it may, radio performed a service by putting the final quietus on the false reports.