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Listening While I Work (13)

By "Materfamilias"

IT looks as if dramatised biography has become part of the bony structure of our radio entertainment. We have *Women of Courage* (ZB), *The March of Science* (ZB), *Fighters for Freedom* (an NBS production, which may be heard from National and Commercial stations), *The American Challenge*; and so on. I cannot claim to have listened regularly to all of these—each week's programme is self-contained—but I have listened to a number, and on the whole, they tend to follow the same sort of pattern. Listening, I have asked myself all sorts of questions. These programmes are a little more than pure entertainment. They purport also to be unobtrusively educative, and they are often propagandist as well. Is this the sort of education that we want to listen to, and want our children to listen to? How far is it honest? Is it good history? Or good art?

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LET me take, for example, a programme that I heard last week in the *March of Science* series: "Madame Curie and Radium." When I listen to

a programme about someone whom I know very little about I may say "How interesting." When I listen to one about someone that I know something about I am disgusted at the inadequacy of the presentation. Madame Curie is a good example of what I mean, as her biography by her daughter must be well known to many listeners. But the programme ran something like this: We get a picture first of the young Polish girl arriving in Paris. She starts on her physics course, then meets Pierre Curie. She arouses surprise that a girl should be doing such a masculine subject as physics. Pierre falls in love with Marie and expresses himself in the most banal Hollywood jargon: "You're beautiful" (I breathed a sigh of relief that we were spared "You're wonderful"), and Marie having replied in appropriate terms, they set out to make their discoveries. Marie, by turning her charms on a professor, manages to get a shed to work in but no pitchblend from which to extract the new suspected element. She has the bright idea of buying pitchblend residue. No results. Things are back where they were, when in walks the owner of the uranium mines, who kindly offers her all the tons of pure pitchblend that she wants. "Now we will discover radium," (or something like that), say Marie and Pierre, a remark which reminded me of the man who galloped into the village and cried "To arms! The seven years war has begun!" And so radium was discovered . . . the greatest, etc., etc.

Reading the biography of Madame Curie by her daughter I get a different picture, and I feel that this sort of crude assembling of a few facts strung together with a little modern dialogue just isn't good enough. There is plenty in Marie Curie's life to make a vivid, romantic, fascinating story. Must all Pierre's admiration for a fine mind and intellect and spirit be expressed in Hollywood banalities? And for "human interest" surely Marie's struggles with housekeeping, with cleaning, rearing babies, and cooking, as well as with making ends meet while she does her research work, are as moving as any part of her life. Of Pierre's longing for a laboratory in which to work—the incident, for instance, when his name was suggested for the Legion of Honour and Pierre's reply: "Please be so kind as to thank the Minister, and to inform him that I do not feel the slightest need of being decorated, but that I am in the greatest need of a laboratory." Or again the decision made without the slightest hesitation not to take out a patent for the process of extracting radium, which would have enabled them to live in comfort, or at least have the laboratory and equipment which they needed so desperately to carry on their work. There is endless material for a fascinating talk, or, if you must have it dramatised, for a play.

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"WELL," you may say, "does it matter?" All history as it is written is more or less synthetic. You never get the real thing, but only a construction of it, or an interpretation. So why worry?" Well, I suppose we might say the same if we were given synthetic food to eat. So long as it looked like the real stuff and tasted something the same. But the more like real food it was the more harm it might do. And undernourishing leads to sickness. It may even ruin ability to digest real food. Radio has to overcome the

(continued on next page)

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