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## Listening While I Work (16)

By "Matertamilias"

SUNDAY evening, and we were sitting around at a friend's house, a fairly representative group of women from suburbia—an American, an Englishwoman, a psychologist, and one or two plain New Zealanders. "Nine-fifteen! Let's listen to the American War Department's programme," said the American.

"Whatever for?" asked the Englishwoman.

"I never miss them if I can help it," said the American.

"I've tried," said the Englishwoman, "but I must confess that I fail to find them in the least amusing. I cannot understand what they are about, and if I have the jokes explained to me afterwards they still seem to me extremely weak. And the singing just hurts my ears. Still, turn it on and I'll try again. Perhaps if I see you all laughing I may find a joke somewhere."

"Sure. Jokes that have to be explained aren't funny. Well, here goes—Fibber McGee and Molly, not so good as Bob Hope or Jack Benny, but still funny. I

must say I miss a good many jokes myself, but then that's because I can't help watching my husband. He just *cries* with laughter, and that's even funnier than the show"

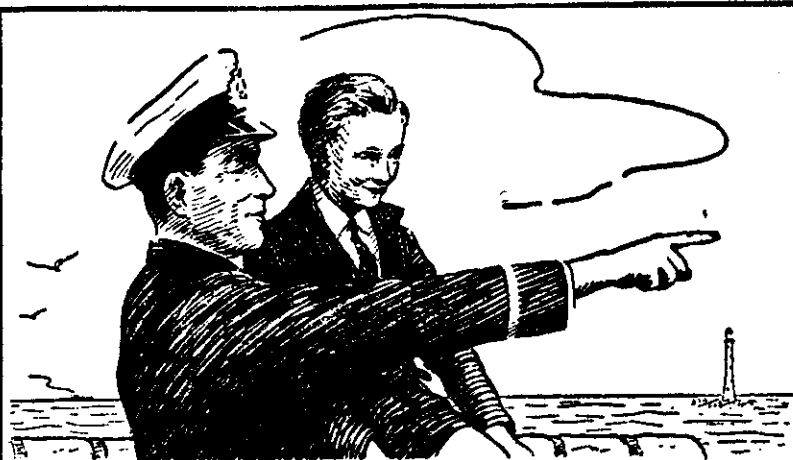
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THERE you have two attitudes toward

American light entertainment, and they are probably fairly general. Either you like it and look forward to it as the laugh of the week, or else you can't see anything funny in it and think the singing an abomination. How many of each variety of listeners there are, it is impossible to say. Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Jack Benny and other Hollywood stars are the more familiar and more popular. But the Fibber McGees have very big audiences too. What is their charm? In this episode Molly McGee had decided to take a "roomer" as part of her war effort to ease the congestion in the town, which was filled with war-workers. The whole entertainment turns on just this: preparing the room and waiting for the new boarder and the climax when he turns out to be a she. Nothing much to split your sides in that, and the wisecracks were not so bright either. Why should thousands of New Zealanders and tens of thousands of Americans listen in to it?

\* \* \*

OUR psychologist friend supplied an answer and I think it was the right one. Fibber McGee and Molly represent to a large extent the great American public or, if you like, the great New Zealand public; not all of it, but a lot. They are the man and woman in the street and at home. They are the clerks and the secretaries and the shopkeepers and the mechanics; the people with limited incomes; respectable and comfortable. They like the things that the man in the street likes—pictures, races, holidays. They have the same little crises over simple everyday things, such as cooking, breakfast in bed, relatives coming to stay—or taking in a lodger. Their foibles and follies, exaggerated of course, are the quintessence of the foibles and follies of their listeners. When Fibber McGee suggests that everything in the roomer's room is ready except that they must turn down the Pullman label on the pillowslip, all the listeners who have ever purloined spoons and pillowslips or cups or anything else, and who don't like to be caught in their petty pilfering, can enjoy the joke. Or when Molly explains that the curious bit of furniture is a tie-rack, that Fibber started it at manual training as a bookshelf but gradually whittled it down to a tie-rack, she is reproducing in exaggerated form a situation that is familiar to most small-town, small-income households where there is home carpentry. And because the laughter of Fibber and Molly is the laughter of a whole social group at itself, it is healthier and better laughter than the laughter provoked by such English comedians as Gert and Daisy. Generally speaking, it is not the Gerts and Daisys of the world who laugh at Gert and Daisy: it is the readers of *Punch* who enjoy them most, and there is a trace of condescension in the laughter. Still, although I approve the principle of laughing at myself and at my husband, and at my environment, I regret that the programmes are in American idiom. I should be sorry to see too wholesale an adoption of American terms even if it increases our appreciation of American humour. And I hope that no New Zealand little girl will ever speak like "Sis."



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