

A Plunket Nurse, Two Troupers And A Baby

How Arthur Hemsley, Comedian, Last Toured New Zealand



LAST week's "Radio Record" hadn't been off the press more than an hour or so when Fred Keeley, publicity manager for R.K.O. (Radio) Films, in Wellington, rang to say that Arthur Hemsley, the English comedian, was a brother of Harry Hemsley, the famous child impersonator. Which promptly settled a point about which the "Radio Record" was curious. Fred Keeley, way back in the music hall days of Brull and Hemsley in England, played on the same bill. So when a "Radio Record" representative discovered Arthur Hemsley in his hotel the following day, there was at least one question he didn't need to ask.

But Arthur Hemsley was interested to learn that Fred Keeley was in Wellington—he knew the film man was somewhere in New Zealand—and was looking forward to renewing the acquaintanceship. There are other people here and there with whom Arthur Hemsley will doubtless have a sip of tea or something, for he spent eighteen months on the Fuller circuit in the Dominion in and about 1922, doing a double turn with his wife, Elsa Brull.

"We toured with a Plunket nurse then," said Mr. Hemsley, who gave his first New Zealand broadcast last Thursday night from 2YA. "But our baby girl is now 16 years old and doesn't need a nurse any longer, though I must say that that early care seems to have given her a good start, for she hasn't had a day's illness. On that tour of New Zealand my wife and I were practically the pioneers of Lancashire humour here, and we seem to have been the first to exploit that characterisation in Australia.

"By the way, it's been rather amusing to find that some of the sketches we did then have won prizes at Eisteddfods here, and they haven't even been published! People like elocution teachers and pupils have copied the sketches down and done them at competitions, with first-prize results."

For the last nine or ten years he has been doing radio work in Australia, and for the last five he has done only that, writing and playing, mostly for 2BL, 2FC and 2UE. One session written and played by Arthur Hemsley, called "Ebenzer and Jeremiah," lasted for nearly 18 months, doing six and sometimes seven nights a week. The Adventures of Bobby Filbert was another, lasting more than two years.

"There was a little boy to play Bobby, and I took the part of his friend, Bertie," continued the humorist. "Bobby could have his picture in the paper and all that—quite a nice-looking little lad—but I had to keep out of that, for think how many listeners the Bobby Filbert sessions would lose if they saw my face in the paper labelled 'Bertie, Bobby's Friend'! No, I don't go in for child impersonations like Hal does. Bertie was just a departure from grown-up character stuff, which I do more than anything else.

"I've a Lancashire 'friend' who keeps butting in on my broadcasts. He's my 'other self,' you might say. We go places together for the entertainment of listeners, and get into a bit of fun somehow. Cockney characterisation is another favourite—Cockney couple at the pictures, Mother and Father at the seaside, and so forth. That sort of

thing is easy to do once you conceive the idea, for it's only real life, after all."

It's the eye that has affected vaudeville, according to this comedian, who spent so many years on the stage. Nowadays one could not tour 25 or 30 people and have the same response as in earlier days, for audiences in the talkies can hear 300 people in three numbers in revue and musical productions, after which the smaller stage company seems cheap and tawdry.

But radio hasn't affected Arthur Hemsley adversely, because he has taken advantage of it. "If you've been collecting humour for many years, you lay in a huge stock," he explained. "Then you can re-dress your shop-window and utilise your fund of humour in a different manner for the new audiences. The value of music-hall experience is

that it is quite possible for an experienced trouper to become quite a good radio writer. He knows the requirements of an audience, and has a particular appreciation of correctly-used pauses and climax. In variety I may be getting older, but in broadcasting I'm getting younger. In vaudeville one is building on shifting sands all the time, but radio is a real thing of

the present."

Harry and Arthur are similar in appearance. Their father, W. T. Hemsley, was the premier scenic artist in London at one time, and in the hey-day of wonderful productions was kept as busy as a man could be.

Writing and playing humorous stuff for the radio is not an easy task. As Arthur Hemsley said, you have to interest your listener immediately and personally, and get him to 'even half-smile. It's very different from being before an audience where, say, four out of six are prepared to laugh because they think you funny, and the other two laugh because the others laugh. Thinking of a fresh plot every day when engaged in a series of broadcasts such as those Mr. H. did in Australia. A good way out of this difficulty was to leave off a session at a thrilling moment and finish it off next time.

"Radio is more satisfactory than the stage," continued Mr. Hemsley. "Why? Well, I haven't really analysed my attitude. There's a certain amount of fascination in preparing for radio work. You can't afford to be satisfied, for there is often some phrase or word which, if changed, will bring an extra grin or laugh from the listener. But this game is only for those who are fond of work. In vaudeville you're much too much inclined to rest on your laurels, whereas in radio work the laurel wreath is always a little fraction ahead of you!"

*Character Comedian
Brother of Famous
Child Impersonator*