

READING FOR THE RATIONED

What Food Shortages Really Mean

We do not as a rule print horror stories, whether they are of famine or war. Where nothing can be done, or no more than is being done already, it is usually better to say nothing. We have not therefore reproduced any of the word pictures, or any of the photographs, of the misery that has recently afflicted Bengal.

But squeamishness can go too far. If we shut our eyes to misery altogether we shall persuade ourselves sooner or later that it does not exist. And if the particular kind of misery we refuse to look at is starvation, we shall find ourselves before long behaving as if every one else in the world had enough to eat.

Here then is an extract from the "New Statesman" which, if it does nothing else, should stop our mouths when we feel inclined to moan about the misery of an eight-ounce butter ration.

The writer is an officer now serving in India whose regiment was ordered recently from the hills to Bengal.

"THERE'S a famine down there," they told me. "Probably people dying and so forth."

I knew that, of course—but had read about it in the paper—but on the eve of my move I pigeonholed and forgot the information; the famine would, no doubt, be noticeable if it were real. Anyway, poverty is so ever-present in India that forgetting is a protective armour. I left with no more than that half-warning in my head.

On the journey I had too much to do to think of the people or the country. This was a Company move, and I was responsible for 150 Indian troops from the hills, in land as foreign to them as it was to me. They could not speak this language; they had never seen quite this sort of landscape before. Yet, quickly they were bored with it all—the long travelling hours, the awkward changes, the carrying of kit and stores, the rain and the general discomfort.

After a couple of days of slow journeying, we changed trains at a fair-sized junction. Fires were started and food prepared on the platform. I had to make some arrangements, and when I returned the men were all eating. This was the first time I saw the beggars. They were not like other Indian beggars, calling for an anna from a passing train. These people did not ask for money. They wanted food, and they stood there watching the men of their own nation cooking and eating. I counted about 30 of these beggars as they clustered on the railway line between the two platforms; they were of all ages and in one condition; the majority were women: some were blind and all were ill. One old man, tall, with a fine head and straggly beard, was being led by a woman; his sightless eyes looked up high over the heads of those squatting on the platform. Some of the beggars were silent and a very few were still; most

were watching closely, for occasionally, as a man finished his food, he would walk to the edge and sweep the scraps on to the line. The watchers, who had drawn closer, rushed forward then and scraped in the dirt for the few grains of rice, until they were driven back by a couple of railwaymen. The blind old man, at these times hearing the movement and the shouts, made a low noise rather like a whine, perhaps an echo of days when he had been a prosperous beggar.

For the more romantic of my readers I say with reluctance that this old man had no more dignity than the others. His head was lifted and twisted on a scraggy neck; he was very dirty and his rags revealed no suspicion of former beauty. He was hungry. Like the other beggars he had a small cloth and a tin which he held out for scraps. The men of my Company were rather embarrassed and when I arrived were giving the remains of their food in a hurried way as though the giving were distasteful. I watched this scene for a short while and then, as more men finished their food and the crowd began to fight among themselves, I stopped this indiscriminate scattering of food and had the scraps placed in a box to be distributed later.

But I had forgotten one member of the Company—the goat. He had been given his ration separately on a small plate. But that day, he was fussy. He had a few mouthfuls, nibbled the rest, turned away, thought again and managed a little more. Then with a rather distant look, deploring the standard of wartime rations, he stalked away. Within ten seconds, a small crowd of men and women were fighting over the remnants of his meal.

AIRMEN AND AIRWOMEN

FLIGHTS AND FANCIES. By A. R. Grimward. Drawings by Oriwa T. Haddon. Hutchison, Bowman and Johnson, Ltd., Wellington.

THIS book is what it pretends to be—a collection of stories, meditations, and sketches directly or indirectly associated with the Air Force. Many people will buy it to send overseas, and the great majority of those who receive it will be delighted with it. Other copies will find their way into the hands of Air Force personnel at home—women as well as men—and again not many will want their money back. But it was a little bold to describe it on the dust cover as "a book in the first flight." It is somewhere about the twenty-first flight as war literature, and the hundred and twenty-first in pure literature; but it was worth writing and publishing for the purpose for which it has been produced. Flight-Lieutenant Grimward, the author of the letterpress, has considerable technical skill, and that pleasant combination of sentimentality and seriousness that the publishers no doubt had in mind when they claimed for all the tales "a strong tang of the Service." The artist responsible for the drawings—which, by the way, are not illustrations, but a more or less independent feature—has skill too, and talent as well as skill, but he has not been able to make up his mind whether he is a Maori or a Pakeha. As a Pakeha he places himself in competition with men who make him look a little foolish, but the Maori field he has to himself, and it is a pity he was not content to exploit that more thoroughly. It is, after all, a most unusual fact that a book of this kind should carry drawings by a Maori, but Pakeha-Maori is

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