

# BABY DAYS

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# NOT BACKWARD BUT VERY FORWARD

*Brian Knight And His School  
For Difficult Children*

YOU never saw a stranger school in all your born days than Brian Knight's hostel in Auckland. Just now there are about 20 pupils, 17 of whom live in the hostel, the other three coming, apparently willingly, from near by. I am giving the numbers only approximately because you never really know if everyone will be there. The ages of these pupils range from five up to 14 years. But besides these young people there are two girls of 16 and one of 21 living in the hostel and working daily—one works in a nursery school, one is a typist and the third is in a factory. And besides these again there are between 50 and 100 clinic cases, children and adults, coming regularly to the hostel for treatment.

"If only people would get it out of their heads that I am running a school for backward children," Brian Knight complained to me the first time I visited the hostel. "I could tell them that my 'backward children' have included two people now with B.A. degrees, a civil engineer, two fully-trained nurses and various other people of ability. It could be called a school for abnormal people, but certainly not for subnormal ones."

The name of it is the Brian Knight Hostel and Clinic and it is controlled by a board of trustees of a comparatively new organisation known as the Institute for Remedial Education, an incorporated society whose officials include a woman who is a member of the Auckland City Council, two medical men, an accountant, and several men and women occupying public positions in Auckland. The staff for the hostel and clinic numbers eight, including the director, Brian Knight. This has been the organisation for the last eighteen months. Before that the history of the hostel was the history of Brian Knight himself.

### He Wanted to Teach

He went to school in Auckland, took his degree at Auckland University College and trained for teaching at the Auckland Teachers' Training College. After that he spent five years in sole-charge and other primary schools in the Auckland district. About his experiences at one, Nihotupu, in the Waitakere Ranges, he wrote a book called *Nine to Three and After*, published in 1940. It is the book of that very happy person, the right man in the right job. He wanted to teach and he was teaching. But he wanted to teach the pupils in difficulties and found a growing tendency in himself to leave the bright ones alone while he devoted himself to helping those others. For several years he took part in radio sessions (the most important were 12B's Child Psychology session and Radio School conducted by the Friendly

Man) in which he used a question-and-answer method of helping not only scholars in difficulty, but also their parents. In addition he gave individual coaching for examinations and worked with "problem children" brought to him for advice by worried parents.

It seemed to me he had always had a particular interest in coaching and individual teaching and I asked him if it was so.

"That's what built the spine of the whole thing—the coaching and so on," he said. "First you find the lower ranges of the class—I'm not saying dull—need individual help. Then you find that the problems are of two kinds—simple education problems (oh, short cuts in arithmetic, the sensibleness of geometry and so on), which can be easily fixed, or very very deep-seated emotional problems which can't be easily fixed. They need individual attention, but also constant attention—obvious answer: hostel. So we began by taking them into our house, my wife and I, and gradually the hostel idea grew."

### A Question of Money

For three years the idea was growing, somewhat painfully at times, in Mr. Knight's house, a small one. Then four years ago he moved with his big family (he has three children of his own as well) into a big house at Epsom. He and his wife (a teacher too) and a small staff taught and fed and clothed and cleaned. And that's his hostel—upstairs and down-



Neither had white hair

stairs, big kitchen, big sunny rooms, dormitories with big windows, everything big except one room—his own study.

The trouble was, he explained, he was nearly as often on the rocks and worrying about how to meet expenses as he was worrying about the legitimate business of solving the problems of his charges. In emergencies he had even turned to the kitchen to become the cook.

"What did you do for money?" I asked, bold measures being the kind Mr. Knight seems to expect—and take.



Alan Blakey photograph  
BRIAN KNIGHT

"Well, the ones who could, paid. The others didn't. If too many didn't I had to go out and get it."

"How?"

"By going and asking for it. Just going and asking for it."

"Companies or individuals?"

"Oh, individuals mostly. You know so-and-so? And so-and-so? They've always helped when I needed it. Firms have been very good, too. For instance, yesterday one firm sent along a load of sand for the sandpit which up till then had been merely a pit lacking the sand. But I have to get money like that in my own way. And that's all over now, thank heaven."

That's all over now because the Institute has taken over and Mr. Knight is a teacher again; at least, that's the idea of having a board of trustees: they take over the administration worries and it doesn't hurt anyone individually if a needy pupil can't pay the full fees—or even any fees.

MOST of this I knew already when I first went to see the hostel. Mr. Knight had been to a trustees' meeting and took me out with him afterwards. There is some native bush along the drive at the hostel, good old-fashioned hide-and-seek stuff, I thought. At the top of the terrace, near the hostel, we came on a hut built of sacking and branches, obviously the result of many hours of toil. We had a look. Everything was neat, there seemed to be a purpose for everything, even for the peep-hole overlooking the drive up from the gate. Mr. Knight was standing on what was obviously meant for duck-boards. How many had built it, I wanted to know.

"Well, it's the whole team. The ring-leader was a flaming obstructionist when he came here. An anarchist. Wouldn't do a thing. Now he's got the lot of them working in gangs—I've even seen him lining them up and numbering them off. He's the government." At the corner, facing the drive, was a notice board on top of a stick.

"More government," said Mr. Knight. "That'll say No admittance. By order." We went round to see. It did not say

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