

"Nothing Is So Precious As Soil"

THE third and final article of a series written by the Editor of "The Listener" about his recent visit to Japan

THE police, by the way, are one of the problems of the occupation, and, to the Japanese themselves, one of the puzzles. To the Americans they are simply a necessary evil—a bad lot with whom they would gladly have no truck, but in the meantime indispensable. If a man is wanted, the police will find him. If there is a plant of arms somewhere, they will unearth it as soon as they are sure that the Americans suspect its existence. They know everybody's past activities, and nearly everybody's present, and they have always had such miserable pay that blackmail and graft have been their daily occupation. So they stand about with their swords and brass-buttons, ready for an inquiry, a search, or a raid, and afraid of nothing so much as losing America's protection. When that happens their fate is obscure, but I was told that there are usually so many of their own people waiting for them that they are lucky if they live long. Whether that is true or not they are desperately anxious to retain the favour of the occupation forces, and one of my problems with them was to avoid catching their eye and getting both a salute and a bow; an embarrassing situation when

one is not even, like a padre, an officer by courtesy.

The last policeman I saw was guarding the plane on which we finally left Japan about two hours before daylight. How long he had been there when we arrived I don't know, but he had made himself a little fire in an oil-can and was trying to escape the bitter wind by crouching against the wall of an out-house. It was pathetic and a little disgraceful, to see how obsequiously he surrendered his place and how selfishly we took it, how he ran about in the darkness looking for more sticks for the fire and how like pukka sahibs we accepted it all. As we moved off to the plane I looked back, and there he was standing in the light of the fire saluting our contemptuous posteriors.

I AM reminded by that policeman's fire that fuel, after food and clothes, is perhaps the most precious article of consumption in Japan. If you look at the map you will see that most of Japan is about as far north of the equator as we are south. Roughly, therefore, it has our climate in reverse, with the difference made by the great land-mass of Asia. Its summers are no hotter than ours, but its winters are appreciably colder, especially in the North, which lies under snow for two or three months.

February is not perhaps the coldest month, but it is cold enough to make fires and warm clothing necessary for comfort, and great numbers of the Japanese at present have neither one nor

the other. Thousands have in fact no homes, and it was therefore lucky for them that the first winter after their collapse was relatively mild. But concrete subways and basements are bitter places in the mildest winter, and it may have been because so many were sleeping in such places that I was so painfully aware of their lack of handkerchiefs.

In any case, most of the great cities (except Kyoto) are badly bombed. Most of the bombing was with incendiaries, and so vast areas in some of the biggest cities—Osaka, for example—are at present just a barren waste. There is neither shelter from the wind nor power nor light nor heat, and although thousands are still living there, they are living miserably. But in February everybody was living miserably everywhere who had no wood or coal for fires, and one of the pictures I shall always have of Japan is groups of people huddled round fires in unexpected places—public streets, wharves, warehouse floors, and even the decks of ships. The fuel was any worthless thing that would burn, and although I never saw a fire-engine, and must assume therefore that no fire ever got out of control, the risks taken to get warm made one realise what a job the bombers had made of their work, and even wonder whether fires had any further terrors for people who had come through so many already.

AND fires and fuel recall the timber situation in general in Japan, which, for a country so closely crowded with

people, seemed surprisingly good. The explanation must be that about half the land is too poor to grow anything but trees, and that all the people are too conscious of the value of wood to waste the smallest stick. Everywhere you go you see women, women oftener than men, carrying home bundles of brushwood, or men trundling two or three logs on a hand-cart, or bullock-carts carrying longer lengths to the sawmills. It is astonishing in a civilisation as old as Japan's that there should be so many mills engaged in the elementary work that most New Zealand mills were doing 50 years ago, but Japan is always astonishing you with these plunges from the modern to the mediaeval. It is one of the explanations of her toughness in war that so many of her people are literally hewers of wood and drawers of water and tillers of the soil and toilers in shallow and deep waters.

IT is a secret of their toughness in war, and it is a reason why they will get through everything that defeat has now forced them to endure in peace. They will not starve, or sink into apathy, or refuse to work, or surrender their place in the company of Asiatic nations. Even in this desperate crisis in their affairs they are feeding themselves, and a day spent in almost any prefecture reveals why. One person in every two is growing something; one acre in every two is yielding food. Though much of the soil is light and poor, they have contrived, and will go on contriving, to make the best of it produce two crops a year and all of it produce something that, with the harvest of the sea, will maintain life and health. I saw nothing more of their fishermen than the glimpses one gets from the air or skirting the coast in an express train. But I saw fish, smelt fish, could not escape from fish in town or country and in big houses or small. You were conscious of it in railway stations and in trains, you saw people eating it in the streets, you saw it hanging and ripening on house-fronts as often as you see washing in New Zealand drying on the lines.

But if I saw few fishermen I saw a great deal of the tillers of the soil. I travelled into the country to see them, I watched them at work wherever there were a few free feet of earth in and around the towns. In the end I came to the conclusion that nothing is so precious in Japan as soil, nothing so carefully guarded, nothing so generously fed. Everything that is not city or forest or lake or highway or railway line or public park is garden or farm, tended by 20 million people, and fed from the bodies of 70 million. I made a rough count from a railway window of the workers per acre in an area that took about 20 minutes to traverse, and it was not less than three. It was probably far more than three, but I am being careful, and the point is in any case clear. We have



N.Z. Government Official Photograph

"I SAW FISH, smelt fish, could not escape from fish in town or country." The photograph shows a fishmonger doing business at the market in Hiroshima.