

England Was Kind To Them

LOOKING far from hungry and sharing some undisclosed hilarious joke, the Auckland organist Murray Fastier and his wife Lyla Fastier called at the Auckland office of *The Listener* last week after they returned from their twenty months' visit to England. They looked so well and sounded so cheerful we asked them if this was the effect of their long sea journey—they were held up for ten days at Panama—on a full ship-board diet, or the effect of living in England.

"Well, England's not starving, you know," said Mr. Fastier. "There's not a lot of food, but you can get enough. Of course we had to rely on parcels from home for luxuries. But we certainly didn't see any skeletons, did we Lyla?" Mrs. Fastier agreed.

They arrived in England in November, 1944, Mr. Fastier to work, Mrs. Fastier to take singing lessons from Dino Borgioli. Mr. Fastier answered an advertisement calling for an organist for a chain of four of Mr. J. Arthur Rank's West End Odeon theatres and he got the job.

Twenty-Minute Job

"Funny that," he told us. "I went there to the audition, marvellous big Compton organ, and I played Bach to those theatre managers and they said, 'That'll do, just the thing,' and I got the job. Bit of luck, you see. They had just decided on a new scheme of giving their theatre audiences classical music during the show. So I played for ten minutes at the first session and ten minutes at the second session and that was it. Marvellous job—twenty minutes a day, eh? Of course there was a lot more to it than that—I used to go up in the mornings for practices and rehearsals and so on. And those audiences really liked Bach."

We didn't ask Mr. Fastier just what Mr. Rank paid him for those twenty minutes, but we found that it was enough to make him grumble about the taxes he had to pay. Those were the only things—apart from the buzz-bombs—he or Mrs. Fastier found to grumble about in England.

They were lucky over their housing problem for instance. Free to be early, one morning Mr. Fastier arrived at a house 12 miles from London just before 8 o'clock, the first in a long stream of careful folk wanting to rent a furnished house at four and a-half guineas a week—"That was pretty reasonable," he said. "Furnished houses mostly started about six guineas."

Then they were lucky over Blundell's, the public school at Tiverton at which Mr. Fastier taught for two terms. After six months Odeon theatres wanted Mr. Fastier to sign on for a longer term, but as the buzz-bomb season was in full swing he decided that Devon would be more comfortable than London. So they gave up the furnished house and moved into staff apartments at Blundell's. "And," they said in chorus, "we fed in."

Mr. Fastier is full of praise of the music in a school of 400 pupils such as Blundell's, which supports its own orchestra and puts in major works such as Benjamin Britten's "A Ceremony of Carols." There is a scheme by which pupils pay a guinea each special music fee and twice a term there is a concert by famous artists. While the Fastiers were in residence they heard the

Boyd Neel String Orchestra and Leon Goossens and before they arrived Solomon and Myra Hess had both played at the school. The other two concerts while they were there were given by themselves.

The French organist Dupré, one of Mr. Fastier's Paris teachers, paid a short visit to London to broadcast for the BBC, and Mr. Fastier described the broadcast as one of the most remarkable he had ever heard.

"They finished with a stunt," he said. "They announced that they were handing M. Dupré a sealed envelope with a theme written inside and M. Dupré would try to improvise at once on this theme. Well, it was a theme by Benjamin Britten—a perfectly terrible theme. We sat there and wondered what on earth he'd do with it. But in two minutes he began and for twelve solid minutes he improvised a toccata and then a five-part fugue and then a carillon. Amazing, absolutely amazing."

During the last week they were in England it happened that de Saint-Martin had come to London from Paris to broadcast a series of recitals for the BBC. With the hope of meeting him, Mr. Fastier presented himself at the church from which the broadcast was to be made.

"And this was the greatest stroke of luck. Here was de Saint-Martin with his manager and this wonderful organ all ready for a rehearsal and everyone in desperation. The poor fellow didn't know a word of English—couldn't read the stops, didn't understand the English system of manual arrangement and so on. And there was I just by chance on hand to help him out. So he'd plough away at playing and I'd work the stops for him and a pedal piston now and then. This was marvellous. So I got the chance to play with him."

"So you count yourself lucky to have had lessons in Paris?"

"Yes, I was lucky. But you have to remember those lessons cost 300 francs an hour—about three guineas an hour is pretty hot, isn't it?"

Up to High F

"And yet mine were two guineas for half-an-hour," Mrs. Fastier reminded him.

"Well, that was worth it too. That was real teaching. I used to go along with her to her lessons—in case of buzz-bombs you know—and old Borgioli was wonderful," Mr. Fastier said.

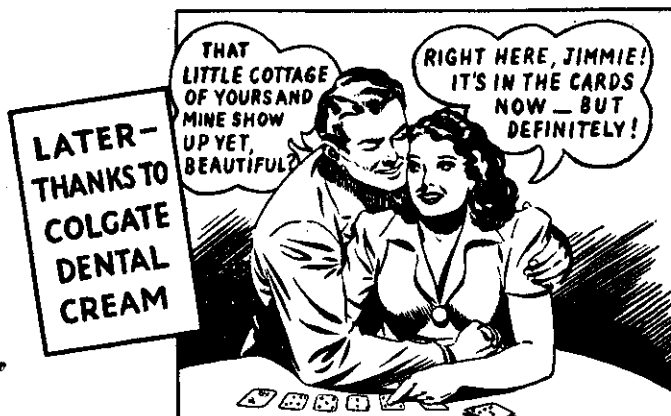
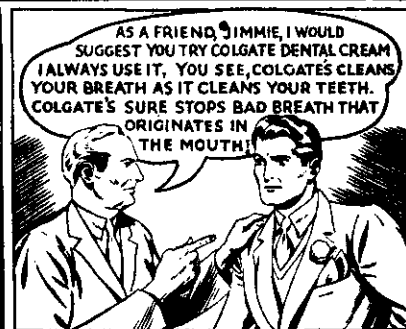
"He used to make Murray sit in the corner and watch so that he could help me with my practice."

"And he got her up to high F—not that she'd need to use it, but on the idea that it's better to have a reserve and then C is just nothing."

The Fastiers had various escapes and excitements during their stay in England—including "a half-mile away near-enough miss" buzz-bomb, an invitation to a dance attended by Princess Elizabeth, the honour (for Mr. Fastier), of playing the organ at the preview of the film *Henry V.*, and the honour (for both), of giving what Mr. Fastier describes as their "Darby and Joan recitals" in various famous churches and theatres. They bought one smart suit of clothes each and that was the end of their coupons. Then they had the luck to get passages home to New Zealand. And that, according to Mrs. Fastier, was much the most exciting thing that happened.

—J.

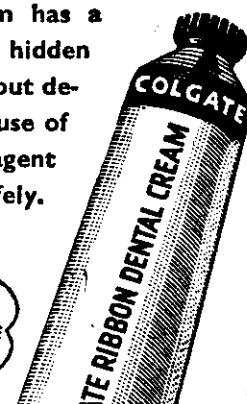
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