

THE MEN WHO CAME TO DINNER

One Month Without the Option for a Three-Minute Broadcast

"BUT of all the tough jobs this year," wrote Laurence Gilliam, when describing preparations for the BBC's 1946 Christmas Day Empire broadcast, "the toughest is the broadcast from the Bishop's Rock Lighthouse, off the Scillies. Edward Ward, the commentator, will leave St. Mary's, weather permitting, five days before Christmas, together with an engineer and gear. After an hour in a tiny boat, tossing in the Atlantic rollers, the party will arrive at the 'Bishop,' to be hauled by rope into the lighthouse, and from then on they will be the guests of Trinity House and Keeper Jack Beale."

Laurence Gilliam did not over-state the difficulties. Even counting his war experiences, it is doubtful if Ward has had a more trying assignment. With the

engineer, Charles Coombs, he arrived at Bishop's Rock on schedule and from then on they were the guests of Trinity House—for a month. Like *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, they arrived and could not get away again. Nothing so routine as breaking a leg on the front steps immobilised them. Stormy weather rolling in from the Atlantic held them prisoner until their rescue—by lifeboat—late in January.

The incident was mentioned briefly in the cables at the beginning of the year (without any details of the adventure), and there was some speculation in *The New Zealand Listener* office as to how the pair put in their time—there is hardly room to swing a mike in a lighthouse, and exercise is probably confined to running up and down stairs, or promenading underneath the lamplight like Lili Marlene, but with only the microphone-flex for company. A month without the option generally leaves one with time on one's hands, but, as somebody suggested brightly, they could always listen to the radio.

And in point of fact, that, apparently, is just what they did do. As was natural in the circumstances, they lived in daily hope of being taken off, and the month was up, if not before they realised it, at least before they had resigned themselves enough to think of reorganising their lives.

But here is the story, as it has just reached us, told by Edward Ward himself in *London Calling*:

It feels quite strange being out in the world again. It is particularly nice being in square rooms, once more. Those circular, granite walls inside the Bishop Rock lighthouse became rather depressing towards the end. A month in a lighthouse is certainly an experience. But it is an experience which I confess I am not anxious to repeat. And it leaves me with the feeling that two months in a

lighthouse (if he is lucky) is a terribly long stretch for a lighthouse keeper.

The surprising thing about Jack Beale, Tony Thomas and Paddy Daly, my three companions during my stay on the Bishop Rock—that is, apart from Charlie Coombs, the BBC engineer—was their, to me, unbelievable cheerfulness. Somehow, I had formed the impression that lighthouse keepers were silent, taciturn men—as, indeed, well they might be.

Tony and Paddy, the two younger ones, used to argue almost incessantly. "Don't you two ever agree on anything?" I asked once. "Of course not," Paddy replied. "We'd get no fun at all if we did." And I suppose there is a lot in that. Anyway, they all certainly made the best of what is undeniably a most monotonous life, and took their misfortunes with a great deal more philosophical calm than I was able to muster.

Since I have been back, practically everyone has asked the same question. "What did you do with your time?" And the answer, I am afraid is—practically nothing. Somehow, it was impossible to settle down to doing anything serious. No matter how bad the weather was, or how discouraging the weather reports, one always hoped that, somehow, a miracle would happen during the night, and that the dawn would bring a sea calm enough for a relief boat to come out. So we lived just from day to day, hoping for something to happen.

Of course, finally it did. There was a slight break in the weather. There was still far too much swell for the relief boat to come out, but we heard over the radio that the St. Mary's lifeboat was going to make one of her monthly trials, and would take the opportunity of bringing out some fresh supplies—for we had long since run out of all fresh food except for a few potatoes, which we had been eking out—and would at the same time try to take off Coombs and me.

We heard the wonderful news about ten in the morning—incidentally, the radio transmitter and receiver on a lighthouse is a real godsend. You can at least keep in touch with the shore, and talk to the other lighthouses from time to time. Before radio was installed a lighthouse keeper really was cut off from the world, and I certainly made full use of this amenity—thanks to the grand co-operation of Henry Thomas, the lifeboat engineer in St. Mary's, whom, I am afraid, I kept very busy relaying messages, and, of Land's End radio, too.

At any rate, on this red-letter day, Henry Thomas said the lifeboat would be leaving St. Mary's at 12.30, and would be at the Rock an hour later. There was feverish activity of packing. Bedding was left until we saw the boat on its way, because to pack your bedding before this is considered very bad luck by lighthouse keepers.

Down the Rope

Then, when the lifeboat approached, Tony and Paddy went up to the gallery which runs around the lantern, and got busy with the winch. We went down to the entrance door, which is about 50 feet above the sea. Jack Beale threw



out a buoy at the end of a long line for the lifeboat to pick up. The other end was attached to the main rope, coming down from the winch 100 feet or so above.

The boat drew up close, and it was only when I could see her wallowing in the swell that I realised what it would have been like for a boat to have come out when the weather was really rough. The lifeboat crew, wearing oilskins and life-jackets, hauled the rope aboard. At the end of the main rope were some of our belongings, and the keeper's outgoing mail. That, at least, was safely aboard. Then boxes of fresh provisions, and long-awaited incoming mail were hauled up on the winch, and pulled in through the entrance door.

Then it was my turn to go down. A loop was made in the rope, just big enough for me to stick my leg through. I then prepared for the worst. It was much worse than getting on to the lighthouse, because there was a drop of some 25 feet more, and the journey was much longer because the boat was standing far further out.

I had been warned that I should probably get very wet. However, I was wearing a life-jacket, and I was prepared to get more than wet if I could only get ashore. I hung on as hard as I could, swaying in mid-air, and sometimes dropping sickeningly when the boys on the winch let out the rope a bit quick. It looked, too, as if I gradually got nearer the boat, as if I was going to connect with the deck with considerable violence. And I was getting uncomfortably conscious of the very sharp fluke of an anchor which was lying below me. It was a difficult job for Tony and Paddy on the winch because they were 150 feet above the boat, and it was hard to judge vertical distances, but they did a fine job.

Practically the whole population of St. Mary's seemed to have turned out to meet us, and it was wonderful to get back to the hotel and have a hot bath, the first for a month.



BBC photograph

EDWARD WARD
The cheerfulness was terrific

(continued from previous page)

its programme of Tchaikovsky's Fifth and Schubert's "Unfinished," as well as the Brahms Violin Concerto. There had been two rehearsals, but the complaint was that careful preparation and good playing go for nothing nowadays if soloist and conductor are not household names. Both the Philharmonia and the National Symphony Orchestra were obliged to cancel their January concerts.

On Razor Edge

The London Philharmonic Orchestra lost as much as £300 a concert on its season at Covent Garden. Thomas Russell, head of the L.P.O., says: "Admission prices have not materially changed since 1939, but concert productions costs have doubled. I don't see how salaries can well be cut or admission costs increased. Financially every orchestra is on the razor edge. My personal feeling is that the only way out is for the London County Council to municipalise one orchestra or more, according to London's requirements."

It is agreed by most musicians in England that the main cause of the present

slump is over-promotion. Eight full-scale symphony orchestras, as compared with three before the war, are competing for the favours of a London concert-going public which there is no reason to suppose is bigger than in 1939. Orchestral membership is to some extent interchangeable, but concerts have multiplied enormously owing to "mushroom" promoters.

As shown by the case of the Royal Philharmonic Society and the Shostakovich work, one grave artistic outcome of present stringencies is the one-rehearsal limit, which prevents even seasoned players from giving more than a cursory account of unfamiliar music. A gloomy scene is relieved by occasional gleams. Some little time ago Beecham packed the Davis Theatre, Croydon (4,000 capacity), with an all-Tchaikovsky programme. Is it to be inferred from these cases, the writer asks, that the London concert-goer is attracted only by big names and familiar music? This is one of the key questions. An affirmative answer would mean putting back the clock for a generation.