

TEN SHILLINGS (less tax)

(Written for "The Listener" by W. R. KINGSTON)

Persons with defective eyesight are invited to offer themselves as patients for the opticians' examinations. They will be paid 10/- for approx. three hours' work. Attend for preliminary test St. Paul's Schoolroom, November 18, 9.45 a.m.

CAN you beat it? said I to myself when I read that advertisement in the paper. Ten shillings in cash for doing nothing, and an eyesight test thrown in free. Certainly I shall be there.

St. Paul's schoolroom looked gaunt and desolate on a wet Monday morning. Although I was early 17 people were there before me, all ranged on a form against one wall, strictly in order of arrival. I joined the tail end, next to an old lady of about 70, who immediately started in on the iniquity of deducting the 10% Wages Tax from the 10/- we were going to be paid. She regarded it as another injustice to Ireland.

Presently a couple of men came in and took their places beyond me, and shortly afterwards a small party of man, wife and daughter arrived to become the tailpiece of the queue. (Thirty bob for the family coffers, I thought, not a bad idea; wish I had brought my wife along).

All Sorts and Conditions

That advertisement drew 23 people in all, 16 women and 7 men, practically all of them middle-aged or elderly, but what they were all there for I couldn't imagine. Some looked so poor that obviously the 10/- was the whole attraction, others were most superior people, well dressed and with an air. Who were they? Wives of opticians pressed into service in case the *hoi polloi* didn't turn up? Or people genuinely wanting an independent and non-commercial report on their eyesight? Or just people filling in time while waiting for a train? Probably the last.

An agreeable buzz of conversation filled the empty and battered old schoolroom with its floor markings and wire-netting for badminton or basketball. Everybody chattered to his neighbour; they might have been old friends meeting after an absence of years instead of complete strangers. I was a bit unlucky in this respect, for the man on one side talked of nothing but General de Gaulle, and the old lady on the other only on variations of the wages tax theme, until I got round to feeling that way too.

The Opticians Arrive

Around ten o'clock half-a-dozen brisk men arrived with boxes of apparatus and an air of business. They wasted no time in arranging themselves at their stations, peremptorily called the first four people

to come to the table for registrations, and set out quick and busy to find out just what was the state of our eyesight before letting the students loose on us.

Our names and addresses were entered up, we were given a paper to take round with us and the first test was the old familiar wall card with letters of different sizes. One of these experts recorded this test on our slips and at the same time marked down the type of lens used by those people who were wearing glasses (about half the number who turned up). He merely had to squint through the lens for a second to know what kind they were, which I thought pretty good, but when he came to the old girl ahead of me he found a pair of glasses that puzzled him.

Could she see anything at all? Where had she bought them?

The poor old girl thought perhaps at a counter of a chain store.

Oh no, said the lad, not these.

Well then, perhaps at a second-hand shop, she thought.

Perhaps, said he grimly, while all the mob gaped.

Flower of Democracy

I found the reading test easy, and while waiting in another queue for the

next test had time to meditate on this casually-met example of the flower of British democracy. These men had left their businesses on a busy morning, merely because they were on some committee of the Opticians' Society, to give their time free for conducting students' examinations. Here they were co-operating readily with their erstwhile competitors, to help to qualify still more competitors for their businesses, all without payment and without Government coercion. This is where we've got Hitler. . . .

"Next please" cut across these thoughts, and I was ushered into a darkened room, sat down with my back to what light there was, told to look at a spot on the wall while a brisk young man looked into my eyes with a spotlight and commented: "There is not much wrong with your eyesight."

Oh yes there is, I said, in sudden fright at the thought of losing that 10/- (less tax) at this stage. One eye is weaker than the other.

The other chap then had a peep, too. Then they both had a longer look, while hope restored itself in my mercenary mind. But alas, they explained they were looking for really bad cases of defective eyesight, and there was nothing wrong with me at all.



"... What they were all there for I couldn't imagine"

By this time I was determined not to be done out of that 10/- (less tax), and suggested brightly that it would be a hot idea to plant a person with good eyesight on the students and fool them into working harder. But no go; I was shown outside, where it was still raining.

So that 10/- (less tax) just faded out of my vision, inward or outward—unless of course I can earn it from *The Listener* for describing the episode.



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