

TEA, CAKES and CONVERSATION

TWICE recently I have entertained in my home a soldier on leave, but although I am most anxious to be hospitable, I have found it a little difficult to know the best thing to do. The boys were strangers to me, and their tastes may well have run to the Bright Life, for all I knew, but they both said, that just being in the home was O.K. by them, and as they seemed sincere, I had to believe them.

What do other people do to entertain utter strangers?

I ASK this question because it is one of the things that puzzle me. I believe myself to be normally gregarious and what is called "a good mixer," and over the years we have entertained many hundreds of people in our home. But because of my upbringing and early home life, the type of friends I have made and the routine of life I have drifted into, I know quite well that I am a bit moth-eaten. I don't go to wild parties, race parties, dancing parties, drinking parties, stag parties, or indeed

How To Entertain Soldiers On Leave? —Asks "K.S."



any of the places where hard liquor and soft words are the main ingredients of the entertainment. I'm a suburbanite. I go home at 5 o'clock. I dig in the cabbage garden all day Saturday. I take an interest in the state of the children's footwear, and the discount due on the electric light account, and as soon as dinner is over I just naturally put on an apron to do the washing up. In a word, I belong to an older and staler generation, and my ideas on entertaining are definitely out of the Ark.

Not infrequently, of course, I invite someone to come along to my home for the evening, and merely for the sake of any future historians studying social customs in the twentieth century, I set down here what happens.

TO start with, the callers or subjects or whatever you like to call them, are friends, or friends of friends, or at any rate members of what in New Zealand constitutes the middle class. In number they are not more than five or six, and more usually just a married couple not too unlike ourselves. They know to arrive about 8 p.m. If there are ladies, my wife takes them into the bedroom and they leave their hats, coats, and bags on our best bedspread. Meantime I have taken the men into the sitting room, offered them a smoke with the concomitant "How's business these days?" and we have got as far as "Oh! fair enough: can't complain" when the ladies join us. There is a good deal of pushing round of chairs before everyone is settled, and then (I've noticed it hundreds of times, so I know) the conversation flags just a trifle. It may be, and usually is, rescued by a reference to the weather or the war news, and then gradually it warms up. The talk starts. The entertainment offered by me is under way. We all talk. We talk about all sorts of subjects, and in an hour or so there will be supper, but that's all there is to it. We haven't a drop of liquor in the house—we never have. Cards as a medium of passing the time are not suggested. There are no instruments, so we can't make music, even assuming that anyone is able to, which usually is doubtful. The entertainment we offer is talk around the fire, and our callers either know and expect this, or just have to put up with it.

NOW what do we talk about? Just the everyday subjects that fill the average middle-class mind in wartime—a little politics (if you are more or less

sure of the other party); a good deal of surmise about the war; a little film gossip; books; local personalities; local affairs like changes in the tram and bus timetable; and (a fairly recent innovation but now well established) comment on something heard on the radio.

About a quarter to ten my wife finds some excuse to go and put the kettle on, and wheels in on the dinner-waggon tea, buttered scones or pikelets, and iced cakes for supper. About 10.30 one of the couples say they are afraid they must be moving, as they have a long way to

go, and, if this is Auckland, there then ensues a long discussion on the rival merits of changing at Newmarket or walking along Karangahape Road, depending on the suburb. My wife and I see them off at the front door to "You must come back and see us some time—I'll give you a ring next week"; and then we go to bed.

BELIEVE it or not, as Mr. Ripley would say, "entertainment" of this type is offered by me, and reciprocated (apparently cheerfully) by my friends, in the Dominion of New Zealand in this year of grace, 1941. In fact, I'll go further, and say that however horrifyingly dull it might strike you, this sort of thing goes on among quite a lot of people all over New Zealand every night in the week. I'm so sunk in it that, not only did I not know any other, but I quite enjoy this.

Speaking strictly for myself, I think homely, folksy talk round a blazing wood and coal fire is an institution of some real merit. The friendly undercurrent of sound and movement from the fire, the feeling of "belonging," of being one in a community of interest, the rise and fall of conversation as it drifts carelessly from point to point all round the compass, happy laughter and the voices of friends over the clatter of supper dishes—I like all that.

But that's only my opinion. What worries me is what to do for soldiers on leave. I'm anxious to be hospitable to the boys, but what's the right thing to do?

HE KNOWS THE ANSWERS

New Zealand's Prime Minister

ALAN MITCHELL recently broadcast from the BBC an interesting account of the life and character of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Right Hon. Peter Fraser, who had just arrived in Britain. "When I met Mr. Fraser the last time he was in London I remember thinking to myself: 'How easy he is to get along with.' There was no formality about him, no attempt build up an air of a great presence or anything like that. Another thing I noticed quickly about him was his sense of humour.

"I think it must be the Scot in him that gives him this ever-present sense of fun. He was born in Hill of Fearn, a village in the Scottish Highlands. His father was the local shoemaker who had come back home to settle down after a spell at being in the North-West Mounted Police in Canada. It was in this shoemaker's shop that young Peter Fraser picked up his first knowledge of politics. You see, his father was the local Liberal agent. And as he mended the village shoes he used to hold forth on what the Liberals thought was the best way of running a country. The villagers called the shop the local 'House of Commons,' and they used to spend long hours there listening. Young Peter used to listen too, and he learnt quite a bit.

"When Peter Fraser went to New Zealand as a young man of 26, he worked for a time as a labourer. He

was very interested in local affairs—which in New Zealand are quite a nursery for Members of Parliament—and he was elected to the Wellington Harbour Board and also to the City Council. He gave Wellington one of the best municipal milk distributions that you will find anywhere in the world. His wife worked with him, too, and she became a member of the hospital board. He entered Parliament in 1913 and soon became one of the outstanding members of the New Zealand Labour Party; and in 1935, when that party was returned to govern the country for the first time, he became a Minister and not only a Minister but deputy to Mr. Savage, the Prime Minister.

"If anyone tries to take him in with a name or a title or a position, they are riding for a fall, because he will not pay any attention to any of them. And he can be pretty biting if he wants to. There was an occasion once when he quietened a political opponent very effectively. This man was scolding Mr. Fraser's views and opinions on farming. He backed up his own arguments with: 'For myself I can at least claim that I was born on the land'; Mr. Fraser chipped in with: 'A sheep could claim that much.' Another time someone wrote to one of the papers expressing annoyance with certain of Mr. Fraser's views. He wrote that as a Socialist of thirty years' standing he dissociated himself from Mr. Fraser's attitude. He got his answer. Mr. Fraser said that thirty years was a bit too long to be standing and suggested that he moved on a bit and caught up with the times!"

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