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L79-3

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, AUGUST 27.

WHEN "FORTUNE" FROWNED

An Interview That Did Not Come Off

THIS is the story of an interview that did not come off. Perhaps I was clumsy. Perhaps we did not click. Perhaps it was a case of dog eating dog.

In the front of my mind was the fact that he had come all the way to New Zealand to study our political and social problems; and I kept wondering why. In the front of his was the fact that he was a *Fortune* man collecting information rather than distributing it.

"Mr. Edmondson?"

"Yes—Charles. Come in."

"Thank you. I'm New Zealand Listener."

"Ah, yes, I've seen that paper. Sit down."

"Thank you."

Pause.

THE longer you stop the harder it is to start again, as every interviewer knows; but where do you start on a man who is perfectly polite but sits on guard looking into the fire?

Had he come to look at us, or at his own countrymen; at New Zealand or at a place called New Zealand which had become a United States base?

New Zealand itself, he assured me—the country that was doing so well in the war; so well on the battlefield; so well in its factories and on its farms. But he had come also for another reason: he wanted a close-up view of our compromise between Socialism and Capitalism.

Was that how our economy appeared in the States?

Undoubtedly.

And was it something that appealed to Americans?

Most certainly.

To those even who subscribed to *Fortune*?

Many read *Fortune* who did not subscribe, and very many who subscribed were people of quite moderate means. It lay on the tables of libraries and was supplementary reading in colleges and universities. But what was the point?

The point was whether *Fortune's* interest in the "middle way" indicated a national interest, and whether its interest in social security meant that Americans are no longer sure of their ability to achieve their own security.

It would, he replied, be inappropriate to say anything about that in his present circumstances. He could say things, but silence was best.

SILENCE, I thought, but abstained from saying, was an unpleasant intruder during an interview, but perhaps he would consider the question from another angle. New Zealand was very young, but it was also very small. In a hundred years, therefore, it had passed from the first to the second phase of development—taken the richness out of its virgin land, worked out its gold-mines, and cut down the best of its timber. Few felt any longer that the future was full of exciting possibilities. Had they come to that yet in the States, or did the average American still feel that old age and un-

employment were evils he need not worry about?

The average American thought that there should be provision for those in need.

But that he himself was not likely to be one of them?

The question was not answered. It would be dishonest to say that it was ignored, crude to say that it was refused. It was just reserved *sine die*, turned back into the void, with perfect courtesy and in absolute silence.

SO there we sat looking into the fire again, my question all unasked, his answers not even formulated.

"I am mighty glad to have seen your country," he was suddenly saying, and I was solemnly thanking him.

"Our boys in the Pacific call it home."

"That is nice."

"When they can't go back to the States the next best thing is leave in New Zealand."

"Good."

"And when I saw your Pacific boys their only complaint was that they were doing no fighting."

"I can believe that."

"Of course your African Division has been praised by every soldier I have spoken to."

"Yes, they have made a great name and I am gratified to hear you confirming it, but we are beginning to be afraid of praise."

"Why?"

"We have had so much of it. We don't like being the world's good boys."

"What are you afraid of? You have a mighty lot to boast about. I have met several of your Ministers, and they certainly know their Departments."

"That is true."

"And your hospital system is very good."

"Yes, I think it is."

"Your control of venereal disease is the best I have seen anywhere."

"That certainly is encouraging."

"And your Social Security system is very fine."

"But it cuts right across the American idea that only the helpless should be helped."

"Perhaps that is right and perhaps it is wrong. But I tell you what, Mr. —, I have another appointment in ten minutes."

"Right, I'll go. Many thanks for seeing me."

"Many thanks for coming up. I'm sorry I could not give you a story."

"But you have."

"No, forget about this. I won't be offended."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that. You still don't want to give me a photograph?"

"I'd rather not."

(He was good-looking, too, and a Harvard American is like a Cambridge Scotsman—a little more and a little less than an Englishman. Our readers, I knew, should have had him).

But he was now helping me back into my coat, and when we shook hands there was not a line on his face or a flicker in his eye to show his relief at getting rid of me.

—"Tuatara"



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