

"SO THEY KEEP TELLING US"

(Written for "The Listener" by
"DOMINIE")

WE had been neighbours for years and never had an argument. He worked as a carpenter all week and I taught in a school. If I wanted a hen-house or another shelf for books it was his hammer and saw that gave them to me. If he wanted a letter written or a loan of a book it would sometimes, but not always, be my shelves that would supply them, for like most tradesmen, in my experience, he was shy. He would anticipate my wants but try every means of satisfying his own before asking anyone for help.

So I was surprised when he called last night and talked politics—a subject we had never directly discussed before. Not that we discussed it very directly even then. But our conversation was all political indirectly. He came over because he was troubled, and it was clear to me that he was more troubled when he went away.

BUT he did not refer to these things when he first arrived. Instead he talked about his garden, our plans for buying paint and freshening up our roofs before Christmas, our shooting trip together last Easter.

It was not till supper-time came, and my wife was buttering the scones, that his anxieties broke through his reserve.

"Meat next," he said suddenly, when a pound of butter was unwrapped. "And they won't stand that in New Zealand."

"Stand what?" I asked.

"Going without meat."

"But we are not going without meat, are we?"

"Not yet. But it's coming. You ought to hear the chaps at work."

"What are they saying?"

"Lots of things, but chiefly that they're not going hungry if the farmer doesn't."

"But no one is going hungry yet in New Zealand. You're not, are you?"

"Well you know about the butter."

"Yes, we're on half a pound. But the people of England are on two ounces."

"That's what they tell us. I suppose it's true. But our chaps want to know how much New Zealand farmers eat."

"Well, I was on a farm last week-end—four of us arrived at short notice—and the farmer's wife was short of butter. But she said she couldn't make butter—it 'wouldn't be playing the game'."

"Mighty few of them are like that."

"I agree with you. But do you expect them to be? You wouldn't expect a fisherman to go without fish, or a fruit-picker not to eat an apple."

"I don't, and I tell our chaps that I don't. But you can't expect the workers to make all the sacrifices. The farmers are doing pretty well out of the war."

"Do you really think that?"

"Well they are, aren't they? They've got guaranteed prices."

"Did you read about the apple-growers last week?"

"No. What have they done?"

"You read it. And read about the honey-producers too. And the vegetable-growers. And the poultry-farmers."

"But those jokers are not farmers. I mean the fellows who have sheep-stations and dairy-herds and grow fat



—But Bert Doesn't Believe Them

lambs. They're making pots, and living like lords too."

"Well, Bert, I'm interested in farming. All my people are farmers, and I would like to be one too. But I have two brothers who left primary school when I went to High School. They've been 40 years at the game and they are not a bit better off to-day than we are."

"I bet they have motor-cars?"

"Yes, they have cars, though they hardly use them these days, and they have comfortable homes. But they work from daylight to dark, and they never get ahead of their obligations."

"Perhaps they bend their elbows?"

"As it happens they neither drink nor smoke nor gamble nor go to the races. But they save no money. They may save for a year or two, but then something goes wrong and they slip back again. I honestly believe that the great majority of farmers are in the same boat."

"You would not get our chaps to believe it."

"No, I don't suppose I would. But I expect you to believe me. Though it doesn't matter much whether I am right or wrong."

"Why?"

"Because it's not a question of who has most and who has least in New Zealand. We all know that we have three or four times as much as the people of England."

"If these chaps are telling us the truth."

"What chaps?"

"These Government chaps."

"But they're your own chaps—they represent working-men far more than they represent farmers."

"I suppose they do; but there's a hell of a lot of lying in wartime."

"Of course there is, everywhere. But why should they lie about the people of England?"

"Because they want us to give them our bread and meat?"

"But why?"

"Because they haven't enough, I suppose."

"And isn't that a good reason?"

"I suppose it is. It must be the Devil to have two ounces of butter."

"It is the Devil. And it's the Devil to get bombed and lose your home, and get your children killed, and go without fires because there is no coal."

"Well, that's something we don't have to do here."

"No, thank God. But we moan when we have to be careful with the butter, and threaten to raise Hell if we get less meat."

"It's not getting less that worries us."

"What is it then?"

"Getting less than some other people."

"But we get more than millions of people—more than almost any one left in the world. There is certainly no fighting nation with nearly as much as we have."

"So they're always telling us."

"Well, ask yourself. Who are they?"

"The Yanks."

"Yes, I suppose they do—so far. But the people of Britain get a quarter of our ration of butter, and about an eighth of our meat. Millions of Russians get no meat or butter at all. Tens of thousands of Greeks have died of starvation. Six thousand New Zealand prisoners would have come near to starving if the Red Cross had not fed them."

"But we give the stuff to the Red Cross to give to the prisoners."

"Of course we do. And that's one reason why it's disgraceful to moan over rationing."

"Well, you ought to hear our chaps."

"No, I shouldn't hear them, and neither should you. No one should. None of us should be moaning. We should be thanking God that we are so lucky."

* * *

IT was the nearest I had ever come to reproaching Bert for anything. I am still worried because I had to go so near to telling him that he was not playing the game. I know no one more honest, more diligent, or more fair than he is—no one who would more readily give you his last loaf, if you needed it.

But democracy is like that. All the Berts are kind, and nearly all are fair. They have never loafed or they would have starved. But a little leaven of injustice is dropped into the mass, or of

(continued on next page)