

Tested for Television

HELEN COX tells the story of a New Zealand sponge-cake

"WEAR something you'll feel comfortable and attractive in," they said when they gave me the audition date, "but it must not be either black or white." So I decided on an outfit that would be businesslike enough for a cooking demonstration and yet attractive enough for me to feel comfortable in. Yellow being my favourite colour, it was natural that I should make a beeline for a smart plain matching blouse and skirt in that colour that was displayed in the Sports Section at Swan and Edgars in Piccadilly Circus. It fitted perfectly and was just what I had in mind, so I felt that one important part of my television audition was satisfactorily accounted for.

For the demonstration I had promised to make a New Zealand sponge cake. One only needs to be away for a very short time to realise that those high, light, moist sponge cakes so dear to the New Zealand woman are not generally known in other parts of the world. To people in other countries a sponge cake is something made with eggs, sugar and flour and no butter. But New Zealanders have found an ingenious way of including butter in their light sponge cakes—thus giving unconscious expression to a trend which can already be called national. Other nations have their "Butter Cakes" and "Victoria Sandwiches," but they come into a different category altogether.

I decided to take one of these sponge cakes to the audition, so I made the best I possibly could, then dolled it up with whipped cream and strawberries (between and on top). It looked wonderful, and as I lowered it carefully into a tin I thought to myself, "This'll rock 'em!" (It did.)

Came the 26th of June and at the appointed time I arrived at Lime Grove Studios complete with cake and all the props needed for the demonstration. In the dressing-room I found the other two candidates, who were also to have auditions that afternoon. They were sitting in silence in front of the rows of mirrors, and both were looking as though they were sorry they ever came. One was a girl from the Cordon Bleu, which is considered to be the most important Cooking School in London (an off-shoot from a French school), and the other was a Dutch woman. We had rather a long wait in that dressing room, because the studio staff had gone off late to lunch, and were therefore late back. We were told that we would be made up in dark tan and possibly with green lipstick! At last the word came through that the staff had returned and soon one of the producer's assistants appeared to guide us to the studio. We were still not made up.

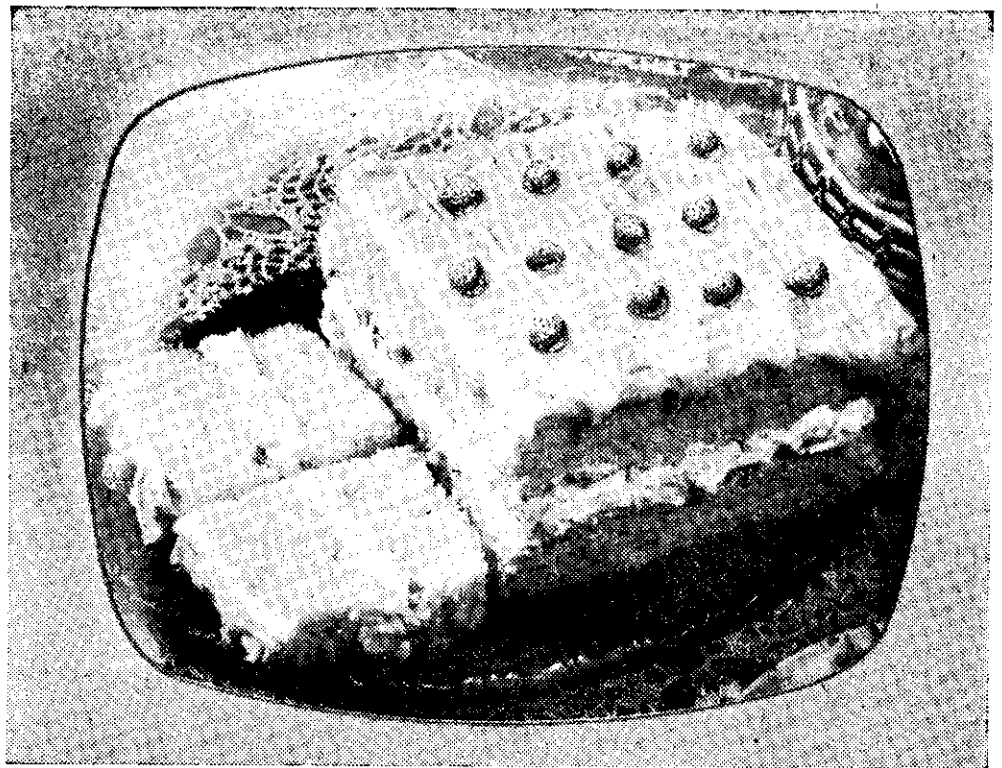
Lime Grove Studios are a conglomeration of old buildings and old houses all joined together, and to get from one part to another means a long and tortuous walk along corridors, across open companionways up and down old staircases and through many doors. However,

even a walk around Lime Grove can come to an end if one's guide knows the way, and at last we came to the torture chamber. This is quite an awesome place. About three floors must have been hacked out to provide the great height needed for lights and equipment, and the floor space is proportionately large. There were innumerable sets of very bright lights, some away up aloft and some lower down, also several huge cameras and other equipment. All were served with miles of cables and wires sprawling all over the place, and I felt that one would need to be a magician to manage them with any semblance of order.

The numbers of producers, producers' assistants, floor managers and technicians were rather bewildering, but as I was to be the first to be auditioned, and I had only a few moments to make my preparations, I hadn't much time to examine them. Unfortunately, pressure of time also prevented us from having our bizarre make-up, which was rather disappointing. I was shown a table on which there was an electric egg-beater and one or two other things that I had requested, and while I quickly made a

few preparations and also set down my lovely strawberry sponge cake (oodles of cream!) one of the producers came up and gave me a few last moment hints. "Don't talk as though you're giving a lecture to an audience," she said, "just remember that you're talking to one person sitting at home in a chair." The floor manager and a male producer then came up to tell me about the cameras. "This," said one of them, pointing to a large camera poised right in front of me, "is the camera you will be talking at, and this one over there," pointing to another camera on my right, "is the one that will show close-ups of what you are doing." Someone else came up and repeated this, so I thought it must be rather important. (Actually, during the demonstration I hadn't the faintest idea which camera was on me and when!)

While the technicians were training the lights on me and the floor managers were giving their last-minute instructions, I hastily whizzed my eggs and sugar on the beater and set things out as well as I could in the time. How I envied the other two demonstrators, who had plenty of time to make their



preparations. Now the time was nigh and the floor manager called for complete silence. He then turned to me and gave me a signal to start. I had my opening lines off pat, and my strawberry sponge to back me up, and in no time all nervousness had gone. Again I had proved something that I had always believed and that is that excessive preparation for a broadcast does not make one stale, but on the contrary has the effect of making one sound more spontaneous and natural. There are sufficient obstacles to overcome to take the edge off one's confidence without adding uncertainty of lines into the bargain.

I began my television audition by directing attention to the strawberry and cream sponge, then said that New Zealand women took great pride in making these cakes, and they were never really satisfied with their cooking unless they could turn out a perfect one. "And to be perfect," I continued, "these sponge cakes must rise very high—they must rise quite evenly, no bumps and no hollows, and when cut they must have a fine texture, not dry or coarse, but moist and very light and fluffy."

After a little more of this preliminary chatter I started to demonstrate the making of the cake, and also explain the recipe. The audition was to last only six minutes, so I knew that I would not be able to complete the whole demonstration. But this is the usual time allowed and apparently it is sufficient for the producers to make their judgment. The electric egg-beater had fluffed the eggs and sugar to a lovely thick light foam, and I was just adding the flour when the floor manager signalled that I had only one more minute left. So I had only time to add a little of the hot water and butter mixture

before the minute was up and my audition was over.

Unknown to me, several producers and also the head of the Women's Sessions, Miss Doreen Stephens, had been hiding up aloft and watching the audition on a television screen up there. They came down afterwards and expressed approval and Miss Stephens promised me a real appearance some time in the autumn. She then said, "There seem to be anxious eyes on your cake." There certainly were. All the technicians were standing staring at the cake, so I at once started to cut it into pieces. In a matter of seconds the men were around me, and in the twinkling of an eye all that was left on the plate were a couple of very small crumbs. Never have I seen a cake disappear so quickly! Their enthusiasm was enormous and I shouldn't be surprised if it were the cause of a few more candidates for emigration to New Zealand! They all wanted to know when I was coming again, and several were most anxious to have the recipe.

But time was pressing and the next audition was due to begin. The girl from the Cordon Bleu had everything ready and at the signal for silence, off they went. She was doing a poached fish with sauce and all went well and smoothly. She was very efficient and I am sure will qualify. The third demonstrator was then bidden to do her audition, and this also was an efficient performance. She showed how to do stuffed cabbage leaves in the Dutch way. When this was over, we were all hustled quickly out of the studio, and we had quite a scurry to gather together all our props. I got to the door, when I suddenly remembered my cake plate. I dashed back for it, and was very amused to see several of the technicians standing with anxious expressions on their faces looking at the cake batter that I had left uncooked. "Do you think we could cook it?" they cried after me as I fled after the others and out of the studio. Whether they did cook it and what the result was I have not yet discovered, but there was no doubt that they were extremely impressed with that New Zealand sponge cake.



HELEN COX