

TELEVISION DEBUT

A FEW months ago I wrote about an audition to test me for an appearance on BBC television. Later a date was fixed for the real thing, but it was suddenly cancelled and postponed until "early in the New Year." Instead of my demonstration, the BBC's official cooking demonstrator was to show the making of home-baked bread. This was a pity in more ways than one because that day, October 25, turned out to be an historic occasion in British television. For some time attempts had been made to send pictures across the Atlantic to America, without success. But on this day, the day on which I was to have appeared, the first picture was picked up on American television screens. What a near thing it had been for a New Zealander to have this honour!

But it was not to be, and it was not until January of this year that a date was fixed and I was asked to sign a contract. It was to be on February 14, and in the *Radio Times* of that week I was advertised as showing how to make a New Zealand Sponge Cake. The time was 3 p.m. and the programme, *About the Home*. I was rather surprised when a letter came a few days before, asking me to be at the studios at 10.30 a.m.; but when the day came and I discovered how much had to be fitted in, I understood why I had to begin so early.

On arrival at the studios I was given a key to a dressing-room where I could safely leave my things. After that I was led along a maze of corridors to a huge studio. Here was the usual conglomeration of cables, cameras, lights and other important equipment, and the same amount of feverish activity by electricians, cameramen, sound experts, floor managers and assistants. I was to have a run-through without props just to get the feel of things, but as there was another rehearsal going on for a play, my patter had to be given in a whisper into the producer's ear. As you can imagine, this was not the easiest way to give a polished talk, and I felt that it would go well as a comic item.

I brought along most of my own props, but the BBC had decided previously that they could supply me with a mixing basin, an electric beater and a small saucepan. When I arrived, all these props were present, but the saucepan was large enough to cook porridge for ten, and the mixing basin was so small that it would have held only enough mixture for a doll's cake. Consternation reigned for a few minutes; but the producer, confident that the props department could do better than that, sent the messenger back for a saucepan and basin of specified sizes.

The next item was my make-up. For this I was taken to the Make-up Rooms, which resemble a West End beauty salon. Here I was given a completely new face. The make-up was very heavy, especially around the eyes; and afterwards, whenever I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror I leapt back in fright. In comparison with me I would say that Mata Hari looked pale and wilted as a lily in a dustbin. But according to reports received after the show, I looked quite natural on the screen (in fact better than off it), and ever since I have felt grateful to the clever make-up girl.

This completed, a call came for me to go to the luncheon room. Here was a table in the centre set for six, and a

side table elegant with a variety of drinks—gin, sherry (sweet and dry), tonic water, vermouth, and tomato juice. The six were the people connected with the three-quarter hour "About the Home" programme. The producer and assistant, the commère (Joan Gilbert), Barry Bucknell, who was to give the first of a series of "Do it Yourself" programmes (carpentering mostly), Frances Perry, who is the horticultural expert, and me. After drinks and lunch I had to hurry away for a rehearsal, for I was the first on the programme. The preparations for this rehearsal took a little while because I had to have all the ingredients ready just to combine together while I was on the screen.

It was during this rehearsal that I realised that an audition teaches one practically nothing about the real thing. The question of the cameras (which one was on me, and when) was vitally important, and it was not easy to get the hang of it. The camera straight ahead is the one I must talk to, and the one on the left shows close-ups of what I am doing. The cameramen keep switching around at the direction of the producer much as an orchestra obeys its conductor. With only one rehearsal it was quite a worry because there was constant danger that I might be caught talking to the left-hand camera when I should have been facing my viewer (one of about two million!) It was not until the end of the rehearsal that I cottoned on to the idea and felt that if I could keep my head I would manage it all right.

After this rather gruelling session I had to go to the make-up rooms for a re-touch before I began the preparations for the real thing. While I was getting this second lot of ingredients together and putting everything in a handy place, Barry Bucknell and Joan were running through their programme, with the cameras. The hands of the clock were ticking around, and as they came nearer and nearer to 3 o'clock, I felt my heart pounding a bit. But a very stern reprimand from my head set it back to normal and when zero hour struck I felt quite calm. The programme, *About the Home* was announced, then Joan's face was flashed on to the screen. She made her little opening speech, then announced that Helen Cox from New Zealand was here and would show how to make a New Zealand sponge cake.

I had a glorious sponge in front of me—a great high thing filled with coffee and rum cream and finished on top with a rough coffee icing decorated with almond daisies, and this was a great help to my opening two and a half minute talk. I had an electric beater to fluff up the eggs and sugar and apparently the mixture looked luscious on the screen. I had an unfilled cake ready to

produce when my mixture went in its tins into the oven, and this I filled with whipped cream flavoured with passion fruit. The passion fruit aroused great interest, as few people in this country have heard of it. The fruit are procurable in one or two very exclusive London shops, but are mostly wizened up and past the state when they would be bought in New Zealand. I had managed to pick out a few fairly good ones—enough to make a passion fruit icing as well as a passion fruit cream for the filling—and there were a couple left over to show, whole and then cut in halves.

I had plenty to say about the popularity of the sponge cake in New Zealand and the skill of the New Zealand women in making perfect ones, and the demonstration went off without any mistakes. I even remembered about the cameras, which seemed to me to be nothing short of a miracle. Since then I have thought of some of the ghastly things that could have gone wrong. For instance, there was a cable between me and the stove which served the electric mixer; I could easily have tripped over this while taking my uncooked cake to

the oven, and shot the batter bang into the camera lens. But luckily my feet must have gone unconsciously over it because the cake went safely into the oven and I remained upright.

Filling the cake with the whipped cream flavoured with passion fruit must have been a mouth-watering experience for viewers because so many wrote saying how wonderful it looked. On my side of the screen it looked revolting because I had had to colour it a bright pink! The reason for this is that nothing must be white for television cameras. Even men in evening clothes must wear coloured shirts and collars, and I had to see that all my equipment was coloured.

Since the broadcast I have had dozens of letters from all over the country from people wanting the recipe for the New Zealand sponge cake and many asked where they could buy the passion fruit. I feel sure that there could be a market here for them if an advertising campaign were to be launched. The BBC have asked me to make a second appearance in April, and this time I have promised to make another delectable New Zealand dish, the Pavlova.



HELEN COX tells how her New Zealand sponge cake reached the screen