

East Coast Christmas

by "PIC"

AT seven o'clock the first Ngati-Pouri bus arrives on the marae. It is an old bus, its colour invisible under dust. The engine stops and it sinks into the evening quiet.

It's cool down here on the flat. A light wind sounds softly in the macrocarpas round the church on the other side of the road. There is no sun, only a pale wash of rose on Mount Hikurangi and on the tops of the eastern hills, just enough to make it look warmer outside the bus than it really is.

Women and children pile out. The children run about the marae, shouting thinly. They scramble on to the hall porch, or hang, creaking on the wire, over the fence that separates them from the school grounds. The women go into the hall. Some of them shiver in satin blouses, or in thin over-stuffed frocks. The older ones—a few have moko on their chins—are warm under blankets. They make loud comments on the clothing of the others, and laugh shrilly at the stilt-heeled shoes the younger women wear strapped on their bare feet.

"Aee, you fall down soon!" one of them screeches as a girl slips on the hall floor. The girl sniffs an answer, regaining her balance and her dignity, and minces into the kitchen with one hand on the plastic slides in her hair. There, with her friends, she bursts into a fit of giggling.

THE copper is lit, bread and cake sliced and piled on plates. Talk is incessant, mainly about men and food, in Maori with occasional mutated English words or phrases.

"Ka kite koe e a Tami e purei foot-ball ana i te hatarei nei," says a young woman in an outlaw blouse, boastfully

But nobody cares about Tommy and last Saturday's play. A bottle of Christmas port is being handed round. They drink it without glasses or cups, making faces. The taste is not very good. The talk becomes louder.

By the time the second bus arrives the copper is boiling, and the floor has been polished by the feet and clothing of the children. Two Tilley lamps hang hissing under the roof, filling the hall with hot air and the smell of kerosene.

The men are well primed with beer, and they come in arrogantly. Although they sang or squabbled in groups in the bus as it wrenched and jostled them over the potholes, here, in front of the women, they find themselves united. Yet, at the same time, they are not quite sure what they should do.

The younger women, hearing the bus, have crowded out of the kitchen through the small door behind the piano. As the men come in they flow, like mercury in a tilted box, into a corner.

For a moment the two groups face each other self-consciously. The women titter and watch the men out of the corners of their eyes. The men jostle each other, the bottles in their shirts clinking, and whisper private jokes. Then an old woman in a black coat and gumboots, with a white satin scarf over her head, calls, *Aue!* You feller goin' a stand there all night? How about givin' us some music."

For a second everyone is still, white eyeballs and brown faces tinged blue-green by the light from the lamps. Blouses and frocks, coats and pineapple shirts are drained of their colour. Even the children are quiet, standing, holding the benches along the walls, their eyes moving from one group to another.



There is a movement among the men. Three of them, in Hawaiian shirts and paper leis, cross the floor to the piano. Two carry guitars; the third is the pianist. Without preamble or fuss they begin to play a Western swing tune. The groups disintegrate, mingle. Some dance; some stand round the walls or by the door. Two or three sing.

HALF an hour later the truck with the keg arrives. There's an exodus from the hall. Those who have bottled beer hide it or swallow it as quickly as they can. Everyone drinks, standing round the truck. Even the children try a sip or two, making faces at its bitterness, and then go back to running

through the dark. The music starts again, a little louder, a little wilder.

A troop of horsemen gallops into the marae, whooping. The riders dismount, tie their horses to the fence, and swagger into the hall. Even the harsh light cannot dull the colours of their tartan shirts and blue denims; it catches on spurs and elaborately riveted knife-sheaths, and shows up the hopeful stubble that may one day be a beard. They settle their hats—broad-brimmed, with fancy bands to match their belts—and pick out their women.

The music and the dancing go on. The keg gets lighter, the hall hotter. The air smells of sweat, beer and smoke. There is a pause for supper, but no one wants tea. The food, though, goes quickly. Then there is more dancing.

The tunes from the hall are ragged now. The new pianist is not an expert, and there is only one guitar player. The couple in the corner get up and go into the night. An old woman watches them and laughs harshly. What dancers there are on the floor move unsteadily, their sense of rhythm confused. The children sleep on the benches.

ON Christmas Day there is always a *hangi* down at Charlie Topu's. The women get up about eight to start getting things ready. The men sleep on. It is raining today, so the fire is built in the big chimney at the back of Charlie's barn. Boards are set on trestles for tables, and boxes and stools fetched to sit on. Some women cut up pork and peel kumara ready for cooking, while others set out trifles and jellies and cake. When the stones under the fire are hot enough, they pack kumara, pork and puha on top in a nest of damp sacks and fern, cover it with more sacks, and pile earth and embers over everything.

By now the men are up, feeling sorry for themselves and behaving as if their sore heads are more the women's fault than their own. They wander into the barn and pick at cake and trifle, or stand, dull-eyed, watching the preparations.

About midday everything is ready. Although it's raining hard and the river is high, nobody stays away. They ride or drive buggies across the ford, or walk across the swing bridge. The children are out again, with sacks or old coats

(continued on next page)

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

Solution to No. 579)

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Clues Across

- Nothing more than an outer covering for a greeting
- Exclude profit? Naturally, if it's a really good one!
- An actor's euphemism for "out of work."
- Paynim from a pang.
- One off seven, or two off eleven. Odd? Not at all!
- Gerard Husch, for instance.
- Father's attempt at a pie, presumably.
- Take the Silent Service away from this hole in the ground and you've still got one left.

Clues Down

- The one Tony drew caused a sensation in the picture.
- Enlists (anag.).
- Latin poet.
- His opera would be gay.
- Retaliation largely made up of praise.
- Along (anag.).—Indian or—Saxon.
- Is Nan keen on this material?
- Dismiss in favour of the rascal.

- Forceful seizure of a kind of medicine found over age.
- Food should be this.
- "Full many a gem of — ray serene" (Gray).
- A Disney character.
- "When Greek — Greek . . ."
- What the poor man was gathering in the carol.

No. 580 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

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