

THE BELL-BIRDS' CHORUS.

A WONDERFUL MORNING SONG.

(By Will Lawson).

One of the most wonderful of Nature's gifts to New Zealand is the song of the bell-bird. Though at one time this wild minstrelsy could be heard anywhere in the New Zealand bush, to-day it is only to be heard in a few places, remote from the sounds and signs of civilisation. One of these places is Tanga-rakau Gorge through which the railway has recently been taken and which penetrates steep, razorback country, heavily timbered, with clearings here and there where settlers have struggled to secure a footing.

But though the railway pierces the ranges by this route, at the place where the bell-birds are to be heard, the line passes by a side gully, leaving the feathered singers undisturbed.

In the stillness of the morning, at about three o'clock, those who desired to hear the chorus of the bell-birds, rose and went a little distance into the bush, where they waited for the little musicians to warm up to their song.

Through the silence was heard presently the clear-cut sound of an axe. "That is a tui, starting the music," a bushman said; "they are mimics." Again there was silence. Then came a faint sweet *tinkle, tinkle*—faint and thin, from the bush slope some distance away. It was such a tiny sound, that first call of a bell-bird, that a feeling of disappointment was unavoidable. One expected to hear clear, ringing bell notes.

Such a note, the true note of a tui clear and loud, suddenly rang out. That seemed more like the popular idea of a bell-bird's song. But like an under-current of sound, fairy-sweet and elfin-clear, the bell-birds' chorus was rising. In waves of gentle sound the music swayed, now louder in the gully, now on the ridges, as though thousands of tiny bells were being softly shaken by warm breezes or a ghostly hand. "Magical" was the word that sprang into the mind, to describe it. If ever there were fairies, this bell-bird song surely was theirs.

The dawn was breaking over the high hills. The light gave the songsters encouragement. The volume of music grew and swelled, sometimes in strong waves of sound, sometimes fading away. Tall trees showed their shapes in the growing light of dawn, and louder still the bell-birds sang.

As broad daylight beamed and the glow of the coming sun was seen, the choristers seemed to be bursting their throats, so full-toned and sweet was their music. Yet it was a perfect