

# Over The Hills From Wellington

[III]

I HAD two personal reasons for going to the Wairarapa which, since the others concerned are now dead, I can, I hope, safely give. The first goes back 44

**PURELY PERSONAL** years to a contract made under the stars at an outpost in the back veldt of the Transvaal. The contract was that if either of the two men making it should not return the other would take his personal belongings to his people in New Zealand and tell them what had happened to him. Both survived the war, but one decided for private reasons not to return, and the other found himself in September, 1902, knocking at a door in the 40-Mile Bush with a kit-bag at his feet and a very disturbed mind. Last week he tried to find the same door, but memories get blurred in two generations and houses disappear altogether. He found neither the house nor any member of the family, nor anyone in the district who recalled a lad quarrelling with his father and going off to the South African war.

My second reason goes back 60 years to a young man harrowing a ploughed paddock in Central Otago. I don't know whether he was harrowing it carelessly or not, overlapping too much or missing too much, or whether it was one of those days when nothing would please the exacting Scot who was his father. But his father complained, there were foolish words on both sides, then the son threw down the reins and telling his father to do the blasted job himself, walked out of the paddock. He kept on walking, or moving somehow, till he reached the Wairarapa, and for 40 years never came back. I don't think he even wrote a letter. But he married, and had a family, and then one day just walked in as he had walked out, and no one asked any questions.

It is not exactly a part of the story of New Zealand to-day, but it is a part of the story of the making of New Zealand yesterday, and it has a sequel.

The young man was my cousin. I therefore remembered last week that the Wairarapa held a number of second cousins—men and women almost as old as myself—whom I had never seen. It happens even in a country as young and small as our own. But when the time came to make myself known I felt almost as embarrassed as Whitman did when it was proposed that he should meet an illegitimate son, hitherto a complete stranger. I was not ready for the encounter. Perhaps they weren't either. It would be better to go to the end as we were.

It is disturbing everywhere in New Zealand to think that here or here or here a great forest once stood whose big trees went back to Piers Plowman. But I

found it especially disturbing in the Wairarapa that the bush had been cleared to a point at which close observation was necessary to detect the original boundaries. Though a

**TREES** few points still remain, half-a-dozen white pines in a swamp, an old totara in the open, or an almost virgin patch by some devout settler's homestead, you travel for miles on end without seeing either logs or stumps or the hollows from which the stumps have been



extracted. One welcome exception to all this is the patch of tawa forest preserved by the people of Pahiatua—a quite sensational survival to a South Islander—and another in the area of totara, matai, and kahikatea, preserved near the homestead at Rathkeale. I find it difficult to describe my sensations as a New Zealander when I stood gazing at the sky through trees that must have been there when the battle of Bannockburn was being fought and that have stood "maintaining their terrible composure" through all the long conflicts since. North Islanders are no doubt blasé about such things, but to those born and bred in the tussocks they can be like the cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces that carry us from wonder to worship.

Well, the Wairarapa will not see them much longer unless it now protects and shelters them. But it has had experience enough of living in the void the bush has left, and already has produced some amazing substitutes. I saw a clump of gum trees on the Wangaehu road that stopped me for half-an-hour. A day or two later I saw some pine trees planted in the 'nineties that were now 120 feet high and yielding up to 2,000 feet of board timber. But I was astonished to hear from the owner that his share in all that wood was 2/- a hundred feet—£2 for an outstanding tree, £1 for an ordinary big one. He has certainly had their shelter for 50 years; but he has had all the risk of them too, the cost of fencing them, the labour of tidying them up and protecting them against fire—and his reward is just about enough to pay for replanting and restoring his necessarily shattered fences. Farmers, I thought when he told me, can make a big noise

when they are not seriously hurt; but when someone does hurt them they are often as meek as lambs.

I HAVE thought sometimes that the most pathetic figure in New Zealand is the farm labourer who likes his work but sees no hope of getting a farm of his own. But the situation is not always so black as it seems. I did not meet a farmer in the Wairarapa who began with no money at all, though I was told about one who began with £40. I did, however, meet one who began with "a hundred or two" 25 years ago, who gave £100 an acre for bare land, and who to-day "owes nothing to no man." When I asked what had pulled him through the depression he said, "Cows and a town milk supply." Land, he went on, is worth what it will produce, no more and no less; but we don't know how much it will produce until we try.

"I gave too much; far too much. But if I had listened to other people I would have gone down the road. I didn't. I listened to my wife. We thought we could get through if we took our milk to town. It was hard going, but I am still here."

"Still going to town?"

"No, I gave that up as soon as I was free. But the cows saved me."

"The cows and your wise wife."

"Yes, my wise wife. I left all the money side to her. Women are better at saving than men if they get a chance."

"I have heard that they are pretty good at spending too."

"Well, perhaps some are. But my wife wasn't. When we couldn't pay we didn't buy, and that's the first lesson for any farmer."

"But you required a house, and fences, and the cows to begin with. How did you pay for them?"

"We had a little when we started, not much; a few hundred. So we began with a 'monkey.' But we set to work from the first day to rid ourselves of the 'monkey' and we did it. There's a lot of money in a cow when you collect it in a bucket."

"You mean when you sell milk by the pint instead of in bulk?"

"Yes. You lost a little but not much. Right through the depression we got our money week by week. Very few went without milk, and when they got it they nearly always paid for it."

"Now you are free."

"Now I am free."

"Now you can take it easy."

"No, I can't take it easy. This is a small place and won't pay labour. But I am not worried. Everything is paid for, and we live well."

"You seem to have every convenience."

"I have every convenience that a small place and won't pay labour. But my machines, concrete yards, concrete paths, hot and cold water. But one of the first improvements I went in for was a washing machine for my wife. Every man should buy one of those when he can. I have spent many an hour in the wash-tub myself and it is hard work. Women should not have to do that and all their other jobs too."

"You run some sheep?"

"A dozen or two. They keep down weeds, and they are money-makers too

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if you use your head when you buy. Those you see there cost me exactly 4/- each. They were cull lambs at a sale that nobody would buy. Now their skins alone are worth 7/6, and if you come this way I will show you something."

What he showed me was the dressed carcase of a small but butter-fat hogget which would last an ordinary family for a fortnight.

"There's no need to pay big prices, but you must nurse them when you get them. They have cost me nothing at all but the labour of looking after them. Anyone else could get the same results, but it can't be done in 40 hours."

"How long do you work?"

"As long as I have daylight and there is something that has to be done."

"Always?"

"Yes, always in the busy season, but things are quiet in the winter."

"Does your farm really pay you—I mean do you average as much an hour as a plumber or carpenter or taxi-driver?"

"No farmer thinks of it that way. His farm is his life."

"Not merely his living?"

"I don't understand."

"He doesn't farm for income only—because he can make more out of the land than out of a trade or a business?"

"I can't follow that. I have always been a farmer. I always will be a farmer. There is nothing else I can do, and nothing else I want to do."

"If you were young and starting again?"

"I'd go the same way. I wouldn't give £100 an acre for land, but I'd buy land somehow, and I'd somehow pay for it."

"You think any man can do it?"

"Any man who is tough enough. But he needs a good wife and he must do without luxuries till he can pay for necessities. It is not easy, but nothing so good ever is."

THERE are still romantic farmers.

Whether there are more in the Wairarapa than in other districts I don't know, but I met two in one week.

I got into conversation with the first on the top of the hill between

**ROMANTICS** Martinborough and Hinakura. There was a strong wind blowing, and I had stopped in the shelter of some trees to smoke a cigarette and take in the view. He had a dog with him, a genuine beardedie, and conversation began on that topic.

"Yes, they're getting scarce, but that fellow's a good one. He's a bit short in the temper, but if he likes you you're all right. My granddaughter takes bones out of his mouth."

"Is that a natural lagoon or a pond you have made yourself?"

"It's natural, but we don't drain it off. We keep it for the ducks. The neighbours think we're mad, but we protect them."

"Good man. Shake hands."

"Well, it's not me altogether—it's the wife. She feeds them."