

# ON FROM MASTERTON

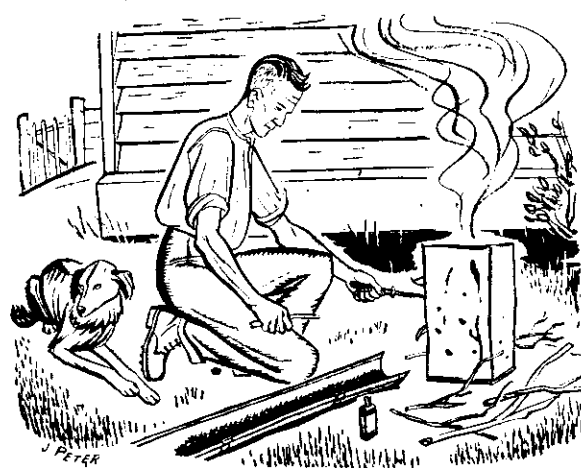
"It will be raining in Eketahuna," my Masterton hostess told me as I was saying good-bye. "It always is." I was not troubled—any more than I was when they told me in Featherston how windy I would find it in Martinborough, and in Martinborough how fortunate they were to live beyond the range of the gales that made life so unpleasant in Featherston. I like these local prides and prejudices, having had them for nearly 60 years myself. But my hostess was right. It was raining in Eketahuna, it rained on each of the three days I stayed there, and it had been raining, the residents themselves confessed, nearly every day for a month. It probably stopped raining the day I left, since the thermometer when I got up was eight below zero, and the whole landscape was white.

But I greatly enjoyed Eketahuna. It was cold and wet and windy, but I thought the setting of the borough almost perfect. It is one of those cases where the road and the railway both leave far more than half the story untold. I can't imagine any change in our national economy that will make it much bigger than it is, or much different; but if I lived there and crossed that bridge every day from one side of the town to the other, if I had gone fishing as a boy in the river and courting as a youth along the cliff walk, I should not want to apologise for it, and I don't think I should ever resent the weather sufficiently to wish to live somewhere else.

In any case, Eketahuna is just one cold spot in a generally cold and damp stretch of country. You are not many miles north of Masterton before you realise that the flats are becoming increasingly damp and the hills increasingly unstable and bleak; and this continues until you emerge from what used to be the 40-mile bush. There is of course much beautiful country on the way, some of it limestone. It is highly productive country of New Zealand's most valuable crop. But it is a place for hard men and patient women, and the visitor is a flatterer who calls it smiling land or who praises the rich pockets and sheltered side valleys and is silent about the rest.

THERE is a very pleasant road running east from Pahiatua to the coast, not a road to go to sleep on at the wheel, but a road that every fisherman knows at least half-way. I don't know whether it is true or just a local legend that the Makuri river is sweeter to trout than all the waters flowing in or out of Taupo, but no one doubts that in Pahiatua. I had to go to Makuri to avoid appearing discourteous to so many kind people who urged me to go, and I am glad I went. But I did not go with my mind on trout and the first of October. I went to see the country and the people and the animals on the way, and my reward was half-an-hour with one of those unsung New Zealanders whom I always regard as the salt of our land. He was without complexes, or petty grievances; made no unreasonable com-

plaints; was completely unselfconscious; had spent most of his life in one district; worked hard without feeling either virtuous or exploited; had no jealousies, was open and friendly; did not wonder whose "snooper" I was, or think it necessary to entertain me. I saw him working (as I thought) in his garden and went to talk to him; but when I reached him—his home was on a little terrace about 50 feet above road level—it was



not weeds he was wrestling with on his knees, but the spouting from one side of his house, which had rotted through and was being re-made.

I admit that I have a weakness for men who can do things with their hands—carpentry, plumbing, fencing, car repairs: all the stubborn jobs that confront us at intervals whoever we are and that most of us muddle or funk or pay someone else to do for us. Well this man could not afford to send for plumbers, whose charge, he told me, would have been 5/- a mile to begin with, and then material and skilled labour on top of that. He had to keep his home in order as he kept his garden in order without the assistance of specialists; and although he apologised for what he called his unhandiness with the soldering iron, he was making a repair that would resist weather and time.

"I am using far too much solder, I know. New chums always do. But if I don't do it well I'll have to do it over again in a few months, and I can't afford that either."

"Can anyone afford to do any job badly?" I asked him.

"No, I don't suppose so. But in town you can get things done when you want them done. Here it is different."

"You might be busy with something else?"

"We are always busy with something else. This spouting has been gone for weeks. But first I had to wait to get a new piece, and then had to wait until I had time to solder it in."

"Cows?"

"Yes, 16 cows after a day's work on the roads. I am a county man."

"And 16 cows before you start work, too?"

"Yes, they keep me busy, but they give me a chance to educate my children."

"You have your own school here?"

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"Yes, but we are afraid of losing it. We are down to nine pupils, and if we lose another we lose our teacher."

"What about consolidated schools?"  
"I am right against them."

"Even when they collect your children and bring them home again?"

"Here they would collect them at half-past nine and get them to school at ten. Then they would call for them at half-past two, and they would always be behind the others with their work."

It was the nearest he came to a complaint about anything, but it was clear that the education of his children was his big anxiety. He had had very little schooling himself, he said, and he wanted his children to start without that handicap.

"But you are educated," I told him. "You can fix your own spouting. You make these roads. You know when bridges are unsafe. You understand milking machines, and tractors, and a host of other things that are completely beyond my range of knowledge."

"Would you change places with me?"

"Well, I'm a little old to think about that now, but I envy you your skills. I hope your boy gets to High School. But don't worry if he doesn't. And don't let him worry. When he is as old as I am it will not seem very important to him where he learnt to live. Not many of us learn that at school."

"Are we going to have another war?"

"There you are, you see. You catch me right away. I am supposed to know things like that, but I don't know them a bit better than you do. And I don't know your jobs at all."

"But you know your own."

"No, honestly I don't. You can fix two pieces of tin together and make them stay fixed. I can't place two pieces of news together and tell you what they will mean next week. I can pretend to, of course, and sometimes the luck will be with me. But luck will never be with you if you just pretend to milk your cows or put in your culverts. So you are better educated than I am. And because you are I will now drive through the rest of this gorge without any anxiety."

And I did.

BECAUSE I go to bed with the birds I find it easy to get up with them, and in the Wairarapa as everywhere else that means exciting new experiences. But I also find it pleasant, after

BIRDS eight years in the bush at Day's Bay, to be in the open again where the English birds are. I was in Martinborough before I heard my first lark, but I have gone to sleep every

evening since to the music of blackbirds and thrushes, and every morning it has been starlings as well. It was also in Martinborough that I saw my first flights of starlings, hundreds and hundreds of them heading south in the fading light to their camping ground. Always, too, there would be stragglers, two or three sometimes, sometimes one solitary bird flying high and fast in the thickening light, and I found myself wondering what he had been doing to get himself left so far behind. But he always knew where he was going.

Another surprise in Martinborough was the presence of some mynahs, which I had never before seen so far south, and did not see again all the way to Woodville. But I am writing this note in the beautiful patch of tawa forest on the outskirts of Pahiatua, and although I saw six tuis here half-an-hour after I came, five of them on the same small bush, I have not heard one of them in the break-of-day chorus. I have heard one quite late at night; but at dawn they are silent or their notes are drowned by the starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes which swarm in the edge of the bush where I am camped.

I DON'T suppose the cost of intensive production is any higher in the Wairarapa than it is anywhere else, but it is high. I saw a pig farm in the North Wairarapa whose owner PRODUCTION had collected nearly a AT A PRICE hundred dead cows this spring from the suppliers of one dairy factory. A man who milked only 14 cows a little further on told me that he had lost four calves—more than 25 per cent. I passed a poultry farm where 800 hens had died; and so on. But the most convincing evidence was in the shop windows. I don't think I have ever seen so many veterinary aids, genuine and fake, as I saw in the farmers' supply shops of Masterton and Pahiatua; and it is a case in which the charlatan is just as good a witness as the man of science. Where there is no sickness there are no sales of nostrums good or bad. But if syringes, pellets, drenches, and injections are considered good window-dressing, the manufacturers of these things have a market, and the purchasers of them have panic or something not far removed from it.

I HAVE sometimes been tempted to creep into hotels and wait there for finer weather—like a farmer who milked his cows on fine days and let them rip when it rained. But it is always bad weather for some body or something on a farm, and when I remembered that I was almost glad once or twice to be getting wet. Cook's company got wet, Tasman's got wet. Both got cold. Both for days on end endured the noise, the unease, the piled-up irritations of the wind. So did the first wave of pioneers, and the second.

But if I found myself accepting mud and rain again at 63, it was not because the discoverers of New Zealand had to endure them or because there was no escape from them for 50 years for my own father and mother. It was rather that rain and mud have been the farmer's lot since the beginning of time. He gets wet in the Pacific to-day. But he was getting wet in Europe a thousand years ago, in Asia ten thousand years ago. He has been getting wet and cold or parched and hot since it first entered his head