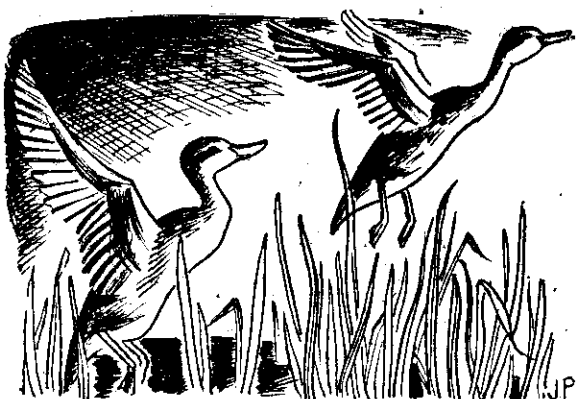


# NORTHWARD ACROSS A DESERT

SOONER or later everyone who drives a car in New Zealand has an accident or a near-miss. I don't suppose our accident rate is high in relation to the number who drive

## OVER THE BANK

and the difficulty of our roads, but the total is high in the course of a year, and there are not many motoring families who have never been concerned directly or indirectly. I could not help noticing when I was towed into Taihape on Sunday morning after going over a bank on the Desert Road that what had been a sensation to me was such an ordinary event in the town and the garage that I excited neither curiosity nor pity. I don't mean that I was ignored or had difficulty in obtaining assistance. I mean the very opposite—that assistance was so readily available it was clearly a matter of routine. The competence shown



".... I disturbed two paradise ducks"

in getting me back on the road and towing me 32 miles, the equipment available, the lack of delay by the foreman in estimating the damage done and by the insurance agent in getting a price for repairs, all pointed to a state of affairs that was routine rather than emergency; and I have no doubt that it would have been the same if I had been towed into a dozen other towns. The roads are neither better nor worse near Taihape than the average for the rest of New Zealand, and if the provision against accident is so good here I suspect that it is equally good elsewhere. In any case, the handbook issued by the Automobile Association lists the garages throughout the Dominion that are equipped with breakdown trucks and there are not many centres of any size in which salvage equipment is not available.

It is clear therefore that motor accidents are common enough to be a part of our lives, but it is not so clear that we accept and remember the lessons of them. I am still reluctant after five days to agree that I was careless or incompetent or ignorant or the victim of some mechanical fault. I deny that I lost my head. But if my vehicle was as good as I still wish to think it is, and I showed no personal fault, I would not have gone over the bank unless the road had collapsed or rocked. The road did nothing but remain what it was to begin with—too difficult in that particular stretch for my speed and tyres; in other words, too difficult for me in that vehicle at that moment. My speed was very low

—between 20 and 25 miles. But my tyres were very high—45lb. to begin with, and after a hundred miles of bitumen probably 55lb. Whatever the figures were I was driving with far more than average care and still left a straight and almost level road in broad daylight. The lesson of course is that safety is the speed at which a given driver or a given vehicle does not leave a given stretch of road, and I suspect that other drivers are as reluctant to accept it as I have been.

THOUSANDS of New Zealanders have slept in deserts, some of them bigger than the whole Dominion. I have done it myself many times over. But I had only once before

## NIGHT IN THE DESERT

The guide books in fact say that there is no genuine desert in New Zealand but that on the Onetapu plateau between Waiouru and Lake Taupo; but that is not correct. There is a desert near Cromwell in Central Otago which is as genuine as the Sahara or the Kalahari and has exactly the same cause: drought. It is not very big or very difficult to cross, but it is shifting sand and nothing else, and the tracks you make across it in the morning are quite likely to be buried a foot deep in the afternoon. I slept in that desert in November, 1906, and can still remember how cold I was before sunrise.

I was cold also in the Waiouru desert, but that was partly because it is over 2,500 feet above sea-level, partly because it is not sand, but volcanic ash, and partly because I followed a snowstorm which had covered Ruapehu to its feet. But it is one thing to be cold and another thing to be miserable. I was not miserable. With another blanket I would have been extremely comfortable, but would of course have gone to sleep and forgotten where I was. As things were I woke half-way through the night and lay listening to the silence.

It was not complete silence. Twice a motor car passed, filled (I suspected) with anglers bent on being first at a Tongariro pool, and there was a distinct noise from the Wangaehu coming down from the feet of the mountain. But there were no animal noises or bird noises; no wind; no sound from the railway trains that must have passed about 15 miles away; no voice or bugle or rumble of truck from the distant camp. I remembered that when I slept in the desert at Cromwell a dotterell called at intervals all night, probably because I was near its nest; but although I disturbed two paradise ducks when I went at daybreak to a little tarn about a quarter of a mile away, they did not once call in the night after I woke. Nor did a rabbit approach me and thump or a deer cross my scent and bark. On my way to the tarn I saw the marks of a

hare that had passed within 20 yards of me, one only, but there were no other signs of life or movement except near the water itself, where a duck had dropped a feather and there were two or three footprints in the mud. Thoreau says somewhere that Nature is either winged or legged. After a night on Onetapu I could almost be irreverent enough to contradict him.

IT is a shock to landlubbers when the sea suddenly throws a creature at them of whose existence they had only known dimly. It happened to me when

## SEA SECRETS

I ran alongside a beach the morning after a school of blackfish had been stranded. Whales we have heard about since Jonah, and even if we haven't seen them we are somehow on terms with them. Most of us, too, have seen porpoises. But blackfish are monstrosities, mammals as heavy as cart-horses living and loving right under our noses but entirely (apart from these rare accidents) without our knowledge. And now because a treacherous wave caught them or a bigger monster still had them on the run, here were 20 or 30 of them lying helpless in full view, big and little bulls, cows, and young heifers, nothing hidden, nothing toned down as with mammals on land, but the whole story moulded in black and white for prying eyes to read. Yesterday two tons of masculinity driving away marauders from his harem. To-day a helpless mass of blubber proclaiming his impotence to the gulls.

IT is often enough said of New Zealand that we have a little of everything—mountains and plains, swamps and deserts, glaciers and boiling pools, and so on. I think Alan Mulgan used "Land of Everything" as the secondary title

## SOME VARIETY

of one of his books about us. But I had not realised, till I drove from Palmerston North to Hamilton, via Taupo, that nearly everything is encountered on that brief journey. For an hour after I left Palmerston I saw only green grass, fat sheep, and sleek cattle. The land was flat or undulating, and nothing suggested unrest but the wind. Then I came to Hunterville, and nothing suggested repose. All the way to Waiouru I was climbing hills or dropping down into deep gullies, with cliffs or sharp peaks or curious knobs lining the road on both sides, and disaster waiting for me if I went to sleep. But it was still, except for the last few miles, fertile country sending wool and mutton and beef and butter and cheese to the other side of the world.

At Waiouru all that ended. Production of food just about ceased until I was

well on the way to Rotorua, and there were long stretches without even trees. It is just about the worst country in New Zealand that is not too high to be settled; but many people find it the most interesting. Topographically it lacks hardly anything but ocean's coral strands; icy mountains, swirling rivers, drifting sands, lakes, smoking volcanoes, geysers, boiling mud-pools, natural forest, destroyed forests, man-made forests, tussocks, fern, swamp, and rocky wastes. Meteorologically it provided everything but a heatwave the day I crossed it: rain at Waiouru, snow in the desert, sunshine at Turangi, hail so heavy along the shores of Taupo that I had more than once to stop and wait for the track to become clear, and such violent wind on the road to Rotorua that I travelled half the way in a dust storm.

To fill the traveller's cup on this route there are first the terrifying Huka Falls and Aratiatia Rapids and then the long run through millions of blackened trees left by last summer's fires. How the fire started does not now matter; but it used to be permissible, if a man pointed even an empty gun at you, to knock him down; and I hope it will soon be the rule to knock down every man who drops a burning match or cigarette butt, and to send him to jail without the option of a fine if he leaves an unquenched fire.

I MISSED the Jubilee in Whangarei by four days, but not the Jubilee spirit. While the people of some towns—Taihape, for example—seemed to have lost interest in their surroundings, everybody I met in Whangarei seemed proud

## NORTHLAND JUBILEE

of the borough and confident of its future. When I came in the first night I noticed that although the shops were shut, most were lighted, and many occupied. It was partly the Show and partly the Jubilee. When I climbed Parahaki Mountain I found the tracks all sign-posted, the big trees all labelled, and the steep places provided with steps and seats. The mountain was celebrating too. Even in the motor-camp where we were all birds of passage, the atmosphere was confident and cordial. No one said it, but the message was unmistakable: "Welcome to Whangarei."

This is the kind of thing I mean. I had parked under a fig-tree about 50 yards from the kitchen and conveniences. It had been raining, and the grass was wet. But when I returned after my first walk abroad the custodian had run the lawnmower as far as my caravan, and round it, giving me a chance to come and go with dry shoes.

(continued on next page)



"I met a boy riding one pony and leading another"