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LANDS

for

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YESTERDAY-TODAY-TOMORROW

THE TRAIN

THIS is the obituary notice of a train, or rather "the Train." Other trains are known by name—the South Express, the Limited, the Napier Express—but our train was never anything else during its lifetime but "the Train." It wasn't the only one that ran along our isolated, local line. Certainly not. In the harvest season, and when the Freezing Works opened, there was a train every few hours. But these mere haulers of merchandise were never referred to as trains, only "specials." You see, there was a subtle distinction. Even if the "specials" had slightly larger locomotives and longer rakes of trucks . . . they didn't carry passengers. "The Train" did. Clamped, like an afterthought, behind 20 to 30 trucks rode a carriage.

The origin of this carriage is wrapped in mystery. Tradition, and the oldest inhabitants, had it that it was built on the spot, piece by piece, as the various sections arrived by sea from Wellington, way back in the 'nineties. Here authoritative opinion—Stan, our guard, to be precise—maintained that it had arrived from the North Island "in toto," having worn out its usefulness on the line there, and the Department having unearthed a long buried plaint, from the settlers of the valley, that they should have a carriage, "as riding in open trucks disturbs the ladies." Whatever its origin, there was little doubt as to the date of the carriage's construction. It didn't take an archaeologist to recognise the date of those plush, or once plush, seats, facing each other across a narrow aisle. A traveller in the carriage was perforce a good mixer, as his knees were jammed within a few inches of his vis-a-vis. The windows were of the type that are open and won't shut, or are shut and won't open. Towards the end all the windows belonged to the second type—an advantage, as Stan loyally pointed out, because the children couldn't lean out and get cinders in their eyes. The carriage had brakes, not Westinghouse, of course, but those wheel-affairs that the guard screws down. We always knew when "the Train" was getting a bit above herself on the down grades. Stan would emerge on the carriage platform and begin to screw down the wheel. After that it was like riding on a sledge.

IF the carriage was a bit congested with babies squalling, or being fed, and mothers dropping the contents of their shopping bags on your head from above, while they ransacked for pacifying biscuits or bottle, the van was a cheerful club for the male. Stan didn't have much to do. There was always someone who would throw out Wilson's bread, or Brown's paper, or hop out and pitch in the parcels at the sidings where "the Train" stopped. It was what was expected of you for the privilege of riding in the van. And the one and only evening when Stan boarded "the Train" a little off colour, two worthy cockies of the



"HALF THE FARMERS would have been left behind at the crossing nearest the pub but for Stan"

valley ran "the Train" through to the terminus, brakes, signals, and all. All thanks to Stan's good training, they said, and besides they weren't going to let the heads get down on Stan. He was too good a man to lose.

Didn't he hold "the Train" any night if he knew that someone who should be going out wasn't on? On Sale nights half the farmers who used "the Train"

Written for "The Listener"
by K. E. GOULTER

would have been left behind in town, if Stan hadn't kept his weather eye open at the crossing nearest the pub. Stan was busy all day in town, too. His job didn't end when "the Train" puffed into town at 10, and begin again at four, when she left. He had a hundred and one commissions to do. If you wanted something from town urgently, the quickest way was to go to the siding and ask Stan. He thought nothing of matching knitting wools and embroidery silks. Drapery counters and superior young saleswoman had no terrors for Stan. Often I've seen him, sitting among the patients in the doctor's waiting-room, waiting for a prescription for somebody's sick baby. Tradition had it that he even chose Mrs. Stan's hats for her.

BUT we mustn't forget the engine, which is after all the heart of a train. I'm no railway expert, so I can't tell you what type our locomotive was, but she was undoubtedly "vintage model." She wore the number "130" in brass on her dingy side, and the wags had it that it was a record of her age. She was small, but she had a great heart. It was incredible the loads that tiny engine hauled over the hill into the valley. I've counted as many as 29 trucks, admittedly some of them empty, twisting away behind her. It was rarely that Harry, the engine-driver, took on more

than he could handle. When he did, generally on wet days, "the Train" would come to a shuddering stop, wheels slipping, and then, if he couldn't get up steam sufficiently, he had to break train, haul half over the hill, then return for the rest. It was unfortunate that the carriage was always necessarily in the part that waited. Harry didn't often have to break train, though. There's only one time he'll never live down. The day he arrived in town with only two trucks and the engine—the rest of "the Train," carriage and all, being left behind at the last siding he'd shunted at. He blamed Stan, and Stan blamed him for not waiting for the signal, but gave everyone at the station in town a good laugh—especially Harry's face when he looked back and saw all he had on behind.

"I wondered why the old girl pulled those last two miles so slick," said Harry. "Now I know."

NOW that our line has been connected to the Main Trunk, we miss "the Train." There was something homely about her, and we had got into the way of saying "meet you train time," meaning 5.30 in the evening, when "the Train" puffed up the cutting into our siding with the papers from town. All times are "train time" now. There is a new schedule of through trains, an express every day, new faces at the van door, and large, unfamiliar engines, which no longer go backwards on the south trip, like old "130" did. (We had no turntable before). Everything is very modern, and the two-minute stops are two minutes, not as long as it took Stan to fix things up and have a yarn. But it's not the same.

I saw old "130" in the station yard in town the other day. She was dutifully shunting trucks, making up trains for the sleek black monsters which had taken her place on the line. She looked old and dingy, and a little sad.