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Through New Zealand (XXVIII)

THE FRIENDLY BACKBLOCKS

IT surprised me in Nelson to hear Takaka described as land's end—as it often does in Wellington when I hear people say that they would not like to live so far off the map as Nelson

LAND'S END

is. There is no such thing as isolation anywhere in New Zealand to-day, if isolation means mental as well as physical separation from the world to which we belong. Even in Jackson's Bay and Preservation Inlet you could listen to New Zealand all day and to Australia all night; but Nelson has two or three air services a day with Wellington, a steamer both ways every night, and passenger buses coming and going every day to Christchurch and Greymouth. Takaka in its turn has two buses (and of course two mails) each way to Nelson, and an aerodrome in addition for emergencies. To call such a place isolated is to call a man starving who has a cow and an acre of potatoes, and people well fed who have access to cake shops and ice-cream parlours.

Takaka has of course no university; no art school; no schools of music or of architecture or of engineering. Your son could not become a doctor there or your daughter play in a symphony orchestra, which would be almost as severe a handicap for them as living in Jerusalem two thousand years ago or in Athens a thousand years farther back still. But except for face-to-face contact with the best men in the world, from which only the remaining best would gain anything, they, and you too, could get everything in Takaka that a wise man needs, including more culture through books and broadcasting than you could ever hope to assimilate. And you would not be living uncomfortably while your mind was absorbing it. You would be earning your bread as easily as anywhere else in New Zealand, living eight months of the year in sunshine, in a pleasant green valley sheltered by bush-clad and snow-topped mountains. Every day and every night you would be within sound of the sea, and it would be your own fault if your garden was not bright with flowers in the spring and heavy with fruit in the autumn. It would be isolation in the sense that you were separated from thousands of less fortunate people in colder, bleaker, tamer, and more monotonous parts of the country, as Shakespeare finally isolated himself in Warwickshire. But if the thought of that troubled you too much, you could reach the wet West Coast in a couple of hours by car or on your own legs in about the same time reach Murderers' Bay and spend an hour at the foot of the Tasman memorial plinth remembering the first white men who came there 305 years ago and the four who died—not exactly

that you should live pleasantly three centuries later, but pointing a shadowy way to that. Though they did not know why, and not very clearly how, they died in the battle for knowledge, and for your comfort and safety therefore, and mine.

* * *

THE publicity books (in which Nelson is well served, and Golden Bay best of all) describe the journey from Takaka to Collingwood as picturesque and interesting. It is certainly interesting but picturesque to those only who see it with

FROM MINERALS TO FAT

the eyes of imagination—as a dreary stretch of the gold trail, with eager men going and disillusioned men returning, through scrub and swamps and over rivers and hills,



"They are farmers and not miners any more"

either because they were too poor to take the easier route by sea or had the fever so badly that every gully and creek on the way was a new hope. Though you pass fertile patches the country in general is sour and uninviting, and can never have been anything else. But it is mineral country, had its gold rush seven years before Otago and Westland, is still our only hope in iron, and has long produced great quantities of good coal. It surprised me to see a daring little ship loading timber from the very side of the road leading into Collingwood, with miles of mud flat between it and the open sea, and the winding way in and out marked by slender sticks of manuka. That is the kind of thing they must have been doing, with a slightly different ship, in 1855, and is as good a sign as any of the present state and mood of a town that once had 16 hotels.

But if Collingwood is quiet to-day it is not dead. Its population has declined from whatever it was in thousands during the gold-rush, to about 400, but these 400 don't go about lamenting the good old days. They don't even talk about them until you ask questions, and then their attitude is likely to be more detached than your own. The gold days are old days, not sighed for, not forgotten, but for ever past. You could still, if you searched hard, find a stray

fossicker in the hills, but gold is something that visitors amuse themselves with when they are shown how to find a colour in a dish. Collingwood itself talks about butter-fat. I saw one flat that I was told ran a cow to the acre, and was almost persuaded that this was the truth; but even if it was an exaggeration of a hundred per cent., land as good as that is better than any gold mine. A county official told me that every farmer on the roll had paid his rates, some cheerfully and some with a growl, which of course proves that they are farmers and not miners any more.

* * *

I HAD the strange experience in Pohara of being awakened by a courting peacock. I had seen peacocks in zoos, usually with bedraggled tails and looking thoroughly down-hearted, but I had never before had one strutting a few feet from

A LONG COURTING

my bed, in the slanting rays of the rising sun, which was striking right through his incredible fan and making his back and neck a blue flame. He was not of course strutting for me, though that was how it appeared when I opened my eyes. He had come to the caravan door for food, then seen a peahen approaching, and gone crazy.

Nor would his strutting alone have wakened me. He achieved that by the surprising noise he was able to make when he started his feathers shuddering—a rustle punctuated by tappings and clippings that he could apparently produce at will. Simultaneously he would hold his beak half open and give little hissing sighs, though he turned those on only when the lady came close to him. And that was not often. If I threw a piece of bread right in front of him she would follow it, but it was food she wanted and not love. Whether he backed in her direction or moved forward to her, sighed, shuddered, rattled, or bowed, she showed no interest whatever as far as I could see. He on the other hand showed no interest in food as long as she was in sight. When he was alone he would feed right at my feet, and when he gained confidence, out of my hand. He would not strut then, or spread his tail, or indulge in exhibitionism of any kind. But he had only to see a hen out of the corner of his eye to become a shimmering mass of nonsense again, a vibrant fan at least nine feet across moving slowly round in a half-circle.

It was love's labour lost as far as I could judge, but he no doubt knew better. He at least knew how to maintain his dignity when she walked away, and I discovered, by following him into the bush at dusk that he slept in solitary grandeur by night on a limb 30 feet above the ground. He is as out-of-place in New Zealand as a kiwi would be in India, but he is a splendid intruder into our generally drab world, and almost the only creature I can think of whose beauty alone has kept him alive.

* * *

BAD weather prevented me from getting to the South Island's real land's end, the lighthouse on Farewell Spit. But I got to the end of its remotest road and looked out on the Tasman Sea from

(continued on next page)