

# BLOOD AND TOIL

THE whistle shrieks, the dogs bark, the machines start—another day of work begins. I was still fresh from my impressions of my fellow-workers, who swore so heartily but, I wisely pondered, rather affectedly and superficially. Now, I had been told, I would see life in all its gory reality—the Freezing Works.

After pulling on my apron I went to my place in the "sticker" with my glorious title of "sticker's labourer pusher" and my head full of the psychology tests I could try out on the workers. I had been led to expect a gang of inhuman, blood-bathed demons revelling in their murderous activity; what I saw were three men sharpening their knives, finishing their morning smoke and occasionally glancing at me. Finally one asked me if I was a Varsity student and at my reply he smiled thinly and went on whistling.

My work of pushing the freshly-killed lambs along a rail soon lost its novelty and I became accustomed to the sudden fatal gush of blood and the adroit skill of the butchers, so now I had time to study "types."

THERE was one young Maori boy with a serious but somehow mischievous face. He worked steadily and at first it was very hard to make conversation with him. However, as time passed, I managed to get to know him, learnt his name was Darky, he was taking a correspondence course in novel-writing ("one chap is now famous who couldn't even spell Australia to start with,") and was thereby saving money from the gambling school which was really hard to do because he was always lucky on account of his double thumb (this he finally shyly showed me). Darky, I found out, worked easily during the day, but when it came to overtime he was suddenly transformed into a very strict overseer of myself. He admired my signet ring very much and when I playfully told him he could have it he suddenly looked at me very seriously with his big eyes and protested that he wouldn't take a valuable present like that! I was too surprised to speak and when I did my voice sounded peculiar somehow.

DARKY and I got along very well and after a few days I started to teach him the *Marseillaise* in French while he taught me to swear in Maori. We both had a lot of fun out of each other's efforts, especially when I tried to boast and call myself a wise man in Maori, and by mistake called myself something very different and not nearly so complimentary. When I finally left work, Darky had given up novel writing and was making good money at two-up.

A FELLOW pusher of mine was another object of study. Mr. Conan, no one ever knew his Christian name,

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by H. RALPH UNGER

was an alcoholic trying to go straight. Every few minutes he dashed to the tap and gulped water; then he went back to his steady smoking of bludged tobacco. He was completely broke and by lending him tobacco I began to get to know him and to post his letters to his wife to inform her of his whereabouts. I learnt he was well educated and that he had no faith in himself. Ah, here was a case for me; I freely gave of my advice gleaned from a few after-exam bashes.



"Happy birthday, Mr. Conan"

He was away for two days in the second week of work and returned looking sick and stating that to-day was his birthday. The butchers look round at this statement, put down their knives and we all formed a circle around him. Here we were in a dirty stinking pen, all generously daubed with blood, the lambs bleating, their fellows lying with gashed throats, the constant whirr of machinery; gathered around a thick-set

man, singing "Happy Birthday, Mr. Conan," while he wagged his head up and down in time. There was something about the scene that made me sing very loudly.

TOHATI was a happy man. He was a Maori butcher with a balding head, a wide mouth with a few scattered friendly-looking teeth and a heavenly baritone. He sang lullabies while he was cutting throats and spirituals as he hooked lambs on to the elevator. I found out that he had sung overseas and I could never understand why he was happy with his present work. There was just a hint of a clue in his twinkling eyes which made life seem like one tremendous joke.

Yes, they were a strange crowd, but when I came to say *au revoir* to them and the stink and feel of the works I knew I was changed. I had learnt something all right—not to understand the dregs of society but to glimpse some pretty fine people. Mr. Conan had disappeared, Tohati's voice followed me to the bus, Darky shook my hand without a word, the lambs bleated for the last time and I heard knives being sharpened for next morning when I would be back studying.

I SHOUTED a last good-bye from the bus, rolled a smoke and tried to think of the coming Varsity year—of abstract discussions, exam cramming, wild parties, traditional customs and all the rest that make up the life, but my mind always returned to a spiritual, harmonising the steady symphony of slaughter with the whirring hooks and the screeching knives, the scared sounds and smell of lambs, the steady stream of blood in the drains and a serious boy trying to sing *Q'un sang impur* . . .

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