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Without erosion New Zealand would be uninhabitable."

"Have you read Cumberland's book?"

"What name?"

"Cumberland."

"No, I've never heard of it. But you don't have to read a book to see where the good soil comes from."

"Or the dust storms."

"We don't have many dust storms here. But what if we had? The dust settles again somewhere. They told us at Lincoln that the Port Hills are just covered rock—erupted stuff buried in the dust from the plains."

"You listen to the experts sometimes?"

"When they talk sense. Not when they give you half a story and hope you'll forget the other half."

"What's the other half of erosion?"

The answer was the tangle of lucerne at his feet, but he was too irritable to think of that. He mumbled something that I did not hear, then walked round to the mower blade and pulled it back a yard. The discussion was over. But when he was in his seat again, steering the tractor with one hand and tripping the mower with the other, watching ahead but all the time glancing back, age settled on him a second time and I found it hard to see him as one of the new school of farmers whose science their fathers regard with such suspicion.

* * *

IF I had not been reared in a district in which everything was either black or white, every man against you who was not for you, and every politician a scoundrel who said No when the answer your interests demanded was Yes,

RAILWAY ROUTES

I might have found it strange that the railway line in Reefton kept such a safe distance from the town. But I had seen a man's arm broken in a brawl over a survey peg. I had seen a family walk out of church when another family walked in who supported a different railway route. I had seen fences cut and neighbours threatening one another with violence over a proposed road deviation of 30 or 40 chains. I had been in Tapanui and I knew the story of Cheviot.

So I did not have to ask what had happened in Reefton. I knew that it would be some variation of that original theme; as a resident soon told me that it was. And when I had returned to the east coast again and reached Kaikoura—distracted from politics by an epidemic of typhoid—I knew that there must be a similar explanation of the cleavage there. I did not bother to ask, and I do not yet know, what local convulsion had divided that lovely little township in two. I knew that it would not seem a strange story if anyone had gone out of his way to tell it to me.

Most of all I knew that it would not be a story at which any outsider could scoff unless he had long ago sold all his possessions and given them to the poor. There is no city in New Zealand,

and no street, in which someone is not holding out his hand for increments that he has not earned or laying plans for diverting the stream of traffic his way. Not to do it ranks as folly, and the folly usually leads to failure. But when a farmer does it, or tries and fails, when his triumph appears on a map and his failure becomes a local legend, he is a rogue or a fool for two generations. I was not looking for rogues in Reefton or for fools in Kaikoura; nor am I trying to draw attention to them now. I am drawing attention to the fools we all are, and must always be, if we think we can eat our cake and have it too—exploit one another and wholly escape the consequences. I am writing my own epitaph.

* * *

AMONG the surprises of back country roads are the invitations you receive in unexpected places to stop for tea. I can remember the day when the only notices you ever say in No Man's Land were the crude X's of somebody's brewery, not always put there by the brewer himself, or equally crude reminders of

MORNING TEA

the Day of Judgment. I don't think the last were ever intended to be jokes, or ever put there by zealots with a sense of humour, but one warning that used to recur as often as there was a rock face to carry it was "Prepare to Meet thy God." The first time I saw it I thought it had been left by a wag with strong opinions about the piece of road that followed, a long steep hill subject to slips. But in those days no one joked about God.

In the same way when I saw "Morning Tea" on a broken piece of box board on the roadside near the Boyle river I suspected a more modern wag and was not inclined to stop. Then it occurred to me suddenly that I might be wrong, and when I went back I thought that no tea sign I had ever seen had stopped me with better justification. The kettle was steaming on the stove and the stove was burning wood. The scones were fresh from the oven and the cakes home-made. I had two cups of tea and was offered three, and soon had a strong conviction that the inspiration to open that tea-room came from the lady's heart and not out of her purse. So I asked her how she came to be there.

"I could not believe that your sign was real," I said to her. "What brought you to a place like this?"

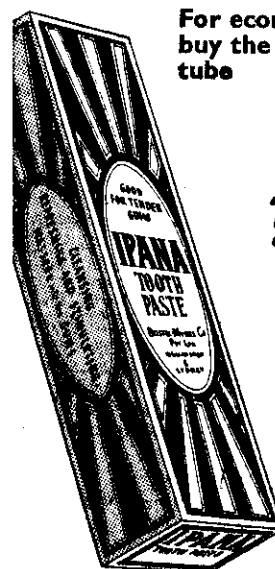
"Hunger; hunger and thirst. I arrived here one night to visit my brother who was helping to build a bridge. I was wet and cold, and the cup of tea he gave me was heavenly. Then the idea got into my head that others passed along the same road in the same state and that it would be lovely to bring them into a warm room and give them a steaming cup of tea. So here I am. It's rough, but they seem to like it."

Of course they like it. Fresh tea, crisp cakes, a singing kettle, the smell of burning wood—many lonely miles from anywhere. But it is only women who go into business to give pleasure to other people. Men never have such nice impulses as that, or translate them into action if by any chance they do have them.

(To be continued)



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