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Through N.Z. To-day (XXXVIII)

Underneath the Larches

By "SUNDOWNER"

I HAVE a brother whose dramatic sense is so much more active than my own that he once described a gale to me as strong enough to compel him to throw himself to the ground—he weighs about 200 pounds—and hold on to the tussocks to avoid being swept away. He was on the top of a ridge, he told me, and as he clung desperately to his hold his legs flapped in the wind like trousers on a clothes line.

BIG WINDS

I've lived too long in Wellington, and the windier parts of North Canterbury and West Otago, to be disturbed by an ordinary gale, but I was twice on this southern journey reminded of the fate of my romantic brother. The first time, I was driving from Burke's Pass to Tekapo and was caught by a wind that came at me with a roar that frightened me. If I had not been driving straight into it, I should probably have had to shelter in the only cutting till the gale speed dropped from whatever it was to 40 or 50 miles. The second time, I was near Blackstone Hill on the way to Naseby, and the trouble in this case was that the wind caught me on my stern quarter and pushed me so hard that I could not drive my top-heavy vehicle in a straight line. I did not have to attach myself to the tussocks, but I had the feeling that I was moving sideways as well as forwards like a big mechanical crab, and I was glad when I dropped into the slight dip of Ranfurly and found shelter in the lee of the hotel.

IT was a strangely moving experience to sit in the vacant station of the Naseby Fire Brigade. I went there on the suggestion of a man who told me that he had spent all his life in Naseby and remembered a time when both sides of the road on which we were standing were filled with offices and shops. He had seen them disappear one by one, but told me that if I went up to the brigade station I would see some of the old faces.

FIRE BRIGADE

He was right about the faces. I found the butchers and bakers, the watchmakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, publicans, and miners who for 80 years had protected this high settlement against fire. I am sure they never failed to answer a call whether the thermometer stood at 90deg. or at nine; and if their engine was just a high-wheeled drum pulled and operated by hand, I found it as affectionately preserved and polished as if it had cost them thousands of pounds. They had given it what money could never have bought, faith and devotion, and it had given them safety.

But it had done more than that. It had brought and kept them together for three generations.

This was their club-room, their meeting house. Its story was their story for many hours every week. Round the walls were not only the faces of past brigadesmen but home-made concert programmes, invitations to smoke concerts and dances, cartoons and jokes, all sobered up in the most solemn way with a reminder that in the end we all die.

If it was impossible to laugh with those bygone humorists, whose jokes had long lost all meaning and savour, it was impossible to laugh at them. Their own grandchildren can draw better, paint better, do far better lettering, but it has yet to be seen how they will react if destiny lands them in as tough a spot as Naseby was for 50 or 60 years. In any case I have no inclination to laugh at men who do necessary jobs that I am too selfish to do myself. The man who has worn a fire brigade helmet for 40 years may laugh at it if he feels inclined, but the laughter of those who have sat by the fire while others have trained is a little too offensive to be endured.

THEY told me in the "Ancient Briton" in Naseby that if I went out the back door, up the tailings and over the hill I would see a sluicing claim working. I not only saw it. I spent half a day in the claim itself, seeing everything that there was to see there, and if it had been washing-up day when I arrived I could have seen

THIRD GENERATION MINERS

that too. It still seems strange to me that the partners (Hore and Brown) were so open and frank, but gold secrets belong to the past. It used to be the case, Mr. Hore explained, that a miner would not venture on another man's workings without an invitation, but he welcomed anybody who came openly.

"It's a lonely job standing at a nozzle all day, and visitors make a pleasant break. Anyhow we have nothing to hide."

(continued on next page)



"There will be a forest here in another hundred years"

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