

## Earthquakes Are Wonderful

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She realised what was happening, and looked at me a little fearfully. I explained it was only a small one. I guessed it would be about two or three by the Ross-Ferrari measurement, and this reassured her. Anything you can measure is very reassuring. It gives you a basis for comparison. Perhaps you remember, when you were young and susceptible to corporal punishment, how reassuring it was to realise that the whacking you got last night was only half as bad as the one you had last week. It is that way with earthquakes, and Messrs. Ross and Ferrari are to be thanked for giving us this method of computing the extent of our fear and trembling. If you are only scared two points out of a possible ten then you get over it quickly. On the other hand, if you are scared ten out of the possible you're scared near to death and you don't want it to happen again. Unless, of course, you're sadistic, like me, and take a morbid interest in calamity. Huh!

AFTER that one in October I naturally felt pretty confident about my prophecy, and I went around with renewed vigour telling my friends that this year we were due to get a good one. I even pointed out to some of them which way I thought the different hillsides would slip, and I discussed with them the probable fate of reclaimed land. We talked of the geological fault, or whatever it is, that happens across Cook Strait, and causes all that trouble for small boats when the tide rip hits it; off Cape Terawhiti I think that happens. It struck me as an amusing idea that the North Island should loosen its grip on the surface of the world at this spot, leaving the South to represent New Zealand on the map, as it should anyway, in spite of E. Earle Vaile.

I don't know about my friends, but I have a healthy imagination, and I can imagine that cliff in the bed of the ocean. I can see the darkness down there, and the deep green of the things that grow and trail in the water. I can imagine the tide hastening through the Straits and hitting this cliff, and I can see with my own eyes what happens when this uprush of moving water comes to the surface. The waves do not flow. They dance up and down, so that if you are in a small boat your movement is not rolling, but a series of very disconcerting heaves and slaps. I can imagine also how horrible it would be for one of us to be living down there in the half light and to feel the water agitated by some foreign movement in the world underneath, and to see this cliff slipping off like butter when you scrape a knife against the edge of a plate.

That would be pretty horrible, although I do not say that some of us would not be the better for seeing a few things like that occasionally. We are not, after all, sufficiently sensitive to horror. Ordinary human beings, if my book and Bible learnings are true, would faint in horror at many everyday things that go on in the cities where they live. Perhaps the book learning is not true after all and human beings are not so nice in fact.

NATURALLY, with all this talk, she became a bit worked up about earthquakes, and I don't deny that I was imagining a bit too vividly myself.

However, to come to the end of the story. One day after some bad weather when the sky had cleared and the sun was out again, everyone in the office felt pretty good. We fooled a good bit and the typists danced when they ran, and ran when they walked in the way they have in springtime. I felt so good I rang her up at her work and we chatted a bit and she said, "Come up to-night." I said I didn't think I would, seeing I'd been up the night before. So she said what was I doing? I said nothing, which was true, and which I hoped to keep being true. But she said, "Come for a hike." I said, "Yes, I would come for a walk." So we fixed it up.

I decided we'd walk round one particular road so as to cross the viaduct I've mentioned before. This we did, and when we came near the viaduct I looked down at the road with the tramlines on it pretty far below and I remembered what I had thought that afternoon. It was this: if we should be walking round this spot and an earthquake came it would be a good place to get out of. It would be wise, I considered, to run back. If we went forward we should get where the valley is narrow and its sides steep. If anything slipped that would be where it would slip. If we ran back we would quickly get to a place where the hillside sloped less steeply and here there would be less chance of a slip.

I WAS remembering these things, and it was just as well, for while I remembered sure enough it came. The rumble this time was a real one. There was no mistaking it. It was the rumble of the rocks heaving and the earth moving, and over it came the rumble of houses rocking and shaking down and concrete work moving and cracking and buckling out. "This way," I said, and I had her by the hand. She was silent, and I felt pretty cool, having got myself ready for this situation. It was awkward running with only one hand to swing, but I held on believing that she would gain confidence from me. I ran pretty fast, and she dragged a little behind. I said, "You're not running very fast, darling." She let go my hand and swung into it. I let her catch up and get an inch or two in front so I could see her better and keep pace.

We were getting clear of the big concrete facing to the cutting, and I was thinking that it would be all right in a moment when we were clear of that place where the two-storey houses come high over the road, when it came on us from behind. It was difficult running, for the movement was very irregular. All I remember now is that one convulsion caught me on a forward balance and set me scuttling to catch up on my weight. It must have caught her on her back foot, because when I caught up on myself and turned round to look through the dust she was not there. Neither was the concrete facing, nor the houses above it, and I hurried on to the place where the road widened and a man could grab a tree and have something to hold on to.

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