

Over the Fence and Into the Trees

by "SUNDOWNER"

YESTERDAY I had a letter from Wanganui, and today one has come from Dunedin, telling me what I should already have known about Donald Grant Mitchell, namely, that he was the American "Ik. Marvel" who wrote *Dream Life* and *Reveries of a Bachelor*. I am not so much ashamed of my ignorance, however, as surprised at it, since I did once struggle through *Dream Life*.

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It was a harder struggle than reading that other American bachelor Washington Irving, who probably influenced Mitchell without helping him—a service the little so often get from the big. I could, I suppose, read Knickerbocker's *History of New York* with a little more interest now than it aroused in me 40 years ago, but I am not eager to try. If I had to turn back to Irving today, and had freedom of choice, I would try one of his biographies (Columbus, Mahomet, or Oliver Goldsmith); but I don't want to go back to him, and can think of no good reason why I should.

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I NEVER cease to be surprised at the difficulty I find in doing nothing when I am alone and at the ease with which I relapse into idleness when help comes over the fence or through the gate. For weeks I have been making myself tired thinking of a job that became more and more exhausting as I assembled the materials and used up my excuses for further delay—the putting up of a dog-proof, fowl-proof fence a hundred yards long on a line that rises about one foot in four. Now it is done, a delight to my

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eyes, and a lift to my mind, and my chief contribution has been carrying the tools for two younger men. I don't know when I would have started if they had not forced my hand, but the moment I surrendered my spade I dropped my whole bundle and found no difficulty at all in looking on idly while they worked.

Of course, we talked, too, and I was inclined to argue when Jim said that the bluegum stakes I had bought were the only return New Zealand was likely to get from the thousands of gum trees it had planted. But he had facts to argue with and I had only feelings. Gums to me mean sunshine, bees, spring, twittering starlings, childhood. Central Otago. To Jim they mean scale, withered limbs, plantations that have gone wrong, logs that won't split, trunks that break your saw and your heart. And when he returned after lunch he showed us something else that they have brought to New Zealand—a tortoise-shaped beetle as big as a pea that will carry on the war against us if we finally conquer all the breeds of scale. I had to agree that the commercial prospects for eucalypts are a little dim, but I hope New Zealand will go on planting them. I saw a gum-tree a few years ago in Kenepuru Sound that will remain with me as long as I have a memory for trees. It was then, I believe, about 80 years old, and those who see it when it is twice eighty will thank God for the pioneer who planted it.

* * *

I AM not going to carry on the argument about blue-gums (as we so vaguely call them), but when I tried today to move a temporary fence I put up 20 years ago the light, twisted, split stakes were still quite sound. I can't remember what they cost me then, and

I can't think how I drove such spindly things so far into the ground; but if my new fence

proves as durable it will be some other poor sinner's job to patch or replace it. I should like to feel as confident that half a dozen young gums I have been watching for eight or nine years will still be growing in beauty and strength when my new posts and stakes have rotted away. Though the tallest is now about 30 feet, with a trunk near the ground eight or nine inches through. They are not as robust as I should like them to be—and as they perhaps would be if I could persuade myself to trap and kill the opossums that take the young leaves.

They will, however, never be big trees as we already measure bigness in this very young country—I mean, of course, bigness created since white men arrived. Our really big trees were here a thousand years ago, and some of them earlier than that. But there is a chestnut tree in New Plymouth bigger already in 80 or 90 years than any I saw in England or America; there is a walnut in Butcher's Gully, near Alexandra, under which 500 men could hide; there is Macmahon's gum-tree in the Marlborough Sounds—a hundred feet high and 30 feet round. My gums will never be breathtaking, soul-stirring, presences like those, since they are growing on shallow soil and clay, with a foundation of volcanic rock. But they will perhaps never blow down; and if they escape fire, blight, scale, beetles and lunatics armed with axes, they may still be standing when wires and telegraph poles have disappeared and fencing posts are required no longer.

(To be continued)



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