

same cheery voice saluted him as its owner took a chair opposite.

'Hello, Mr. Raymond!' he exclaimed. 'Genuine Christmas weather, this. Snapping, hearty, gorgeous, isn't it? Christmas is in the air.'

Gordon Raymond, unclosing his eyes, nodded several times without lifting his head.

'Yes,' he answered, slowly. 'Genuine Christmas weather, and—er—Christmas is generally in the air about this time of the year, isn't it?'

But Bob Windthrop's high spirits could not be dashed because Gordon Raymond was not enthusiastic.

'Each Christmas seems happier to me than the one that preceded it,' he said. 'The boys make it lively—I've four youngsters, you know, and I'll guarantee we have a-much fun to the square inch—'

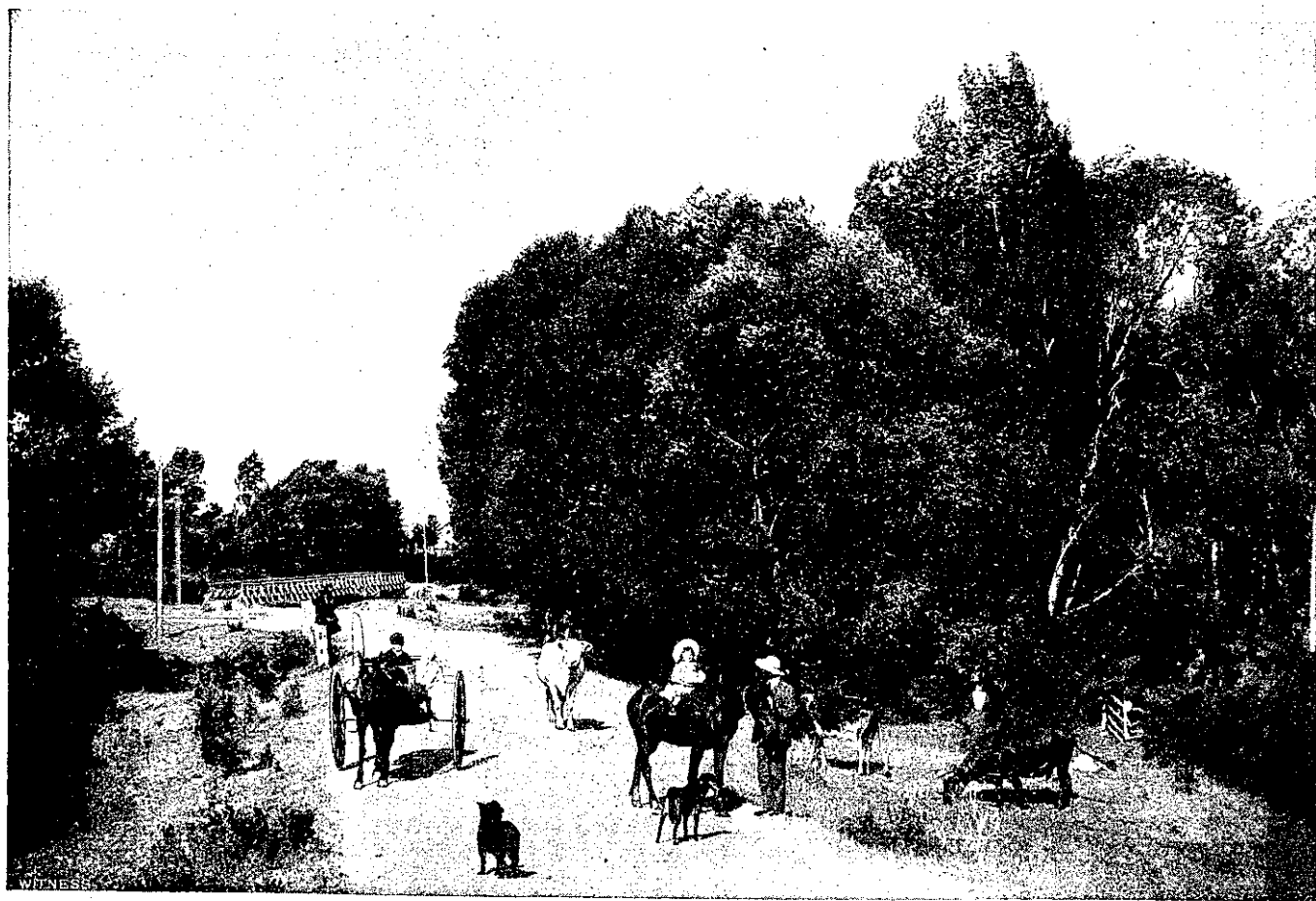
He paused suddenly. He was indeed a gay-hearted fellow, not too young, with a splendid home, a lovely wife and happy, healthy children. But he had not gone through life untouched by its pain, and he read the signs now in the white countenance opposite him.

'Of course, of course!' cried the young man hastily. 'I didn't know, Raymond. In fact, you've surprised me. I thought—every one believes—of course, that is another thing. Well, a merry Christmas, a merry Christmas! I must be going on. I just dropped in to see if I could catch Peters and take him back with me. Peters is god-father to my youngest, and I suppose I'm a fool over them, but Peters is worse than I am. A merry Christmas, Raymond, and to'—with a curious look—'a merry Christmas to your daughter too!'

He rose, turned, but his gaze lingered on the old man's face. There was an unwonted brightness in his eyes as he went down the room.

'The poor old chap!' he whispered under his breath. 'The poor, lonely old chap—with all his money.'

At the door he met Peters. Peters had already despatched almost a half vanload of toys to the Windthrop domicile, but Peters now bore under his arm several suspicious-looking bundles, and his pockets were full to overflowing. Peters was younger than his lifelong friend, Bob, but not yet as happy, as Bob told him, since he was



RURAL SCENE, MILL ROAD, WAIMATE.

'I say, I really forgot you didn't have any one,' he began in an altered tone. 'Lots of friends, oh—of course—but you know—well, you know what I mean.' He paused. The other, neither by word nor sign, filled up that pause. 'Do me a favor, will you, Raymond? We'll have none of the old folks this year. Neither of Marion's parents are alive, and mine are still in Europe on account of the father's health, so we must keep Christmas without them. Will you come home with me? There's nobody in that big house of yours to care, and—oh, hang it all, Raymond, it must be a bit lonesome for you! Come on, and let those lads of mine pester you a bit!'

He ended so cheerfully, so boyishly, that Gordon Raymond bent forward. A smile crept to his thin lips, and from his lips to his eyes.

'I'd be tempted to accept, Bob,' he said. 'I would, indeed, but that I take Christmas dinner to-morrow with my daughter.'

Bob Windthrop's eyes widened.

'Your—'

'My daughter, yes; my daughter Adele. Under the circumstances—'

still single. Now, as they went out together, Windthrop indicated that quiet figure in the chair by a nod.

'I just asked Raymond to the house. He declined; says he's going to dine with his daughter to-morrow. Who's his daughter?'

'Never heard he had one,' said Peters. 'Never knew he was married. Sure he said his daughter?'

'His daughter Adele—those were the words.'

'Oh, his mind must be wandering.'

'Poor old chap, poor old chap!' repeated Bob Windthrop. 'If I told Marion that it would spoil her Christmas.'

'Then for goodness' sake, don't tell her!' exclaimed Peters, very energetically. 'There's enough unhappiness in the world without making her unhappy. Why, Bob, every time I see Marion I only hope I can bring that look to Nell's face.'

'Well, you've every prospect,' said Bob, laughing. 'Both young, hearty, cheerful, and of like tastes.'

And so the 'poor, lonely, rich old man,' with his chilled heart and empty soul, drifted out of the conversation, and even the thoughts of these happy folk, to whom the delights