

THE CHURCH IN NEW ZEALAND

MEMOIRS OF THE EARLY DAYS

(Contributed.)

WESTLAND GOLD DIGGINGS.

(Continued.)

Leaving Try Again, Father Binsfeld started for what was then the centre of this group of mining places. On the way he called at Callaghan's, another small diggings upon high terrace land. This had to be done on foot, making his way through mud and streamlets as best he could, but the terrace had to be ascended by literally crawling on all fours and by pulling oneself by the aid of tree roots. Late in the afternoon he reached his next station. This was an alluvial digging in a dense forest and in full working order, as was evident from the number water-races met with on nearing the place. On arriving at the hotel the proprietor's welcome was the reverse of cordial, neither was the reception of the miners very encouraging, for reasons that need not be entered into here. Next day Mass was well attended, although it was a working day, and the good pastor left with an easier heart than when he came. He now retraced his steps down the Grey River Valley to No Town. This had been a populous centre for a few years, but like Try Again he found it deserted and desolate, only a few straggling claims being worked, almost the whole mining community having moved on further afield. The following day being Sunday Mass was celebrated, with but few in attendance. Later on he moved onwards towards a more recently discovered goldfield. A blazed track, through a dense and swampy forest, marked the way. This meant simply a projected track without any formation, the direction being marked either by a chip out from the bark of a tree or a broken down branch. This was not an easy task, and one requiring time and patience to make headway over a spongy ground, filled with water and thickly covered with bush, or along the stream of a creek running between high and narrow banks. To keep in the right direction in this maze was the first thing to be kept in mind, but a lookout for the horse's safe stepping place was quite as necessary. One had to lay flat down on the horse's neck to pass under projecting branches, and whilst the attention was thus divided in different directions off goes the hat, brushed away by the branches, or the whip is torn out of the hand in like manner. Towards sunset an opening in the forest revealed the locality of the new El Dorado, which had the appearance of a small canvas township, the dwellings being in cottage form and covered in with canvas from roof to ground. Dismounting and taking off the saddle, no sooner was the bit removed from the horse's mouth than he turned round and made for the wilderness. It took more than a week to find him again. A packer returning to Greymouth allowed Father Binsfeld to join him on one of his horses, and thus he got home and ended his first journey to the diggings. Going over the same ground some months later those places where his mission in the first instance had been fruitless now proved a veritable stronghold of the faith. From then onwards his work on the goldfields of the Grey district turned out to be the happiest part of his missionary career in New Zealand and elsewhere.

Father Columb.

On my return to Greymouth, states Father Binsfeld, I found Father Columb installed at the presbytery as parish priest of the mission, a position I did not in the least begrudge him. He was my senior, and I had known him in England, and knew that in a short time he would prove the right man in the right place. For seventeen years he had been in charge of the small but comfortable mission of Romford in England, where he was in continual intercourse with leading Catholic families, such as Lord Petre's. Hence, on his arrival, the people, on account of his easy and refined manner and way of speaking, looked upon him as a real English gentleman. That he was master of the English language was proved in conversation and in the pulpit. He had no experience of what was meant by 'roughing it' on the diggings. The life of the digger was passed in mud and water all day long, dressed only in a pair of moleskin trousers; a stout pair of water-tight boots, and a flannel shirt. Civilization, as far as good manners, good habits, thriftiness, sobriety, etc., as a general thing were concerned, was at that time at a low ebb. This was not surprising, considering that the gold-mining population was a gathering of people composed of many nationalities. Father Columb took at once his stand against the prevailing disorders, and he was the man for it. People somewhat feared for the result, but he had great knowledge of men, coupled with tact and

sympathetic feeling for the failings of the poor and ignorant. With these qualities he soon worked himself into the right groove of his position; he proved, as at first predicted, he right man in the right place, and won the esteem and respect of all. His first move in the parish was the purchase of a house which he turned into a school. This property was unfortunately later on washed away by the river whilst in flood. He delivered a series of able, original lectures on education, which were followed by a second series on the vice of intemperance, full of illustrations of what was going on around him, and a scathing denunciation of the fearful disorders on the West Coast of those days. In the meantime he carried on a regular house-to-house visitation of his parishioners, and by these various means gained the full confidence of and entire control over his people. They were proud of him.

The Miner and His Haunts.

Whilst Father Columb was thus engaged in Greymouth Father Binsfeld followed his favorite occupation of living and moving among the diggers up country, which he found delightful and most congenial. There was first the novelty of a new unopened country, rugged in every direction, resplendent in scenery, and so unlike any other territory he had yet seen. The very dangers of travelling carried with them a feeling of pleasure gained by adventure. Then there was the life of the diggers, so full of interest. There were thousands of men scattered in smaller or larger numbers all over the wilderness, and at times in almost inaccessible spots, where the horse had to be left behind, and the priest had to carry the saddle-bag containing the vestments, etc., on his shoulders to reach them. Dressed in the proverbial moleskins, flannel shirt, and a pair of boots of the strongest material, the soles of which were mostly of iron, the miners stood in mud and water all day long and all the year round, washing away, by hydraulic power, high terraces or the face of mountains, great forest trees and rock-like masses of stone coming down in quick succession. But this was only a preparation to lay open the substratum of gold-bearing ground, which consisted of earth, sand, and gravel. The whole of this was dug out and thrown into a water-race, and thus the gold was separated from all alluvial matter. Sometimes the ground would be rich, and a man would make £10 to £14 a week, but these were exceptions; generally it would be less, and in numberless cases it turned out a 'duffer,' and the men who had worked together would dissolve partnership and disperse. Butchers and storekeepers, who had supplied them, would in such cases share the ill-success, that being an understood and arranged custom between diggers and their suppliers. It was the frequency of such failures that verified the strange anomaly that, on the whole, the expense of getting the gold cost more than it was worth. The diggers generally worked their claims in small companies of four to six men. These would for the time being live together, their common expenses being defrayed out of the return of the claim, and the surplus divided in equal parts among them. Their meals consisted of beef, black tea, and 'damper.' These were as a rule the only articles of food that could be conveyed to them for want of communication. When Father Binsfeld was their guest he would receive a liberal portion of these luxuries. As long as the diggers worked they were industrious and orderly. They had to keep to their claims, as absence from them, except on official holidays, gave anyone the right to 'jump' it, and make it his lawful property. Though they were a gathering of all nationalities, they lived and toiled together in harmony, and entertained fellow-feelings one towards another. The Russian 'Charley,' the Norwegian 'Jensen,' the German 'Michael' felt themselves as much at home as 'Pat' or 'Tommy.' They had an *esprit de corps* among themselves; they formed a class apart—a fine lot of men, independent and proud of their position. The whole range of society had their representatives among them, from the nobleman, the university man, and the clergyman, down to the ordinary working man. 'What pleasant nights were spent among them when time allowed me,' states Father Binsfeld, 'to admit scholars to my hut, and to hear quotations from Virgil, Horace, Homer, etc., longer and more varied than I could recite, or to hear them speak as learned men on a variety of interesting subjects. On the whole, they were a class of men one could not help liking and admiring, on account of their good-natured dispositions. Two serious evils they were, however, subject to especially. Gold-fever was one of them; that is, they thirsted after riches, and when they had earned sufficient capital to retire and enjoy ease and comfort, or engage in some other pursuit, they would invest all they had in greater mining undertakings. These generally turned out failures, and then, penniless once more, they had to begin life again. The other evil was far more deplorable. In selling their gold at the bank the diggers would get their pockets filled with loose bank notes; with these they would go to a drinking saloon,