



Benediction



DESPITE the fact that it was the middle of summer, a southerly was coming up. Already the southern sky was darkened with rapidly gathering clouds and the freshening wind had an unmistakable feeling of rain. Fearing that he might be caught without his coat, old Sam hurried toward his whare. He was not making rapid progress, for he had long since seen the best years of his life; in fact he had been a shepherd on this Wairarapa station for ten, twenty, yes—nearly thirty years. He had seen it hewn from the bush; he had, indeed, helped and had cut and shaped from its timbers enough material to build his own whare. Now he needed a stick to help him along, and his haste to reach shelter before the storm broke left him panting for breath.

Just before the door he paused, looked round, and whistled. "Here, boy!" he called, and an anxious pause followed. Round the side of the whare came trotting an old collie. The old shepherd leant down and patted the shaggy head, and together the two entered the rude shelter. They were part of one another's lives, these two, and both were growing old in the solitude of the back country. But Sam would not wish it otherwise, for he had grown to love the quietness and simplicity of the life. He had two great friends: his dog, Tim, and a radio set his employer had given him a year or so previous.

Sam would have none of it at first, and it was hours before he could be persuaded to even touch the dials. However, curiosity eventually overcame his fear, and he cautiously advanced a timid hand. By a happy chance the first movement of the dials resulted in a burst of melody from the loudspeaker. After that Sam would not miss a minute when he was not out with the sheep. He had been given an interest in the happenings of the great world outside—an interest which made his days brighter and his homecomings eager.

HIS simple meal over, and his dog fed, the old shepherd settled down in front of the fire to enjoy the evening programme. " . . . To-morrow night will be Christmas Eve, and we are presenting a special midnight church service. . . ." Sam, with a guilty start, realised he had completely forgotten it was Christmas, and the thought of it revived haunting memories of the gay Christmases of his youth. Then he was young, happy, and surrounded by friends. He had no one now to wish him a merry Christmas—no one to care whether he lived or died, except Tim.

"Tim, old pal," he muttered, as the dog snuggled his head between the old man's knees, "we're outcasts, but we're coppers." And as a bushy tail swished the uneven floor, two full brown eyes shining at him spoke their assent. Yes, they were coppers, and who else mattered?

THE following afternoon, and grey clouds scudded overhead, driven by a strong wind. Occasional showers lashed the

THE story of what radio meant in the life of a lonely old shepherd, and how in death it "helped him through."

—By A.E.R.

old shepherd's face as he knelt leaning over the bluff that rose steeply behind his whare. But Sam didn't notice the weather—didn't realise his clothes were sodden and his cap was gone. He was peering out of tear-dimmed eyes at a brown, huddled shape lying ominously still on a projecting ledge some fifty feet below. His face was working, and he was moaning piteously. His dog, his old companion and help-mate, lay down there crushed and broken. He couldn't believe it—it had happened so suddenly. Tim had been rushing along the cliff edge, intent on turning back a sheep that had left the flock. The rain-sodden brink had given way and the dog made one desperate jump for safety. Sam could see him now, half on his side, his four feet pawing madly against the soil that wasn't there. The almost human wail that rose when he finally hurtled downward still rang in the old man's ears.

"Tim; Tim, old boy," he half sobbed. There was a faint responding stir as a tail moved just slightly—just enough to kindle a wild hope.

Very cautiously, but without hesitation, Sam lowered himself over the cliff-edge, groping with his feet for holds. Infinitely slowly, and with an intense concentration on the rocky face before him, he worked his way toward the ledge where his dog lay. The exertion was almost too much for a man so old, but at last he reached it, shaking from the tremendous strain on his muscles and nerves. He crawled slowly along to the still form, and knelt beside it. His trembling hands moved over the shaggy coat, eagerly at first, but more slowly as no responsive tremor met his touch. He raised the limp head—there was just a move-

ment of the eyes and a slight swish of the tail, then no more.

Tim was dead. His dog; his pal, who had stuck by him, easing his labours, lessening his loneliness, had, after fifteen years of devoted service, left him. People said that when animals died they were finished with—cast aside. Sam pondered. Why shouldn't dogs like old Tim have some reward waiting for them on the other side? He shook his grey head dully. Perhaps everyone was wrong.

Perhaps there was some kind of dog's heaven. He fervently hoped so, for his old comrade's sake.

Carefully, very carefully, his hands clutching the rock wall, Sam stood upright and looked over the brink. He shuddered, and at the movement sank back on the ledge, every nerve fluttering. Below him lay his whare. He looked again and felt dizzy and slightly sick. Curious, but he'd never noticed the shack's chimney was slanting so much. Perhaps it wasn't so noticeable from the ground. His mind was wandering, and with an effort he brought it back to his present terrible plight.

He was certain he couldn't climb up again, and now his dog's need was past, he wondered how he had ever been able to get down to the ledge. His eyes returned to the still, brown form at his side. No, he couldn't possibly take Tim. He'd have to leave him there.

Feeling around and crawling backward and forward along the ledge, he collected a heap of stones, and these he tenderly piled on the inert body. He placed the last stone in position, and with dimmed eyes paused for a moment in wordless farewell.

He crept along to the end of his resting-place, and after pausing a few seconds to steady his nerves, turned round and slowly lowered his body over the void. Gradually he worked his way lower. His muscles ached and his hands were cut and bleeding. Half way down he rested awhile, panting heavily, and then cautiously lowered an exploring foot. He encountered nothing, and a dizzy nausea enveloped him, threatening to tear him from his hold to crash on the rocks beneath.

But the spasm passed, and with his hands clinging desperately to a niche, and his whole body pressed hard against the cliff face, he forced himself to look downward. About four feet below him, but a little to one side, lay a small ledge a few inches in width.

It was his one chance. He waited a few moments, and with a coolness born of desperation, gradually lowered his body until he was crouching. His fingers sought eagerly for the crevice, found it, and clutched. His feet swung downward and to the side, groped, and touched the ledge. He'd done it, and in a rush of exhilaration (Concluded on page 8.)