Cameos of Colonial Life and Character.

BEING THE REMINISCENCES, RUMINATIONS, AND ROVINGS OF AN OLD COLONIST.

BY THE AUTOCRATIC IDLER.

No. III.—A DIOGENES OF THE PACIFIC.

WHETHER the hatred of man, the love of woman, or downright laziness, drove him where we found him, nobody can very precisely tell. There he was, anyway: there he has been for fourteen years. And, I can assure you, he looked as if he had suffered grievously, not from any one of these complaints, but from all three—and more especially the last, which perhaps, is the most deadly of the various maladies specified, as well as the most anromantic.

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We didn't go to see him (as people in general do) in a four-horse drag, along a road not at all bad, as roads in New Zealand go. As it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon we took to the hills, from the summit of some of which one gets a charming view of three boroughs, to say nothing of a suggestion of a large city—all within a very moderate space, by no means well populated. Island Bay, indeed, enjoys the privilege of being a ward, all by itself, in the Borough of Melrose. There are, I think, a dozen ratepayers in the whole ward, and if they don't enjoy the blessings of Home Rule and self-government—why it is the simplest thing in the world to split the ward into two. Of course, as we were in search of a short cut to our destination, we missed our way more than once; and it was five o'clock in the evening when we heard the murmur of the ocean, and got round to the rocks by the sea amongst which is the Hermit's Cave.

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How this cavern came into existence is no more clear than how the hermit came to take up his abode therein. The hermit himself, I venture to say, never made such a spacious hole anywhere in the earth's surface, in his life; the sea, evidently, did not make it; the Maoris did not make it. The entrance, for all the world looks like the commencement of a miner's tunnel, the front of which had got somewhat battered by the wind and the rain; but, inside, the cavity extends itself in an irregular manner, to a height of from 6 to 12 feet, for a distance of maybe 15 feet or so. There it stops, and I see no reason why it shouldn't. Water trickles down through the stones above; the floor is of sand. On looking into the cavern one at first sees nothing but black darkness. Presently a not unpleasant voice invites us to enter if we will—and as we do so an outstretched arm in the distance indicates a seat like a carpenter's trestle. In five minutes or so, we are able to see distinctly the hermit himself, who sits opposite to the entrance to the cave on a seat somewhat similar to our own. There is literally nothing else visible in the cavity beyond what has been mentioned. The hermit sleeps, no doubt—indeed, he told us that for fourteen years during which he had lived his lonely life, he had, every night slept well for some hours. But no bed or bed clothes are visible, nor yet a stick of firewood, nor washbasin, nor table, nor pannikin, nor kettle. He said he was fond of reading, and read a good deal. But not a solitary scrap of paper was about the premises; and when we offered to send him an occasional copy of the Wellington *Post*, he said he was already full up of that stupendous publication.

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In general appearance, I am sorry to say, the hermit reminded me of 'General' Booth. He looks as General Booth might look if the General resided in such a cave, for fourteen years. He has the same hawk face, that the General has, and otherwise strongly resembles him. But his eye is more restless, and his beard more shaggy and unkempt. The General, too, is a much older man—the hermit is not much over fifty years of age. What his name is, or history, no one, I think, knows. The man is, evidently, not an ordinary working man: in fact he is no working man at all, and very likely never has been one. About ships, and the Royal Navy he seems to know a good deal: but he can speak tolerably fluently on other subjects too—and more especially on religion and politics. With regard to the latter he conversed freely; expressing the opinion that politicians in general were humbugs—'Sir William Fox said so—himself a humbug,' he reflected. It was curious to hear him speak of Mr Seddon as 'Dick'—I thought that was a privilege confined to the stalwart men and miners of the West Coast. But he said 'Dick' had fought for his position and deserved it, 'if for nothing else but the way in which he had stuck to his party.' In the Government Buildings he manifested a considerable interest, but seemed somewhat surprised when we assured him that it still occupied the same site as ever it did. What he, no doubt, expected was to learn that Mr Seddon had shifted the gigantic structure some distance in the direction of the harbour, with a view to its ultimate submergence in the bottom of the sea. We asked him if any of the Governors of the colony had ever visited him. He said he had seen none of them but one: 'Jervois passed by the cave several times but took no notice. The fact is,' he continued, 'Governors have no curiosity to examine a cave with only a man in it; what they like to see in a cave is stalactites. But if a Governor did come in I shouldn't trouble one way or another.' There is about half a mile from the cave, on the road round by the rocks, an hotel, and we suggested that perhaps if only for the sake of occasional recreation and human society, he sometimes called in there? He said he did so at first, but the kindness of the persons he found there became a nuisance to him and for years he had not done so. Besides, although no member of any temperance organization, he was a teetotaller, and did not even smoke. Many persons, however, visited him, especially on Sunday, in his retreat. Some of these found fault with him for spending his life as he did. But he harmed nobody, 'asked nothing from no one;' nobody was taxed for him, or was troubled in any way by him, and surely he was entitled to say that his mode of existence was his business? It wasn't, certainly, the sort of life that had attractions for many. In winter the south wind blew in there, and the sea occasionally washed into the cave. But he preferred to pass his days so—and that was enough for him.

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By this time the sun was getting low down in the west, and we left our cards in a hole in the wall and left the hermit to prepare his tea—that is, if he does prepare his meals, or if he has any meals to prepare. There was no evidence of food anywhere; but even hermits must live, and this one must get food somehow; also clothes for that matter—bed clothes as well as day clothes. The former may have been stowed away in some dark recess: we saw none. The clothes he stood, or rather sat in, for he never rose, were of the most unpicturesque description. They appeared rather seedy and entirely too loose, for the man who got into them. It is certainly true that our friend not only does not ask, but positively refuses, gifts from people. Money is left in the cave for all that, and there is fish in the sea—and no doubt this is how the nameless one continues to keep the wolf from the place where there isn't a door. He occasionally, but at long intervals, visits Wellington. It is not so easy to ascertain how he gets firing. There isn't a sign of a stick of timber anywhere at all near—nor yet far. The more one probes into these little difficulties the more unromantic grows the hermit. Still after all, the man must be a character, if not clean cracked, who lives in this extraordinary way; who dwells alone in a cave by the sea for years and years! Such a cave too—there is no beauty about it; the rocks around are not picturesque, and, in fact, the general aspect of the immediate locality is unpleasant. On a stormy winter's night the wind I am sure must howl around the region in the wildest manner, and the roar of the ocean, at such times, must be dismal. But, winter or summer, what does he *do* with himself during the twenty-four hours; how does he pass the day—to say nothing of the night? Well, I'm sure I don't know—nor does anyone else. He does no work, that's certain—but perhaps he thinks. What about? I'm really afraid he hasn't got anything very serious or deep to brood over. There isn't any mystery, I think, nor yet romance, in his history. I am prepared however to declare that the hermit is an Irishman—and that accounts for ever so many strange things. He did not tell me that he was an Irishman, but I knew it when he spoke his first sentence. That he has spent some time at sea is probable: that he is not enamoured of hard work, any work, is still clearer. However, we won't call him lazy—we don't know enough about him to judge. He may be suffering from some physical incapacity, or even some mental malady, or from both. Anyhow, he is one of the curiosities of, and indeed, the chief personage at, Island Bay.

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Just notice, before you lay down this paper, notice once more, how history repeats itself, and how true it is that there is really nothing new under the sun. I mean to say that there is a good deal of resemblance between Diogenes who lived in a tub B.C. 412, and the Island Bay recluse. In the first place, Diogenes (in a Pickwickian sense of course) was a humbug—and our hermit is something of that kind, in a very meek way. Secondly, Diogenes wasn't scrupulously clean in his tastes and habits. Thirdly, he declared that if people could live without him, he could get on quite as he liked without those people. Also Diogenes discarded utensils and furniture, suitable clothing and strong drink. Nor is there very much difference between an Athenian tub and an Island Bay cave—as a place of residence. Furthermore the ancient cynic bid Alexander to get from between him and the sun, as the only favour he could confer on him, while the modern gentleman will let Glasgow know—if he gets the chance—that he, Glasgow, can do nothing for him. I can't say, to be sure whether Diogenes bore any outward resemblance to 'General' Booth. Probably he did: at all events he resembled the General in some ways, if not in features. And isn't it strange that a man at all resembling the Great Captain of the Salvation Army should live in a cask or cave. Mentally, anyway, General Booth is constructed on entirely different lines. I'm really sorry for the whole three myself; and I can assure you there isn't a man amongst all of us, who could tell positively and with absolute certainty, which of the three was the most genuine man. My own opinion is that the Athenian who lived 400 years before Christ may have been—but this is a mere opinion. If you, on the other hand, prefer General Booth—take him. I am afraid no one will pin his or her faith altogether to the Island Bay hermit, who, after his fourteen years of retirement from the world, deserves better treatment.