Casual Impressions of Colonial Life . . . and Character . . .

At Work With a Survey Party

In the winter of 1902 I joined a Government survey party under the command of Mr. D., and incidentally I may here state, had many notions on the conduct of surveys ruthlessly dispelled. I had heard, and do not doubt, that others have been similarly misinformed—that life in a survey camp is one delightful picnic, interspersed with occasional relapses into gentle toil, to create an appetite, and to break the cloying sweetness of otherwise continuous holidays. Of course, it may be that such conditions obtain in some favoured camps, but in this particular company a pay-day, unaccompanied by an equivalent in hard labour, was unknown. We were more likely to strain ourselves with a slasher or axe than in reaching out our hands for unearned money at the end of the month.

This particular survey was to connect the Rotorua-Maketu road with Poungakawa and the coast. It started off the main road at a distance of some three miles from Okere, skirting the high land of Rotoiti, and turning off into the dense rimu, matai, and towa bush beyond Otaramarai. We were a party of five, and could take our camp and provisions to within three miles of our ground by water, and from thence we had to carry them in swags over the fern ridges and curly bush tracks to our headquarters at an old native spring in the dense timber country below. This was a deadly, arduous employment; the tracks were greasy yellow clay, to climb which you had to scratch your toes into the ground like an inquisitive fowl. A sack of rewis, for instance, would make four solid loads, and take two men a day to transport; other goods in proportion. The bulk of our outfit the Maoris, with their ragged-looking, long-suffering prads, would, for a departmental consideration, undertake to shift.

There is much humour and hard work about packing with Maori ponies; their gear is of the most primitive description, and the loads work off over the tail on the up grades, and over the shoulder on the down. Nothing in this life pleases a Maori pony better than to rub a couple of fifties of flour off against a tree, and then to tear a large hole in them with his teeth and have a feed. The Maori is not a strenuous toiler, but he can talk. Where a white would curse a beast and continue working, the Maori does not. He stops, hauls off, and apostrophises the beast in a quarter of an hour's speech. He also has notions of the value of his services where the pakeha is concerned that would discredit any mere unionists' pretensions. The surveyor's horse was a good upstanding hack, and the chainman and myself used to impress him into this toil at times, the boss being away. He was an animal of considerable discernment, and would take a lot of persuasion to permit us to load him. He could calculate to an inch what trees to squeeze between to rid him of his burden, and would take advantage of his arithmetical calculation to the full. Maori weeds are too thin; they can crawl through almost anything—even their girths, if they can annoy you thereby. Tales of the weight they can carry, the tracks they can climb, and the suffering they patiently endure, I will leave for some writer who has less popular regard for his veracity.

After four or five days of ceaseless toil, we got our camp pitched and enough scrub and heavy towa knocked down to enable us to see daylight at least once a day. All people and tongues have their peculiar notions of physical beauty; the standard of the Mongolian is wide apart from that of the Caucasian; the beauty that irresistibly appeals to the western, passes unheeded the eastern eye. Upon the scenic beauty of countries we meet on more common ground, though even then we are prone to be biassed in favour of that which is more familiar to us—the country we call home. The cultivation of the power to grasp scenic beauty is as necessary (if we wish to fully benefit by all the privileges we possess) as the cultivation of a taste for orchestral music. How many people pass unheeded the most beautiful of God's handiwork, having no perception of their educative value to themselves and others, because in their self absorption they have never noticed it. The sum of the beauty of New Zealand bush is all its own; to the forest scenery of other lands there is no basis for comparison. The grandeur of the South Gippsland forests, the giant eucalypti, their smooth blue grey trunks, towering up to heaven, their tops shutting out the sky, the dim religious light even at noontide almost compelling the unaccustomed to uncover their heads and bow down before a might and majesty they can but faintly comprehend; the karri and jarrah countries of Western Australia, with their huge black red boles, Dantesque in their sombre gloom; the bamboo groves of Burmah, their fantastic, feathery sprays responsive to every wind from heaven; the teak forests of Northern India, with their dense undergrowth, a combination of majesty and beauty; the gloomy groves, overshadowed by the snow-clad peaks of the mighty Himalayas—each and all of these have given up some indefinable beauty to swell the infinite charm of the New Zealand bush.

The wonderful shades of colour, in green, in red, in brown; every beauty of form, from the graceful plumes of the rimu to the dainty fronds of the fern, are here represented; and yet how few city people ever avail themselves of the inestimable privilege of seeing for themselves the beauties of their native land. The routine of survey camp life begins at some indistinguishable hour in the morning, and is generally heralded in by the cook, growling because the fire won't burn. We may stay in our bunks, and know that an hour's grace remains to us; but not to sleep. Smoke is everywhere; it permeates every cranny of the camp; it will do anything but rise. If you look outside you will see the creeping stuff wandering about like a noxious smelling bolster; perhaps, though the fire has been alight half an hour, the smoke has not risen clear of the punga tops. We are as at the bottom of a well, the high timber all round forming the walls. Dawn is yet a long way off, when the cook, fiendishly belting two tin dishes together, rouses us up to breakfast. Porridge, backed up with cold pork, is the staple food, but birds of sorts that would be self-incriminating to mention, often form the base of a very excellent stew. Bismarck, the pig dog we borrowed from the Maoris, wakes up, and reminds us that the smell of tucker, though appetising, is not filling, by getting on the bark roof of his house and chanting the canine equivalent of the seven penetential Psalms. It is still too dark to take to the track that leads us out into the country where our work lies. We make up one swag of pegs, grind our hooks or axes, and speculate how much frost is outside, as the punga tops are white, even in our little clearing, and the frost never penetrates into the dense bush. The boss gives the word, and starts off in the lead, at a gait of his own, which, before we clear the bush brings the sweat about our ears. As we near the open the cold gets keener; every tree fern, every bough is white with rime. We reach the open; the frozen ground crunches under our feet. Another half-mile, and we reach the head of the fern ridge, and fairy land lies before us and around. The mere human conceptions of glories of paradise pale before such a scene. The sun has risen from the ocean behind us, his level rays, touching the tops of the gloomy wood we have just left, crowns it with glittering gold. The fern, who shall paint the glory of it, as far as the eye can see its snow-white fronds iridescent with a million rainbow hues, every spider's web a sheeny mesh to entrap the souls of men with the magic of its beauty. As the light breeze from the sea stirs the surface, the quivering frozen fronds reflect myriad lights back to heaven. Looking backwards, over the land, mist billows of golden snow stretch away to the coast, broken here and there by islands of high lands, or tree-tops thrust out from their soft mantle. Motiti is black on the silver waters, White Island, enveloped in a cloud of steam, reflects back the rays of the sun which plays through its changing masses like a celestial kaleidoscope. A hundred miles' distant, over the gap to the south-west, rises the snow-clad pinnacle of Ruapehu, a glittering crystal against the skyline. At our feet Rotoiti, with its winding arms, lying in placid calm in the shadows, Tikitere smoking and steaming behind the low hills beyond, the tops of the steam clouds just picking up the fires of the eastern sky. Voices come up to us from below, faint voices from the awakening Maori village, the kroak kraik of the contented cock pheasant, as the sun warms him in his fern home. Such a scene surely must have been present in the mind's eye, the window of the soul of him who coined that phrase of minted gold, "The peace of God which passeth all understanding," so familiar to most of us.

After a spell to recover our wind, we plunge off into the fern to pick up our line. The word fern is to the unitiated a misleading term, and is usually associated with soft, low growths of the variety that only attain a height of about two feet. New Zealand fern grows 10 or 15ft high, and if year after year passes without it being swept by fire, it becomes impenetrable to anything but a pig. Slash hooks now go to the fore, and we hew our way through the dense growth, every blow sending showers of spray from the thawing frost rime over head, which in about two minutes has us wet to the skin. The end of the cleared line is not far off. We make it, and go back for our loads of pegs, etc., while the chief and chainman go off to get a trial line on ahead, leaving us to clear the track on the grade already marked out by tall "toot" poles, with bits of paper on for sighters. This recreation keeps us going till noon, when continued coo-ee's announce the return of the chief. We light a fire and boil the billy, spread the tucker out on a sugar bag, and get to work.

It does not matter much what you have to eat in the bush; you can eat anything, and be glad of it. Tucker over, the boss and I go off. He is of opinion that he can strike an easier grade on to the saddle about two miles away (it seems 20). We reach there, and I crawl about sidlings and set sticks up with bits of paper on, in apparently impossible places, while he, in other equally apparently impossible places, shouts directions. This goes on for hours, and I learn that apparent up-grades are really down-grades—what is a transparent down-hill is in reality a steep up-hill, and what looks level ground is proved to be gullies filled with fern. These and many other things I find out—amongst others that there is a limit of endurance to human legs. Afternoon is very much on the wane when we get out on the track again, and meet the others coming full speed for home. We get into single file, and the chief in the lead, going like a scalded cat, try to save daylight to camp. To be benighted in the bush country is no joke; the darkness can be felt, and to keep to the pad you might have to go on hands and knees for a mile or so.

The smell of roast sucker welcomes us home, and we learn after a wash and change that the cook had the good luck to meet a sow out giving her family an airing. Bismarck nailed the Joseph of the family by the ear, and his middle piece stuffed and roasted formed our piece de resistance. I am uncommonly tired. After dinner, when pipes are lit, and a few old variegated chestnuts have seen the light again, and a few original lies are told, I turn in, to dream of a house afire, and to awake to find the drought being broken at the rate of an inch an hour or thereabouts, and several pounds of solid looking smoke infesting the tent.

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