

# BETWEEN THE RAIL HEADS: BUILDING THE MAIN TRUNK LINE.

## THE COACH JOURNEY THROUGH THE BUSH.

Like two enormous centipedes, the north and south ends of the Main Trunk line are creeping across the land; over hill and dale, over chasm and roaring river, through swamp and bush—creeping slowly but resistlessly to the meeting spot, the yawning gorge of the Makatote. Mother Earth grumbles at the long, narrow, naked scar her children are making along her green sides. She meets them with rocky barriers, where the daily progress is only measured in inches; with mile-long swamps that swallow up stuff by the train-load; with gaping canyons across which men look mere pigmies; with swift rivers whose waters light every inch with the giant-footed piers in the boulder-strewn bed. Also, the Opposition will tell you she is aided and abetted by that power in the land of yates, the "co-op.", who, some say was born under the truest sign of the Zodiac. But vain is the resistance! Striding over the level plain, climbing laboriously up the hills, and sliding down the other side, clinging to the sides of the precipices, fording the streams, leaping the canyons, and boring through the mountain sides, go the line builders, and behind them trails the space-annihilating parallel of steel.

weatherboards and paint. Tracks become roads, roads become streets, and the straggling houses begin to shuffle round and line up like a file of recruits when they hear, "Dress by the right!"

Right out there in the contest with Nature you get your bearings more easily and with more certainty than you do in the city. It is life reduced almost to its primitive conditions and

robbed of those thousand and one hypocrisies and dis-embellings which can only live in crowded streets. The folks are rough but genuine, and a week among them is a fine tonic for the city dweller.

In spite of the remarks about the co-op's, leisurely habit of life the stretch of country where the lines are not in place, sleeping quietly on their well-ballasted bed, and waiting for the Wellington-Auckland express, is very short. Two months ago there was a gap between the rail heads of twenty-two miles from Waimarino on the plains of that name to Ohakune, to be covered in the coach; last month it was reduced to fourteen miles; and now the hiatus is narrowed down to some ten miles—



WAIMARINO STATION, LOOKING ACROSS THE PLAINS

from Makatote to Ohakune, so that the opportunity of seeing this work with one's own eyes is rapidly slipping away.

Railway red tape runs as far as Tamarunui, where the line crosses the Wangarua River, 175 miles south of Auckland. Here it is chopped off short and the Public Works Department takes the traveller under its care. You get your ticket in the train from a good-natured guard, who does not seem to worry much about schedule time, who has silver braid on his cap—and who carries a bag just like a tram conductor. He hands out a block of paper tickets like a lottery book, and there is much writing with a stubby pencil and manipulation of small change. You have time to get tolerably well acquainted with him, and the contrast between this section, and the rush and bustle of the line where the Railway Department tries to keep up a time-table is sufficiently marked to give one a sort of personal interest in the matter which is quite refreshing in anything where Government officials are concerned—they have such an awsome haughty



COACHES LEAVING WAIMARINO STATION TO CONNECT WITH SOUTH RAIL HEAD AT OHAKUNE.

To appreciate the romance of it you want to see the thing in the making. Occasional reports from the Vigilance Committee of the Railway League, complaints from the "co-op." if his cheque is five minutes late, a police raid on the sly gang fraternity, or an account of the progress of some wandering M.P. who comes through to get the full value of his talismanic little gold pass, don't give you an inspiring idea of the linking up of the Capital City and her Northern sister. The poetry of it appeals to you when you get right up there on the roof of the island among the snowy mountains, the treeless plains of tussock, and the silent forests, and watch that strange little mortal man clasping a circle of steel round the unwilling brows of Mother Earth! It is good to see a great work when done, but better to see it in the making. For miles the Main Trunk line runs through virgin country, which Nature still haunts, and it is good to see her before man drives her away with his seeping sawmills, his scarring fires, and, lastly, his unlovely houses. You can trace the evolution of a town. First go the surveyors, whose arduous work is never properly appreciated, because it is unseen. Then comes the bushman with his axe and his tent. The navy follows and hews out first the service road, and next the line. Geographical position, fertility of the soil, or the exigencies of the work are responsible for a cluster of tents at some particular point. The tent gets a wooden floor, by-and-by a sheet or two of corrugated iron and a few more boards give added permanence, till at last it sloughs its patched skin and appears in all the splendour of



CUTTING AT MAKATOTE.

On the right is Anderson's Works, where the iron work was made, all the machinery being driven by electricity. The viaduct, now in course of construction, is just the other side of the bank in the background. It will be the highest in New Zealand when finished—260 feet from the bed of the river to the rails.