

The world was empty and unresponsive. Day was not yet, and the last stars had gone out before the sickly light in the east. A white mist seethed over the plains and along the hills, blotting out all the familiar landmarks, and bringing to him a curious certainty that nothing was tangible or real. The earth was dead and very silent, and he—what was it he had read somewhere, very long ago? “God allows long aches, but only short agonies.” Was this an agony or an ache? How long had it lasted? When was it that Humphrey had told him—*that!*

echoing down to the creek, and a solemn more-pork flew to cover, abashed at being up so late.

Neil gripped the window-ledge with a half-stifed cry as the boisterous new day chased the numbness from his brain.

“Joan,” he said, “Joan, I can’t face it—dearest, I *can’t!* It—it frightens me. Old Humphrey called me a coward, but—he’s a bit hard sometimes, and no one ever told him——” He stared vacantly at the stable-yard, where the men were watering the horses, and joking loudly as they smashed



THIS GEHENNA MUST BE FOUGHT THROUGH ALONE.

His brain was playing a game of cross questions and crooked answers, and it was not funny, only unutterably stupid.

Then the sun sprang up, rolling the heavy mist along the mountain bases. The yellow tussocks flamed where the level rays caught them, and the dark bush climbing the long low spurs sent back glittering flashes from glossy broad-leaf and matapo. And the mountains came into being, one by one, until, far away to southward, they circled in purpling haze to the sea.

A sleepy note from a moko-moko in the clematis was the signal for a rollicking chorus

the ice on the arinking-pond.

Humphrey, waiting in his room for Neil’s step, heard it at last, coming slowly round the house. Then he pulled on his boots and followed it stable-wards.

Neil was curry-combing his hunter when Humphrey’s broad form blocked the doorway, and he did not look up.

“Going to the meet to-day?” Neil vaguely noted surprise in the tone.

“Yes,” he said, laconically.

“And—will you go to Wakarewa too?”

“Yes. Stand over!” Neil slapped the Ace’s quarter and resumed his work energetically.