

THE NE'ER DO WHEEL.

BY HUNTER MURDOCH.

Illustrated by H. E. Taylor.



HE mid-day rays of a burning sun beat down upon a New Zealand woolshed, through the open door of which could be seen a long stretch of plains and flax swamps bounded by ranges of interlocking hills, upon which the grey-green of the fern was in beautiful contrast with the rich dark bush which crowned their summits.

In the shed all was bustle and activity, the shearers, stripped to their trousers and singlets, each vieing with the other in his efforts to make the biggest tally. Ever and anon one of them would throw open one of the pens wherein the sheep were waiting to be shorn, carry out a sheep, place it on the "board," tack it between his legs in an uncomfortable and undignified position, speedily deprive it of its fleece, and then bundle it unceremoniously through one of the port-holes into a pen outside, where it stood naked and astonished. Then after a short pause for sharpening his shears and wiping off the perspiration which streamed down his face, he would make a dive at another fleecy victim. There was but little vandyking or tomahawking, the men being practised hands, and the cry of "Tar!" was rarely heard.

"Smoke O!" At the welcome signal the men threw down their shears, and sat down and lighted their pipes.

Suddenly the hum of talk was interrupted by the notes of a fiddle, and the men made a rush for the door to see whence the unwonted sound proceeded.

In the yard stood the musician, a young man of medium height, with short, crisp,

brown hair, a clean-shaven face, and frank, steel-grey eyes, with a humorous twinkle in them which suggested that they were ever on the look out for a joke. Well set up and carefully groomed, he gave one the idea of a man who had been in the army. The most curious thing about him was his dress. A high collar, a silk scarf fastened with a horse shoe pin, a Melton morning coat buttoned across his broad chest, grey trousers and dainty, thin soled boots; everything was of the best material, and fitted him to perfection. He would have looked like a man fresh from Bond Street but for the melancholy facts that his coat and trousers were threadbare and frayed, and that the uppers of the dainty boots seemed to be contemplating a speedy divorce from their soles. At his feet were his violin case and a small bundle done up in a handkerchief, a thing seldom seen off the stage.

There was a gasp of astonishment at this apparition. On the appearance of his auditors the young man ceased playing, and with a nod wished them "Good morning."

"Mornin' to you, mate," replied Coates, the ringer. "Come in and have a smoke."

"Thanks. I shall be glad of a rest. It's awfully hot!"

"It is *warm*," corrected the other.

They went back to the shed, where he sat down with them.

"Queer cove!" remarked one aside.

"Looks like a broken down swell. There's a good few knockin' about the towns, though they don't in general find their way so far up country."

"Come far this mornin'?"

"From Gisborne," replied the stranger."

"You're an actor, ain't you?" inquired