



“S · O · N · N · Y .”

By E. C. J. HARDING.

Illustrated by Frances Hodgkins.

“COME, cheer up, old woman! It's the only thing to be done. Sonny will look after you while I'm away.”

“What's that, dad?” asked Sonny, as he came in, plaiting a stock-whip.

Dick Lorten put his rough, brown hands on the boy's shoulders, and said: “See, Sonny, we are only working a dead horse here, what with the mortgage and one thing and another, I'm going up to Auckland to see if I can get work on the gumfields there. I'll have to tramp it, of course. You must manage to rub along here by yourselves for a bit till I've got work, and a home to bring you to. Now promise me you'll look after your mother, and do your best for her and the kid!”

Sonny raised his head, and looked his father squarely in the face. “All right, dad,” he answered, “I promise I'll stand by them, so don't fret yer eyelids on that score! Yer can trust me, can't yer?”

Dick Lorten clapped him on the back, and then shook hands. “Yes, I can, Sonny,” he said.

Sonny, who had seemed a little embarrassed by the hand-shaking, grinned, and returned to his stock-whip. He was not a handsome boy, except, perhaps, to his mother. Possibly she saw some beauty in his bullet head, broad, turned up nose, large mouth, eyes whose lashes and brows were so colourless as to be hardly discernible, and yellowish white hair. Anyhow it was a beauty entirely hidden from an impartial observer. Add to his other charms, very long, thin legs and arms, and a

voice which apparently came from his boots, though occasionally it soared so high that it seemed to be on the point of leaving him altogether; remember that he always wore his father's old clothes—very old they were, too, when they reached him—and you will have a fairly good idea of Sonny's general appearance. Of course he had not been christened Sonny. He had some other name, doubtless, only nobody seemed to know it. As to his age, in years he numbered twelve, but in appearance, conversation, and knowledge of the world, he might have been anything from fifty downwards.

Dick Lorten, when he trudged away with his swag on his back, had entire confidence in Sonny's power of managing things. True, there was not much management required. Ten cows to be milked, night and morning, and the milk taken to the factory, that constituted the chief work. But what with other jobs and his school, Sonny's time was pretty well occupied. Education was compulsory, otherwise he would not have troubled himself about it. He was only in the second standard, with not a chance of ever passing out of it. ^{MUSE}ver, to school he had to go, or else there would have been fines to pay, and money was too scarce for that. Not that that was anything new. Often and often had the Lortens been—well, not starving, our politicians tell us that is impossible in New Zealand, but next door to it. Sonny knew very well what it was to get up from a meal feeling as though he had just sat down. It is bad enough to be hungry