

# Impressions—Feb. 2nd, 1901.

By E. KEMPE.

**T**HE train stops at a countryside station.

You know the hush that comes over the conversation in the long carriages as the clanking of the brakes and engine ceases. People glance round over their shoulders to see where they are. The quiet of the empty platform, of the blank road stretching away outside, of the rolling hills of fern and tea-tree beyond, impresses itself on your mind. You wait instinctively for the shriek of the whistle and the crash of the carriages as the engine takes up its old song of the road, before you lapse into your talk or your paper.

But now—we are waiting and waiting! The silence hangs heavy, and still the whistle does not shriek. The only audible sound beside an occasional spurt of talk or laughter up and down the train, is a hissing of steam from the engine just in front of us, an unfamiliar sound.

The silence hangs heavier. We begin to let down windows and thrust out heads. Nothing to be seen but an empty platform, and other heads emerging up and down the train.

Everyone asks at once:

“What are we stopping for?” and answers simultaneously:

“It must be for the funeral.”

Then there breaks loose a babel of surprised and rather indignant questions, answers, remonstrances, fears that we shall be late, etc., etc. Yet after all we had seen something about it in the paper this morning, but the reality is so unique and surprising that it is hard to grasp.

I climb down from the carriage and stroll up to the engine to make enquiries.

The grey-bearded driver is perched on some steel shelf among cranks and levers, with his feet strutted on a steel rail—a

precarious attitude, for most of his body hangs over space, but he seems comfortable enough as he is dropping off into a doze.

The fireman, a grimy, dark-eyed young man, is balanced on a slung rope's end at the other end of the cab, taking his dinner at his ease.

The steam is sizzling cheerfully out of some valve; even the engine seems to be dozing.

Three questions satisfy me (which the driver opens his eyes to answer, and immediately closes them again).

“Yes; we have stopped. We are stopping for half-an-hour. All the trains are stopping for half-an-hour all over the colony, and stopping wherever they happen to be—station, siding, or open track—from half-past eleven to twelve.”

I stroll back along the platform, silent, but for the buzz from the train—empty but for two or three puzzled-looking travellers. I felt quite oppressed with the thought.

The pulse of the country is standing still.

At this moment, as if by stroke of an enchanter's wand, every wheel under control of the civic power of the land is motionless.

I imagine some huge embodiment of labour, some giant engaged in some gigantic work of building, cutting, hewing, carrying—imagine him suddenly struck into stone, pausing in the middle of a blow—axe in air; trowel hanging suspended; brick part in, part out of place; saw half-way through its stroke; muscles of arm and chest expanded in the middle of the effort—so fixed for half-an-hour by the clock.

It seems to me that no more impressive sign of the nation's mourning could have been chosen. I find myself trying in vain to realise the full force of this manifestation of regret.

How quiet the world seems to be! That little hissing of steam alone—for the idle