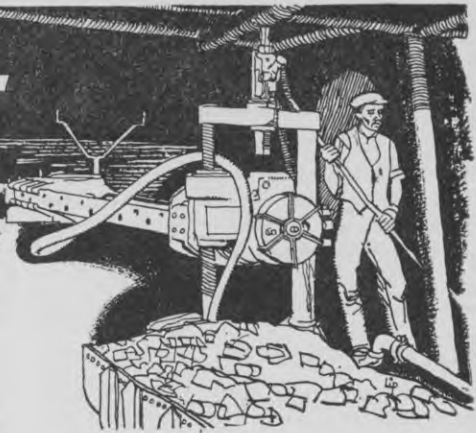


WESTPORT COAL+PORT

By J. D. McDONALD



THERE IS coal-dust in the air at Westport. Twenty miles north, at Stockton, electric locomotives haul the $\frac{1}{2}$ ton "tubs" of coal from the mines to the "bins," and bull-dozers roar at the "opencast" coal-quarry. Nearer to Westport, at Millerton and Denniston, the tubs perform a ceaseless round trip on an endless rope from the mines to the bins. At Charming Creek, Diesel engines draw the coal through some of the loveliest scenery in New Zealand—now a little coal-dusty. To the east from the Cascade mine the coal is "flumed" by water-power down a long trough for seven miles. To the south at Charleston the "overburden" (top-cover) over the coal is swept away by hydraulic sluicing. Lorries do the transporting.

Everywhere coal is in the air. Its transport is responsible for the operating profit on "the only paying line in New Zealand." Westport exists to export coal.

The coal-dust in the air at Westport begets a parched feeling in its throat. The wide mile-long main street frames, at its south end, the rugged grandeur of Mount Kelvin—but, strategically situated on convenient corners are seventeen pubs, one of which offers excellent accommodation to the moneyed traveller, while others offer a chance to be "one of the family" in the friendliest possible manner.

In smoky little back parlours friendly little groups meet to play "forty-fives" with uproarious oaths and much heavy thumping of the table. For the uninitiated it may be stated that in this game the "five fingers" (the five of the trump suit) beats all other cards. The trump

suit order is five, jack, ace, king, queen—all other suits begin with the king. Non-trump suits win high in red; low in black. Obviously the ace of diamonds is the lowest card in the pack unless diamonds are trumps, in which case it is the fourth best. The word "obviously" in the preceding sentence is a little optimistic—as the ace of hearts (the "Maggy") is always the third best trump. It is credibly reported (a) that the game is of Irish origin, (b) that there are no written rules, (c) that the game can only be learned by playing it, and (d) it is as characteristic of Westport as whitebait or coal. Perhaps after all, there are some things obvious about the game.

For Westport is a town of apocryphal stories and things that couldn't be true—but are. Where else could, long ago, a hotel, all lights blazing, blithely sail down the river to sea but in a Westport flood? And where else could one hear the utterly damning opinion, "He's the sort of chap who'd burn down a pub!"

The list of improbabilities begins with the legend that Tasman watered his ships at the Mohikinui, continues with Cook's being blown off-shore at Cape Foulwind (the pleasantest part of the district), and the amazing journeys of Brunner and Heaphy (1846-48) from the South Wanganui via the Buller to Hokitika. They took with them 10 lb. of provisions and were away for months. We read in their diary, "that they suffered from hunger." Brunner, stout fellow, opined that he had