DOING AND DARING

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THE OLD CHIEF. Page 81.

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Pre-title page

DOING AND DARING

A New Zealand Story

BY

ELEANOR STREDDER

Author of "Lost in the Wilds," "The Merchant's Children," "Jack and his Ostrich,"

etc.

"Who counts his brother's welfare
As sacred as his own,
And loves, forgives, and pities,
He serveth Me alone.
I note each gracious purpose,
Each kindly word and deed;
Are ye not all my children!
Shall not the Father heed?"
WHITTIER.

T. NELSON AND SONS

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DOING AND DARING.

CHAPTER I.
IN THE MOUNTAIN GORGE.

It was a glorious autumn day, when the New Zealand bush was at its loveliest—as enchanting as if it truly were the fairy ground of the Southern Ocean; yet so unlike every European forest that weariness seemed banished by its ceaseless variety. Here the intertwining branches of majestic trees, with leaves of varied hue, shut out the sky, and seemed to roof the summer road which wound its devious track towards the hills; there a rich fern-clad valley, from which the murmuring sound of falling water broke like music on the ear. Onwards still a little farther, and an overgrown creek, gently wandering between steep banks of rich dark fern and graceful palm, came suddenly out of the greenwood into an open space, bounded by a wall of rock, rent by a darkling chasm, where the waters of the creek, tumbling over boulder stone and fallen tree, broadened to a rushing river. Along its verge the road continued, a mere wheel-track cut in the rock, making it a perilous crossing, as the driver of the weekly mail knew full well.

His heavy, lumbering coach was making its way towards it at that moment, floundering through the two feet deep of mud which New Zealanders call a bush road. The five poor horses could only walk, and found that hard work, while the passengers had enough to do to keep their seats.

Fortunately the coach was already lightened of a part of its load, some fares with which it started having reached their destination at the last stopping-place. The seven remaining consisted of a rough, jolly-looking, good-humoured fellow, bound for the surveyors' camp among the hills; an old identity, as New Zealanders call a colonist who has been so long resident in the land of his adoption that he has completely identified himself with it; and a newly-arrived settler with his four children, journeying to take possession of a government allotment in the Waikato district.

With the first two passengers long familiarity with the discomforts of bush travelling had grown to indifference; but to Mr. Lee and his family the experience was a trying one, as the coach swayed heavily to this side and that, backwards and forwards, up and down, like a boat on a rough sea. More than once Mr. Lee's little girls were precipitated into the arms of their *vis-à-vis*, or bumped backwards with such violence a breakage seemed inevitable; but which would suffer the most, the coach or its passengers, was an open question.

Any English-made vehicle with springs must have been smashed to pieces; but the New Zealand mail had been constructed to suit the exigencies of the country. With its frame of iron and sides of leather, it could resist an amount of

wear and tear perfectly incredible to Mr. Lee. He sat with an arm round each of his daughters, vainly trying to keep them erect in their places. Their two brothers bobbed recklessly from corner to corner, thinking nothing of the bruises in their ever-increasing merriment when the edge of Erne's broad-brimmed straw hat went dash into the navvy's eyes, or Audrey's gray dust-cloak got entangled in the buckles of the old identity's travelling-bag.

Audrey, with a due regard for the proprieties, began a blushing apology.

"My dear child," exclaimed the portly old gentleman, "you speak as if I did not know you could not help it."

The words were scarcely uttered, when the whole weight of his sixteen stone went crushing on to little Cuthbert, who emerged from the jolly squeeze with a battered hat and an altogether flattened appearance. Then came an unexpected breathing-space. The coachman stopped to leave a parcel at the roadman's hut, nestling beneath the shelter of the rocks by the entrance of the gorge.

New Zealand roads are under the care of the government, who station men at intervals all along their route to keep them in order. The special duty of this individual was to see that no other traffic entered the gorge when the coach was passing through it. Whilst he exchanged greetings with the coachman, the poor passengers with one accord gave a stretch and a yawn as they drew themselves into a more comfortable position.

On again with renewed jolts between the towering walls of rock, with a rush of water by their side drowning the rumble of the wheels. The view was grand beyond description, but no rail or fence protected the edge of the stream.

Mr. Lee was leaning out of the window, watching anxiously the narrow foot of road between them and destruction, when, with a sudden lurch, over went the coach to the other side.

"A wheel off," groaned the old identity, as he knocked heads with the navvy, and became painfully conscious of a struggling heap of arms and legs encumbering his feet.

[image]

AN AWKWARD PLIGHT.

Audrey clung to the door-handle, and felt herself slowly elevating. Mr. Lee, with one arm resting on the window-frame, contrived to hang on. As the coach lodged against the wall of rock, he scrambled out. Happily the window owned no glass, and the leathern blind was up. The driver was flung from his seat, and the horses were kicking. His first thought was to seize the reins, for

fear the frightened five should drag them over the brink. The shaft-horse was down, but as the driver tumbled to his feet, he cut the harness to set the others free; earnestly exhorting the passengers to keep where they were until he could extricate his horses.

But Edwin, the eldest boy, had already followed the example of his father. He had wriggled himself out of the window, and was dropping to the ground down the back of the coach, which completely blocked the narrow road.

His father and the coachman both shouted to him to fetch the roadman to their help. It was not far to the hut at the entrance of the gorge, and the boy, who had been reckoned a first-rate scout on the cricket-field, ran off with the speed of a hare. The navvy's stentorian "coo"—the recognized call for assistance—was echoing along the rocky wall as he went. The roadman had heard it, and had left his dinner to listen. He saw the panting boy, and came to meet him.

"Coach upset," gasped Edwin.

"Here, lad, take my post till I come back; let nobody come this way. I'll be up with poor coachee in no time. Anybody hurt?"

But without waiting for a reply the man set off. Edwin sank into the bed of fern that clustered round the opening of the chasm, feeling as if all the breath had been shaken out of him. There he sat looking queer for an hour or more, hearing nothing, seeing nothing but the dancing leaves, the swaying boughs, the ripple of the waters. Only once a big brown rat came out of the underwood and looked at him. The absence of all animal life in the forest struck him: even the birds sing only in the most retired recesses. An ever-increasing army of sand-flies were doing their utmost to drive him from his position. Unable at last to endure their stings, he sprang up, trying to rid himself of his tormentors by a shake and a dance, when he perceived a solitary horseman coming towards him, not by the coach-road, but straight across the open glade.

The man was standing in his stirrups, and seemed to guide his horse by a gentle shake of the rein. On he rode straight as an arrow, making nothing of the many impediments in his path. Edwin saw him dash across the creek, plunge through the all but impenetrable tangle of a wild flax-bush, whose tough and fibrous leaves were nine feet long at least, leap over a giant boulder some storm had hurled from the rocks above, and rein in his steed with easy grace at the door of the roadman's shanty. Then Edwin noticed that the man, whose perfect command of his horse had already won his boyish admiration, had a big mouth and a dusky skin, that his cheeks were furrowed with wavy lines encircling each other.

"A living tattoo," thought Edwin. The sight of those curiously drawn lines was enough to proclaim a native.

Some Maori chief, the boy was inclined to believe by his good English-made saddle. The tall black hat he wore might have been imported from Bond Street at the beginning of the season, barring the sea-bird's feathers stuck upright in the band. His legs were bare. A striped Austrian blanket was thrown over one shoulder and carefully draped about him. A snowy shirt sleeve was rolled back from the dusky arm he had raised to attract Edwin's attention. A striped silk scarf, which might have belonged to some English lady, was loosely knotted round his neck, with the ends flying behind him. A scarlet coat, which had lost its sleeves, completed his grotesque appearance.

"Goo'-mornin'," he shouted. "Coach gone by yet?"

"The coach is upset on that narrow road," answered Edwin, pointing to the ravine, "and no one can pass this way."

"Smashed?" asked the stranger in tolerable English, brushing away the ever-ready tears of the Maori as he sprang to the ground, expecting to find the treasure he had commissioned the coachman to purchase for him was already broken into a thousand pieces. Then Edwin remembered the coachman had left a parcel at the hut as they passed; and they both went inside to look for it. They found it laid on the bed at the back of the hut—a large, flat parcel, two feet square.

The address was printed on it in letters half-an-inch high: "Nga-Hepé, Rota Pah."

"That's me!" cried the stranger, the tears of apprehension changing into bursts of joyous laughter as he seized it lovingly, and seemed to consider for a moment how he was to carry it away. A shadow passed over his face; some sudden recollection changed his purpose. He laid his hand persuasively on Edwin's shoulder, saying, "Hepé too rich, Nga-Hepé too rich; the rana will come. Hide it, keep it safe till Nga-Hepé comes again to fetch it."

Edwin explained why he was waiting there. He had only scrambled out of the fallen coach to call the roadman, and would soon be gone.

"You pakeha [white man] fresh from Ingarangi land? you Lee?" exclaimed the Maori, taking a letter from the breast-pocket of his sleeveless coat, as Edwin's surprised "Yes" confirmed his conjecture.

The boy took the letter from him, and recognized at once the bold black hand of a friend of his father's whose house was to be their next halting-place. The letter was addressed to Mr. Lee, to be left in the care of the coachman.

Meanwhile, the roadman had reached the scene of the overturn just as the navvy had succeeded in getting the door of the coach open. Audrey and Effie were hoisted from the arms of one rough man to another, and seated on a ledge of rock a few feet from the ground, where Mr. Lee, who was still busy with the horses, could see the torn gray cloak and waving handkerchief hastening to assure him they were unhurt.

Poor little Cuthbert was crying on the ground. His nose was bleeding from a blow received from one of the numerous packages which had flown out from unseen corners in the suddenness of the shock.

”Mr. Bowen,” said the navvy, ”now is your turn.”

But to extricate the stout old gentleman, who had somehow lamed himself in the general fall, was a far more difficult matter.

The driver, who scarcely expected to get through a journey without some disaster, was a host in himself. He got hold of the despairing traveller by one arm, the roadman grasped the other, assuring him, in contradiction to his many assertions, that his climbing days were not all over; the navvy gave a leg up from within, and in spite of slips and bruises they had him seated on the bank at last, puffing and panting from the exertion. ”Now, old chap,” added the roadman, with rough hospitality, ”take these poor children back to my hut; and have a rest, and make yourself at home with such tucker as you can find, while we get the coach righted.”

”We will all come down and help you with the tucker when our work is done,” laughed the navvy, as the three set to their task with a will, and began to heave up the coach with cautious care. The many ejaculatory remarks which reached the ears of Audrey and Mr. Bowen filled them with dismay.

”Have a care, or she'll be over into the water,” said one.

”No, she won't,” retorted another; ”but who on earth can fix this wheel on again so that it will keep? Look here, the iron has snapped underneath. What is to be done?”

”We have not far to go,” put in the coachman. ”I'll make it hold that distance, you'll see.”

A wild-flax bush was never far to seek. A few of its tough, fibrous leaves supplied him with excellent rope of nature's own making.

Mr. Bowen watched the trio binding up the splintered axle, and tying back the iron frame-work of the coach, where it had snapped, with a rough and ready skill which seemed to promise success. Still he foresaw some hours would go over the attempt, and even then it might end in failure.

He was too much hurt to offer them any assistance, but he called to Cuthbert to find him a stick from the many bushes and trees springing out of every crack and crevice in the rocky sides of the gorge, that he might take the children to the roadman's hut. They arrived just as Nga-Hepé was shouting a ”Goo'-mornin'” to Edwin. In fact, the Maori had jumped on his horse, and was cantering off, when Mr. Bowen stopped him with the question,—

”Any of your people about here with a canoe? I'll pay them well to row me through this gorge,” he added.

”The coach is so broken,” said Audrey aside to her brother, ”we are afraid

they cannot mend it safely."

"Never mind," returned Edwin cheerily; "we cannot be far from Mr. Hirpington's. This man has brought a letter from him. Where is father?"

"Taking care of the horses; and we cannot get at him," she replied.

Mr. Bowen heard what they were saying, and caught at the good news—not far from Hirpington's, where the Lees were to stop. "How far?" he turned to the Maori.

"Not an hour's ride from the Rota Pah, or lake village, where the Maori lived." The quickest way to reach the ford, he asserted, was to take a short cut through the bush, as he had done.

Mr. Bowen thought he would rather by far trust himself to native guidance than enter the coach again. But there were no more horses to be had, for the coachman's team was out of reach, as the broken-down vehicle still blocked the path.

Nga-Hepé promised, as soon as he got to his home, to row down stream and fetch them all to Mr. Hirpington's in his canoe. Meanwhile, Edwin had rushed off to his father with the letter. It was to tell Mr. Lee the heavy luggage he had sent on by packet had been brought up from the coast all right.

"You could get a ride behind Hirpington's messenger," said the men to Edwin, "and beg him to come to our help." The Maori readily assented.

They were soon ascending the hilly steep and winding through a leafy labyrinth of shadowy arcades, where ferns and creepers trailed their luxuriant foliage over rotting tree trunks. Deeper and deeper they went into the hoary, silent bush, where song of bird or ring of axe is listened for in vain. All was still, as if under a spell. Edwin looked up with something akin to awe at the giant height of mossy pines, or peered into secluded nooks where the sun-shafts darted fitfully over vivid shades of glossy green, revealing exquisite forms of unimagined ferns, "wasting their sweetness on the desert air." Amid his native fastnesses the Maori grew eloquent, pointing out each conical hill, where his forefathers had raised the wall and dug the ditch. Over every trace of these ancient fortifications Maori tradition had its fearsome story to repeat. Here was the awful war-feast of the victor; there an unyielding handful were cut to pieces by the foe.

How Edwin listened, catching something of the eager glow of his excited companion, looking every inch—as he knew himself to be—the lord of the soil, the last surviving son of the mighty Hepé, whose name had struck terror from shore to shore.

As the Maori turned in his saddle, and darted suspicious glances from side to side, it seemed to Edwin some expectation of a lurking danger was rousing the warrior spirit within him.

They had gained the highest ridge of the wall of rock, and before them

gloomed a dark descent. Its craggy sides were riven and disrupted, where cone and chasm told the same startling story, that here, in the forgotten long ago, the lava had poured its stream of molten fire through rending rocks and heaving craters. But now a maddened river was hissing and boiling along the channels they had hollowed. It was leaping, with fierce, impatient swoop, over a blackened mass of downfallen rock, scooping for itself a caldron, from which, with redoubled hiss and roar, it darted headlong, rolling over on itself, and then, as if in weariness, spreading and broadening to the kiss of the sun, until it slept like a tranquil lake in the heart of the hills. For the droughts of summer had broadened the muddy reaches, which now seemed to surround the giant boulders until they almost spanned the junction.

Where the stream left the basin a mass of huge logs chained together, forming what New Zealanders call a "boom," was cast across it, waiting for the winter floods to help them to start once more on their downward swim to the broader waters of the Waikato, of which this shrunken stream would then become a tributary.

On the banks of the lake, or rota—to give it the Maori name—Edwin looked down upon the high-peaked roofs of a native village nestling behind its protecting wall.

As the wind drove back the light vapoury cloudlets which hovered over the huts and whares (as the better class of Maori dwellings are styled), Edwin saw a wooden bridge spanning the running ditch which guarded the entrance.

His ears were deafened by a strange sound, as if hoarsely echoing fog-horns were answering each other from the limestone cliffs, when a cart-load of burly natives crossed their path. As the wheels rattled over the primitive drawbridge, a noisy greeting was shouted out to the advancing horseman—a greeting which seemed comprised in a single word the English boy instinctively construed "Beware." But the warning, if it were a warning, ended in a hearty laugh, which made itself heard above the shrill whistling from the jets of steam, sputtering and spouting from every fissure in the rocky path Nga-Hepé was descending, until another blast from those mysterious fog-horns drowned every other noise.

With a creepy sense of fear he would have been loath to own, Edwin looked ahead for some sign of the ford which was his destination; for he knew that his father's friend, Mr. Hirpington, held the onerous post of ford-master under the English Government in that weird, wild land of wonder, the hill-country of the

north New Zealand isle.

CHAPTER II.
THE WHARE BY THE LAKE.

A deep fellow-feeling for his wild, high-spirited guide was growing in Edwin's mind as they rode onward. Nga-Hepé glanced over his shoulder more than once to satisfy himself as to the effect the Maori's warning had had upon his young companion.

Edwin returned the hasty inspection with a look of careless coolness, as he said to himself, "Whatever this means, I have nothing to do with it." Not a word was spoken, but the flash of indignant scorn in Nga-Hepé's brilliant eyes told Edwin that he was setting it at defiance.

On he spurred towards the weather-beaten walls, which had braved so many a mountain gale.

A faint, curling column of steamy vapour was rising from the hot waters which fed the moat, and wafted towards them a most unpleasant smell of sulphur, which Edwin was ready to denounce as odious. To the Maori it was dear as native air: better than the breath of sweet-brier and roses.

Beyond the bridge Edwin could see a pathway made of shells, as white and glistening as if it were a road of porcelain. It led to the central whare, the council-hall of the tribe and the home of its chief. Through the light haze of steam which veiled everything Edwin could distinguish its carved front, and the tall post beside it, ending in a kind of figure-head with gaping mouth, and a blood-red tongue hanging out of it like a weary dog's. This was the flagstaff. The cart had stopped beside it, and its recent occupants were now seated on the steps of the whare, laughing over the big letters of a printed poster which they were exhibiting to their companions.

"Nothing very alarming in that," thought Edwin, as Nga-Hepé gave his bridle-rein a haughty shake and entered the village. He threaded his way between the huts of mat and reeds, and the wood-built whares, each in its little garden. Here and there great bunches of home-grown tobacco were drying under a little roof of thatch; behind another hut a dead pig was hanging; a little further on, a group of naked children were tumbling about and bathing in a steaming pool; beside another tent-shaped hut there was a huge pile of potatoes, while a

rush basket of fish lay by many a whare door.

In this grotesque and novel scene Edwin almost forgot his errand, and half believed he had misunderstood the hint of danger, as he watched the native women cooking white-bait over a hole in the ground, and saw the hot springs shooting up into the air, hissing and boiling in so strange a fashion the English boy was fairly dazed.

Almost all the women were smoking, and many of them managed to keep a baby riding on their backs as they turned their fish or gossiped with their neighbours. Edwin could not take his eyes off the sputtering mud-holes doing duty as kitchen fires until they drew near to the tattooed groups of burly men waiting for their supper on the steps of the central whare. Then many a dusky brow was lifted, and more than one cautionary glance was bestowed upon his companion, whilst others saw him pass them with a scowl.

Nga-Hepé met it with a laugh. A Maori scorns to lose his temper, come what may. As he leaped the steaming ditch and left the village by a gap in the decaying wall, he turned to Edwin, observing, with a pride which bordered on satisfaction: "The son of Hepé is known by all men to be rich and powerful, therefore the chief has spoken against him."

"Much you care for the chief," retorted Edwin.

"I am not of his tribe," answered Nga-Hepé. "I come of the Ureweras, the noblest and purest of our race. Our dead men rest upon the sacred hills where the Maori chiefs lie buried. When a child of Hepé dies," he went on, pointing to the mountain range, "the thunder rolls and the lightning flashes along those giant hills, that all men may know his hour has come. No matter where the Hepé lay concealed, men always knew when danger threatened him. They always said such and such a chief is dying, because the thunder and lightning are in such a place. Look up! the sky is calm and still. The hills are silent; Mount Tarawera rears its threefold crest above them all in its own majestic grandeur. Well, I know no real danger menaces me to-night."

"I trust you are right, Nga-Hepé, but—" began Edwin quickly. The Maori turned his head away; he could admit no "buts," and the English boy made vain endeavours to argue the question.

A noisy, boisterous jabbering arose from the village as the crowd outside the grand whare hailed the decision of the elders holding council within. Dogs, pigs, and boys added their voices to the general acclamation, and drowned Edwin's so completely he gave up in despair; and after all he thought, "Can any one wonder at Nga-Hepé clinging to the old superstitions of his race? In the wild grandeur of a spot like this it seems in keeping."

So he said no more. They crossed the broken ground. Before them gleamed the waters of the lake, upon whose bank Nga-Hepé's house was standing—the old

ancestral whare, the dwelling-place of the Hepés generation after generation. Its well-thatched roof was higher than any of the roofs in the pah, and more pointed. The wood of which this whare was built was carved into idol figures and grinning monsters, now black and shining with excessive age.

The garden around it was better cultivated, and the ample store of roots and grain in the smaller whare behind it told of the wealth of its owner. Horses and pigs were snorting and squealing beneath the hoary trees, overshadowing the mud-hole and the geyser spring, by which the Maori loves to make his home. The canoe was riding on the lake, the lovely lake, as clear and blue as the sky it mirrored.

The sight of it recalled Edwin to his purpose, and he once more questioned Nga-Hepé as to the whereabouts of the ford.

"Enter and eat," said the Maori, alighting at his low-browed door.

The gable end of the roof projected over it like a porch, and Edwin paused under its shadow to take in the unfamiliar surroundings. Beneath the broad eaves huge bundles of native flax and tobacco were drying. In the centre of the long room within there was a blazing fire of crackling wood. But its cheerful welcome seemed to contend with a sense of desertion which pervaded the place.

Nga-Hepé called in vain for his accustomed attendant to take his horse. No one answered his summons. He shouted; no answer. The wooden walls of the neighbouring pah faintly echoed back his words. All his men were gone. He muttered something in his own tongue, which Edwin could not understand, as he led the way into the long room. In so grand a whare this room was divided into separate stalls, like a well-built stable. An abundance of native mats strewed the floor.

The Maori's eyes fell upon the corner where his greenstone club, the treasured heirloom of many generations, leaned against an English rifle, and on the boar's tusks fixed in the wall at intervals, where his spears and fishing-rods were ranged in order. By their side hung a curious medley of English apparel. The sweeping feathers of a broad felt hat drooped above a gaudy table-cloth, which by its many creases seemed to have done duty on the person of its owner. Edwin's merriment was excited by the number of scent-bottles, the beautiful cut-glass carafe, and many other expensive articles suspended about the room—all bearing a silent testimony to the wealth of which Nga-Hepé had spoken. Two happy-looking children, each wearing a brightly-coloured handkerchief folded across their tiny shoulders in true Maori fashion, were grinding at a barrel-organ. One fat little knee served as a pillow for a tangle of rough black hair, which a closer inspection showed him was the head of a sleeping boy.

Nga-Hepé's wife, wearing a cloak of flowered silk, with a baby slung in a shawl at her back, and a short pipe in her mouth, met him with soft words of

pleading remonstrance which Edwin could not understand.

Her husband patted her fondly on the arm, touched the baby's laughing lips, and seated himself on the floor by the fire, inviting Edwin to join him.

The sleeping boy gave a great yawn, and starting to his feet, seemed to add his entreaties to his mother's. He held a book in his hand—a geography, with coloured maps—which he had evidently been studying; but he dropped it in despair, as his father only called for his supper.

"Help us to persuade him," he whispered to Edwin in English; "he may listen to a pakeha. Tell him it is better to go away."

"Why?" asked Edwin.

"Why!" repeated the boy excitedly; "because the chief is threatening him with a muru. He will send a band of men to eat up all the food, and carry off everything we have that can be carried away; but they will only come when father is at home."

"A bag of talk!" interrupted Nga-Hepé. "Shall it be said the son of the warrior sneaks off and hides himself at the first threat?"

"But," urged Edwin, "you promised to row back for Mr. Bowen."

"Yes, and I will. I will eat, and then I go," persisted Nga-Hepé, as his wife stamped impatiently.

Two or three women ran in with the supper which they had been cooking in a smaller whare in the background. They placed the large dishes on the floor: native potatoes—more resembling yams in their sweetness than their English namesakes—boiled thistles, and the ancient Maori delicacy, salted shark.

They all began to eat, taking the potatoes in their hands, when a wild cry rang through the air—a cry to strike terror to any heart. It was the first note of the Maori war-song, caught up and repeated by a dozen powerful voices, until it became a deafening yell. Hepé's wife tore frantically at her long dark hair.

The Maori rose to his feet with an inborn dignity, and grasped the greenstone club, taking pride in the prestige of such a punishment. Turning to Edwin he said: "When the ferns are on fire the sparks fall far and wide. Take the horse—it is yours; I give it to you. It is the last gift I shall have it in my power to make for many a day to come. There lies your path through the bush; once on the open road again the ford-house will be in sight, and Whero shall be your guide. Tell the old pakeha the canoe is mine no more."

The woman snatched up the children and rushed away with them, uttering a wailing cry.

Edwin knew he had no alternative, but he did not like the feeling of running away in the moment of peril.

"Can't I help you, though I am only a boy?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Hepé's wife, as she almost pushed him out of the door in

her desperation; "take this."

She lifted up a heavy bag from the corner of the whare, and put it into his hands. Whero had untied the horse, and was pointing to the distant pah, from which the yells proceeded.

A band of armed men, brandishing clubs and spears, were leading off the war-dance. Their numbers were swelling. The word of fear went round from lip to lip, "The tana is coming!"

The tana is the band of armed men sent by the chief to carry out this act of savage despotism. They had been on the watch for Nga-Hepé. They had seen him riding through the pah. All hope of getting him out of the way was over.

Father and mother joined in the last despairing desire to send off Whero, their little lord and first-born, of whom the Maoris make so much, and treat with so much deference. They never dreamed of ordering him to go. A freeborn Maori brooks no control even in childhood. But their earnest entreaties prevailed. He got up before Edwin. He would not ride behind him, not he, to save his life. He yielded for the sake of the horse he loved so well. He thought he might get it back from the young pakeha, but who could wrest it from the grasp of the tana? Perhaps Nga-Hepé shared the hope. The noble horse was dear to father and son.

"Oh, I am so sorry for you!" said Edwin as he guessed the truth; "and so will father be, I'm sure." He stopped in sudden silence as another terrific yell echoed back by lake and tree.

He felt the good horse quiver as they plunged into the safe shelter of the bush, leaving Hepé leaning on his club on the threshold of his whare.

Edwin's first care now was to get to Mr. Hirpington's as fast as he could. But his desire to press on met with no sympathy from his companion, who knew not how to leave the spot until his father's fate was decided. He had backed the horse into the darkest shadow of the trees, and here he wanted to lie in ambush and watch; for the advancing warriors were surrounding the devoted whare, and the shrieking women were flying from it into the bush.

How could Edwin stop him when Whero would turn back to meet his mother? The rendezvous of the fugitives was a tall karaka tree—a forest king rearing its giant stem full seventy feet above the mossy turf. A climbing plant, ablaze with scarlet flowers, had wreathed itself among the branches, and hung in long festoons which swept the ground. The panting women flung themselves down, and dropped their heavy burdens at its root; for all had snatched up the nearest thing which came to hand as they ran out. One had wrapped the child she carried in a fishing-net; another drew from beneath the folds of the English counterpane she was wearing the long knife that had been lying on the floor by the dish of shark; while Whero's mother, shaking her wealth of uncombed hair about her like a natural veil, concealed in her arms a ponderous axe.

The big black horse gave a loving whinny as he recognized their footsteps, and turning of his own accord, cantered up to them as they began to raise the death-wail—doing tangi as they call it—over the outcast children crying for the untasted supper, on which the invaders were feasting.

”May it choke the pigs!” muttered Whero, raising himself in the stirrups and catching at the nearest bough, he gave it a shake, which sent a shower of the karaka nuts tumbling down upon the little black heads and fighting fists. The women stopped their wail to crack and eat. The horse bent down his head to claim a share, and the children scrambled to their feet to scoop the sweet kernel from the opened shell. The hungry boys were forced to join them, and Edwin found to his surprise that leaf and nut alike were good and wholesome food. They ate in silence and fear, as the wild woods rang with the shouts of triumph and derision as the rough work of confiscation went forward in the whare.

With the much-needed food Edwin’s energy was returning. He gave back the bag to Whero’s mother, assuring her if her son would only guide him to the road he could find his own way to the ford.

”Let us all go farther into the bush,” said the oldest woman of the group, ”before the tana comes out. The bush they cannot take from us, and all we need the most the bush will provide.”

The weight of the bag he had carried convinced Edwin it was full of money.

Whero’s mother was looking about for a place where she could hide it; so they wandered on until the sun shone brightly between the opening trees, and they stepped out upon an unexpected clearing.

”The road! the road!” cried Whero, pointing to the gleam of water in the distance, and the dark roof of the house by the ford, half buried in the white blossom of the acacia grove beside it.

”All right!” exclaimed Edwin joyfully. ”You need go no farther.”

He took the bridle from Whero, and turned the horse’s head towards the ford, loath to say farewell to his strange companions. As he went at a steady trot along the road, he could not keep from looking back. He saw they were burying the bag of treasure where two white pines grew near together, and the wild strawberries about their roots were ripening in the sun. The road, a mere clearing in the forest, lay straight before him. As Nga-Hepé had said, an hour’s ride brought him to Mr. Hirpington’s door.

The house was large and low, built entirely of corrugated iron. It was the only spot of ugliness in the whole landscape. A grassy bank higher than Edwin’s head surrounded the home enclosure, and lovely white-winged pigeons were hovering over the yellow gorse, which formed an impenetrable wall on the top of the bank. A gate stood open, and by its side some rough steps cut in the rock led down to the riverbed, through a tangle of reeds and bulrushes. Like most New

Zealand rivers, the bed was ten times wider than the stream, and the stretch of mud on either side increased the difficulties of the crossing.

Edwin rode up to the gate and dismounted, drew the bridle through the ring in the post, and entered a delightful garden, where peach and almond and cherry trees brought back a thought of home. The ground was terraced towards the house, which was built on a jutting rock, to be out of the reach of winter floods. Honeysuckle and fuchsia, which Edwin had only known in their dwarfed condition in England, rose before him as stately trees, tall as an English elm, eclipsing all the white and gold of the acacias and laburnums, which sheltered the end of the house.

The owner, spade in hand, was at work among his flower-beds. His dress was as rough as the navvy's, and Edwin, who had studied Mr. Hirpington's photograph so often, asked himself if this man, so brown and brawny and broad, could be his father's friend?

"Please, I'm Edwin Lee," said the boy bluntly. "Is Mr. Hirpington at home?"

The spade was thrown aside, and a hand all smeared with garden mould grasped his own, and a genial voice exclaimed, "Yes, Hirpington is here, bidding you heartily welcome! But how came you, my lad, to forerun the coach?"

Then Edwin poured into sympathetic ears the tale of their disaster, adding earnestly, "I thought I had better come on with your messenger, and tell you what had happened."

"Coach with a wheel off in the gorge!" shouted Mr. Hirpington to a chum in-doors, and Edwin knew he had found the friend in need, whose value no one can estimate like a colonist.

Before Edwin could explain why Nga-Hepé had failed in his promise to return with his canoe, Mr. Hirpington was down the boating-stairs, loosening his own "tub," as he called it, from its moorings. To the Maori's peril he lent but half an ear. "No use our interfering there," he said. "I'm off to your father."

A head appeared at a window overlooking the bed of rushes, and two men came out of the house door, and assisted him to push the boat into the water. The window above was thrown open, and a hastily-filled basket was handed down. Then a kind, motherly voice told Edwin to come in-doors.

The room he entered was large and faultlessly clean, serving the threefold purpose of kitchen, dining-room, and office. The desk by the window, the gun in the corner, the rows of plates above the dresser, scarcely seemed to encroach on each other, or make the long dining-table look ashamed of their company.

Mrs. Hirpington, who was expecting the "coach to sleep" under her roof that night, was preparing her meat for the spit at the other end of the room. The pipes and newspaper, which had been hastily thrown down at the sound of Mr. Hirpington's summons, showed Edwin where the men had been resting

after their day's work. They were, as he guessed, employés on the road, which was always requiring mending and clearing, while Mr. Hirpington was their superintendent, as well as ford-keeper.

His wife, in a homely cotton dress of her own making, turned to Edwin with the well-bred manner of an English lady and the hearty hospitality of a colonist.

"Not a word about being in the way, my dear; the trouble is a pleasure. We shall have you all here, a merry party, before long. There are worse disasters than this at sea." She smiled as she delayed the roast, and placed a chop on the grill for Edwin's benefit.

The cozy sense of comfort which stole over him was so delightful, as he stretched himself on the sofa on the other side of the fire, it made him think the more of the homeless wanderers in the bush, and he began to describe to Mrs. Hirpington the strange scene he had witnessed.

A band of armed men marching out of the village filled her with apprehension. She ran to the window overlooking the river to see if the boat had pushed off, and called to the men remaining behind—for the ford was never left—to know if the other roadmen had yet come in.

"They are late," she said. "They must have heard the coachman's 'coo,' and are before us with their help. They have gone down to the gorge. You may rest easy about your father."

But she could not rest easy. She looked to the loading of the guns, put the bar in the gate herself, and held a long conference with Dunter over the alarming intelligence.

But the man knew more of Maori ways than she did, and understood it better. "I'll not be saying," he answered, "but what it will be wise in us to keep good watch until they have all dispersed. Still, with Hepé's goods to carry off and divide, they will not be thinking of interfering with us. Maybe you'll have Nga-Hepé's folk begging shelter as the night draws on."

"I hope not," she retorted quickly. "Give them anything they ask for, but don't be tempted to open the gate. Tell them the coach is coming, and the house is full."

A blaze of fire far down the river called everybody into the garden. Some one was signalling. But Dunter was afraid to leave Mrs. Hirpington, and Mrs. Hirpington was equally afraid to be left.

A great horror fell upon Edwin. "Can it be father?" he exclaimed.

Dunter grasped the twisted trunk of the giant honeysuckle, and swung himself on to the roof of the house to reconnoitre. Edwin was up beside him in a moment.

"Oh, it is nothing," laughed the man—"nothing but some chance traveller waiting by the roadside for the expected coach, and, growing impatient, has set

a light to the dry branches of a ti tree to make sure of stopping the coach."

But the wind had carried the flames beyond the tree, and the fire was spreading in the bush.

"It will burn itself out," said Dunter carelessly; "no harm in that."

But surely the coach was coming!

Edwin looked earnestly along the line which the bush road had made through the depths of the forest. He could see clearly to a considerable distance. The fire was not far from the two white pines where he had parted from his dusky companions, and soon he saw them rushing into the open to escape from the burning fern. On they ran towards the ford, scared by the advancing fire. How was Mrs. Hirpington to refuse to open her gates and take them in? Women and children—it could not be done.

Edwin was pleading at her elbow.

"I saw it all, Mrs. Hirpington; I know how it happened. Nga-Hepé gave me his horse, that I might escape in safety to you."

"Well, well," she answered, resigning herself to the inevitable. "If you will go out and meet them and bring them here, Dunter shall clear the barn to receive them."

Edwin slid down the rough stem of the honeysuckle and let himself out, and ran along the road for about half-a-mile, waving his hat and calling to the fugitives to come on, to come to the ford.

The gray-haired woman in the counterpane, now begrimed with mud and smoke, was the first to meet him.

She shouted back joyfully, "The good wahini [woman] at the ford has sent to fetch us. She hear the cry of the child. Good! good!"

But the invitation met with no response from Whero and his mother.

"Shall it be said by morning light Nga-Hepé's wife was sleeping in the Ingarangi [English] bed, and he a dead man lying on the floor of his forefathers' whare, with none to do tangi above him!" she exclaimed, tearing fresh handfuls from her long dark hair in her fury.

"Oh to be bigger and stronger," groaned Whero, "that I might play my game with the greenstone club! but my turn will come."

The blaze of passion in the boy's star-like eyes recalled his mother to calmness. "What are you," she asked, "but an angry child to court the blow of the warrior's club that would end your days? A man can bide his hour. Go with the Ingarangi, boy."

"Yes, go," urged her companion.

A bright thought struck the gray-haired woman, and she whispered to Edwin, "Get him away; get him safe to the Ingarangi school. Nothing can reach him there. He loves their learning; it will make him a mightier man than his fathers

have ever been. If he stays with us, we can't hold him back. He will never rest till he gets himself killed."

"Ah, but my Whero will go back with the Ingarangi boy and beg a blanket to keep the babies from the cold night wind," added his mother coaxingly.

"Come along," said Edwin, linking his arm in Whero's and setting off with a run. "Now tell me all you want—blankets, and what else?"

But the boy had turned sullen, and would not speak. He put his hands before his face and sobbed as if his heart would break.

"Where is the horse?" he asked abruptly, as they reached Mrs. Hirpington's gate.

"In there," said Edwin, pointing to the stable.

The Maori boy sprang over the bar which Dunter had fixed across the entrance to keep the horse in, and threw his arms round the neck of his black favourite, crying more passionately than ever.

"He is really yours," put in Edwin, trying to console him. "I do not want to keep the horse when you can take him back. Indeed, I am not sure my father will let me keep him."

But he was speaking to deaf ears; so he left Whero hugging his four-footed friend, and went in-doors for the blankets. Mrs. Hirpington was very ready to send them; but when Edwin returned to the stable, he found poor Whero fast asleep.

"Just like those Maoris," laughed Dunter. "They drop off whatever they are doing; it makes no difference. But remember, my man, there is a good old saying, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'"

So, instead of waking Whero, they gently closed the stable-door; and Edwin went off alone with the blankets on his shoulder. He found Nga-Hepé's wife still seated by the roadside rocking her baby, with her two bigger children asleep beside her. One dark head was resting on her knee, the other nestling close against her shoulder. Edwin unfolded one of the blankets he was bringing and wrapped it round her, carefully covering up the little sleepers. Her companions had not been idle. To the Maori the resources of the bush are all but inexhaustible. They were making a bed of freshly-gathered fern, and twisting a perfect cable from the fibrous flax-leaves. This they tied from tree to tree, and flung another blanket across it, making a tent over the unfortunate mother. Then they crept behind her, under the blanket, keeping their impromptu tent in shape with their own backs.

"Goo'-night," they whispered, "goo' boy. Go bush a' right."

But Edwin lingered another moment to tell the disconsolate mother how he had left Whero sleeping by the horse.

"Wake up—no find us—then he go school," she said, wrinkling the patch of

tattoo on her lip and chin with the ghost of a smile.

CHAPTER III.
A RIDE THROUGH THE BUSH.

The fire by the white pines had died away, but a cloud of smoke rose from the midst of the trees and obscured the view. A faint rumbling sound and the dull thud of horses' feet reached Edwin from time to time as he ran back to the ford.

A lantern was swinging in the acacia tree. The white gate was flung open, and Dunter, with his hand to his ear, stood listening to the far-off echo.

A splash of oars among the rushes, and the shock of a boat against the stairs, recalled him to the house. Edwin ran joyfully down the steps, and gave a hand to Mr. Bowen.

"We are not all here now," the old gentleman said. "Your father stuck by the coach, and he would have his daughters with him, afraid of an open boat on a night like this."

Then Edwin felt a hand in the dark, which he knew was Cuthbert's; and heard Mr. Hirpington's cheery voice exclaiming, "Which is home first—boat or coach?"

"Hard to say," answered Dunter, as the coach drove down the road at a rapid pace, followed by a party of roadmen with pickaxe on shoulder, coming on with hasty strides and a resolute air about them, very unusual in men returning from a hard day's labour.

The coach drew up, and Mr. Lee was the first to alight. He looked sharply round, evidently counting heads.

"All here, all right," answered Mr. Hirpington. "Safe, safe at home, as I hope you will all feel it," he added, in his heartiest tones.

There was no exact reply. His men gathered round him, exclaiming, "We heard the war-cry from the Rota Pah. There's mischief in the wind to-night. So we turned our steps the other way and waited for the coach, and all came on together."

"It is a row among the Maoris themselves," put in Dunter, "as that lad can tell you."

The man looked sceptical. A new chum, as fresh arrivals from the mother country are always termed, and a youngster to boot, what could he know?

Mr. Hirpington stepped out from the midst of the group and laid his hand on Mr. Lee's shoulder, who was bending down to ask Edwin what all this meant, and drew him aside.

"I trust, old friend," he said, "I have not blundered on your behalf, but all the heavy luggage you sent on by packet arrived last week, and I, not knowing how to take care of it, telegraphed to headquarters for permission to put it in the old school-house until you could build your own. I thought to do you a service; but if our dusky neighbours have taken offence, that is the cause, I fear."

Mr. Lee made a sign to his children to go in-doors. Edwin led his sisters up the terrace-steps, and came back to his father. The coach was drawn inside the gate, and the bar was replaced. The driver was attending to his horses; but all the others were holding earnest council under the acacia tree, where the lantern was still swinging.

"But I do not understand about this old schoolhouse," Mr. Lee was saying; "where is it?"

"Over the river," answered several voices. "The government built it for the Maoris before the last disturbance, when the Hau-Hau [pronounced *How How*] tribe turned against us, and went back to their old superstitions, and banded together to sell us no more land. It was then the school was shut up, but the house was left; and now we are growing friendly again," added Mr. Hirpington, "I thought all was right."

"So it is," interposed Mr. Bowen, confidently. "My sheep-run comes up very near to the King country, as they like to call their district, and I want no better neighbours than the Maoris."

Then Edwin spoke out. "Father, I can tell you something about it. Do listen."

They did listen, one and all, with troubled, anxious faces. "This tana," they said, "may not disperse without doing more mischief. Carry on their work of confiscation at the old school-house, perhaps."

"No, no; no fear of that," argued Mr. Bowen and the coachman, who knew the Maoris best.

"I'll run no risk of losing all my ploughs and spades," persisted Mr. Lee. "How far off is the place?"

"Not five miles across country," returned his friend. "I have left it in the care of a gang of rabbiters, who have set up their tents just outside the garden wall—safe enough, as it seemed, when I left."

"Lend me a horse and a guide," said Mr. Lee, "and I'll push on to-night."

The children, of course, were to be left at the ford; but Edwin wanted to go with his father. Dunter and another man were getting ready to accompany him.

"Father," whispered Edwin, "there is the black horse; you can take him. Come and have a look at him."

He raised the heavy wooden latch of the stable-door, and glanced round for Whero. There was the hole in the straw where he had been sleeping, but the boy was gone.

"He must have stolen out as we drove in," remarked the coachman, who was filling the manger with corn for his horses.

The man had far more sympathy with Nga-Hepé in his trouble than any of the others. He leaned against the side of the manger, talking to Edwin about him. When Mr. Lee looked in he stooped down to examine the horse, feeling its legs, and the height of its shoulder. On such a congenial subject the coachman could not help giving an opinion. Edwin heard, with considerable satisfaction, that the horse was a beauty.

"But I do not like this business at all, and if I had had any idea Mr. Hirpington's messenger was a native, you should never have gone with him, Edwin," Mr. Lee began, in a very decided tone. "However," he added, "I'll buy this horse, I don't mind doing that; but as to taking presents from the natives, it is out of the question. I will not begin it."

"But, father," put in Edwin, "there is nobody here to buy the horse of; there is nobody to take the money."

"I'll take the money for Nga-Hepé," said the coachman. "I will make that all right. You saw how it was as we came along. The farmers and the natives are on the watch for my coming, and they load me with all sorts of commissions. You would laugh at the things these Maoris get me to bring them from the towns I pass through. I don't mind the bother of it, because they will take no end of trouble in return, and help me at every pinch. I ought to carry Nga-Hepé ten pounds."

Mr. Lee thought that cheap for so good a horse, and turned to the half light at the open door to count out the money.

"But I shall not take him away with me to-night. I will not be seen riding a Maori's horse if Hirpington can lend me another," persisted Mr. Lee.

Then Mr. Bowen limped up to the stable-door, and Edwin slipped out, looking for Whero behind the farm buildings and round by the back of the house. But the Maori boy was nowhere to be seen. The coachman was right after all. Mr. Hirpington went indoors and called to Edwin to join him. He had the satisfaction of making the boy go over the ground again. But there was nothing more to tell, and Edwin was dismissed to his supper with an exhortation to be careful, like a good brother, not to frighten his sisters.

He crossed over and leaned against the back of Audrey's chair, simply observing, "Father is going on to-night."

"Well?" she returned eagerly.

"It won't be either well or fountain here," he retorted, "but a boiling geyser.

I've seen one in the distance already."

"Isn't he doing it nicely?" whispered Effie, nodding. "They told him to turn a dark lantern on us. We heard—Audrey and I."

"Oh yes," smiled her sister; "every word can be heard in these New Zealand houses, and no one ever seems to remember that. I give you fair warning."

"It is a rare field for the little long-eared pitchers people are so fond of talking about—present representatives, self and Cuthbert. We of course must expect to fill our curiosity a drop at a time; but you must have been snapped up in a crab-shell if you mean to keep Audrey in the dark," retorted Effie.

"Cuthbert! Cuthbert!" called Edwin, "here is a buzzing bee about to sting me. Come and catch it, if you can."

Cuthbert ran round and began to tickle his sister in spite of Audrey's horrified "My dear!"

The other men came in, and a look from Mr. Lee recalled the young ones to order. But the grave faces, the low words so briefly interchanged among them, the business-like air with which the supper was got through, in the shortest possible time, kept Audrey in a flutter of alarm, which she did her best to conceal. But Mr. Bowen detected the nervous tremor in her hand as she passed his cup of coffee, and tried to reassure her with the welcome intelligence that he had just discovered they were going to be neighbours. What were five-and-twenty miles in the colonies?

"A very long way off," thought the despondent Audrey.

At a sign from Mr. Lee, Mrs. Hirpington conducted the girls to one of the tiny bedrooms which ran along the back of the house, where the "coach habitually slept." As the door closed behind her motherly good-night, Effie seized upon her sister, exclaiming,—

"What are we in for now?"

"Sleep and silence," returned Audrey; "for we might as well disclose our secret feelings in the market-place as within these iron walls."

"I always thought you were cousin-german to the discreet princess; but if you reduce us to dummies, you will make us into eaves-droppers as well, and we used to think that was something baddish," retorted Effie.

"You need not let it trouble your conscience to-night, for we cannot help hearing as long as we are awake; therefore I vote for sleep," replied her sister.

But sleep was effectually banished, for every sound on the other side of the thin sheet of corrugated iron which divided them from their neighbours seemed increased by its resonance.

They knew when Mr. Lee drove off. They knew that a party of men were keeping watch all night by the kitchen fire. But when the wind rose, and a cold, pelting rain swept across the river, and thundered on the metal roof with a noise

which could only be out-rivalled by the iron hail of a bombardment, every other sound was drowned, and they did not hear what the coachman was saying to Edwin as they parted for the night. So it was possible even in that house of corrugated iron not always to let the left hand know what the right was doing. Only a few words passed between them.

”You are a kind-hearted lad. Will you come across to the stables and help me in the morning? I must be up before the dawn.”

There was an earnestness in the coachman’s request which Edwin could not refuse.

With the first faint peep of gray, before the morning stars had faded, the coachman was at Edwin’s door. The boy answered the low-breathed summons without waking his little brother, and the two were soon standing on the terraced path outside the house in the fresh, clear, bracing air of a New Zealand morning, to which a touch of frost had been superadded. They saw it sparkling on the leaves of the stately heliotropes, which shaded the path and waved their clustering flowers above the coachman’s head as they swayed in the rising breeze. He opened the gate in the hedge of scarlet geraniums, which divided the garden from the stable-yard, and went out with Edwin, carrying the sweet perfume of the heliotropes with them. Even the horses were all asleep.

”Yes, it is early,” remarked Edwin’s companion. ”The coach does not start until six. I have got old time by the forelock, and I’ve a mind to go over to the Rota Pah, if you can show me the way.”

”I think I can find it,” returned Edwin, with a confidence that was yet on the lee side of certainty.

”Ay, then we’ll take the black horse. If we give him the rein, he will lead us to his old master’s door. It is easy work getting lost in the bush, but I never yet turned my back on a chum in trouble. Once a chum always a chum with us. Many’s the time Nga-Hepé’s stood my friend among these wild hills, and I want to see him after last night’s rough handling. That is levelling down with a vengeance.”

The coachman paused, well aware his companions would blame him for interfering in such a business, and very probably his employers also, if it ever reached their ears. So he led the horse out quietly, and saddled him on the road. The ground was white with frost. The moon and stars were gradually paling and fading slowly out of sight. The forest was still enwrapped in stately gloom, but the distant hills were already catching the first faint tinge of rosy light.

Edwin got up behind the coachman, as he had behind Nga-Hepé. They gave the horse its head, and rode briskly on, trusting to its sagacity to guide them safely across the bush with all its dangers—dangers such as Edwin never even imagined. But the coachman knew that one unwary step might mean death

to all three. For the great white leaves of the deadly puka-puka shone here and there, conspicuous in the general blue-green hue of the varying foliage; a poison quickly fatal to the horse, but a poison which he loves. The difficulty of getting out of the thicket, where it was growing so freely, without suffering the horse to crop a single leaf kept them from talking.

"If I had known that beastly white-leaved thing was growing here, I would not have dared to have brought him, unless I had tied up his head in a net," grumbled the coachman, making another desperate effort to leave the puka-puka behind by changing his course. They struggled out of the thicket, only to get themselves tied up in a detestable supple-jack—a creeper possessing the power to cling which we faintly perceive in scratch-grass, but in the supple-jack this power is intensified and multiplied until it ties together everything which comes within its reach, making it the traveller's plague and another terrible foe to a horse, a riderless horse especially, who soon gets so tied up and fettered that he cannot extricate himself, and dies. By mutual help they broke away from the supple-jack, and stumbled upon a mud-hole. But here the good horse started back of his own accord, and saved them all from a morning header in its awful depths. For the mud was seething, hissing, boiling like some witch's caldron—a horrid, bluish mud, leaving a yellow crust round the edge of the hole, and sending up a sulphurous smell, which set Edwin coughing. The coachman alighted, and led the horse cautiously away. Then he turned back to break off a piece of the yellow crust and examine it.

Edwin remembered his last night's ride with the Maori, how he shot fearlessly forward, avoiding all these insidious dangers as if by instinct, "So that I did not even know they existed," exclaimed the boy, with renewed admiration for the fallen chief.

"'The rank puts on the guinea stamp,
But the man's the gold for a' that,'"

he cried, with growing enthusiasm.

"Gold or stamp," retorted the coachman; "well, I can't lay claim to either. I'm a blockhead, and yet not altogether one of nature's making, for I could have done better. When I was your age, lad, who would have thought of seeing me, Dilworth Ottley, driving a four-in-hand over such a breakneck path as we crossed yesterday? Yet I've done it, until I thought all sense of danger was deadened and gone. But that horrid hole brings back the shudder."

"What is it?" asked Edwin.

"One of the many vents through which the volcanic matter escapes. In my Cantab days—you stare; but I was a Cantab, and got ploughed, and rusticated—I

was crack whip among the freshmen. The horses lost me the 'exam;' and I went on losing, until it seemed that all was gone. Then I picked up my whip once more; and here you find me driving the cross-country mail for so much a week. But it makes a fellow feel when he sees another down in his luck like this Maori, so that one cannot turn away with an easy conscience when it is in one's power to help him, or I'd go back this very moment."

"No, don't," said Edwin earnestly; "we are almost there."

The exceeding stillness of the dawn was broken by the wailing cry of the women. The horse pricked up his ears, and cantered forward through the basket willows and acacias which bordered the sleeping lake. Along its margin in every little creek and curve canoes were moored, but from the tiny bay-like indentation by the lonely whare the canoe had vanished.

The sudden jets of steam uprising in the very midst of the Maori pah looked weird and ghostlike in the gray of the dawn. Only one wild-cat crept stealthily across their path. Far in the background rose the dim outline of the sacred hills where the Maori chiefs lie buried.

Edwin looked upward to their cloud-capped summits awestruck, as the wild traditionary tales he had heard from Hepé's lips only last night rushed back upon his recollection.

There before him was the place of graves; but where was the still more sacred Te Tara, the mysterious lake of beauty, with its terraced banks, where fairy-like arcades of exquisite tracery rise tier above tier, shading baths fed by a stream of liquid sun in which it is happiness to bathe?

Edwin had listened to the Maori's description as if it had been a page from some fairy tale; but Ottley, in his matter-of-fact way, confirmed it all.

"This Maori's paradise," he said, "may well be called the last-discovered wonder of the world. I bring a lot of fellows up here to see it every year; that is what old Bowen is after now. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.' This magic geyser has built a bathing-house of fair white coral and enamel lace, with basins of shell and fringes of pearl. What is it like? there is nothing it is like but a Staffa, with its stalactites in the daylight and the sunshine. If Nature forms the baths, she fills them, too, with boiling water, which she cools to suit every fancy as she pours it in pearly cascades from terrace to terrace, except in a north-east wind, which dries them up. All these Maoris care for is to spend their days like the ducks, swimming in these pools of delight. It is a jealously-guarded treasure. But they are wide awake. The pay of the sightseer fills their pockets without working, and they all disdain work."

They were talking so earnestly they did not perceive a patch of hot, crumbling ground until the horse's fore feet went down to the fetlocks as if it were a quicksand, shooting Ottley and Edwin over his head among the reeds by the

lake. Ottley picked himself up in no time, and flew to extricate the horse, warning Edwin off.

”Whatever you may say of the lake, there are a lot of ugly places outside it,” grumbled Edwin, provoked at being told to keep his distance when he really felt alight with curiosity and wonder as to what strange thing would happen next. Having got eyes, as he said, he was not content to gape and stare; he wanted to investigate a bit.

Once more the wail of the women was borne across the lake, rising to a fearsome howl, and then it suddenly ceased. The two pressed forward, and tying the horse to a tree, hastened to intercept the agonized wife venturing homewards with the peep of light, only to discover how thoroughly the tana had done its work.

But the poor women fled shrieking into the bush once more when they perceived the figure of a man advancing toward them.

”A friend! a friend!” shouted Ottley, hoping that the sound of an Englishman’s voice would reassure them.

There was a crashing in the bushes, and something leaped out of the wild tangle.

”It is Whero!” exclaimed Edwin, running to meet him. They grasped hands in a very hearty fashion, as Edwin whispered almost breathlessly, ”How have they left your father?”

”You have come to tangi with us!” cried Whero, in gratified surprise; and to show his warm appreciation of the unexpected sympathy, he gravely rubbed his nose against Edwin’s.

”Oh, don’t,” interposed the English boy, feeling strangely foolish.

Ottley laughed, as he saw him wipe his face with considerable energy to recover from his embarrassment.

”Oh, bother!” he exclaimed. ”I shall be up to it soon, but I did not know what you meant by it. Never mind.”

”Let us have a look round,” said the coachman, turning to Whero, ”before your mother gets here.”

”I have been watching in the long grass all night,” sobbed the boy; ”and when the tramp of the last footsteps died away, I crept out and groped my way in the darkness. I got to the door, and called to my father, but there was no answer. Then I turned again to the bush to find my mother, until I heard our own horse neigh, and I thought he had followed me.”

Ottley soothed the poor boy as best he could as they surveyed the scene of desolation. The fences were all pulled up and flung into the lake, and the gates thrown down. The garden had been thoroughly ploughed, and every shrub and tree uprooted. The patch of cultivated ground at the back of the whare had shared

the same fate.

It was so late in the autumn Ottley hoped the harvest had been gathered in. It mattered little. The empty storehouse echoed to their footsteps. All, all was gone. They could not tell whether the great drove of pigs had been scared away into the bush or driven off to the pah. Whero was leading the way to the door of the principal whare, where he had last seen his father. In the path lay a huge, flat stone smashed to pieces. The hard, cold, sullen manner which Whero had assumed gave way at the sight, and he sobbed aloud.

Edwin was close behind them; he took up a splinter from the stone and threw it into the circle of bubbling mud from which it had been hurled. Down it went with a splash—down, down; but he never heard it reach the bottom.

”Did that make anything rise?” asked Ottley anxiously, as he looked into the awful hole with a shudder.

”They could not fill this up,” retorted Whero exultantly. ”Throw in what you will, it swallows it all.”

To him the hot stone made by covering the dangerous jet was the embodiment of all home comfort. It was sacred in his eyes—a fire which had been lighted for the race of Hepé by the powers of heaven and earth; a fire which nothing could extinguish. He pitied the Ingarangi boy by his side, who had never known so priceless a possession.

”Watch it,” said Ottley earnestly. ”If anything has been thrown in, it will rise to the surface after a while incrusted with sulphur; but now—” He pushed before the boys and entered the whare.

There lay Nga-Hepé, a senseless heap, covered with blood and bruises. A stream of light from the open door fell full on the prostrate warrior. The rest of the whare was in shadow.

Whero sprang forward, and kneeling down beside his father, patted him fondly on his cheek and arm, as he renewed his sobbing.

After the tana had feasted to their heart’s content. after they had carried off everything movable, Nga-Hepé had been called upon to defend himself against their clubs. Careful to regulate their ruthless proceedings by ancient custom, his assailants came upon him one at a time, until his powerful arm had measured its strength with more than half the invading band. At last he fell, exhausted and bereft of everything but the greenstone club his unconscious hand was grasping still.

”He is not dead,” said Ottley, leaning over him; ”his chest is heaving.”

An exclamation of thankfulness burst from Edwin’s lips.

Ottley was looking about in vain for something to hold a little water, for he knew that the day was breaking, and his time was nearly gone. All that he could do must be done quickly. He was leaving the whare to pursue his quest without,

when he perceived the unfortunate women stealing through the shadows. He beckoned the gray-haired Maori, who had waited on Marileha from her birth, to join him. A few brief words and many significant gestures were exchanged before old Ronga comprehended that the life yet lingered in the fallen chief. She caught her mistress by the arm and whispered in her native tongue.

The death-wail died away. Marileha gazed into the much-loved face in breathless silence. A murmur of joy broke from her quivering lips, and she looked to Whero.

He went out noiselessly, and Edwin followed. A hissing column of steam was still rising unchecked from a rough cleft in the ground, rendered bare and barren by the scalding spray with which it was continually watered. Old Ronga was already at work, making a little gutter in the soft mud with her hands, to carry the refreshing stream to the bed of a dried-up pond. Edwin watched it slowly filling as she dug on in silence.

"The bath is ready," she exclaimed at last. The word was passed on to her companions, who had laid down the sleepy children they had just brought home in a corner of the great whare, still huddled together in Mrs. Hirpington's blanket. With Ottley's assistance they carried out the all but lifeless body of Nga-Hepé, and laid him gently in the refreshing pool, with all a Maori's faith in its restorative powers.

Marileha knelt upon the brink, and washed the blood-stains from his face. The large dark eyes opened, and gazed dreamily into her own. Her heart revived. What to her were loss and danger if her warrior's life was spared? She glanced at Ottley and said, "Whilst the healing spring still flows by his father's door there is no despair for me. Here he will bathe for hours, and strength and manhood will come back. Whilst he lies here helpless he is safe. Could he rise up it would only be to fight again. Go, good friend, and leave me. It would set the jealous fury of his tribe on fire if they found you here. Take away my Whero. My loneliness will be my defence. What Maori would hurt a weeping woman with her hungry babes? There are kind hearts in the pah; they will not leave me to starve."

She held out her wet hand as she spoke. Ottley saw she was afraid to receive the help he was so anxious to give. Whilst they were speaking, Edwin went to find Whero.

He had heard the black horse neigh, and was looking round for his favourite. "They will seize him!" he muttered between his set teeth. "Why will you bring him here?"

"Come along with us," answered Edwin quickly, "and we will go back as fast as we can."

But the friendly ruse did not succeed.

"I'll guide you to the road, but not a step beyond it. Shall men say I fled

in terror from the sound of clubs—a son of Hepé?" exclaimed Whero. "Should I listen to the women's fears?"

"All very fine," retorted Edwin. "If I had a mother, Whero, I'd listen to what she said, and I'd do as she asked me, if all the world laughed. They might call me a coward and a jackass as often as they liked, what would I care? Shouldn't I know in my heart I had done right?"

"Have not you a mother?" said Whero.

Edwin's "No" was scarcely audible, but it touched the Maori boy. He buried his face on the horse's shoulder, then suddenly lifting it up with a defiant toss, he asked, "Would you be faithless and desert her if she prayed you to do it?"

This was a home-thrust; but Edwin was not to be driven from his position.

"Well," he retorted, "even then I should say to myself, 'Perhaps she knows best.'"

He had made an impression, and he had the good sense not to prolong the argument.

CHAPTER IV.
THE NEW HOME.

The sun had risen when Edwin and the coach man started on their way to the ford. With Whero running by the horse's head for a guide, the dangers of the bush were avoided, and they rode back faster than they came. The gloom had vanished from the forest. The distant hills were painted with violet, pink, and gold. Sunbeams danced on scarlet creepers and bright-hued berries, and sparkled in a thousand frosted spiders' webs nestling in the forks of the trees. Whero led them to the road, and there they parted. "If food runs low," he said, "I shall go to school. With all our winter stores carried away it must; I know it."

"Don't try starving before schooling," said Ottley, cheerily. "Watch for me as I come back with the coach, and I'll take you down to Cambridge and on to the nearest government school.—Not the Cambridge you and I were talking of, Edwin, but a little township in the bush which borrows the grand old name.—You will love it for a while, Whero; you tried it once."

"And I'll try it again," he answered, with a smile. "There is a lot more that I want to know about—why the water boils through the earth here and not everywhere. We love our mud-hole and our boiling spring, and you are afraid of

them."

"They are such awful places," said Edwin, as Whero turned back among the trees and left them, not altogether envious of a Maori's patrimony. "It is such a step from fairy-land to Sodom and Gomorrah," persisted Edwin, reverting to Nga-Hepé's legends.

"Don't talk," interrupted Ottley. "There is an awful place among these hills which goes by that name, filled with sulphurous smoke and hissing mud. The men who made that greenstone club would have finished last night's work by hurling Nga-Hepé into its chasms. Thank God, that day is done. We have overcome the cannibal among them; and as we draw their young lads down to our schools, it will never revive." They rode on, talking, to the gate of the ford-house.

"I shall be late getting off," exclaimed Ottley, as he saw the household was astir. He gave the bridle to Edwin and leaped down. The boy was in no hurry to follow. He lingered outside, just to try if he could sit his powerful steed and manage him single-handed. When he rode through the gate at last, Ottley was coming out of the stable as intent upon his own affairs as if nothing had occurred.

Breakfast was half-way through. The passengers were growing impatient. One or two strangers had been added to their number. The starting of the coach was the grand event of the day. Mrs. Hirpington was engrossed, and Edwin's entrance passed unquestioned. His appetite was sharpened by his morning ride across the bush, and he was working away with knife and fork when the coach began to fill.

"If ever you find your way to Bowen's Run, you will not be forgotten," said the genial colonist, as he shook hands with the young Lees and wished them all success in their new home.

The boys ran out to help him to his seat, and see the old ford-horse pilot the coach across the river.

Ottley laid his hand on Edwin's shoulder for a parting word.

"Tell your father poor Marileha—I mean Whero's mother—dare not keep the money for the horse; but I shall leave all sorts of things for her at the roadman's hut, which she can fetch away unnoticed at her own time. When you are settled in your new home, you must not forget I'm general letter-box."

"We are safe to use you," laughed Edwin; and so they parted.

The boys climbed up on the garden-gate to watch the crossing. The clever old pilot-horse, which Mr. Hirpington was bound by his lease to keep, was yoked in front of the team. Good roadsters as the coach-horses were, they could not manage the river without him. Their feet were sure to slip, and one and all might be thrown down by the force of the current. But this steady old fellow, who spent his life crossing and recrossing the river, loved his work. It was a sight no admirer of horses could ever forget to see him stepping down into the river, taking such

care of his load, cautiously advancing a few paces, and stopping to throw himself back on his haunches and try the bottom of the river with one of his fore feet. If he found a boulder had been washed down in the night too big for him to step over, he swept the coach round it as easily and readily as if it were a matter of course, instead of a most unexpected obstruction. The boys were in ecstasies. Then the sudden energy he put forth to drag the coach up the steep bank on the opposite side was truly marvellous. When he considered his work was done, he stood stock-still, and no power on earth could make him stir another step. As soon as he was released, splash he went back into the water, and trotted through it as merrily as a four-year-old.

"Cuthbert," said Edwin, in a confidential whisper, "we've got just such another of our own. Come along and have a look at him."

Away went the boys to the stable, where Mr. Hirpington found them two hours after making friends with "Beauty," as they told him.

At that hour in the morning every one at the ford was hard at work, and they were glad to leave the boys to their own devices. Audrey and Effie occupied themselves in assisting Mrs. Hirpington. When they all met together at the one-o'clock dinner, Edwin was quite ready to indemnify his sisters for his last night's silence, and launched into glowing descriptions of his peep into wonderland.

"Shut up," said Mr. Hirpington, who saw the terror gathering in Effie's eyes. "You'll be persuading these young ladies we are next-door neighbours to another Vesuvius.—Don't believe him, my dears. These mud-jets and geysers that he is talking about are nature's safety-valves. I do not deny we are living in a volcanic region. We feel the earth tremble every now and then, setting all the dishes rattling, and tumbling down our books; but it is nothing more than the tempests in other places."

"I'm thinking more of the Maoris than of their mud," put in Effie, shyly; while Audrey quietly observed, everything was strange at present, but they should get used to it by-and-by.

"The Maoris have been living among nature's water-works for hundreds of years, and they would not change homes with anybody in the world; neither would we. Mr. Bowen almost thinks New Zealand beats old England hollow," laughed Mr. Hirpington. "If that is going a little too far, she is the gem of the Southern Ocean. But seriously now," he added, "although the pumice-stone we can pick up any day tells us how this island was made, there has been no volcanic disturbance worth the name of an eruption since we English set foot on the island. The Maoris were here some hundreds of years before us, and their traditions have been handed down from father to son, but they never heard of anything of the kind."

Mr. Hirpington spoke confidently, and all New Zealand would have agreed

with him.

Edwin thought of Whero. "There are a great many things I want to understand," he said, thoughtfully.

"Wife," laughed Mr. Hirpington, "is not there a book of Paulett Scroope's somewhere about? He is our big gun on these matters."

As Mrs. Hirpington rose to find the book, she tried to divert Effie's attention by admitting her numerous family of cats: seven energetic mousers, with a goodly following of impudent kittens—tabby, tortoise-shell, and black. When Effie understood she was to choose a pet from among them, mud and Maoris seemed banished by their round green eyes and whisking tails. The very title of Edwin's book proved consolatory to Audrey—"Geology and Extinct Volcanoes in Central France." A book in the bush is a book indeed, and Edwin held his treasure with a loving clasp. He knew it was a parting gift; and looking through the river-window, he saw Dunter and his companion returning in a big lumbering cart. They drew up on the opposite bank of the river and waved their hats.

"They have come to fetch us," cried Audrey. Mrs. Hirpington would hardly believe it. "I meant to have kept you with me for some days at least," she said; but the very real regret was set aside to speed the parting of her juvenile guests.

According to New Zealand custom, Mr. Lee had been obliged to buy the horse and cart which brought his luggage up country, so he had sent it with Dunter to fetch his children.

The men had half filled it with freshly-gathered fern; and Edwin was delighted to see how easily his Beauty could swim the stream, to take the place of Mr. Hirpington's horse.

"He would make a good pilot," exclaimed the man who was riding him.

Mrs. Hirpington was almost affectionate in her leave-taking, lamenting as she fastened Effie's cloak that she could not keep one of them with her. But not one of the four would have been willing to be left behind.

The boat was at the stairs; rugs and portmanteaus were already thrown in.

Mr. Hirpington had seized the oar. "I take you myself," he said; "that was the bargain with your father."

In a few minutes they had crossed the river, and were safely seated in the midst of a heap of fern, and found it as pleasant as a ride in a hay-cart. Mr. Hirpington sat on the side of the cart teaching Cuthbert how to hold the reins.

The road which they had taken was a mere cart-track, which the men had improved as they came; for they had been obliged to use their hatchets freely to get the cart along. Many a great branch which they had lopped off was lying under the tree from which it had fallen, and served as a way-mark. The trees through which they were driving were tall and dark, but so overgrown with creepers and parasites it was often difficult to tell what trees they were. A hun-

dred and fifty feet above their heads the red blossoms of the rata were streaming like banners, and wreathing themselves into gigantic nests. Beneath were an infinite variety of shrubs, with large, glossy leaves, like magnolias or laurels; sweetly fragrant aromatic bushes, burying the fallen trunk of some old tree, shrouded in velvet moss and mouse-ear. Little green and yellow birds were hopping from spray to spray through the rich harvest of berries the bushes afforded.

The drive was in itself a pleasure. A breath of summer still lingered in the glinting sunlight, as if it longed to stay the falling leaves. The trees were parted by a wandering brook overgrown with brilliant scarlet duckweed. An enormous willow hanging over its pretty bank, with a peep between its drooping branches of a grassy slope just dotted with the ever-present ti tree told them they had reached their journey's end. They saw the rush-thatched roof and somewhat dilapidated veranda of the disused schoolhouse. Before it stretched a lovely valley, where the brook became a foaming rivulet. A little group of tents and a long line of silvery-looking streamers marked the camp of the rabbiters.

But the children's eyes were fastened on the moss-grown thatch. Soon they could distinguish the broken-down paling and the recently-mended gate, at which Mr. Lee was hammering. A shout, in which three voices at least united, made him look round. Down went bill and hammer as he ran to meet them, answering with his cheeriest "All right!" the welcome cry of, "Father, father, here we are!"

Mr. Hirpington sprang out and lifted Audrey to the ground. Mr. Lee had Effie in his arms already. The boys, disdaining assistance, climbed over the back of the cart, laughing merrily. The garden had long since gone back to wilderness, but the fruit still hung on the unpruned trees—apples and peaches dwindling for want of the gardener's care, but oh, so nice in boyish eyes! Cuthbert had shied a stone amongst the over-ripe peaches before his father had answered his friend's inquiries.

No, not the shadow of a disturbance had reached his happy valley, so Mr. Lee asserted, looking round the sweet, secluded nook with unbounded satisfaction.

"You could not have chosen better for me," he went on, and Edwin's beaming face echoed his father's content.

Mr. Hirpington was pulling out from beneath the fern-leaves a store of good things of which his friend knew nothing—-wild pig and hare, butter and eggs, nice new-made bread; just a transfer from the larder at the ford to please the children.

Age had given to the school-house a touch of the picturesque. Its log-built walls were embowered in creepers, and the sweet-brier, which had formerly edged the worn-out path, was now choking the doorway. Although Mr. Lee's

tenancy could be counted by hours, he had not been idle. A wood fire was blazing in the room once sacred to desk and form. The windows looking to the garden behind the house had been all forced open, and the sunny air they admitted so freely was fast dispelling the damp and mould which attach to shut-up houses in all parts of the world.

One end of the room was piled with heterogeneous bales and packages, but around the fire-place a sense of comfort began to show itself already. A camp-table had been unpacked and screwed together, and seats, after a fashion, were provided for all the party. The colonist's "billy," the all-useful iron pot for camp fire or farmhouse kitchen, was singing merrily, and even the family teapot had been brought back to daylight from its chrysalis of straw and packing-case. There was a home-like feeling in this quiet taking possession.

"I thought it would be better than having your boys and girls shivering under canvas until your house was built," remarked Mr. Hirpington, rubbing his hands with the pleasant assurance of success. "You can rent the old place as long as you like. It may be a bit shaky at the other corner, but a good prop will make it all right."

The two friends went out to examine, and the brothers and sisters drew together. Effie was hugging her kitten; Cuthbert was thinking of the fruit; but Beauty, who had been left grazing outside, was beforehand with him. There he stood, with his fore feet on the broken-down paling, gathering it for himself. It was fun to see him part the peach and throw away the stone, and Cuthbert shouted with delight to Edwin. They were not altogether pleased to find Mr. Hirpington regarded it as a very ordinary accomplishment in a New Zealand horse.

"We are in another hemisphere," exclaimed Edwin, "and everything about us is so delightfully new."

"Except these decaying beams," returned his father, coming round to examine the state of the roof above the window at which Edwin and Effie were standing after their survey of the bedrooms.

Audrey, who had deferred her curiosity to prepare the family meal, was glad to learn that, besides the room in which Mr. Lee had slept last night, each end of the veranda had been enclosed, making two more tiny ones. A bedstead was already put up in one, and such stores as had been unpacked were shut in the other.

When Audrey's call to tea brought back the explorers, and the little party gathered around their own fireside, Edwin could but think of the dismantled hearth by the Rota Pah, and as he heard his father's energetic conversation with Mr. Hirpington, his indignation against the merciless tana was ready to effervesce once more.

”Now,” Mr. Lee went on, ”I cannot bring my mind to clear my land by burning down the trees. You say it is the easiest way.”

”Don’t begin to dispute with me over that,” laughed his friend. ”You can light a fire, but how will you fell a tree single-handed?”

The boys were listening with eager interest to their father’s plans. To swing the axe and load the faggot-cart would be jolly work indeed in those lovely woods.

Mr. Hirpington was to ride back on the horse he had lent to Mr. Lee on the preceding evening. When he started, the brothers ran down the valley to get a peep at the rabbiter’s camp. Three or four men were lying round their fire eating their supper. The line of silver streamers fluttering in the wind proved to be an innumerable multitude of rabbit-skins hanging up to dry. A party of sea-gulls, which had followed the camp as the rabbiters moved on, were hovering about, crying like cats, until they awakened the sleeping echoes.

The men told Edwin they had been clearing the great sheep-runs between his father’s land and the sea-shore, and the birds had followed them all those miles for the sake of the nightly feast they could pick up in their track.

”You can none of you do without us,” they said. ”We are always at work, moving from place to place, or the little brown Bunny would lord it over you all.”

The boys had hardly time to exchange a good-night with the rabbiters, when the daylight suddenly faded, and night came down upon vale and bush without the sweet interlude of twilight. They were groping their way back to the house, when the fire-flies began their nightly dance, and the flowering shrubs poured forth their perfume. The stars shone out in all their southern splendour, and the boys became aware of a moving army in the grass. Poor Bunny was mustering his myriads.

CHAPTER V.

POSTING A LETTER.

Mr. Lee and his boys found so much to do in their new home, days sped away like hours. The bright autumn weather which had welcomed them to Wairoa (to give their habitation its Maori name) had changed suddenly for rain—a long, deluging rain, lasting more than a week.

The prop which Mr. Hirpington had recommended was necessarily left for the return of fine weather. But within doors comfort was growing rapidly. One

end of the large room was screened off for a workshop, and shelves and pegs multiplied in convenient corners. They were yet a good way off from that happy condition of a place for everything, and everything in its place. It was still picnic under a roof, as Audrey said; but they were on the highroad to comfort and better things. When darkness fell they gathered round the blazing wood-fire. Mr. Lee wrote the first letters for England, while Edwin studied "Extinct Volcanoes." Audrey added her quota to the packet preparing for Edwin's old friend, "the perambulating letter-box," and Effie and Cuthbert played interminable games of draughts, until Edwin shut up his book and evolved from his own brains a new and enlarged edition of Maori folk-lore which sent them "creepy" to bed.

It seemed a contradiction of terms to say May-day was bringing winter; but winter might come upon them in haste, and the letters must be posted before the road to the ford was changed to a muddy rivulet.

Mr. Lee, who had everything to do with his own hands, knew not how to spare a day. He made up his mind at last to trust Edwin to ride over with them. To be sure of seeing Ottley, Edwin must stay all night at the ford, for after the coach came in it would be too late for him to return through the bush alone.

Edwin was overjoyed at the prospect, for Ottley would tell him all he longed to know. Was Nga-Hepé still alive? Had Whero gone to school? He might even propose another early morning walk across the bush to the banks of the lake.

Edwin was to ride the Maori Beauty, which had become the family name for the chieftain's horse. Remembering his past experiences with the white-leaved puka-puka, he coaxed Audrey to lend him a curtain she was netting for the window of her own bedroom. She had not much faith in Edwin's assurances that it would not hurt it a bit just to use it for once for a veil or muzzle; but she was horrified into compliance by his energetic assertion that her refusal might cost his Beauty's life. Cuthbert, mounted on an upturned pail, so that he could reach the horse's head, did good service in the difficult task of putting it on. The veil was not at all to the Beauty's mind, and he did his best to get rid of it. But the four corners were drawn through his collar at last, and securely tied.

With Mr. Lee's parting exhortation to mind what he was about and look well to Beauty's steps, Edwin started.

The road was changed to a black, oozy, slimy track. Here and there the earth had been completely washed away, and horse and rider were floundering in a boggy swamp. A little farther on a perfect landslip from the hills above had obliterated every trace of road, and Edwin was obliged to wind his way through the trees, trusting to his Beauty's instinct to find it again.

With the many wanderings from the right path time sped away. The lamp was swinging in the acacia tree as he trotted up to the friendly gate of the ford-house.

”Coach in?” he shouted, as he caught sight of Dunter shovelling away the mud from the entrance.

”Not yet; but she’s overdue,” returned the man, anxiously. ”Even Ottley will never get his horses through much longer. We may lock our stable-doors until the May frosts begin. It is a tempting of Providence to start with wheels through such a swamp, and I told him so last week.”

”Then I am just in time,” cried Edwin joyfully, walking his horse up to the great flat stone in the middle of the yard and alighting. He slipped his hand into his coat to satisfy himself the bulky letters in his breast-pocket were all right, and then led his Beauty to the horse-trough. He had half a mind not to go in-doors until he had had his talk with Ottley.

Dunter, who was looking forward to the brief holiday the stopping of the coach secured him, leaned on his spade and prepared for a gossip.

”Did Mr. Lee think of building a saw-mill?” Edwin’s reply ended with the counter-inquiry, ”Had Mr. Hirpington got home?”

Dunter shook his head. ”Not he: we all hold on as long as the light lasts. He is away with the men, laying down a bit of corduroy road over an earthslip, just to keep a horse-track through the worst of the winter.”

Whilst Edwin was being initiated into the mysteries of road-making in the bush, the coach drove up.

Horses and driver were alike covered with mud, and the coach itself exhibited more than its usual quota of flax-leaf bandages—all testifying to the roughness of the journey.

”It is the last time you will see me this season,” groaned Ottley, as he got off the box. ”I shall get no farther.” He caught sight of Edwin, and recognized his presence with a friendly nod. The passengers, looking in as dilapidated and battered condition as the coach, were slowly getting out, thankful to find themselves at a stopping-place. Among them Edwin noticed a remarkable old man.

His snowy hair spoke of extreme old age, and when he turned a tattooed cheek towards the boy, Edwin’s attention was riveted upon him at once. Lean, lank, and active still, his every air and gesture was that of a man accustomed to command.

”Look at him well,” whispered Dunter. ”He is a true old tribal chief from the other side of the mountains, if I know anything; one of the invincibles, the gallant old warrior-chiefs that are dying out fast. You will never see his like again. If you had heard them, as I have, vow to stand true for ever and ever and ever, you would never forget it.—Am I not right, coachee?” he added in a low aside to Ottley, as he took the fore horse by the head.

The lantern flickered across the wet ground. The weary passengers were stamping their numbed feet, and shaking the heavy drops of moisture from hat-

brims and overcoats. Edwin pressed resolutely between, that he might catch the murmur of Ottley's reply.

"He got in at the last stopping-place, but I do not know him."

There was such a look of Whero in the proud flash of the aged Maori's eye, that Edwin felt a secret conviction, be he who he might, they must be kith and kin. He held his letter aloft to attract the coachman's attention, calling out at his loudest, "Here, Mr. Ottley, I have brought a letter for you to post at last."

"All right," answered the coachman, opening a capacious pocket to receive it, in which a dozen others were already reposing. "Hand it over, my boy; there is scarcely a letter reaches the post from this district which does not go through my hands."

"Did you post this?" asked the aged Maori, taking another from the folds of his blanket.

"I did more," said Ottley, as he glanced at the crumpled envelope, "for I wrote it to Kakiki Mahane, the father of Nga-Hepé's wife, at her request."

"I am that father," returned the old chief.

"And I," added Ottley, "was the eye-witness of her destitution, as that letter tells you."

They were almost alone now in the great wet yard. The other passengers were hurrying in-doors, and Dunter was leading away the horses; but Edwin lingered, regardless of the heavy drops falling from the acacia, in his anxiety to hear more.

"I have brought no following with me to the mountain-lake, for by your letter famine is brooding in the whare of my child. Well, I know if the men of the Kota Pah heard of my coming, they would spread the feast in my honour. But how should I eat with the enemies of my child? I wait for the rising of the stars to find her, that none may know I am near."

"I'll go with you," offered Ottley.

"You need not wait for the stars," interposed Edwin; "I'll carry the big coach-lantern before you with pleasure. Do let me go with you," he urged, appealing to Ottley.

"How is this?" asked Kakiki. "Does the pakeha pity when the Maori frowns? What has my son-in-law been about, to bring down upon himself the vengeance of his tribe?"

"Let your daughter answer that question," remarked Ottley discreetly.

But Edwin put in warmly: "Nga-Hepé was too rich and too powerful, and the chief grew jealous. It was a big shame; and if I had been Whero, I should have been worse than he was."

Whero's grandfather deigned no reply. He stalked up the well-worn steps into Mrs. Hirpington's kitchen, and seating himself at the long table called out

for supper. Edwin just peeped in at the door, avoiding Mrs. Hirpington's eye, for fear she should interfere to prevent him going with the old Maori.

"I shall see her when I come back," he thought, as he strolled on towards the stable, keeping an anxious watch over the gate, afraid lest the fordmaster should himself appear at the last moment and detain him.

"You have brought Nga-Hepé's horse," said Ottley. as he entered the nearest stall. "We must have him, for he knows the way. We have only to give him his head, and he is safe to take the road to his master's door."

"If you have him you must have me," persisted Edwin, and the thing was settled. He nestled down in the clean straw under Beauty's manger, and waited, elate with the prospect of a night of adventure, and stoutly resisted all Dunter's persuasions to go in to supper.

Wondering at the shy fit which had seized the boy, Dunter brought him a hunch of bread and cheese, and left the lantern swinging in the stable from the hook in the ceiling, ere he went in with Ottley to share the good feed always to be found in Mrs. Hirpington's kitchen, leaving Edwin alone with the horses. He latched the stable-door, as the nights were growing cold. The gates were not yet barred, for Mr. Hirpington and his men were now expected every minute.

Edwin's thoughts had gone back to the corduroy road, which Dunter had told him was made of the trunks of trees laid close together, with a layer of saplings on the top to fill up the interstices. He was making it in miniature with some bits of rush and reed scattered about the stables, when the latch was softly lifted, and Whero stood before him. Not the Whero he had parted from by the white pines, but the lean skeleton of a boy with big, staring eyes, and bony arms coming out from the loose folds of the blanket he was wearing, like the arms of a harlequin. Edwin sprang up to meet him, exclaiming, "Your grandfather is here." But instead of replying, Whero was vigorously rubbing faces with his good old Beauty.

"Have you come to meet your grandfather?" asked Edwin.

"No," answered the boy abruptly. "I've come to ask Ottley to take me to school." His voice was hollow, and his teeth seemed to snap together at the sight of the bread in Edwin's hand.

"Whero, you are starving!" exclaimed Edwin, putting the remainder of his supper into the dusky, skinny fingers smoothing Beauty's mane.

"A man must learn to starve," retorted Whero. "The mother here will give me food when I come of nights and talk to Ottley."

"But your own mother, Whero, and Ronga, and the children, how do they live?" Edwin held back from asking after Nga-Hepé, "for," he said, as he looked at Whero, "he must be dead."

"How do they live?" repeated Whero, with a laugh. "Is the door of the

whare ever shut against the hungry? They go to the pah daily, but I will not go. I will not eat with the men who struck down my father in his pride. I wander through the bush. Let him eat the food they bring him—he knows not yet how it comes; but his eyes are opening to the world again. When he sees me hunger-bitten, and my sister Rewi fat as ever, he will want the reason why. I will not give it. His strength is gone if he starves as I starve. How can it return? No; I will go to school to-morrow before he asks me."

Edwin's hand grasped Whero's with a warmth of sympathy that was only held in check by the dread of another nasal caress, and he exclaimed, "Come along, old fellow, and have a look at your grandfather too."

There was something about the grand old Maori's face which made Edwin feel that he both could and would extricate his unfortunate daughter from her painful position.

"It is a fix," Edwin went on; "but he has come to pull you through, I feel sure."

Still Whero held back. He did not believe it was his grandfather. *He* would not come without a following; and more than that, the proud boy could not stoop to show himself to a stranger of his own race in such a miserable guise. He coiled himself round in the straw and refused to stir.

"Now, Whero," Edwin remonstrated, "I call this really foolish; and if I were you I would not, I could not do it, speak of my own mother as one of the women. I like your mother. It rubs me up to hear you—" The boy stopped short; the measured breathing of his companion struck on his ear. Whero had already fallen fast asleep by Beauty's side.

"Oh, bother!" thought Edwin. "Yet, poor fellow, I won't wake you up, but I'll go and tell your grandfather you are here."

He went out, shutting the door after him, and encountered Mr. Hirpington coming in with his men.

"Hollo, Edwin, my boy, what brings you here?" he exclaimed.

"Please, sir, I came over with a packet of letters for Mr. Ottley to post," was the quick answer, as Edwin walked on by his side, intent upon delivering his father's messages.

"All right," was the hearty response. "We'll see. Come, now I think of it, we can send your father some excellent hams and bacon we bought of the Maoris. Some of poor Hepé's stores, I expect."

"That was a big shame," muttered Edwin, hotly, afraid to hurt poor Whero's pride by explaining his forlorn state to any one but his grandfather.

He entered the well-remembered room with the fordmaster, looking eagerly from side to side, as Mr. Hirpington pushed him into the first vacant seat at the long table, where supper for the "coach" was going forward. Edwin was

watching for the old chief, who sat by Ottley, gravely devouring heap after heap of whitebait, potatoes, and pumpkins with which the "coach" took care to supply him. Mrs. Hirpington cast anxious glances round the table, fearing that the other passengers would run short, as the old Maori still asked for "more," repeating in a loud voice, "More, more kai!" which Ottley interpreted "food." Dunter was bringing forth the reserves from the larder—another cheese, the remains of the mid-day pudding, and a huge dish of brawn, not yet cold enough to be turned out of the mould, and therefore in a quaky state. The old chief saw it tremble, and thinking it must be alive, watched it curiously.

"What strange animals you pakehas bring over the sea!" he exclaimed at last, adding, as he sprang to his feet and drew the knife in his belt with a savage gesture, "I'll kill it."

The laughter every one was trying to suppress choked the explanation that would have been given on all sides. With arm upraised, and a contorted face that alone was enough to frighten Mrs. Hirpington out of her wits, he plunged the knife into the unresisting brawn to its very hilt, utterly amazed to find neither blood nor bones to resist it. "Bah!" he exclaimed, in evident disgust.

"Here, Edwin," gasped the shaking fordmaster, "give the old fellow a spoon."

Edwin snatched up one from the corner of the table, and careful not to wound the aged Maori's pride, which might be as sensitive as his grandson's, he explained to him as well as he could that brawn was brawn, and very jolly stuff for a supper.

"Example is better than precept at all times," laughed Mr. Hirpington. "Show him what to do with the spoon."

Edwin obeyed literally, putting it to his own lips and then offering it to Kakiki. The whole room was convulsed with merriment. Ottley and Mr. Hirpington knew this would not do, and exerted themselves to recover self-control sufficiently to persuade the old man to taste and try the Ingarangi kai.

He drew the dish towards him with the utmost gravity, and having pronounced the first mouthful "Good, good," he worked away at it until the whole of its contents had disappeared. And all the while Whero was starving in the stable.

"I can't stand this any longer," thought Edwin. "I must get him something to eat, I must;" and following Dunter into the larder, he explained the state of the case.

"Wants to go by the coach and cannot pay for supper and bed. I see," returned Dunter.

Edwin thought of the treasure by the white pines as he answered, "I am afraid so."

"That's hard," pursued the man good-naturedly; "but the missis never

grudges a mouthful of food to anybody. I'll see after him."

"Let me take it to him," urged Edwin, receiving the unsatisfactory reply, "Just wait a bit; I'll see," as Dunter was called off in another direction; and with this he was obliged to be content.

Ottley was so taken up with the aged chief—who was considerably annoyed to find himself the laughing-stock of the other passengers—that Edwin could not get a word with him. He tried Mr. Hirpington, who was now talking politics with a Wellingtonian fresh from the capital. Edwin, in his fever of impatience, thought the supper would never end. After a while some of the passengers went off to bed, and others drew round the fire and lit their pipes.

Mrs. Hirpington, Kakiki, and the coachman alone remained at the table. At last the dish of brawn was cleared, and the old Maori drew himself up with a truly royal air. Taking out a well-filled purse, in which some hundreds of English sovereigns were glittering, he began counting on his fingers, "One ten, two ten—how muts?" (much).

Ottley, who understood a Maori's simple mode of reckoning better than any one present, was assisting Mrs. Hirpington to make her bill, and began to speak to Kakiki about their departure.

The fordmaster could see how tired the chief was becoming, and suddenly remembered a Maori's contempt and dislike for the wretched institution of chairs. He was determined to make the old man comfortable, and fetching a bear-skin from the inner room, he spread it on the floor by the fire, and invited Kakiki to take possession. Edwin ran to his help, and secured the few minutes for talk he so much desired. Mr. Hirpington listened and nodded.

"You will have to stay here until the morning," he added, "every one of you. Go off with Dunter and make the boy outside as comfortable as you can. I should be out of my duty to let that old man cross the bush at night, with so much money about him. Better fetch his grandson in here."

Mrs. Hirpington laid her hand on Edwin's shoulder as he passed, and told him, with her pleasant smile, his bed was always ready at the ford.

Dunter pointed to a well-filled plate and a mug of tea, placed ready to his hand on the larder shelf; and stretching over Edwin's head, he unbolted the door to let him out.

The Southern Cross shone brightly above the iron roof as Edwin stepped into the yard to summon Whero. The murmur of the water as it lapped on the boating-stairs broke the stillness without, and helped to guide him to the stable-door. The lantern had burnt out. He groped his way in, and giving Whero a hearty shake, charged him to come along.

But the hand he grasped was withdrawn.

"I can't," persisted Whero; "I'm too ashamed." He meant too shy to face the

”coach,” and tell all he had endured in their presence. The idea was hateful to him.

Edwin placed the supper on the ground and ran back for Ottley. He found the coachman explaining to Kakiki why Marileha had refused to accept the money for the horse, and how he had kept it for her use.

”Then take this,” cried Kakiki, flinging the purse of gold towards him, ”and do the like.”

But Ottley’s ”No!” was dogged in its decision.

”What for no?” asked Kakiki, angrily.

”Who is his daughter?” whispered Mr. Hirpington to his wife.

”You know her: she wears the shark’s teeth, tied in her ears with a black ribbon,” Mrs. Hirpington answered, sleepily.

Then he went to the rescue, and tried to persuade Kakiki to place his money in the Auckland Bank for his daughter’s benefit, pointing out as clearly as he could the object of a bank, and how to use it. As the intelligent old man began to comprehend him, he reiterated, ”Good, good; the pitfall is only dangerous when it is covered. My following are marching after me up the hills. If I enter the Rota Pah with the state of a chief, there will be fighting. Send back my men to their canoes. Hide the wealth that remains to my child as you say, but let that wahini” (meaning Mrs. Hirpington) ”take what she will, and bid her send kai by night to my daughter’s whare, that there may be no starving. This bank shall be visited by me, and then I go a poor old man to sleep by my daughter’s fire until her warrior’s foot is firm upon the earth once more. I’ll wrap me in that thin sheet,” he went on, seizing the corner of the table-cloth, which was not yet removed.

Mr. Hirpington let him have it without a word, and Ottley rejoiced to find them so capable and so determined to extricate Marileha from her peril.

”Before this moon shall pass,” said Kakiki, ”I will take her away, with her family, to her own people. Let your canoe be ready to answer my signal.”

”Agreed,” replied Mr. Hirpington; ”I’ll send my boat whenever you want it.”

”For all that,” thought Edwin, ”will Nga-Hepé go away?” He longed to fetch in Whero, that he might enter into his grandfather’s plans; and as, one after another, the passengers went off to bed, he made his way to Mrs. Hirpington. Surely he could coax her to unbar the door once more and let him out to the stables.

”What, another Maori asleep in the straw!” she exclaimed. ”They do take liberties. Pray, my dear, don’t bring him in here, or we shall be up all night.”

Edwin turned away again in despair.

Having possessed himself of the table-cloth, the old chief lay down on the bear-skin and puffed away at the pipe Mr. Hirpington had offered him, in silence

revolving his schemes.

He was most anxious to ascertain how his son-in-law had brought down upon himself the vengeance of the tribe amongst which he lived. ”I will not break the peace of the hills,” he said at length, ”for he may have erred. Row me up stream while the darkness lasts, that I may have speech of my child.”

”Too late,” said Mr. Hirpington; ”wait for the daylight.”

”Are there not stars in heaven?” retorted Kakiki, rising to try the door.

”Am I a prisoner?” he demanded angrily, when he found it fastened.

Mr. Hirpington felt he had been reckoning without his host when he declared no one should leave his roof that night. But he was not the man to persist in a mistake, so he threw it open.

”I'll row him,” said Dunter.

Edwin ran out with them. Here was the chance he had been seeking. He flew to the stable and roused up Whero. Grandfather and grandson met and deliberately rubbed noses by the great flat stone which Edwin had used as a horse-block. Whilst Dunter and Mr. Hirpington were getting out the boat, they talked to each other in their native tongue.

”It will be all right now, won't it?” asked Edwin, in a low aside to Ottley, who stood in the doorway yawning. But Kakiki beckoned them to the conference.

”The sky is black with clouds above my daughter's head; her people have deserted her—all but Ronga. Would they cut off the race of Hepé? Some miscreant met the young lord in the bush, and tried to push him down a mud-hole; but he sprang up a tree, and so escaped. Take him to school as he wills. When I go down to the bank I shall see him there. It is good that he should learn. The letter has saved my child.”

CHAPTER VI.

MIDNIGHT ALARMS.

After his return home, Edwin felt as if mud and rain had taken possession of the outside world. The rivulet in the valley had become a raging torrent. All the glamour of the woods was gone. The fern-covered hills looked gaunt and brown. The clumps of flax and rush bent their flattened heads low in the muddy swamp before the piercing night winds. The old trees in the orchard were shattered, and their broken branches, still cumbering the ground, looked drear and desolate.

The overgrowth of leaf and stalk presented a mass of decaying vegetation, dank and sodden.

One chill May morning brought a heavy snow, veiling the calm crests of the majestic hills with dazzling whiteness, becoming more intense and vivid as their drapery of mist and storm-cloud blackened. All movement seemed absorbed by the foaming cascades, tearing down the rifts and gullies in the valley slope. Every sign of life was restricted to a ghostly-looking gull, sated with dead rabbit, winging its heavy flight to the blue-black background of dripping rock.

But in this England of the Southern Seas the winter changes as it changes in the British Isles. Sharp, frosty nights succeeded. The ground grew crisp to the tread. The joyous work in the woods began. Mr. Lee went daily to his allotment with axe on shoulder and his boys by his side. His skill in woodcraft was telling. Many of the smaller trees had already fallen beneath his vigorous stroke, when the rabbiters—who glean their richest harvest in the winter nights—reappeared. They were so used to the reckless ways of the ordinary colonist—who cuts and slashes and burns right hand and left until the coast is clear—that Mr. Lee's methodical proceedings began to interest them. His first step was to clear away the useless undergrowth and half-grown trees, gaining room for charcoal fires, and for stacks of bark which his boys were stripping from the fallen trunks. His roving neighbours promised to leave their traps and snares, and help him to bring down the forest giants which he was marking for destruction.

One June evening, as the Lees were returning from a hard day's work, they passed the rabbiters going out as usual to begin their own. A slight tremor in the ground attracted the attention of both parties. As they exchanged their customary good-night, one of the rabbiters observed there was an ugly look about the sky.

The boys grumbled to each other that there was an ugly look about the ground. Although thousands of little brown heads and flopping ears were bobbing about among the withered thistle-stalks, thousands more were lying dead behind every loose stone or weedy tuft.

The ghoul-like gulls were hovering in increasing numbers, some already pouncing on their prey and crying to their fellows wheeling inland from the distant shore. No other sound disturbed the silence of the bush. The sense of profound repose deepened as they reached their home. To Mr. Lee it seemed an ominous stillness, like the lull before the storm; but in the cheerful light of his blazing fire he shook off the feeling.

The weary boys soon went to bed. For the present they were sleeping in the same room as their father, who slowly followed their example.

It was nearly midnight, when Edwin was awakened with a dim feeling of something the matter. Cuthbert was pulling him. "Edwin! Edwin!"

”What is it?” he cried. Edwin’s hurried exclamation was lost in the bang and rattle all around. Were the windows coming in? He sprang upright as the bed was violently shaken, and the brothers were tossed upon each other.

”What now?” called out Mr. Lee, as the floor swayed and creaked, and he felt himself rolling over in the very moment of waking. The walls were beginning a general waltz, when the noise of falling crockery in the outer room and the howling of the rabbiters’ dogs drowned every other sound.

A sickly, helpless sensation stole over them all, Mr. Lee too, as everything around them became as suddenly still—an eerie feeling which could not be shaken off. The boys lay hushed in a state of nervous tension, not exactly fear, but as if their senses were dumfoundered and all their being centred in a focus of expectation.

Effie gave a suppressed scream. Mr. Lee was speaking to her through the wall. ”It is over, my dear—it is over; don’t be frightened,” he was saying.

”It—what it?” asked Cuthbert, drawing his head under the bed-clothes.

”Our first taste of earthquake,” returned his father; ”and a pretty sharp one, I fancy.”

At this announcement Cuthbert made a speedy remove to his father’s bed, and cuddled down in the blankets. Mr. Lee walked round the room and looked out of the window. It was intensely dark; he could see nothing.

”Oh my head!” they heard Audrey saying; ”it aches so strangely.”

Mr. Lee repeated his consolatory assurance that it was over, and returned to bed, giving way to the natural impulse to lie still which the earthquake seemed to produce. The violence of the headache every one was experiencing made them thankful to lie down once more; but rest was out of the question. In a little while all began again; not a violent shock, as at the first, but a continual quaking.

Mr. Lee got up and dressed. He was afraid to light a lamp, for fear it should be upset; so he persuaded his children to keep in bed, thinking they would be rolled down in the darkness by the heaving of the floor. He groped his way into the outer room, treading upon broken earthenware at every step. This was making bad worse. He went back and lit a match. It was just two o’clock.

Audrey, who heard him moving about, got up also, and began to dress, being troubled at the destruction of the plates and dishes. In ten minutes they were startled by a fearful subterranean roar. Edwin could lie still no longer. He sprang up, and was hurrying on his clothes, when the house shook with redoubled violence. Down came shelves, up danced chairs. The bang and crash, followed by a heavy thud just overhead, made Edwin and his father start back to opposite sides of the room as the roof gave way, and a ton weight of thatch descended on the bed Edwin had just vacated.

”The chimney!” exclaimed Mr. Lee. ”The chimney is down!”

The dancing walls seemed ready to follow. Cuthbert was grabbing at his shoes. Mr. Lee ran to the door, thinking of his girls in the other room.

”Audrey! Effie!” he shouted, ”are you hurt?”

But the weight of the falling thatch kept the door from opening. He saw the window was bulging outwards. He seized a stick standing in the corner, and tried to wrench away the partition boarding between him and his daughters. But the slight shake this gave to the building brought down another fall of thatch, filling the room with dust. Edwin just escaped a blow from a beam; but the darkness was terrific, and the intense feeling of oppression increased the frantic desire to get out.

”In another moment the whole place will be about our ears!” exclaimed Mr. Lee, forcing the window outwards, and pushing the boys before him into the open. He saw—no, he could not see, but rather felt the whole building was tottering to its fall. ”Let the horses loose!” he shouted to Edwin, as he ran round to the front of the house to extricate the girls.

The boom as of distant cannon seemed to fill the air.

”O Lord above, what is it?” ejaculated one of the rabbiters, who had heard the chimney go down, and was hurrying to Mr. Lee's assistance.

Again the heavy roll as of cannon seemed to reverberate along the distant shore.

”It is a man-of-war in distress off Manakau Head,” cried a comrade.

”That! man, that is but the echo; the noise is from the hills. There is hot work among the Maoris, maybe. They are game enough for anything. The cannon is there,” averred old Hal, the leader of the gang.

”Then it is that Nga-Hepé blowing up the Rota Pah by way of revenge,” exclaimed the first speaker.

Edwin had opened the stable-door, and was running after his father. He caught the name Nga-Hepé, and heard old Hal's reply,—

”He buy cannon indeed, when the muru took away his all not three months since!”

Edwin passed the speaker, and overtaking his father in the darkness, he whispered, ”The man may be right. Nga-Hepé's wife buried his money by the roadside, by the twin pines, father. I saw her do it.”

”Ah!” answered Mr. Lee, as he sprang up the veranda steps and rapped on Audrey's window. As she threw it open a gruff voice spoke to Edwin out of the darkness.

”So it was money Marileha buried?”

But Edwin gave no reply. Mr. Lee was holding out his arms to Erne, who had scrambled upon the window-sill, and stood there trembling, afraid to take the leap he recommended.

”Wrap her in a blanket, Audrey, and slide her down,” said their father.

Edwin was on the sill beside her in a moment. The blanket Audrey was dragging forward was seized and flung around the little trembler, enveloping head, arms, and feet. Mr. Lee caught the lower end, and drawing it down, received his ”bonnie birdie” in his fatherly arms. Edwin leaped into the darkness within.

”Quick, Audrey, quick, or the house will fall upon us,” he urged.

She was snatching at this and that, and tying up a bundle in haste. Edwin pulled out another blanket from the tumbled bed-clothes, and flung it on the window-sill.

”No, no,” said Audrey; ”I'll jump.”

She tossed her bundle before her, and setting herself low on her feet, she gave one hand to her father and the other to the gruff speaker who had startled Edwin in the darkness. They swung her to the ground between them just as the log-built walls began to roll. Edwin was driven back among the ruins, crouching under the bulrush thatch, which lay in heaps by the debris of beam and chimney, snug like a rabbit in its burrow, whilst beam and prop were falling around him. He heard Cuthbert calling desperately, ”Look, look! father, father! the world's on fire!”

Edwin tugged furiously at the mass of dry and dusty rushes in which he had become enveloped, working with hands and feet, groping his way to space and air once more. The grand but terrific sight which met his gaze struck him backwards, and he sank confounded on the heap, from which he had scarcely extricated himself.

The sacred Maori hills, which at sunset had reared their snowy crests in majestic calm, were ablaze with fire. The intensity of the glare from the huge pillar of flame, even at so great a distance, was more than eyes could bear. With both hands extended before his face to veil the too terrific light, Edwin lay entranced. That vision of a thousand feet of ascending flame, losing itself in a dome of cloud blacker and denser than the blackness of midnight, might well prelude the day of doom. Unable to bear the sight or yet to shut it out, he watched in dumb amazement. White meteor globes of star-like brilliancy shot from out the pall of cloud in every direction, and shed a blue unearthly light on all around. They came with the roar as of cannon, and the rocks were riven by their fall. Huge fissures, opening in the mountain sides, emitted streams of rolling fire.

Edwin forgot his own peril and the peril of all around, lost in the immensity of the sight. The cries and groans of the rabbiters recalled him. Some had thrown themselves on their faces in a paroxysm of terror. Old Hal had fallen on his knees, believing the end of the world had come.

Edwin heard his father's voice rising calm and clear above the gasping ejac-

ulations and snatches of half-forgotten prayer.

”Would you court blindness? Shut your eyes to the awful sight. It is an eruption of Mount Tarawera. Remember, Hal, we are in the hands of One whom storm and fire obey.”

The play of the lightning around the mountain-head became so intense that the glare from the huge column of volcanic fire could scarcely be distinguished. The jagged, forked flashes shot downwards to the shuddering forest, and tree after tree was struck to earth, and fire sprang up in glade and thicket.

”To the open!” shouted Mr. Lee, blindfolding Cuthbert with his handkerchief, and shrouding Effie in the blanket, as he carried her towards the recent clearing.

Cuthbert grasped his father’s coat with both hands, and stumbled on by his side. A dull, red spot in the distance marked the place where the charcoal fires were smouldering still, just as Mr. Lee had left them.

He laid his burden down in the midst of the circling heaps, which shed a warmth and offered something of a shelter from the rising blast. It was the safest spot in which he could leave the two; and charging Cuthbert to be a man and take care of his sister, he hurried away to look for Edwin.

With their backs against the sods which covered over the charring wood, the children sat with their arms round each other’s necks, huddled together in the blanket, all sense of loneliness and fear of being left by themselves absorbed in the awe of the night.

Inspired by Mr. Lee’s example, old Hal had rallied. He had caught Beauty, and was putting him in the cart. Audrey, with her recovered bundle on her arm, with the quiet self-possession which never seemed to desert her, was bringing him the harness from the new-built shed, which was still standing.

The gruff rabbiter, who had been the first to come to Mr. Lee’s assistance, followed her for a fork to move the heaps of thatch which hemmed Edwin in. He was crossing to the ruined house with it poised upon his shoulder as Mr. Lee came up. He saw the lightning flash across the steel, and dashed the fork from the man’s insensate grasp. The fellow staggered backwards and fell a senseless heap. Star-like rays were shooting from each pointing tine as the fork touched the ground, and lines of fire ran from them in every direction. Edwin saw it also, and seizing a loosened tie-beam, he gave the great heap of thatch before him a tremendous heave, and sent it over. The sodden mass of rush, heavy with frozen snow, broke to pieces as it fell, and changed the running fire to a dense cloud of smoke.

A deep-voiced ”Bravo, young un!” broke from the horror-stricken rabbiters, who had gathered round their comrade. But Mr. Lee was before them. He had loosened the man’s collar and torn open his shirt. In the play of the cold night

air his chest gave a great heave. A sigh of thankfulness ran round the group. The lightning he had so unthinkingly drawn down upon himself had not struck a vital part.

Audrey had dropped her bundle, and was filling her lap with the frozen flags by the edge of the stream.

They dragged him away from the smoke, and Audrey's icy gleanings were heaped upon his burning head. A twitch of the nostrils was followed by a deep groan.

"He'll do," said Hal. "He's a coming round, thank God!"

With a low-breathed Amen, Mr. Lee turned away, for the cloud of smoke his boy had raised completely concealed him. The cheery "All right" which answered his shout for his son put new life into the whole party.

Audrey and her father ran quickly to the end of the house. The great beam of the roof was cleared, and Edwin was cautiously making his way across it on his hands and knees.

"Stand back!" he cried, as he neared the end, and, with a flying leap and hands outspread he cleared the broken wall, and alighted uninjured on the ground.

Mr. Lee caught hold of him, and Audrey grasped both hands.

"I'm all right," he retorted; "don't you bother about me."

A terrible convulsion shook the ground; the men flung themselves on their faces. A splendid kauri tree one hundred and seventy feet high, which shaded the entrance of the valley, was torn up by the roots, as an awful blast swept down the forest glades with annihilating force. The crash, the shock reverberating far and wide, brought with it such a sense of paralyzing helplessness even Mr. Lee gave up all for lost.

They lifted up their heads, and saw red-hot stones flying into the air and rolling down the riven slopes.

"O my little lambs!" groaned Mr. Lee, thinking of the two he had left by the charcoal fires, "what am I doing lying here, and you by yourselves in the open?"

"Get 'em away," said Hal; "the cart is still there. Put 'em all in, and gallop off towards the shore; it's our only safety."

There was too much weight in the old man's words to disregard them. Mr. Lee looked round for his other horse, which had rushed over him at a mad bound when the last tree fell. He saw it now, its coat staring with the fright, stealing

back to its companion.

CHAPTER VII.
THE RAIN OF MUD.

It was about four o'clock in the morning. A new thing happened—a strange new thing, almost unparalleled in the world's history. The eruption had been hitherto confined to the central peak of Tarawera, known among the Maori tribes as Ruawahia; but now with a mighty explosion the south-west peak burst open, and flames came belching forth, with torrents of liquid fire. The force of the earthquake which accompanied it cracked the bed of the fairy lake. The water rushed through the hole upon the subterranean fires, and returned in columns of steam, forcing upwards the immense accumulation of soft warm mud at the bottom of the lake. The whole of this was blown into the air, and for fifteen miles around the mountain fell like rain. The enormous amount of steam thus generated could not find half vent enough through the single hole by which the water had poured in, and blew off the crust of the earth above it.

Showers of rock, cinders, and dust succeeded the mud, lashing the lake to fury—a fury which baffled all imagination. The roar of the falling water through unseen depths beneath the lake, the screech of the escaping steam, the hissing cannonade of stones, created a volley of sound for which no one could account, whilst the mud fell thick and fast, as the snow falls in a blizzard.

The geysers, catching the subterranean rage, shot their scalding spray above the trees. Mud-holes were boiling over and over, and new ones opening in unexpected places. Every ditch was steaming, every hill was reeling. For the space of sixty miles the earth quivered and shook, and a horrid sulphurous smell uprose from the very ground; while around Tarawera, mountain, lake, and forest were enveloped in one immense cloud of steam, infolding a throbbing heart of flame, and ascending to the almost incredible height of twenty-two thousand feet. Beneath its awful shadow the country lay in darkness—a darkness made still more appalling when the huge rock masses of fire clove their way upwards, to fall back into the crater from which they had been hurled.

As Mr. Lee caught his horse by the forelock, the first heavy drops of mud hissed on the frozen ground. In another moment they came pelting thick and fast, burning, blinding, burying everything in their path. The horse broke loose

from his master's hand, and tore away to the shelter of the trees. The heavy cart lumbering at his heels alone kept Beauty from following his mate. Hal caught his rein, Edwin seized his head, as the thick cloud of ashes and mud grew denser and blacker, until Edwin could scarcely see his hand before him.

"Get in! get in!" gasped the old rabbiter.

Edwin swung himself upon the horse's back, and rode postilion, holding him in with all his might.

"The sick man first," said Mr. Lee, almost choking with the suffocating smell which rose from the earth. He lifted the poor fellow in his arms, a comrade took him by the feet, and between them they got him into the cart. Hal had resigned the reins to Edwin, and taken his place, ready to pillow the unconscious head upon his knees.

"The Lord have mercy on us!" he groaned.

Mr. Lee groped round for Audrey. Her feet were blistering through her thin boots, as she sank ankle-deep in the steaming slime, which came pouring down without intermission. Her father caught her by the waist and swung her into the back of the cart. Another of the rabbiters got up on the front and took the reins from Edwin, who did not know the way. The other two, with Mr. Lee, caught hold of the back of the cart and ran until they came to their own camp. The tents lay flat; the howling dogs had fled; but their horse, which they had tethered for the night, had not yet broken loose.

Here they drew up, sorely against Mr. Lee's desire, for he could no longer distinguish the glimmer of his charcoal fires, and his heart was aching for his children—his innocents, his babies, as he fondly called them—in that moment of dread. As the rabbiters halted, he stooped to measure the depth of mud on the ground, alarmed lest the children should be suffocated in their sleep; for they might have fallen asleep, they had been left so long.

"Not they," persisted Edwin. "They are not such duffers as to lie down in mud like this; and as for sleep in this unearthly storm—" he stopped abruptly.

"Hark!" exclaimed his father, bending closer to the ground. "Surely that was a 'coo,' in the distance."

Every ear was strained. Again it came, that recognized call for help no colonist who reckons himself a man ever refuses to answer.

Faint as was the echo which reached them, it quivered with a passionate entreaty.

"They are cooing from the ford," cried one. But another contradicted. It was only when bending over the upturned roots of a fallen tree that the feeble sound could be detected, amidst all the fearsome noises raging in the upper air.

The rabbiters felt about for their spades, and throwing out the mud from the cavity, knelt low in the loosened earth. They could hear it now more plainly.

Mr. Lee pressed his ear to the freshly-disturbed mould, and listened attentively. The cry was a cry of distress, and the voice was the voice of his friend.

The rabbiters looked at each other, aghast at the thought of returning to the thick of the storm. It was bad enough to flee before it; but to face the muddy rain which was beating them to the earth, to breathe in the burning dust which came whirling through it, could any one do that and reach the ford alive? Not one dare venture; yet they would not leave the spot.

At break of day they said, "We will go." They were glad of such shelter as the upheaved roots afforded. It was a moment's respite from the blistering, blinding rain. But whilst they argued thus, Mr. Lee was striding onwards to the seven black heaps, in the midst of which he had left his children.

The fires had long gone out; the blackness of darkness was around him. He called their names. He shouted. His voice was thick and hoarse from the choking atmosphere. He stumbled against a hillock. He sank in the drift of mud by its side. A faint, low sob seemed near him; something warm eluded his touch. His arms sought it in the darkness, sweeping before him into empty space. Two resolute small hands fought back his own, and Cuthbert growled out fiercely, "Whoever you are, you shan't touch my Effie. Get along!"

"Not touch your Effie, my game chick!" retorted Mr. Lee, with the ghost of a smile in spite of his despair.

"Oh, it is father! it is father!" they exclaimed, springing into his arms. "We thought you would never come back any more."

He thought they would never stop kissing him, but he got them at last, big children as they were, one under each arm, lifting, dragging, carrying by turns, till he made his way to the cart. Then he discovered why poor Effie hung so helplessly upon him. Both hands had tightly clinched in the shock of the explosion, and her feet dragged uselessly along the ground.

"She turned as cold as ice," said Cuthbert, "and I've cuddled her ever since. Then the mud came on us hot; wasn't that a queer thing?"

They snugged poor Effie in the blanket, and Audrey took her on her lap.

"I'm not afraid now," she whispered, "now we are all together. But I've lost the kitten."

"No," said Audrey; "I saw it after you were gone, scampering up a tree."

Mr. Lee was leaning against the side of the cart, speaking to old Hal.

They did not hear what he was saying, only the rabbiter's reply: "Trust 'em to me. I'll find some place of shelter right away, down by the sea. Here, take my hand on it, and go. God helping, you may save 'em at the ford. Maybe they are half buried alive. It is on my mind it will be a dig-out when you get there. The nearer the mischief the worse it will be. When our fellows see you have the pluck to venture, there'll be some of 'em will follow, sure and sartin."

"We are all chums here," said Mr. Lee, turning to the men. "Lend me that spade and I'm off to the ford. We must answer that coo somehow, my lads."

"We'll do what we can in the daylight," they answered.

"I am going to do what I can in the darkness," he returned, as he shouldered the spade and crossed over for a last look at his children.

Audrey laid her hand in his without speaking.

"You are not going alone, father, when I'm here," urged Edwin, springing off the horse. "Take me with you."

"No, Edwin; your post is here, to guard the others in my absence.—Remember, my darlings, we are all in God's hands, and there I leave you," said Mr. Lee.

He seized a broken branch, torn off by the wind, and using it as an alpenstock, leaped from boulder to boulder across the stream, and was up the other side of the valley without another word.

Cuthbert was crying; the dogs were whining; Audrey bent over Effie and rocked her backwards and forwards.

The cart set off. The mud was up to the axle-tree. It was slow work getting through it.

The rest of the party were busy dragging their tents out of the mire, and loading their own cart with their traps as fast as they could, fumbling in the dark, knee-deep in slush and mud.

As Beauty pulled his way through for an hour or more, the muddy rain diminished, the earth grew hard and dry. The children breathed more freely as the fresh sea-breeze encountered the clouds of burning dust, which seemed now to predominate over the mud.

They could hear the second cart rumbling behind them. The poor fellow who had been struck by the lightning began to speak, entreating his comrades to lay him somewhere quiet. "My head, my head!" he moaned. "Stop this shaking."

By-and-by they reached a hut. They were entering one of the great sheep-runs, where the rabbiters had been recently at work. Here the carts drew up, and roused its solitary inmate. One of the rabbiters came round and told Hal they had best part company.

"There are plenty of bold young fellows among Feltham's shepherds. We are off to the great house to tell him, and we'll give the alarm as we go. He'll send a party off to the hills as soon as ever he hears of this awful business. A lot of us may force a way. We'll take this side of the run: you go the other till you find somewhere safe to leave these children. Wake up the shepherds in every hut you pass, and send them on to meet us at Feltham's. If we are back by daylight we shall do," they argued.

"Agreed," said the old man. "We can't better that. Dilworth and the traps

had best wait here. He will sleep this off," he added, looking compassionately at his stricken comrade.

Out came the shepherd, a tall, gentlemanly young fellow, who had passed his "little-go" at Trinity, got himself "ploughed" like Ottley, and so went in for the southern hemisphere and the shepherd's crook.

Pale and livid with the horror of the lone night-watch in his solitary hermitage, he caught the full import of the direful tidings at a word. His bed and his rations were alike at their service. He whistled up his horse and dog, and rode off at a breakneck gallop, to volunteer for the relief-party, and send the ill news a little faster to his master's door, for his fresh horse soon outstripped the rabbiters' cart. Meanwhile old Hal drove onward towards the sea. A shepherd met him and joined company, breathless for his explanation of all the terrors which had driven him from his bed. He blamed Mr. Lee for his foolhardiness in venturing on alone into such danger.

Freed at last from the clayey slime, Beauty rattled on apace. Cuthbert was fast asleep, and Edwin was nodding, but Audrey was wide awake. She gathered from the conversation of the men fresh food for fear. The "run" they were crossing was a large one. She thought they called it Feltham's. It extended for some miles along the sea-shore, and Audrey felt sure they must have journeyed ten or fifteen miles at least since they entered it. Thirteen thousand sheep on run needed no small company of shepherds. Many of them lived at the great house with Mr. Feltham; others were scattered here and there all over the wide domain, each in his little shanty. Yet most of them were the sons of gentlemen, certain to respond to the rabbiters' call. Again the cart drew up, and a glimmer of firelight showed her the low thatched roof of another shanty. Hal called loudly to a friend inside.

"Up and help us, man! There is an awful eruption. Tarawera is pouring out fire and smoke. Half the country round will be destroyed before the morning!"

Down sprang the shepherd. "We are off to Feltham's; but we must have you with us, Hal, for a guide. We don't know where we are wanted."

Edwin was wide awake in a moment. The men were talking eagerly. Then they came round, lifted the girls out of the cart, told them all to go inside the hut and get a sleep, and they would soon send somebody to see after them.

Hal laid his hand on Edwin's shoulder. "Remember your father's charge, lad," he said, "and just keep here, so that I know where to find you."

It was still so dark they could scarcely see each other's faces; but as Edwin gave his promise, Audrey sighed a startled sigh of fear. Were they going to leave them alone?

"Must," returned all three of the men, with a decision that admitted of no question.

”Afraid?” asked the shepherd, in a tone which made Edwin retort, ”Not a bit.”

But Audrey could not echo her brother’s words. She stood beside him the picture of dismay, thinking of her father. Hal’s friend Oscott picked up a piece of wood and threw it on the dying lire; it blazed up cheerily.

”My dear,” said Hal, in an expostulating tone, ”would you have us leave your father single-handed? We have brought you safe out of the danger. There are numbers more higher up in the hills; we must go back.”

”Yes, yes,” she answered, desperately. ”Pray don’t think about us. Go; do go!”

Oscott brought out his horse. The shepherd smiled pityingly at the children. ”We’ll tell the boundary-rider to look you up. He will bring the dog his breakfast, and I have no doubt Mrs. Feltham will send him with yours.”

With a cheery good-night, crossed by the shepherd with a cheerier good-morning, intended to keep their spirits up, the men departed.

Edwin put his arm round Audrey. ”Are you really afraid? I would not show a white feather after all he said. Come inside.”

The hut was very similar to the one at the entrance of the gorge, with the customary bed of fern leaves and thick striped blanket. The men had laid Effie down upon it, and Cuthbert was kneeling beside her rubbing her hands.

”I’ll tell you a secret,” he whispered. ”Our Audrey has gone over to the groaners.”

”No, she has not,” retorted Edwin. ”But once I heard that Cuthbert was with the criers.”

”Where are we?” asked Effie piteously.

”Safe in the house that Jack built,” said her brother, wishing to get up a laugh; but it would not do.

Audrey turned her head away. ”Let us try to sleep and forget ourselves.”

Edwin found a horse-rug in the hut, and went out to throw it over Beauty’s back, for the wind was blowing hard. There was plenty of drift-wood strewing the shore, and he carefully built up the fire. Having had some recent experience during the charcoal-burning, he built it up remarkably well, hoping the ruddy blaze would comfort Audrey—at least it would help them to dry their muddy clothes. The sound of the trampling surf and the roar of the angry sea seemed as nothing in the gray-eyed dawn which followed that night of fear.

He found, as he thought, his sisters sleeping; and sinking down in the nest of leaves which Cuthbert had been building for him, he soon followed their example. But he was mistaken: Audrey only closed her eyes to avoid speaking. She dared not tell him of their father’s peril for fear he should rush off with the men, urged on by a desperate desire to share it. ”I know now,” she thought, ”why

father charged him to remain with us."

Her distress of mind drowned all consciousness of their strange surroundings. What was the rising of the gale, the trampling of the surf upon the sand, or the dashing of the tumultuous waves, after the fire and smoke of Tarawera?

But Cuthbert started in his dreams, and Edwin woke with a cry. Shaking himself from the clinging leaves, now dry as winter hay, he ran out with the impression some one had called him. It was but the scream of the sea-gull and the moan of the storm. It should have been daylight by this time, but no wintry sun could penetrate the pall-like cloud of blue volcanic dust which loaded the atmosphere even there.

It seemed to him as if the sea, by some mysterious sympathy, responded to the wild convulsions of the quaking earth. The billows were rolling in towards him mountains high. He turned from the angry waves to rebuild his fire.

Did Oscott keep it as a beacon through the night on the ledge of rock which sheltered his hut from the ocean breezes? From its position Edwin was inclined to think he did, although the men in the hurry of their departure had not exactly said so. By the light of this fire he could now distinguish the outline of a tiny bay—so frequent on the western coast of the island—a stretch of sandy shore, and beyond the haven over which the rock on which he stood seemed sentinel, a sheet of boiling foam.

And what was that? A coasting steamer, with its screw half out of the water, tearing round and round, whilst the big seas, leaping after each other, seemed washing over the little craft from stem to stern.

He flung fresh drift-wood on his beacon-fire until it blazed aloft, a pyramid of flame. "Audrey dear, Audrey," he ran back shouting, "get up, get up!"

She appeared at the door, a wan, drooping figure, shrinking from the teeth of the gale. "Is it father?" she asked.

"Father! impossible, Audrey. We left him miles away. It is a ship—a ship, Audrey—going down in the storm," he vociferated.

She clasped her hands together in hopeless despair.

Cuthbert pulled her back. "You will be blown into the sea," he cried. "Let me go. Boys like me, we just love wild weather. I shan't hurt. What is it brings the downie fit?" he asked. "Tell old Cuth."

"It is father, dear—it is father," she murmured, as his arms went round her coaxingly.

"I know," he answered. "I cried because I could not help it; but Edwin says crying is no good."

"Praying is better," she whispered, buttoning up his coat a little closer. But what was he wearing?

"Oh, I got into somebody's clothes," he said, "and Edwin helped me."

"It is father's short gray coat," she ejaculated, stroking it lovingly down his chest, as if it were all she ever expected to see of her father any more.

"So much the better," he answered, undaunted. "I want to be father to-night."

"Night!" repeated Edwin, catching up the word, "How can you stand there talking when there is a ship going down before our eyes?"

Cuthbert ran up the rocky headland after his brother, scarcely able to keep his footing in the increasing gale. There, by the bright stream of light flung fitfully across the boiling waves, he too could see the little vessel tossing among the breakers. An Egyptian darkness lay around them—a darkness that might be felt, a darkness which the ruddiest glow of their beacon could scarcely penetrate.

"You talk of night," Edwin went on, as the brothers clung together, "but it is my belief it has long since been morning. I tell you what it is, Cuth: the sun itself is veiled in sackcloth and ashes; it can't break through this awful cloud."

Young as they were, they felt the importance of keeping up the fire to warn the steamer off the rocks, and again they set to work gathering fuel. The men had said but little about the fire, because they knew it was close on morning when they departed, and now—yes, the morning had come, but without the daylight.

Old roots and broken branches drifted in to shore were strewing the beach. But as the boys were soon obliged to take a wider circle to collect them, Edwin was so much afraid of losing his little brother he dare not let go his hand. Then he found a piece of rope in the pocket of "father's coat," and tied their arms together. So they went about like dogs in leash, as he told Cuthbert. If dogs did their hunting in couples, why should not they?

Meanwhile Audrey, whose heart was in the hills, was watching landwards from the little window at the back of the hut. Edwin's pyramid of fire shot fitful gleams above the roof and beyond the black shadow of the shanty wall. Beauty, who had never known the luxury of a stable until he came into the hands of his new masters, was well used to looking out for himself. He had made his way round to the back of the hut, and now stood cowering under the broad eaves, seeking shelter from the raging blast.

Where the firelight fell Audrey could faintly distinguish a line of road, probably the one leading to the mansion. To the left, the wavering shadows cast upon the ground told her of the near neighbourhood of a grassy embankment, surmounted by a swinging fence of wire, the favourite defence of the sheep-run, so constructed that if the half-wild animals rush against it the wire swings in their faces and drives them back. She heard the mournful howling of a dog at no great distance. Suddenly it changed to a clamorous bark, and Audrey detected a faint but far-away echo, like the trampling of approaching horsemen.

She pushed the window to its widest and listened. Her long fair hair, which

had been loosely braided for the night, was soon shaken free by the raging-winds, and streamed about her shoulders as she leaned out as far as she could in the fond hope that some one was coming.

The knitted shawl she had snatched up and drawn over her head when she jumped into her father's arms was now rolled up as a pillow for Effie. She shivered in the wintry blast, yet courted it, as it blew back from her the heated clouds of whirling ashes. Faint moving shadows, as of trees or men, began to fleck the pathway, and then a band of horsemen, galloping their hardest, dashed across the open.

Audrey's pale face and streaming hair, framed in the blackness of the shadowing roof, could not fail to be seen by the riders. With one accord they shook the spades they carried in the air to tell their errand, and a score of manly voices rang out the old-world ballad,—

”What lads e'er did our lads will do;
Were I a lad I'd follow him too.
He's owre the hills that I lo'e weel.”

Audrey waved her ”God-speed” in reply. With their heads still turned towards

her, without a moment's pause, they vanished in the darkness. Only the roll of the chorus thrown back to cheer her, as they tore the ground beneath their horses' hoofs, rose and fell with the rage of the storm—

”He's owre the hills we daurna name,
He's owre the hills ayont Dumblane,
Wha soon will get his welcome hame.
My father's gone to fecht for him,
My brithers winna bide at hame,
My mither greets and prays for them,
And 'deed she thinks they're no to blame.
He's owre the hills,” etc.

The last faint echo which reached her listening ears renewed the promise—

”What lads e'er did our lads will do;
Were I a lad I'd follow him too.
He's owre the hills, he's owre the hills.”

The voices were lost at last in the howl of the wind and the dash of the waves

on the angry rocks. But the music of their song was ringing still in Audrey's heart, rousing her to a courage which was not in her nature.

She closed the window, and knelt beside the sleeping Effie with a question on her lips—that question of questions for each one of us, be our emergency what it may—"Lord, what wouldest thou have me to do?" She was not long in finding its answer.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RAGING SEA.

The boys rushed in exclaiming, "Audrey, Audrey! the ship is foundering! The men are getting off into the boat, and they can't keep its head to the sea. She swings round broadside to the waves, and must be filling. Is there a rope about the hut—anywhere, anywhere; a long, strong rope, dear Audrey?"

How should she know what was in the hut? But she knew what was put in the cart: the ropes which tied the load were there. She had pulled them out of the shed with the harness herself.

Off went Edwin, shouting, "A rope! a rope! a kingdom for a rope!"

Cuthbert released himself from the leash, which was dragging him along too fast, and ran back to his sister.

"Did you hear the singing?" she asked. "Did you see the men ride past? They are gone to the rescue, Cuth; they are gone to father's help. May God reward them all."

"And will you come to ours?" he said. "Audrey, you could feed the fire. Edwin and I have got a lot of wood together. You have only to keep throwing it on; and then I can help Edwin."

"'What lads e'er did our lads will do;
Were I a lad I'd follow him too,'"

she answered, slipping her shawl from under Effie's head and tying it once more over her own. They went out together. Cuthbert helped her up the rock, pulled a big root in to the front of the fire to make her a seat, and left her a willing stoker.

He had pointed out the tiny cockle-shell of a boat—a small dark speck beyond the sheet of boiling foam, with the hungry, curling waves leaping after it.

Could it escape swamping in the outer line of breakers it could never hope to cross? It was running before them now. Edwin had put Beauty once more into the cart, and was carefully knotting the rope to the back of it.

He had learned to tie a safety-knot—a sailor's knot—on their voyage out. Thank God for that! It whiled away an idle hour at the time; now it might prove the saving of human creatures' lives. That the cart was heavy and lumbering and strong was cause for rejoicing.

"You and I, Cuth, could not pull a man through such a sea; but Beauty can. We know how well he crossed the ford. I shall back him into the water as far as ever I can, and then jump into the cart and throw the rope. You see my plan?"

"I do," said Cuth; "but as soon as you leave go of Beauty's head he'll come splashing back again out of the water. You must have me in the cart to hold his reins."

"I dare not," protested Edwin. "A shrimp like you would be washed out to sea in no time; and I promised father to take care of you. No, Cuth, you are not yet ten years old."

"I am sure I look a good bit older than that, in father's coat," urged Cuthbert, looking down upon himself with considerable satisfaction; but Edwin was inexorable. "Tie me in the cart, then," cried Cuthbert.

"Where is the old leash?"

It was quickly found, and Edwin owned the thought was a good one.

When all was ready a sudden impulse prompted them to run back into the hut and look at Erne, and then up the rock for a final word with Audrey. They found her already wet with the salt sea spray, and almost torn to pieces by the wind, but, as Edwin said, "at it all the same."

The final word was spoken, reiterated, shouted; who, alas! could hear it in the rage of the storm? So it came to a snatch of kiss, and away they ran, leaving Audrey with the impression that the moving lips were trying to repeat, "Keep us a jolly blaze."

Voice being useless on such a morning, Audrey made answer by action, and flung her brands upon the fire with such rapidity that the column of flame rose higher and higher, flinging its fitful gleams across the sands, where the boys were busy.

The recent voyage had taken away all fear of the sea even from Cuthbert, who was already tied to the front of the cart, with Beauty's reins in his hand, holding him in with all his might. Edwin, with his teeth set and a white look about his lips, had seized the horse's head, and was backing him into the water. Splash, splash into the wall of wave, rising higher and higher at every step, and almost

lifting Edwin off his feet. Then he swung himself into the cart by Cuthbert's side. Beauty felt his firmer grasp as the reins changed hands, and turning his head with a look in his resolute eye that showed him a willing partner in the daring plan, he reversed the position, choosing rather to breast the opposing billows. Edwin let him have his way, and with a dash and a snort he plunged into their midst, carrying the boys full fifteen yards into the raging sea. The brothers clung to the cart as the waves dashed in their faces. Caps were gone in a moment. The cart was filling. Beauty held his head high above the water, and struggled on another yard or so. Then Edwin felt they must go no further, and turned the cart round.

It was no easy matter to make Beauty stand. His natural sense of danger, his high intelligence, his increasing love for the boys, all prompted him to bring them out of the water, not to stay in it. He was bent on rushing back to dry ground, as Cuthbert had predicted. The boys thundered "Whoa, whoa!" with all the endearing epithets they were wont to lavish upon him in his stable. He was brought to a stand at last, and Edwin, raising himself on the side of the cart, looked round for the boat.

It was nowhere. His heart sank cold within him.

"O Cuth, we are too late, too late!" he groaned.

Then Audrey's fire sent up a brighter blaze, and hope leaped lightly into life once more, and he cried out joyfully, "I see it!" but stopped abruptly, almost drawing back his words with bated breath.

The momentary glimpse had shown him the luckless boat, blown along by the force of the wind, without the help of an oar, dash into the bursting crest of a giant roller. It flung the boat across the line of boiling foam. The men in it, finding their oars useless, were kicking off their boots, preparing for a swim. He knew it by their attitudes. He seized the pole they had put in the cart to use as a signal. It was a willow sapling, torn up by its roots, which they had found when they were gathering the firewood.

Cuthbert had peeled off the bark at the thin end, whilst Edwin had twisted its pliant boughs into a strong hoop, to tie at the end of his rope.

As Edwin raised it high above his head—a tall, white wand, which must be conspicuous in the surrounding darkness—he saw the boat turn over, the angry waves rush on, and all was gone. A cry of dismay broke from the brothers' lips: "Lord help us, or they perish!"

"I could not have done this without you, Cuth. We are only two boys, but now is our hour."

Edwin had learned a great deal from the sailors' stories during their voyage, and he had been a crack kite-flier on the playground at his English school; so that he was quite alive to the importance of keeping his rope free from entanglement, which really is the vital point in throwing a rope at sea. He had laid it carefully

on the bottom of the cart, fold upon fold, backwards and forwards, and Cuth had stood upon it to keep it in place. The hoop lay on the top of the coil, and to the hoop he had tied the plaid-scarf from his own neck, to serve it as a sail.

The paralyzing fear came over him now that whilst they were doing all this the time for help had gone by. "But we won't stop trying," he said, "if it seems ever so hopeless; God only knows."

He took his brother's place on the coil of rope, and unfolding a yard or two, flung the hoop from him, taking aim at the spot where the boat had capsized. The wind caught the scarf and bore the hoop aloft; Edwin let his rope go steadily, fold after fold. Would it carry it straight? Would the men see his scarf fluttering in the wind? He felt sure a hand might catch the hoop if they only saw it. But, alas, it was so small! He leaned against his brother back to back, and if the hot tears came it was because he was only a boy. Cuthbert put a hand behind him. There was comfort to him in the touch. One burning drop just trickled on his thumb.

"What, you crying!" he exclaimed; "is not praying better?"

"God have mercy on us!" burst from Edwin's lips; and Cuthbert echoed back the gasping words. Had they ever prayed like that before? All, all that was in them seemed to pour itself forth in that moment of suspense, when God alone could hear.

[image]

A PERILOUS RESCUE.

The rope tightened in Edwin's grasp; something had clutched it at last. The tug had come. Would his knots give way? He was faint with the fear that his work was not well done—not strong enough to stand the strain which he felt was increasing every moment. It seemed to him, as he watched with every sense alert and tried to its uttermost, that each successive earthquake shock, as it heaved the land, sent a corresponding wave across the sea. One of these had carried out his hoop, and he knew he must wait until it subsided to draw his rope in, or it might snap like pack-thread under the awful strain.

"O Edwin, I am getting so tired!" said little Cuth, in a tone of such utter exhaustion it went like a knife through his brother to hear him.

"Only another minute," he replied; "just another minute—if we can hold on."

The longed-for lull was coming. Edwin gave Beauty his head; but the poor horse was stiffened with standing, and almost refused to move. Then Edwin tied himself to the cart.

"O Beauty, if you fail us we are done!"

The despairing cry roused the torpid energies of the horse. With a stretch and a snort he tugged and strained, dragging his load a yard or two landwards. A man's head appeared above the water. The joy of the sight brought back hope and capability. It was but a spasmodic effort; but Beauty caught the thrill of joy animating the boyish voices, cheering him on to renewed exertions. The wheels splashed round in the water; a cloud of muddy spray rose between Edwin and the rescued man. He could not see the sailor's face. The fire was dying. Was all the wood they had gathered—all that great heap—burnt up at last?

Audrey raked the dying brands together, and a fresh flame shot upwards, and by its welcome radiance Edwin was aware of two hands working their way along the tightened rope, one over the other, towards the cart.

The tightened rope! Yes; that was proof that some one had grasped the hoop. In another moment that stranger hand was clasping Edwin's in the darkness that was following fast upon those fitful flames.

"Hold hard!" shouted a stentorian voice, and a man got up into the cart beside him. A deep-drawn breath, a muttered prayer, and the strong, powerful hands clasped over Edwin's, and began to draw in the rope.

Not a word was said, for the boys had no voice left to make themselves heard. The last shout of joy to Beauty had left them spent and faint. The stranger, surprised at the smallness and feebleness of the hand he now let go, gently pushed the boy aside and took his place. Edwin leaned against the front of the cart beside his brother, dead beat and scarcely conscious of anything but a halo of happiness radiating from the blessed consciousness which found expression in a murmured, "Cuth, old boy, we've done it."

The reins fell slack on Beauty's neck, but the good horse needed no guiding. He seemed aware that two more men got up into the cart, and when a pause followed he gave his proud head a triumphant toss, and brought them up out of the water. There were three men in the cart and twice as many more holding on by the rope.

Audrey ran down from the dying fire to meet them.

A strange, unnatural kind of twilight, a something weird and ghastly, belonging to neither day nor night, seemed to pervade the land, and shed a sepulchral gleam across the men's pale faces. Audrey pushed open the door of the hut and beckoned to the sailors to enter.

They gathered round her, shaking the salt water from their dripping garments, and uttering broken exclamations of surprise and thankfulness. She saw a boy in the midst of the group limping painfully. As she hurried up to his assistance, she discovered that it was neither Edwin nor Cuthbert; but he grasped her outstretched hand so thankfully she could not withdraw it. There was a wildness

in the alarm with which she began to ask them for her brothers the men could not mistake. They gave the forlorn girl an almost unanimous assurance that they knew nothing of her brothers. For the men clinging to the rope had not seen the boys in the cart. "But," added one heartily, "we'll protect you, for there is wild work afoot somewhere to-night. We have heard the cannonading, broadside after broadside, or we should not have gone rock-hunting in the dark. It is fool's work—you can give it no better name—coasting along a dangerous shore, with a sky too black for moon or star to penetrate."

"Yon's the little maid who fed the beacon," said another. "I saw her move across the front of the fire and throw her sticks upon it. God bless her! Every minute I thought we should see her blown over into the sea."

"Not me, not me," interposed poor Audrey.

Getting free in her desperation, and pressing between the sailors, she ran towards Beauty, who was slowly lagging round to the back of the hut.

"If my brothers are missing," she cried, "they must have been washed out of the cart." She clasped her hands before her eyes to shut out the sight of the drowning boys which imagination was picturing, and so failed to perceive the two weary heads leaning against the side of the cart. It was but a moment of agony, one of the unfounded alarms which always cluster round a real danger and follow the shock of dread like its shadow.

"Edwin, Edwin! where are you?" she cried.—"Cuthbert, Cuthbert! come to me!"

The rocks gave back the hollow echo, "Come to me!"

But she did not hear two faint voices feebly expostulating, "We tied ourselves to the cart, and we can't undo the knots. We are here, like two galley-slaves chained to the oars, and we can't get out."

A shock of earthquake sent Beauty with a shiver of terror straight to the open. The men threw themselves on their faces, knowing how easily they might lose their footing on the reeling ground; whilst Audrey, neglecting this precaution, went over like a nine-pin.

The hut shook as if its carefully-piled walls were about to give way, and Audrey, who had seen their house go down in the beginning of this fearful night, shrieked out for Effie.

As the tremor subsided, and the sailors gathered from poor Audrey's broken sentences some idea of the awful catastrophe on land, they turned from the hut, judging it safer to remain in the open.

Mates were looking out for mates. Were they all there? Captain, boatswain, cook—not one of the little coaster's crew was missing. Passengers all right: a gold-digger from Otago, the schoolboy from Christchurch. Are all saved? Only the hand which threw the rope was missing.

Who backed the cart into the sea? they asked; and where was Oscott?

When they learned from Audrey's frantic replies that every man had gone to the rescue, and the little fugitives had been left in the hut alone, the sailors' desire to find the missing boys was as earnest as her own.

They pointed to the cart jogging steadily across the grassy plain, dotted with sheep, and shaded here and there by groups of stately trees.

"God bless the young heroes!" they exclaimed. "Why, there they are—off to the mansion to beg for tucker for us all."

Audrey, set at rest from this last great fear, escaped from her questioners, and retreated to Effie and the empty hut, saying reproachfully,—

"How just like Edwin! But they might have told me what they were going to do."

It seemed a moment's reprieve. There was nothing more to be done. Audrey sank upon the bed of fern leaves, weary and wet and worn, unable any longer to resist the craving for a little sleep.

The sailors lit a fire on the open grass beyond the hut, and grouped themselves round it to talk and rest. The poor fellows who had been dragged to shore, clinging to the rope, found their shoeless feet cut and bleeding from the sharp edges of the oyster-shells with which the sands were studded. But when an hour or more passed by, the sunless noon brought with it sharper pangs of hunger to them all.

No cart had returned, no boundary rider had put in an appearance, and the men began to talk of a walk over the grass to find the mansion. They were all agreed as to the best course for them to pursue. They must turn "sundowners"—the up-country name for beggars—tramp across to the nearest port, begging their way from farm to farm. They knew very well no lonely settler dare refuse supper and a night's lodging to a party of men strong enough to take by force what they wanted.

The embankment with its swinging fence, the shepherd's hut where the girls were sleeping, told them where they were—on the confines of a great sheep-run. Their route must begin with the owner's mansion, which could not be very far off, as there was no food in the hut, and no apparent means for cooking any, so Audrey had told them. But now the storm was dying, the captain rose to look round the hut for himself. He was wondering what to do with the Christchurch boy he had undertaken to land at another great sheep-run about twenty-five miles farther along the coast It was of no use to take him back with them, a hundred miles the other way. He hoped to leave him at the mansion. The owner must be a wealthy man, and would most likely undertake to put the boy on board the next steamer, which would pass that way in a week or ten days.

So he called to the boy to go with him, and explained his purpose as they

went. They waked up Audrey, to ask the owner's name.

”Feltham,” she answered, putting her hand to her head to recall her scattered senses; between rabbiters and sailors she was almost dazed.

To be left alone again in that empty hut, without food, without her brothers, was enough to dismay a stouter heart than hers. The captain spoke kindly.

”I want to see you all safe in this sheep-owner's care before I leave you,” he said. ”It was stupid in those brothers of yours to go off with the cart, for you are too exhausted to walk.”

”Did you ever hear the name of Bowen in these parts?” asked the Christchurch boy eagerly, nursing a bleeding foot the while.

Audrey thought of the kind old gentleman in Ottley's coach, and answered, brightening.

”I am his grandson,” the boy replied. ”I am Arthur Bowen.”

CHAPTER IX.
NOTHING TO EAT.

As the shock of the earthquake subsided, and Beauty rallied from his terror, his pace began to slacken. If Edwin had not tied himself and Cuthbert so securely in the cart, they might have been thrown out when Beauty ran away. So the knots which would not be untied proved their protection; and now they found themselves trotting leisurely through verdant stretches, dotted with ti tree and blue-gum, and overgrown with toi and flax and rushes. Before them rose the great gates of the avenue leading to the central station-house. The white front of Feltham's mansion gleamed through the tall stems of the trees which surrounded it; whilst beyond and around them were the sheds and walls, the pools and bridges, comprising stock-yards and shearing-places, where thousands of wild cattle and tens of thousands of wilder sheep were washed and dipped, and counted and branded, year after year.

The ingenious arrangement of pool and paddock and pen by which this gigantic undertaking is safely accomplished looked to the boys like a wooden village.

Beauty drew up at the friendly gate of his own accord, attracted by the welcome sounds of human life as stockmen and shepherds hurried out to their morning work. Half the hands were off to the hills; the remaining half found in

consequence the more to do. The poor terrified cattle had suffered considerably. Sheep were cast in every ditch. Cows had gored each other in their mad terror; and broken fences told of wild leaps and escaped bulls to be sought for in the neighbouring bush.

The boundary rider, whose sole duty is to parade the vast domain and give notice at headquarters of unwary gaps and strays, had been spurring hither and thither, delayed by the gloom of the morning and the herds of wild bulls which had broken in, while the tame had broken out. With demolished fences, and frightened sheep dying around them by hundreds, the little fugitives in Oscott's hut had been forgotten.

But when the boundary rider saw a cart at his master's gate, blue with volcanic mud above, and dripping from below with the slime of the sea, he thought of the family from the hills waiting somewhere for the breakfast he was to have carried in his saddle-bag. His circuit was but half completed. "I shall find them yet," he said to himself, as he galloped up behind the cart. He saw the dangling rope, and the white faces of the two boys huddled together in a state of complete exhaustion. He tied his horse to the gate, and jumping into the cart, rattled Beauty up the avenue to his master's door, which stood wide open to all comers. For every hour brought fresh rumours, and fresh parties of fugitives who had fled precipitately from their homes when the storm of mud began.

He took his knife from his pocket and cut the rope which tied Edwin and his brother to the cart. Some one ran out with a cup of coffee, which he poured down their throats, and then the boys began to revive. He wanted to take them in-doors and put them to bed. But the relief-party had already sent down so many sufferers from the hills every bed was full of children, women, and even men, who had been dug out of the muddy stream in which they were suffocating.

As soon as Edwin could speak, he added his story to the others, entreating the men who turned their heads to listen, as they hurried in and out, to send some food to his sisters, who were left alone in Oscott's hut. As for the sailors, the feeling among Feltham's people was decided: any one not from the hills must be left to take care of himself.

Just then a horseman, covered with mud and foam, came spurring towards the house, shouting to the crowd around the door,—

"I've come for every man on the ground, by the master's orders. Leave everything. Bring your spades, and follow me. The nearer we get to Tarawera the thicker lies the mud. Our government station at Rotorua is buried beneath it, church and all. Te Ariki and Maura are nowhere to be seen. The low whares in the Maori pahs are utterly destroyed. Wherever the roofs have been strong enough to uphold the weight of the falling mud, the inhabitants are alive beneath them now. Come to the rescue—come!"

The last hoarse words were scarcely audible. The boundary rider took the unfinished cup from Edwin's lips and passed it to the man, and the boy was glad that he did so.

A cry of "Spades! spades!" rang through the increasing group of listeners, which seemed to gather and disperse with equal rapidity. Mrs. Feltham made her way through the midst to the bell-tower, and rang a frantic peal to call all hands together. Horses were saddling; men were mounting; others were hurrying up to learn the meaning of the hasty summons. Edwin drew his cart aside under the trees to watch the departure.

Mrs. Feltham reappeared on her doorstep with knife and loaf, trying to fill every pocket with bread before each one rode off. She could not make her intention understood. The men, in their impatience to be gone, would hardly stop to take it.

"Oh," thought Edwin, "they forget they will want it all to give away."

He leaned over his brother. "Cuth, take the reins." But Cuth's numbed hands let them drop. Edwin twisted them round his arm, and with a nod and a smile made his way to Mrs. Feltham.

His voice was so weak and faint she could not hear what he said, but the ready hand was offering to pass on the great hunches of bread she was cutting, and she kept him at work, little dreaming how he had to turn his head away again and again to resist the impulse to take a bite by the way. As he took the last crust from her, and saw that it was the last, a sudden faintness overcame him, and he dropped on the stones at her feet.

"I am so very, very hungry," he said piteously.

"Why did not you tell me that before the basket was empty?" she retorted. "You must remember, my boy, every bit of food for man and beast must be buried under this dreadful mud for miles and miles. I may have a famishing army round me before night, and how am I to feed them all? Not a crumb must be wasted. If you are so hungry, go into the kitchen and clear up the scraps on the men's plates. I would turn all the flour in the granary into bread, and feed you every one, if I had only hands to make it and bake it. Stop," she went on; "though you are a boy you could be of some use. You could wash and boil a copperful of potatoes and pumpkins; that would be something to set before the starving cart-loads I hope and trust they will be successful in saving."

"No, ma'am," answered Edwin. "I must go back to my sisters. I have left them alone with a lot of rough sailors."

His "no" was round and resolute.

She took out her purse, saying almost coaxingly, "Here is a week's wage for a day's work."

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Feltham, but I really can't stay," he persisted.

She turned away with an impatient gesture and went in-doors.

”She takes me for some unlucky beggar,” thought Edwin, crawling round to the kitchen door, glad to avail himself of the somewhat ungracious permission to look out for the scraps. ”It is dog’s fare,” thought Edwin, ”but it is more to me than her gold.” He found a piece of newspaper, and walked round and round the long breakfast-table, collecting into it such morsels as he could find. Of most of the dishes the hungry young shepherds had made a clean sweep. Still there were some unfinished crusts of bread, a corner of Melton pie, a rasher of bacon burned in the grilling. On the dresser he discovered a bone of mutton, evidently laid aside for the hounds. He would not touch the sugar in the basin, or take a peep at the contents of the cupboards, feeling himself on his honour. The sounds within convinced him Mrs. Feltham and the rest of her household were hard at work transforming the hospitable mansion into a temporary hospital, for the reception of the poor unfortunates who might be dug out alive but scarcely uninjured.

”O Cuth, we haven’t been the worst off by a long way!” exclaimed Edwin suddenly, as the brothers sat together in their cart, enjoying their bone of mutton, quite in the doggie line, but, as Cuthbert averred, feeling themselves, as they ate, like new-made men.

Then they turned Beauty homewards. Yes, that queer little shanty was a kind of home. It was still dark as in a London fog, but the shocks of earthquake were less, fainter and farther apart.

Half-way down the road they met the party of sailors, walking barefoot on the edge of the grass. They did not recognize the boys, but stopped to ask the way to the central station.

”We have just been there to beg for food,” said Edwin, feeling it quite ”infra dig” to acknowledge the condition in which they reached Mrs. Feltham’s gate. ”But,” he added drearily, ”we could not get it. Not enough for you all.”

Then he hurried on to explain the tidings from the hills and the general stampede to the rescue.

”Turn back,” urged the captain, ”and give us a lift.”

”Lend us the cart,” added Arthur Bowen. ”If any harm should come to it, grandfather will pay you for it; and as for the horse, he will get a good feed of corn in Feltham’s stable. I will see after him.”

Edwin was not sure he ought to trust the horse and cart with strangers, but the prospect of a good feed of corn for Beauty went a long way; for he had nothing for the horse to eat but the winter grass around the hut. Down he jumped.

”If there are so many men at this station,” the sailors were saying, ”maybe they can find us an old pair of shoes; and if strong arms are in request, we are ready to take our turn.”

They shook hands all round.

"Good-bye, my lads, good-bye. It was a brave act to back that cart into the sea, and you'll take a sailor's blessing with you to your home, wherever it is. If there is anything washed ashore from the little craft, you'll store it up high and dry until another coaster calls to fetch it away."

The promise was given on both sides. Edwin would find his Beauty safe at Feltham's, and the captain his wreckage piled against the back of Oscott's hut, although they might both be miles away when the two were reclaimed.

Edwin took Cuthbert's hand in his and walked on in grave silence. One thing was clear—nobody would have time or thought to care for them. They must just look out for themselves.

"It is playing at Robinson Crusoe in earnest, we four in that little hut," said Cuthbert. "He did lots of things to make himself comfortable, but then he was a man."

"It won't be for long," added Edwin. "I hardly think we shall see father to-night, but he may be back to-morrow. If we could only find something to eat. Whero and his mother lived on nuts and berries after the muru, but then it was autumn."

They sank again into silence. The barking of the boundary dog warned them they were near the hut, and when it died away to a low growl they distinguished a faint, soft murmur of singing.

"Oh, hush!" they exclaimed. "Oh, listen! It is the girls; that is Audrey."

It put fresh life into the weary feet as they heard it clearer and clearer—

"Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings."

"Heaven's gate," repeated the boys: it was the only word they could distinguish.

"Heaven's gate. It is a word to comfort us, for that is never shut," added Edwin, as they stumbled against an uprooted ti tree. The long, tapering stem, with its waving plume of feathery leaves, barred their progress. Cuth was about to climb over it, for the hard brown trunk at its base was six feet round; but Edwin ran off to examine its leafy crown, where the cabbage which gave the tree its name should lie hidden.

He parted the yard-long leaflets, and felt a something tall and crisp growing up in their midst.

A shout of glee brought Cuth to his assistance. They pulled the pliant boughs to this side and that, and perceived what looked to them like a coil of white ribbon, as thick and as long as a man's arm. Was this the cabbage of which they had heard so much, for the sake of which the lordly tree was so often cut down and destroyed?

They tore off one of the ribbon-like flakes and tasted it.

Cuth declared it was like eating almonds, only not so hard.

"But how can we cut it without a knife?" cried Edwin, munching away at the raw flakes in his fingers, and pronouncing them a right good feed for them all, if they could but cut the cabbage out.

There might be a knife in the hut, who could say. Away they rushed to explore, guided through the tangle of flax and rushes by their sisters' voices.

The girls were sitting on the bed of fern in an abandonment of despair, scarcely daring to believe their own ears when the refrain of their song was caught up and repeated—

"With everything that pretty is,
My ladies sweet, arise."

"O Edwin, Edwin!" they exclaimed. "We thought you too had vanished."

"We could not bear ourselves," said Effie, "so we took to singing. We feared we were left to starve on our bed of leaves, like the 'Children in the Wood,' and we were afraid there was not a robin redbreast anywhere here to cover us up."

"Oh, but there is a robin blackbreast," retorted Edwin; "a true-born native, all the fitter for the undertaker's work. Only it is not going to be done to-night, Dame Trot." He took the wee white face between his hands, and felt so strong, so vigorous, so determined to take care of it somehow. "I am not going away again, Effie." He pulled the newspaper parcel out of his pocket and tossed it into Audrey's lap. "Beggars' crumbs!" he laughed. But her cold, nerveless fingers seemed incapable of untwisting the paper.

"Hands were made before forks!" cried Cuthbert, pushing in between his sisters, "and I've often heard that pie-crust is made to be broken, like promises. I can spy a bill-hook in the corner, a little too big for cutting up a pie, but just the thing to chop the cabbage out of a ti tree."

Edwin spun round and shouldered it in triumph.

"There goes smash to the promise: he is off again as fast as he can go. And now for the second breakage. You must not mind my dirty pads for once, Audrey," Cuthbert went on, pulling the pie into two pieces and making his sisters eat.

The slender store in the newspaper would be soon exhausted. Cuthbert, like a provident commissariat officer, was anxious to make the most of it. He laid aside the bacon to eat with Edwin's cabbage, and piled up the mutton-bones for their solitary neighbour, the boundary dog, who, like themselves, had been breakfasting on broken promise.

Audrey had recovered herself in some measure by the time Edwin returned

with his spoils.

"Who'll buy? who'll buy?" he shouted; "yards upon yards of vegetable ribbon, white and delicate enough to make the wedding favours for the queen of cooks."

"Oh, don't talk about cooking," put in Cuthbert; "it is so nice, let us eat it as it is."

So down they sat, breaking off flake after flake until they were satisfied. As hunger diminished speech returned, and Audrey, who had scarcely uttered a word whilst Edwin went over all they had heard and seen at Mrs. Feltham's, became suddenly animated. A thought had struck her, but she hesitated to propose her plan too abruptly.

"Dears," she said earnestly, looking round at the other three, "father will not come back to us perhaps for a day or two; it may even be a week. Think of our own escape. Think if one of us had been buried in that awful mud. How should we be feeling now? Whilst there is another life to be saved father will not come away—no, not for our sakes, and we must not wish that he should."

Even Effie answered, "Oh no, we must not."

"Then," continued Audrey, still more earnestly. "what are we going to do?"

"That is a poser," retorted Edwin. "The storm brought down the ti tree, and that gave us the cabbage. The gale is dying. We had better take a walk round and look about us. We may find something else. Heaven's gate is open still, Audrey. We must bear this as patiently as we can, and help will come."

"Yes, dears," she answered, "if you can be patient here a little longer, I think there is something I can do to help us all."

"You, Audrey?" exclaimed her brothers; "you are as white as a sheet. Let us do; we are twice as strong as you are."

"Strength is not everything," she returned quietly. "There are some things which only a girl can do. Now this is my plan. If Edwin will walk with me to the central station, I will ask Mrs. Feltham to let me help her. I will go for so much a day, and then at night when she pays me I may persuade her to sell me some flour and meat and tea, food enough for us all, dears."

"Go out like a charwoman, Audrey!" exclaimed Edwin, in amazement. "Is that what you mean?"

"Well, yes," returned Audrey, in a considering tone, "it certainly would be the same thing, if you like to call it so."

"'Of old men called a spade a spade,'" grumbled Edwin. "I like to give things their plain names, and then we know where we are."

"If little Mother Audrey goes out charing, Cuth will poison himself, and then there will be no more food wanting for him. That Mrs. Feltham looked as cross as two sticks," declared Cuthbert.

”Just listen to these proud young gentlemen,” retorted Audrey. ”Erne, my dear, I turn to you to support me.”

”I’ll do as you do,” returned her little sister, laying her head on her shoulder.

”Not quite so fast, Dame Trot,” interposed Edwin. ”But if Audrey marches home at night with a bag of flour on her back, you must make it into Norfolk dumplings. Cuthbert and I, it seems, are good for nothing but to eat them.”

”You ridiculous boys, why can’t you be serious?” said Audrey, adding, in an aside to Edwin, ”Erne is too ill to exist on your vegetable ribbon, even if we boil it. Well, is not my plan better—”

”Than robin blackbreast and the burying business? Of course, you have shut me up,” he answered.

So the decision was reached. Audrey untied her bundle. Combs and brushes, soap and towels, a well-worn text-book, a little box of her own personal treasures, all knotted up in one of Effie’s pinafores. What a hoard of comfort it represented!

”That is a notice to quit for you and me, Cuth,” remarked Edwin. ”We’ll take the boundary dog his bones, and accommodate our honest charwoman with a pailful of sea-water to assist the toilet operations.”

The storm had died away as suddenly as it rose, and the receding waves had left the shelving sands strewn with its debris—uprooted trees, old hats, and broken boards, fringed with seaweed. A coat was bobbing up and down, half in the water and half out, while floating spars told of the recent wreck. A keg sticking in the sand some feet below high-water mark attracted the boys’ attention, for Edwin was mindful of his promise to the sailors. As they set to work to roll it up, they came upon the oysters sticking edgeways out of the sand, and clinging in clusters to the rocks. With a hurrah of delight they collected a goodly heap. Here was a supper fit for a king.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAORI BOY.

The bath of sea-water which Edwin had provided in the shepherd’s pail did more than anything else to restore poor Effie. When the arduous task of opening the oysters was at last accomplished, by the aid of a great clasp nail and a splinter of stone, the abundant and nourishing meal which followed did them all so much

good, Cuthbert and Effie declared they did not mind being left alone in the hut half as much as when father left them by the charcoal fires. They all wanted Audrey to wait until morning, but her answer was resolute.

"No, dears; the chance might be gone. It is just when the men come back from the hills Mrs. Feltham will want me. They may come in the middle of the night. Nobody knows when, and if I am there, at least I shall hear what they say. Perhaps they will have been with father, and bring us a message."

This reconciled them all to her departure. Then she hurried away with Edwin by her side, for fear the dark wintry day should close before she reached her destination.

Edwin guessed the distance to be about four miles; but they were in poor order for walking, and were reduced to halting by the wayside continually. Yet, as the snail got to the top of the wall at last, so they reached the avenue gates. Here they agreed to part. There was no more danger of Audrey losing herself, and both were uneasy at leaving Effie and Cuthbert alone so long.

During the walk they had talked over everything, which Audrey declared was the greatest comfort imaginable. Edwin did not want to go up to the house to fetch his Beauty.

"I shall come for him to-morrow," he said; "then I can tell you how Effie is, and we shall hear how you are getting on."

The shades of night were gathering as Edwin turned away; but he could not lose the white line of well-made road by which he was returning even by starlight, yet he was afraid of encountering any of the wild cattle, which he knew were roaming at will among the groves and coverts which surrounded him. He found himself a stick, and trudged along, whistling to keep his courage up.

It was a danger to which he was altogether unaccustomed; for there is no four-footed creature native to New Zealand bigger than a rat, and in the primeval forest which surrounded his home the absence of all animal life is its marked characteristic. But here the many horses and bulls which had strayed from the early colonists had multiplied in the bush and grown formidable, not to speak of the pigs which Captain Cook let loose on the New Zealand shore, and which now, like the rabbits, overrun the island. The sound of grunting in the midst of a flax-bush or the bleat of a bell-wether was enough to startle him.

The hoar was gathering white on the grass and sparkling like diamonds on shrivelled fronds and gloomy evergreens, when he heard the barking of the boundary dog, which told him he was nearing the hut, and his weary feet jogged on at a quicker pace.

The barking grew still more furious. A battle was going forward. Instead of turning off towards the sea to find the hut, Edwin ran on to the point of the road where it entered another sheep-run. As it was the public coast-road, there was

no gate. The dog was stationed there, with a chain long enough to command the whole breadth of the road, to keep the sheep from straying on to their neighbour's ground, and well he did his work. He seemed to know in a moment to which side the adventurous rover belonged who dared to intrude on his beat, and sent him home with a resolute bark and a snap of the wool just to show how easily biting could follow. But the cry which succeeded the onslaught of the dog, the cry which made Edwin turn aside, was so like the cry of a child that it shot a fear through him Cuthbert might have been tempted to pay the dog another visit, and having no more bones to give him, the hungry brute had seized poor Cuth instead.

As Edwin came up he could just distinguish a small figure on the other side of the boundary vainly endeavouring to pass. It must be Cuth, he argued, because there was nobody else about; so he shouted to him to stand still until he came up. But instead of obeying, the small figure darted forward once more, and a fearful yell told Edwin the dog had seized him at last.

He sprang towards them, and grasping the dog's collar with both hands, exerted all his strength to pull him off. Strong and savage as the hairy hermit had become from the loneliness of his life, he had all a dog's grateful remembrance of a kindness, and recognizing the hand which had flung him the welcome bone earlier in the day, he suffered Edwin to choke him off without turning on him.

"Run!" cried Edwin to the boy he had delivered; "run beyond his reach whilst I hold him."

He had no need to repeat his exhortation. The shrieking boy fled like the wind. It was not Cuthbert; Edwin knew that by the fleetness of his hare-like speed. He did his best to soothe and coax the angry dog, keeping his eye meanwhile on the retreating figure.

As the distance between them increased, Edwin let the dog go. The fugitive changed his course, and was circling round to regain the road. Then Edwin started at right angles, and so got between him and the hut, where Effie and Cuthbert were probably asleep.

"They will be so frightened," thought Edwin, "if he runs in for refuge. For poor little Eff's sake I must stop him."

So they came up face to face in the open ground beyond the black shadow of the boundary, and eyed each other in the starlight.

"Whero!" exclaimed Edwin.

"Ah, you!" cried the Maori boy, holding out both hands. "To meet you is good."

"Come in with me and rest," continued Edwin. "Are you hurt? It was madness to try to pass the boundary dog in the dark. He might have torn you to pieces."

Out spoke the young savage, "I would have killed him first."

"No, no," interposed Edwin. "He is set there as a sentinel to keep the sheep from straying; he only did his duty."

"I," repeated Whero—"am I a sheep, to be made to fear? All the goblins in Lake Taupo should not turn me back to-night. I heard men saying in Tauranga streets the sacred three had shot forth the lightning that made all faces pale last night and laid the tall trees low. Are not they the men from whom I spring who are sleeping the death-sleep in their bosom? Last night they awakened; they are angry. The thunder of their voices is louder than the cannon of the pakeha. Why are they calling? I know not; but I answer I am theirs. I leaped out of the window of my school, and ran as the water runs to the sea. No one could catch me, for I thought of my father and mother; and I said in my heart, 'Will the anger of the majestic ones fall upon the son of Hepé, or upon those who have despoiled him?'"

Edwin drew his arm within his dusky friend's. "It is not the dead men's bones which are buried on Tarawera but the hidden fires which have burst from the mountain which have done the mischief. Our house went down in the shock of the earthquake, and we fled from it for our lives to the sea."

"I took the coast-road," continued Whero, "for the coach was turned back. Trees lay everywhere in its path; and no man knows more than I have told you."

Edwin trembled for Whero, for he remembered how the men had said the low whares of the natives were completely buried.

"Wait with us," he entreated; "wait for the daylight."

As he began to describe the strangeness of the disaster which had overwhelmed the district, the ready tears of the Maori race poured down in torrents from Whero's eyes.

Edwin led him into the hut; and finding Cuthbert and Effie fast asleep, the two lowered their voices, and sitting side by side in the starlight, went over again the startling story until voices grew dreamy, and Edwin became suddenly aware that the eager listener reclining at his elbow was lost in forgetfulness. Then he too laid down his head and gained a respite from his cares and fears in the deep sweet sleep of healthy boyhood.

Effie was the first to awaken. A solitary sunbeam had made its way through the tiny window, and was dancing along the opposite wall. The rest of the hut was in shadow. She did not see Edwin with Whero nestling by his side, for the long fern fronds rose in heaps around her; but she heard a sound from the road, and called joyously to Cuthbert,—

"Get up; there is somebody coming."

Cuth tumbled to his feet; Edwin started upright. They were rushing to the door, when Whero lifted a black hand and commanded silence. His quicker sense of hearing had already told him of men and horses near at hand.

Effie eyed him in mute amazement. ”Look,” she whispered at last, pointing to Whero’s head, ”there is a big boy-rat rustling in the leaves.”

”Hush! listen!” cried her brothers.

”Is it father?” she asked, in a flutter of fear and expectation.

The boys ran out, elate with a similar hope. But Edwin saw in a moment there was only a party of shepherds returning for supplies. They scarcely waited to listen to his eager questions.

”Can’t stop,” they shouted. ”But the worst is over. All are going back to their farms. You will have your own people coming to look you up before long. You are safest where you are for the present.”

Their words were intended to reassure the boys—Edwin was certain of that; but their faces were so grave, they seemed to contradict the comforting assertion that the worst was over.

”I must hear more,” cried Edwin. ”I’ll run after them and ask if any one has seen father.”

The tired horses were walking slowly; one or two seemed to have fallen lame, and all were covered with mud.

”We shall soon overtake them,” thought Edwin; but Whero outstripped him in the chase. The shepherds looked back. One amongst their number halted, and shouted the inquiry, ”What now?”

”Did you reach the lake in the hills? How is it there?” burst forth Whero.

”Up among the natives?” answered the shepherd, not unkindly. ”Nobody knows. We did not get beyond the road, and we found enough to do. The mud fell so thick every door and window was blocked in no time, and many a roof fell in with the weight. Everything around the mountain lies buried deep in mud.”

The shriek, the howl in which poor Whero vented his alarm so startled the shepherd’s horse it galloped off at a mad rate towards the mansion, just as Edwin came up, pale and panting. But Whero’s English was scattered. He could only reiterate the man’s last words, ”Deep in mud; buried, all buried deep in mud,” and then he ran on in Maori.

Edwin and Cuthbert looked at each other in despair. It was impossible to understand what he was evidently trying to explain.

”You wooden boys!” he exclaimed at last, as he turned away in disgust, and raced off like a hare towards the mansion.

Cuthbert was wild to follow, when a large merino ram bounded out of a group of palm trees and knocked him over.

”Go back to Effie,” urged Edwin, ”and I’ll watch by the roadside, for somebody else may pass.”

But Cuthbert could not find his way alone, and the brothers retraced their steps. As they drew near the hut, the loud barking of the boundary dog was again

heard. Somebody might be coming by the coast-road, somebody who could tell them more.

It was the boundary rider from the neighbouring run, waiting and watching for the appearance of his neighbour, to ascertain if any tidings had yet been received from the lonely mountain wilds. All knew now some dread catastrophe had overwhelmed the hills. Confused rumours and vague conjectures were flying through the district beyond the reach of the muddy rain. Earth-slips and fallen trees blocked every road. The adventurous few who had made their way to the scene of the disaster had not yet returned.

Far as his eye could see across the grassy sweep not a shepherd was moving. Feltham's sheep were straying by hundreds in his master's run. Then the two boys came in sight, and arms were waved to attract attention; and the burning anxiety on both sides found vent in the question, "Any news from the hills?"

As Edwin poured forth the story of their flight, another horseman was seen spurring across the open. It was a messenger Mr. Bowen had despatched the day before, to inquire among the shepherd hermits in Feltham's outlying huts, who might, who must know more than their seaside neighbours. But the man had ridden on from hut to hut, all alike empty and deserted. About nightfall, at the extreme end of the run, he came upon a man who had been struck down by the awful lightning, who told a rambling tale of sudden flight before the strange storm.

"So," said the shepherd, "I rested my horse, and determined to ride round to the central station, or go on from farm to farm, to find out all I could; but a trackless swamp stretched before me. Turning aside, I fell in with a party of Feltham's men, who had made their way by the river-bank as far as the government road. They were returning for a cart to bring off one of their number, who had been knocked on the head by a falling tree, trying to make his way through the bush."

"Who was it?" asked Edwin breathlessly, his brief colloquy with the horsemen he had passed full in his mind. They were the same men, but not a word as to the accident to one of the relief-party had crossed their lips.

The significance of their silence flashed upon him.

"It is father!" he exclaimed, "and they would not tell us."

"No, Edwin, no," interposed little Cuth, with wide-eyed consternation. "Why do you say it is father?"

"Why, indeed," repeated Mr. Bowen's man. "I tell you it was a near neighbour of the fordmaster's, who had come across to his help before the others got up. For Hirpington and his people were all blocked in by the weight of mud jamming up windows and doors, and were almost suffocated; but they got them out and into the boat when the others came. One man rowed them off to the nearest place of refuge, and the others went on to look for the roadmen in their solitary

huts."

Every word the man let fall only deepened Edwin's conviction.

He grasped Cuth's hand. Was this what Whero had tried to tell him?

The doubt, the fear, the suspense was unbearable. Their first impulse was to run after the shepherds, to hear all they had to tell. But the Bowen men held them back; and whilst they questioned Edwin more closely, Cuthbert sat down crying on the frosted grass. The boundary dog came up and seated itself before him, making short barks for the bone that was no longer to be had for the asking. The noise he made led the men to walk their horses nearer to the hut, when the debris of the wreck, scattered about the sands, met their eyes. That a coaster should have gone down in the terrific storm was a casualty which the dwellers by the sea-shore were well prepared to discover. They kicked over the half-buried boots and broken spars, looking for something which might identify the unfortunate vessel, and they brought Edwin into court once again, and questioned him closely. He assured them the sailors were all safe, and when they heard how they had borrowed his father's horse and cart to take them across to the central station, they only blamed him for his stupidity in not having asked the captain's name.

"Yes, it was stupid," Edwin owned, "but then I did not know what I was doing."

The sound of their voices brought Effie to the door of the hut, and they heard a little piping voice behind repeating, "Bowen, please sir; his name was Bowen."

"What! the captain's?" they cried.

"No, the schoolboy's," she persisted, shrinking from the cold sea-breeze blowing her hair into her eyes, and fluttering her scant blue skirt, and banging at the door until it shut again, in spite of her utmost efforts to keep it open.

Here was a discovery of far more importance in the estimation of Mr. Bowen's men than all the rest.

"If that is our young master Arthur," they said, "coming up for the holidays, we must find him, let alone everything else. We must be off to the central station; and as for these children, better take them along with us."

This was just what Edwin wanted. After a reassuring word to Effie anent the black boy-rat, he set himself to work piling up the wreckage, with the care of one about to leave the place.

He had not forgotten Hal's charge to stay where he left them.

"But better be lost than starved," said the men; and he agreed with them. Even Audrey had failed to send them food to that far-off hut. It was clear there was no one to bring it.

"You should have gone with the sailors," said the boundary rider. "You must go with us."

He wrapped the flap of his coat over Effie as Edwin lifted her on to his knee, and his comrade called to Cuthbert, who was hoisted up behind him; and so they set forth, Edwin walking in the rear.

As the horses trotted onwards across the fern-covered downs, the distance between them steadily increased, for the boy was tired. Once or twice he flung himself down to rest, not much caring about losing sight of his companions, as he knew the way.

Edwin had nearly reached the gate of the avenue, when he saw Whero scampering over the grass on Beauty's back.

There was a mutual shout of recognition; and Whero turned the horse's head, exclaiming,—

"Lee! Boy! Lee! Wanderer Lee! have you lost your horse? I went to beg bread at the station, and he leaped over the stable-bar and followed me. You must give him back, as you said you would, for how can I go to the hills without him? I want him now."

"And so do I," answered Edwin; "I want to go back with the shepherds to father."

"The men who spoke to us are gone. I saw them start," returned Whero. "But jump up behind me, and we will soon overtake them."

For one brief moment Edwin looked around him doubtfully. But Erne and Cuthbert were safe with Audrey by this time, and he was sure Mr. Bowen, "the old identity," their kind-hearted travelling companion, would take good care of all three as soon as he heard of their forlorn condition. "His grandson will tell him how Cuth and I pulled him through the surf. I had better ride back to the hills with Whero, and see if it is safe for us to go home. They may have taken father there already, and then I know he will want me." So Edwin reasoned as he sprang up behind the Maori boy. "And if I don't go with him," he added, "we may lose our horse, and then what would father say to that?"

CHAPTER XI.
WIDESPREAD DESOLATION.

As the boys rode onward a sharp and bracing wind blew in their faces. The hoar still lay on the grass, and the many pools at which the sheep were accustomed to drink were coated with ice. But the mysterious darkness of the preceding day

was over, and the sun shone forth once more to gild a desolated world.

Whero and Edwin were alike anxious to avoid meeting any of Mr. Feltham's shepherds who might have returned to their daily work, for fear they should try to stop them.

Whero, with something of his father's skill, shot forward with a reckless disregard for the safety of Edwin's neck. But the party they were pursuing were long out of sight.

As they reached the confines of the sheep-run, an unnatural grayness overspread the landscape. Yet on they went, encountering clouds of dust with every breeze. The blades of grass beneath the horse's hoofs, the leaves rustling on the boughs, were all alike loaded with it. But the cattle were still grazing, and despite the clouds of dust constantly rising, the atmosphere above was clear; and the sunshine cheered their spirits.

"We will not turn back," said Edwin.

They knew, by what the shepherds had told them, the force of the eruption had expended itself; that danger was over. When the boys ascended higher ground and gained a wider view, they could distinguish parties of men marching up in every direction, with their spades on their shoulders. For now the personal danger was diminished, the anxiety to ascertain the fate of the unfortunate people living near the sacred heights of Tarawera predominated.

Above the range of hills there was a dense bank of steam, which rose like a wall of snowy white, extending for miles. Whero shook with terror at the sight, but Edwin urged him on. They had missed the shepherds, but they could soon overtake the men now in sight. Yet the longer they gazed at the huge mass of vapour, the more impenetrable it seemed. It was drifting slowly northwards, where it merged in another cloud, black and restless, like smoke. It was but the work of the winds, stirring the vast deposit of dust covering hill and forest.

Changed as the face of the country appeared to be, Whero seemed able to track his way with something of the unerring instinct of the hound. Emboldened by Edwin's steadier courage, on he went, the gray, drab tint of the volcanic debris deepening around them at every step, until it lay nine inches deep on the ground, covering up all trace of vegetation. The poor cattle wandering in the fields were here absolutely without food, and the blue waters of the liquid rivulets were changed to a muddy brown, thick and repulsive. Every footfall of the horse enveloped his riders in so dense a cloud that eyes were stinging and voices choking, until they began to exchange this dry deposit for the treacherous, deadly mud which had preceded it.

This soon became so thick and sticky poor Beauty could scarcely drag his legs out again, and their pace grew slower and slower. The time was going fast; they had scarcely gained a mile in an hour. They dare not turn aside to view

the ruins of Edwin's home. As they went deeper and deeper into the bush, the blue mud lay fifteen inches thick on all around. The unrivalled beauty of the forest was gone. The boys could see nothing but a mass of dirt-laden tree trunks, bending and falling beneath the weight of their burden. Every leaf was stripped off, and every branch was broken short. It was a scene of desolation so intense Whero set up a wild wail of lamentation. All was taken from the Maori when the wealth of the bush was gone.

They gained the road; the mud was two feet thick at least, and Beauty sank knee-deep in the sulphurous, steaming slime. How they got him out again they hardly knew. They backed him amongst the trees, seeking the higher ground. Fresh mud-holes had opened in unexpected places, and old ones had enlarged to boiling pools, and wide areas of smouldering ashes marked the site of the many fires the lightning had kindled.

Could the boys have extricated themselves just then, they might have been tempted to turn back in sheer dismay. They were forced from the line which Whero had hitherto pursued with the directness which marks the flight of the crow. The trees were quivering with an earthquake shock. The hill was trembling visibly beneath their feet. Guided by a break in the trees, they made their way to the open. Once more the bank of cloud was visible, drifting slowly to the north; but Whero's eyes were fastened on the distance, where he knew the lofty Tarawera reared its threefold crest.

Had the mighty chieftains of renown arisen from their graves and built a wall of luminous vapour around their sleeping-place? He quailed in abject terror at the sight of the clouds, like ramparts rising into the air for thousands of feet, and veined with wavy lines that glowed and shimmered with the reflection of the flames they held enshrined.

"If the arrows of their lightnings burst forth upon us," shrieked Whero, "how shall such as we escape? Better seek sleep in the cold waters of the river than fall before the torture of their presence in the boiling mud and scorching flame."

Edwin, too, was staggered by the strangeness of the sight. It was the sense of unprecedented peril, the presence of dangers which no man could fathom, which overwhelmed him. But he had enough clear-sighted common sense to perceive the first thing to be guarded against was the frantic terror of the wilful boy who was guiding him; for Whero, in his excitement, was urging Beauty to a breakneck speed. But a change awaited them in the open glade, for there the sun and wind had dried the surface of the mud, and the clouds of dust settling down upon it had formed a hard crust.

Edwin breathed more freely as Whero grew calmer. The horse seemed to step along with ease at first; but his weight was too great. The crust gave

way beneath him, and they were soon all floundering in a quagmire. Edwin was flung backwards on a portion of the broken crust, which, like a floating island, was drifting him across the fissure. Whero clung round the horse's neck, clutching wildly at his mane. Beauty, with the intelligence of a fording-horse, pawed through the mud in quest of a firmer foothold, and found it on the trunk of a buried tree.

On this vantage-ground, being lightened of half his load, he was preparing for a spring. At the first movement Whero went over his head, and Beauty, finding himself his own master, changed his mind. Under any other circumstances it would have been fun to Edwin to see him feeling his way along his unseen bridge until he reached the roots of the tree, which, with the many tons of earth clinging in them, rose at least ten feet into the air, a solitary hillock around which the mud was consolidating. Here he took his stand. The boys could see him scraping away the earth and nibbling at the young green shoots of budding fern already forcing their way to the upper air.

Edwin tried to propel his floating island towards the point where Whero was standing, like a heron, on one leg, trying to scrape the mud from the other. He edged about this way and that, until at last the boys were near enough to clasp hands. When he felt the sinewy gripe of his dusky friend, Edwin took the meditated leap, and broke into the mud by Whero's side. He went down upon his hands and knees; but Whero grasped the collar of his jacket, and kept him from sinking. The crust in this place was nearly a foot thick, and when Edwin regained his equilibrium the two stepped lightly over it, walking like cats, holding each other's hands, and balancing themselves as if they were treading on ice, until they reached a precipitous crag, on which it was impossible for the mud to rest. Whero began to climb the steep ascent, reaching down a hand to drag up Edwin after him. They gained a ledge several feet above the lower ground, and here they paused to recover themselves and look around for Beauty. It was a pain, a grief to both the boys to abandon him to his fate. But they dared not shout his name or attract his attention, for fear he should attempt to cross the treacherous waste which lay between them.

To dash the tears from their eyes, to speak as if they "would not care" when their hearts felt bursting, was useless; and yet they did it—risking their own necks in a mad desire to rush off where they could no longer see him, and then returning for a last despairing glance, until Whero had to own he had lost his way.

Another vast column of steam hung in mid air, and when it lifted they could distinguish the gangs of men hard at work, marking the site of more than one annihilated village. They watched them from afar digging away the mud in hopes of finding some of the inhabitants alive beneath it. A mill-sail turning in the wind just showed itself above the blue-gray mass, and warned them that the depth of

the deposit was increasing steadily as they drew nearer and nearer to the sacred mountains. That moving sail told Whero where he was. With one hand shading his eyes he scanned the country round.

"The pakeha seeks out the pakeha, but no man turns to the Maori pah!" he exclaimed, stretching his arms towards the wide waste of hateful blue, and pointing to the foul remains of the crystal lake—the lake by which he had been born. But where was the ancient whare? where was his home?

Edwin thought only of crossing to the nearest group of men, throwing back the mud, right and left, with a desperate energy. He raised his voice and tried to give the "coo" for help, in the fond hope it might reach their ears. Whero joined in the outcry, and they stood still, shouting. But the hollow echo was their sole reply.

They had wandered wide from the ford, for they were approaching the lake from the opposite side.

They sat down on the rocky ledge, and looked at each other in silence. A call from above startled them. It was a shrill but far-off voice that was not human.

Whero, with all a Maori's belief in evil spirits, shook with terror, and his howling shrieks filled the air and drowned the distant sound.

"Oh, hush!" entreated Edwin. "Shut up! do, and let us listen."

They heard it plainly once again—the long-drawn Maori word "Hoké" (Return, return), followed, in quicker accents, by Whero's name. He looked up terror-stricken, surveying the rocky steep above their heads, and gasped out, almost fainting,—

"You know not where you are. This hill is tapu, and he who breaks tapu is sure to die."

"Bosh!" retorted Edwin. "If you would only speak English I should know what you mean."

His arms went round the poor boy, who seemed ready to die, as many a Maori has died before, of pure fright at the thought of breaking tapu—that is, touching anything the chief has made sacred. But Edwin did not understand his dread.

"Don't be such a coward," he expostulated; "I'll stand by you."

"Hoké! hoké!" rang out the bird-like voice. "Whero, hoké!"

The lofty summit of the hill gave back the cry.

"Go up," urged Edwin. "Some of your people may have taken refuge here. Whatever you mean by tapu, it can't scare me. You daren't go! then let me try."

There was a rift in the scarped side of the hill, where human hands had cut a foothold here and there, making the ascent possible. Whero crept along the edge and swung himself over. Edwin crawled after him, and climbed up with less difficulty than he expected. "Hoké" was piped above their heads, and Whero's

courage failed him once again. He sank upon a stone, with every nerve quivering. The English boy climbed on, and found himself at last upon a bit of table-land which from its height seemed to have escaped the general devastation; for the ground was still covered with the dried remains of summer vegetation. He passed between the tree-like ferns until he came upon a spot, bare and dry, without a sign of a scrap of undergrowth of any kind or at any time. It might have been about three-quarters of an acre, and was completely arched over by the inter-woven boughs of four or five gigantic trees, which even the storm of mud could not penetrate. Edwin gazed at their majestic trunks, full sixty feet in circumference, ranged around him like the columns of one of nature's temples, with a kind of awe.

The ground on which he stood was hard and dusty, and yet he knew, by the fern and the creeper through which he had reached it, this unusual clearance was not the work of the eruption. It looked as if it might have been thus barren for ages.

The roots of the trees had grown out of the ground, and were twisted and coiled over and over like a group of mighty serpents transfixed and fossilized by ancient sorcery. Among them lay the human relics of a barbarous age. The very stones on which he trod had once been fashioned by the hand of man. There were axe and spear heads, knives and chisels, embedded in the fibrous coils; and were they human skulls and bones which lay there whitening by their side? Edwin recoiled in horror. A bird flew down from the leafy dome, and alighted near him, renewing its wailing cry, "Hoké, hoké." Edwin saw by the crimson feathers of its breast it was a species of macaw—an escaped pet from some of the buried homes around him.

He called it a little nervously at first, as if it had dyed its plumage in the blood of the murdered captives whose bones lay white at his feet. The bird swooped round, beating the air with its outspread wings, and darting forward as if it had half a mind to perch upon his outstretched hand.

When were Edwin's pockets ever empty? He was feeling in them now for a few dry crumbs wherewith to tempt the wailing bird.

It fluttered nearer at the welcome sight, for grain or insects were nowhere to be found in that place of dearth. It came at last, and nestled, as it had evidently been taught to nestle by its unknown master, close against Edwin's cheek. He grasped it by the wings, and gently smoothed its ruffled feathers.

"Whero," he shouted, running back with it to the brow of the hill, "Whero, it is a bird."

The sound of his own voice seemed to break the spell of horror which had fallen over him, and he rushed away from serpent root and blighted bough with which nature herself had written on the hateful spot, "Accursed."

He no longer wondered that the Maori boy refused to go with him. The slightest suspicion of impatience and contempt had vanished from his tone when he spoke again.

"Look at it, Whero."

But Whero looked not at the bird, but at his friend.

"Did you go far?" he asked.

"Only to the top," answered Edwin.

"Not to the top," persisted Whero, lowering his voice and whispering hoarsely. "There is a spot up there, a fatal spot, where the grass never grows and the air breathes death. Ask me not for more. Come away."

He seized Edwin's arm and drew him backwards. The desolate bird shook itself free, and flew to him with a cry of joy.

"It is my kaka," he exclaimed, "my own dear redbreast, calling out, 'Return.'"

"Are you satisfied, Whero?" asked Edwin, in tones of heartfelt sympathy. "Have we searched far enough? Shall we go back and try to make our way to the ford or across to the diggers?"

"Not yet," answered Whero; "I would see the spot where the great hot stone used to be."

"It is buried," Edwin went on, "too deep in the mud for us to find, I'm afraid."

Whero flung himself on the ground, exclaiming wildly, "All lost! all gone! why don't you tangi over me?"

"I would, if it would do you any good; but I don't know how," said Edwin, bluntly. "We are not sure yet, Whero; your people may have rushed away in the night as we did. We will hope to the last."

In his despair Whero had let the kaka fly, and Edwin watched it wheeling over the space between them and the lake, until it settled down in what appeared to him to be a hole in the all-pervading mud.

"He has found something," cried Edwin, hurrying down the steep descent in a wave of excitement. Whero shrieked after him to stop him; so once again the boys rested awhile, and ate up the remainder of the bread in Whero's pockets. It was Edwin's last resource to revive the wild boy's failing courage, and it partially succeeded.

"Edwin," he said, "am I alone in the world—the last of the proud race who owned the fastness in this steep hill-top and the hot stone by yonder lake? Have I nothing left to me but this awful place where my grim forefathers held their victory-feast? Will you come and live with me there?"

"In that ogre's castle!" exclaimed Edwin, with a shudder. "A moment ago you dare not follow me to its threshold, and now—"

"I have been thinking," interrupted Whero, "I must not slight so strange an omen as the kaka's call. Are the mighty dead using his voice to call me back (for

I should have fled the place); to remind me what I have now become—a chief of the hills, who can make and unmake tapu as he pleases? Let us go up and swear to be true to each other for ever and ever and ever, as my forefathers used to swear on the eve of battle."

"I will stand by you," said Edwin, earnestly; "on the honour of an Englishman I will. I'll go down to the lake with you. Better see what the kaka has found than climb the hill again. Come."

He put his arm round Whero and began the dangerous descent. A fallen tree bridged their path. The tremor of an earthquake was beginning. They flung themselves at once on their faces, for fear they should be rolled over down the treacherous steep. As Edwin lay resting his arms against the fallen tree, he scanned once more the break in the muddy crust round which the kaka was still wheeling.

What did he see, or what did he fancy he could see at such a distance? Was it a blackened fragment of pumice-stone the bird was hovering over with its wailing cry, or was it the quaint old carving on the pointed roof of Nga-Hepé's whare? Whero's eye was fastened on the spot. Could he too see it? They were afraid of losing their foothold, as the tree, like everything else, was covered with the sticky slime, and crawled along the trunk one after the other, Whero leading the way. It landed them on the top of the mud-heap, and they walked across the dried crust, as they had been able to do on the other side.

The stillness of the desert was around them. Little life of any kind seemed to have escaped the widespread destruction. A lonely gull had flown up with the morning breeze, and was pursuing the dead fish across the lake, as they floated entangled in the drift of the wind-torn foliage which strewed its surface.

On they walked, until Whero was satisfied that the dead level they were crossing must cover the site of the Rota Pah. Even the strong wall which defended it was buried. Yet it was a wall strong enough and high enough to resist the attack of English assailants.

The wintry breezes sweeping over the lake had dried the mud more thoroughly on this side of the hill. The crust beneath their feet was thicker and firmer.

The boys ran lightly across the intervening space. As Whero drew near to the hole, the bird alighted on his shoulder, and putting its beak to his ear, exchanged its painful cries for a soft, low, warbling note.

Edwin was sure now they saw the ridge of the high-peaked roof of Nga-

Hepé's whare.

CHAPTER XII.
EDWIN'S DISCOVERY.

Edwin rubbed off the mud from the boss at the point of the gable, and gazed upon the hideous face, which was neither bird's nor man's, but the same, the very same, which had attracted his attention when he went with Nga-Hepé to his home. Edwin looked up. The words upon his lips seemed to die away in pity for the Maori boy. At last he whispered huskily, "Whero, there is something here."

"My home! my home!" was the passionate response, as Whero flung himself across the ridge and hugged the wooden face as if it were a living thing.

Edwin was thinking of all Mr. Bowen's men had said: how the doors and windows of the ford-house had been blocked by the mud with such rapidity there was not time for Mr. Hirpington and his people to get away. He recalled all he had ever heard or read of the frightful colliery accidents when the miners had been entombed for days, and of cottages buried beneath an avalanche of snow. A bitter and overwhelming feeling of self-reproach rose in his heart. "Oh, why did we linger by the way and follow the bird? We ought to have hurried here at once. O Whero, I did not realize, I did not half understand. Help me," Edwin went on, for Whero had begun to raise his howling dirge—"help me to make a hole through the roof, for fear there should be anybody left inside."

"Have I come to the hot stone of my fathers to find it a place of graves?" groaned Whero, pausing in his wail.

"Mr. Hirpington got away in his boat; your father may have taken to his canoe," urged Edwin, clinging to hope to cheer his companion.

A bound, and Whero was up among the leafless boughs of the grand old trees which had sheltered his home.

Were the canoes gone? His eye roved along the reedy swamp for each familiar mooring-place, but all was changed. Mud-banks and shoals surrounded the murky pool, and his landmarks were gone. Yet more than one canoe was embedded in the new-made morass, and he cried out in despair.

Meanwhile Edwin was tugging at the bulrush thatch with all his might. As the hole increased with his efforts, he caught the echo of a feeble sigh. He shouted

to Whero, and tore away at the rushes with frantic desperation. A knock made answer. The wintry day was darkening to its close, and Edwin felt that the task was beyond him. He could not unroof the well-built whare, with no fork to help him and single-handed.

"We must get across the bush somehow, and fetch the men we saw at work on the other side of the hill."

But nothing which Edwin could urge could induce Whero to leave the spot. He sat on the ridge of the roof with the fidelity of a dog, howling and wailing, only pausing to bury his head in the thatch to listen to the faint and feeble sounds within. Edwin watched him breathlessly for a moment or two. They had let in the air through the hole he had made; but the brief New Zealand twilight would soon be over, and what more could they do in the darkness of night? He sprang to his feet. "I'm off, Whero," he shouted. "Trust me, I'll never rest until I get you better help than mine."

He ran across the mud. It was growing harder and harder in the keen frosty air. He knew the wind was blowing from the lake, so that if he were careful to turn his back to the breeze, he could not lose his way.

Edwin had almost reached the hill, when he heard a voice "cooing" in the distance. It was not Whero's. But the swift transition with which night comes on in New Zealand shrouded him in sudden darkness; and whilst he waited for the rising of the stars, he heard the shouts drawing nearer, and gave the answering "coo" with all his might. He could distinguish the echo of a horse's hoofs on the hardening ground. There was no doubt about it now, the rider was coming fast. He shouted with renewed energy; and then the Southern Cross shone out in all its brilliancy, and the horseman perceived the small dark figure waving both arms in the air, and galloped towards him.

In another moment Edwin was grasping hands with his old friend the coachman.

"What! you, my lad, up here?" exclaimed Ottley; and as Edwin answered, the sight of the prancing horse that Ottley was riding shot a pain through his heart. It was so like his own beloved Beauty, abandoned on his little islet in that sea of mud.

The tears came rushing into Edwin's eyes, until he could see no more. He tried to answer. The horse had turned its head to listen with quick, impatient movements, until it fairly rubbed its nose against Edwin's shoulder.

His arms went round its arching neck with a cry of delight. It was his own, his own, own Beauty.

"Yes," said Ottley, "I knew him again. I supposed he had strayed, for I came upon him standing shivering against such shelter as the roots of an upturned tree could afford him. He was not difficult to catch, and he has brought me on. I got

my coach along some miles beyond Cambridge, and found the way completely blocked, so I have left it there, and come to give what help I could. I can spare the time it would have taken me to reach the end of my route. I have been working with a party of diggers at Te Wairoa. Then I determined to come across and see how it fared with my old friend at the ford, and now I find you wandering alone. Come, get up behind me. It is not the first time you and I have crossed these wilds together."

"Oh no," answered Edwin; "and I want you worse than even then. You must come with me at once to the help of the Maori chief. We have found him buried alive, with his whole family, beneath this awful mud—but I think not yet quite dead. I feel as if God had sent you here to save them."

Then Edwin poured out his story, and explained how he had encountered Whero, and how they had come on together to find their fathers.

Whilst he was yet speaking Ottley alighted. "Take your horse, lad," he said, "and ride as fast as you can; the mud will bear you now. As soon as you get to the brow of that hill, you will see the camp-fire of the diggers in the distance. Make that your guide. You will find them by that in the night when you could not have found your way in the daylight and the dust. Trust to Beauty to avoid the boiling jets; they are opening everywhere. You can give this message from me to the first party of diggers you come to. Tell them I want help badly, by the lake. Be a brave lad, and remember that more lives than we can reckon are depending on your speed."

Then Ottley took out his match-box, and sharing its contents with Edwin, charged him, if he happened to lose his way or meet with any obstacle he could not pass, to choose a dry tree and set it on fire. "The blaze will be seen for miles through the leafless forest, and will be sure to bring you help," he added, as he put the boy on the horse and set off at a swinging pace towards the buried whare, over which the kaka was still hovering.

The emergency was so great, Edwin felt himself beyond all personal fear, which might have daunted him at any other time had he been obliged to ride alone in the night through those desolate wilds. He patted Beauty's neck, and heartened himself up with the thought of the eternal presence of the Unseen, ever ready, ever near to help and guide, giving strength in weakness and light in darkness. When will, desire, and trust meet in one point, that point is faith, the strongest power within the human breast. It upheld Edwin, worn and weary as he was, in that lonely ride. He had cleared the rising ground. The camp-fire glimmered in the distance; but Beauty, who had had neither food nor water since the morning, began to flag. Then Edwin remembered Ottley's charge, and looked about for a dry tree.

He found one smouldering still, in the midst of a scorched circle—the dying

remains of a bush fire, kindled by the lightning on the night of the eruption.

He gathered up the charred branches fallen around it, and fanned the glowing embers to a flame. One of the incessant earthquake shocks scattered his fire just as he had got it to burn. He did his work over again. The blaze roared up into the midnight sky. He tied Beauty to a tree at a little distance, and sat down before his fire, thankful for the momentary rest. He could have fallen asleep. He was afraid that he might do so unawares, for he felt he was succumbing to the genial warmth. The change was too great after being exposed for so many hours to the chill of the night, and he fainted.

When Edwin came to himself he was lying under canvas. A cup was held to his lips by some unknown hand, and as he tasted its warm contents, voice came back to him. He asked feebly, ”Where am I? I can’t remember.”

”Never mind then, my boy,” said his rough nurse, in kindly tones which were not altogether strange. ”You are with those who will take care of you to the last. There, sleep, and forget your troubles.”

”Sleep!” repeated Edwin, starting up. ”What business have I with sleep when Mr. Ottley sent me with a message?”

”Ottley! who is Ottley?” asked another voice.

”The coachman fellow who helped us at Te Wairoa,” answered the first speaker.

Edwin roused himself, saying earnestly,—

”He wants you to go to his help. He wants help badly by the lake amid the hills.”

”Where is that?” asked the men of each other.

”I’ll guide you,” said Edwin. ”I’ll show you the way.”

”Not you,” they answered simultaneously. ”You just lie here and sleep in safety. Some of the other fellows will know. That will be all right.”

As they laid him back on the blanket, Edwin saw in the dim, uncertain light the rough sleeve of a blue jacket.

”What! surprised to meet us here, my boy?” said the voice, which he now knew to be the captain’s. ”Though our feet were sore with dragging over the oyster-bed, we went back with Feltham’s shepherds. When we saw your fire flash up against the night sky, says some of the fellows, ’That is a signal,’ and off they went to see, and when they brought you into camp I knew you in a moment.”

Edwin grasped the horny hand held out to him with a smile.

”Where is my horse?” he asked.

”Tethered outside; but there is not a bit of food to give him—no, not a single bite. But lie still and sleep and eat yourself, and in a few hours you will be all right.”

When Edwin waked again it was daylight. A piece of camping-out bread

and a cup of water stood beside him, but every man was gone.

He took the breakfast they had provided, and walked to the door of the tent eating his bread. There was no one in sight but Beauty, looking very wretched for want of food. Edwin broke the crumb from his piece of bread, and carried it to him.

"We will go shares, old fellow," he said, patting him, "and then you will carry me to father.

'What must be, must;
But you shall have crumb,
If I have crust.'"

He looked about the tent, and found a small pail. The hiss and splash of bubbling water guided him to the geyser. He knew the men would not have put up their tent unless there had been a spring at hand. He filled his pail with the boiling water, and left it to cool for Beauty's benefit. Still he thought they could not be very far off, or they would not have left their tent. But he was afraid to waste time looking about him. Some of the party had no doubt remained behind. He longed to follow the captain, and go back to Ottley and Whero, for when their work was over by the lake he knew they would help him to find his father. Edwin found a charred stick where the men had made their camp fire. He wrote with it on a piece of bark:—

"Good-bye, and thanks to all kind friends. I am going back to Ottley.—EDWIN LEE."

Then he gave poor Beauty his water, and started off for the Rota Pah. He was trusting to the horse's sagacity. "If I give him the rein," he thought, "he is safe to take the road to his old home."

But no brief spell of sleep, with its blessed forgetfulness, had come to Whero. He had kept his lonely vigil on the tumbled thatch, chanting his mournful dirge until the echoes rang. There, with the starshine overhead, and that strange cloud through which the fire still flashed rising like a wall between him and the sacred hills, he felt himself abandoned by earth and heaven. But his despair had reached its climax. The help which Edwin had gone to seek was nearer than he thought. A long, dark shadow was thrown across the star-lit ground, and Ottley hastened towards him, exclaiming,—

"Stop that howling. Be a man, and help me. We'll soon see if there is any one alive beneath that thatch."

He found himself a pole among the broken arms of the trees, and set to work tearing away the thatch until the starlight waned, and the darkest hour of

all the night put a stop to his efforts.

But in many places the roof was stripped to its rafters, so that the cold night breeze could enter freely. Whero was gathering the heaps of dusty rush which Ottley had flung off to make a fire. The cheery flames leaped upward, but were far too evanescent to do more than give a glimpse into the interior of the whare. But Ottley saw something in the dark corner of the room like a white dress, fluttering in the admitted gust. Could it be the thin white sheet in which Kakiki had chosen to disguise himself?

Brief as the blaze had been, it had served as a beacon to guide the captain and his mates to the spot with their spades and bill-hooks. To chop away the beam, to build a more substantial fire with the splintered wood, was easy now. Whero leaped through the hole, and reappeared with his mother in his arms. The captain swung himself down after him, directed by Ottley to "that something white in the corner." He dragged it forward—a senseless burden. A spade full of ice from above was dashed into the unconscious face of the aged chieftain resting on his shoulder. As Kakiki Mahane opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the well-remembered face of Ottley looking down upon him, and the first thing he heard was the heartfelt murmur which ran through the little group above, "In time! thank God, in time!"

CHAPTER XIII.
FEEDING THE HUNGRY.

As Edwin crossed the desolated bush, the morning sun lit up the marvellous cloud-banks with a flush of pink and gold that held him spell-bound with the strangeness of the sight, until the dust-drift before him began to tremble visibly with an earthquake shock. He was not wrong in his estimate of Beauty's intelligence, but the weary horse poked his head forward and walked languidly. Edwin avoided the hill where he had found the kaka. He shrank from the gruesome spot even by daylight.

He was trying to find a safe pathway to the lake, when he saw Ottley walking rapidly towards him. He waved his arm to the boy to stop. As they drew near to each other, Edwin almost shuddered, expecting to hear nothing but ill news. He was bitterly reproaching himself for not having asked the captain if he had heard anything of his father.

But Ottley shouted out ”Well met” in a cheery tone, adding dryly, ”I hope you got some breakfast at the camp, for on this side of the bush it is very hard to find. We have been at it all night. Nga-Hepé has not yet come round; but Marileha is saved, and her white-haired father too. We have done what we could, with nothing to help us but the keen frosty air and muddy water. Now we must have food, for most of the villagers from the Rota Pah had taken refuge with them. The mud slipped off the sloping roof of Nga-Hepé's whare when half the huts in the pah lay crushed beneath its weight. I am going to the ford to see if Hirpington has come back to his place. He kept a full store-room at all times.”

”O Mr. Ottley,” exclaimed Edwin, ”let me go too, for father may be with him.”

”No, he is not, my boy,” returned Ottley, compassionately. ”He was the first in the field, and did wonders. He has been hurt by a falling tree, but an old fellow they call Hal is taking care of him in one of the tents. I'll show you where.”

”Show me at once,” entreated Edwin. ”I must go to father first, wherever he is. I have been such a very long while trying to find him. Is it very far from here?”

”No,” answered Ottley; ”but you must wait until I can take you there. You had better come with me now, and get some food for your father whilst I can give it to you. If Hirpington has not come back, we must dig into the house and help ourselves, and reckon the pay when we meet.”

”Please, Mr. Ottley,” burst in Edwin, ”tell me all about father. Is he much hurt?”

”My boy,” exclaimed Ottley, ”I know no more than you do; but if he is roughing it, as our fellows do up there alone, better wait and see what I can find.”

Edwin felt the force of this reasoning, and said no more. Ottley laid his hand on Beauty's rein, and walked beside him.

Suddenly Edwin looked up, exclaiming, ”This is Sunday morning!”

”And a strange Sunday it is,” answered Ottley, somewhat dreamily, as his thoughts went back to Sundays long ago, bringing with them an echo of the church-going bells, to which his ear had so long been a stranger. ”Sunday up country in New Zealand,” he went on, ”is little beside a name, except to those who can hear the sermon of the stones and read the books—”

”In the running brooks,” added Edwin; ”and good in everything. But is it so?”

”Nature's voices have been speaking in tones to which all must listen,” continued Ottley. ”Yet the Lord was not in the earthquake and the storm, but in the still small voice.”

His words were slow and grave, so unlike his usual tones Edwin listened in silence, and in silence they approached the ford. Even Beauty's footsteps were

inaudible, for the mud by the river had not dried as fast as elsewhere.

The boy's heart was heavy with apprehension as he looked up, expecting to see the familiar gate; but not one trace of post or gate remained. The acacia tree in which the lamp used to hang was riven asunder. The grassy mound and the gorse hedge were gone. The road had been raised by the mud and dust to the level of the farm-yard wall. Almost without knowing they did so, they went straight over it, and found themselves even with the window of the hay-loft. The roof of the house was crushed in, and its doors and windows banked up with mud. As they looked round at it, Edwin pointed to the hole his father must have made when he extricated his friend's family. A man was getting out of it at the moment. They stood quite still and watched him draw up a full sack after him.

"There is some one before us on the same errand," said Edwin; but Ottley hushed him without replying.

The man looked round as Edwin's voice broke the profound stillness. Ottley shouted to him, "Wait where you are, mate, and I will come to your help."

The coachman knew if the man were on honest work intent he would gladly accept his offer, for the sack was so full he could hardly move it. But he thought, if the fellow is a thief, he will try to get rid of me. Ottley turned to Edwin, saying carelessly, with the air of one at home in the place, "You will find some hay for your horse inside that window. Give him a good feed, whilst I look round and see if all is safe."

He was speaking loud enough for the man to hear him. He was trying to make the fellow understand that he was there to protect Mr. Hirpington's property. He left Edwin to feed his horse, and walked quickly across the heaps of mud Mr. Lee had shovelled away from the window nearest to the water.

The man had let the sack drop, and now stood idly on the main beam, which had not been displaced, as if he too were surveying the extent of the mischief. Ottley leaped across and stood beside him, observing, "The colonists are everywhere returning to their homes. The general opinion seems to be that the danger is over. Hirpington may be expected any minute. I came over to help him."

The men stood looking at each other, and Edwin recognized the fellow on the roof. It was the rabbiter who had spoken to him in the dark when he thought no one could hear him but his father.

"O Mr. Ottley," he called out, "it is one of the rabbiters who came to our help."

"And are you the farmer's son?" asked the man, descending from the roof to speak to him.

Edwin was feeling very grateful to the rabbiters. Hal was nursing his father, and he looked on them as friends. So when the man approached and asked him what he had come to the ford for he answered him freely, explaining all that

had happened since they parted. Edwin ended his account with the dismaying intelligence, "Mr. Ottley says there is no food to be had—nothing to give the poor Maoris to eat—so we have come to look if we can find any food among these ruins."

"No harm in that," returned the man quickly. "We are all on the same errand."

These were Edwin's own words, and he smiled, not knowing anything of Ottley's suspicion that the man was bent on plunder. The rabbiter walked off, and they saw no more of him.

Ottley continued his examination of the premises. The house to the riverside was not greatly damaged. If the roof were repaired, Mr. Hirpington could inhabit it again, and clear away the mud from the garden side at his leisure. But Ottley had no idea where his friend had taken refuge. He could send him no warning to return and see after his property. The window of the store-room looked to the river. As he went round to examine it, he found the old ford-horse wading about in the water, cropping at the weeds which grew on its margin. When Dunter let him loose—for no power on earth could make him travel on land—he swam down stream, and returned to his beloved ford, which he had crossed and recrossed several times, for his own gratification. Ottley called him out of the water, and led him round to share the hay with Beauty. He was anxious about his own coach-horses, for whose benefit the store of hay had been provided. They were gone. Probably Mr. Hirpington had opened the stable-doors at the first shock of earthquake. The hay was his own, and he told Edwin to tie up a bundle and take it away with him for Beauty. He was glad to see the man had gone off quietly, and said no more about him. He saw no occasion to put Edwin on his guard, as he was going to take him back to his father directly. He had not much faith in any boy's discretion, and he thought he might talk about the man to Hal.

Ottley knew well, when there were so many abandoned homes and so many homeless wanderers, what was sure to follow. "But," he said to himself, "this state of things will not last many days; yet a lot of mischief may be done, and how is the property to be protected? Life must stand first. A good dog would guard the ruins, but Hirpington's must all have followed their master."

He crawled into the hay-loft and pulled out a tarpaulin, which, with Edwin's assistance, he spread over the broken roof, and fastened as securely as he could, to keep out the weather and other depredators. Then he cut away the lattice of the store-room window with his pocket-knife, until he had cleared a space big enough for Edwin to slip through.

"This feels like house-breaking," said the boy with a laugh, as his feet found a resting-place on Mrs. Hirpington's chopping-block, and he drew in his head

and stood upright.

"Ah! but it is not," returned Ottley gravely. "All this is accommodation provided for my 'coach,' and paid for. It will be all right between me and Hirpington. If anybody talks of following in our steps, tell them what I say. Now hand me up that cheese, and the ham on the opposite shelf, and look if there is a round of beef in salt. There should be bovril and tea and sugar somewhere. We may want those for your father. Now for the flour!"

Edwin undid the window from the inside, but he could not lift a sack of flour. He handed up a biscuit-tin, and pound after pound of coffee, until Ottley began to think they had as much as they could carry away. Like a careful housekeeper, Mrs. Hirpington kept the door of her store-room locked, so they could not get through to the kitchen to find the bacon. Where Mrs. Hirpington kept her bread was a puzzle. Then Ottley remembered there was another pantry; but they could not get at it. He discovered two great baskets in the loft, used in the fruit-gathering. He slung them over Beauty's back, and filled them full. Edwin got out of the window again, and shut it after him. Mrs. Hirpington's pastry-board was converted into a temporary shutter. But as all Ottley's fastenings had to be done on the outside, they could also be undone if any one were so minded. Yet this consideration could not weigh against the starving people by the lake. Ottley pulled the hay still in the loft close up to the window, which they left open, so that the old forder could help himself. Then they attempted once again to cross the bush. Poor Beauty was terribly annoyed by his panniers. He conceived the wild idea of rolling over on the ground, to get rid of them. But Ottley promptly circumvented all such attempts. As for the load of hay on his back, Beauty was decidedly of opinion the best way to free himself from that was to eat it up. Edwin contented him with an occasional handful, and much patting and coaxing to soothe his ruffled temper.

It was the middle of the day before they reached Nga-Hepé's whare, which the kindly band of excavators had so expeditiously unroofed. When their work was over in that direction, they had dug into the mud heaps which marked the site of the Rota Pah, and many a poor Maori had been lifted into light and air.

Some of the inhabitants of the village had rushed out at the first alarm, and had escaped in their canoes; others had taken refuge in Nga-Hepé's strongly-built whare; but many had perished beneath their falling roofs.

The captain and his mates had bent all their energies to the task. They had shovelled away the mud from the council-hall, which was also, according to Maori custom, the sleeping-room of the tribe. Here they found men, women, and children huddled together, for the stronger beam of its roof had not yet given way under the weight of the mud. They had carried the survivors to the fire on the bank of the lake, and left them in Whero's care, to await Ottley's return with

the food. There was nothing more that the captain and his companions could do here. But other lives might yet be saved elsewhere; and they hurried back to the help of the comrades they had abandoned when Ottley's message reached them.

The natives, swathed in their mats and blankets, were lying in groups on the frozen mud, still gasping and groaning, suffering as much from terror as from physical exhaustion. But the rich men of the tribe, who may always be known by some additional bit of European clothing, were not among them.

The aged patriarch Kakiki, who had been among the first to rally, had raised himself on his elbow, and was asking eager questions about them.

"Where is Pepepe? Hopo-Hopo where? Are there none to answer?" he demanded, gazing at the dazed faces around him. "Then will I tell you. They are struck by the gods in their anger. Who are the gods we worship? who but the mighty ones of the tribe—men whose anger made the brave tremble even here on earth. Who then can hope to stand against their anger in the dwelling of the gods? Is not Hepé the terrible one foremost among them? Did ye at all appease him when ye sent the tana to a son of his race? See his vengeance on Pepepe! He lies dead in the pah, he who proposed it. Who shall carry up his bones to the sacred mountain, that he may sleep with his fathers? The gods will have none of him, for has he not eaten up their child? Ye who brought hunger to this whare, in this place has hunger found you. Ye left Nga-Hepé naught but a roof to shelter him; he has naught but that shelter to give you now. As the lightning shrivels up the fern, so shame shall shrivel up the tongue which asks of him the food of which ye have robbed him."

He ceased speaking as Ottley came in sight. Whero was hidden among the reeds, filling a pail he had exhumed with the muddy water from the lake. Four or five of the other Maoris staggered to their feet and intercepted the horse, clamouring and snatching at the food in its panniers. They had eaten nothing since the night of the eruption. The supply Ottley had brought looked meagre and poor amongst so many, and whilst he promised every man a share, he steadily resisted all their attempts to help themselves until he came up with the little cluster of women and children cowering between the heaps of thatch, when a dozen hands were quickly tearing out the contents of the baskets.

Old Konga seized a stick and tried to beat them off, while Marileha stood behind her imploring her old friends to remember her famishing babes.

Edwin was pushed down, but he scrambled up and ran to meet Whero, as Kakiki Mahane rose slowly from the ground and laid a detaining hand upon the horse's mane. "Who fights with starving men?" he exclaimed, and the stick fell from Ronga's hand in mute obedience.

"What is the matter?" asked Whero, as the boys stood face to face. "There is trouble in your eyes, my brother—a trouble I do not share."

”Ottley has promised to take me on to father; the time is flying, and he cannot get away,” said Edwin.

Whero’s cheek was rubbed softly against his, a word was whispered between them, and Whero went round to where his own father lay groaning on the ground, leaving his pail behind him. ”Father, father, rouse yourself,” he entreated, ”or the men of the pah will tear the kind coachman to pieces!”

Edwin caught up the pail and threw away the muddy water which Whero had taken such pains to reach, but no vexation at the sight brought the slightest cloud to his dusky face.

”Throw me that tin of coffee,” shouted Edwin to the resolute Ottley, who was dividing the food so that every one should have a share, according to his promise.

The desired tin came flying through the air. Edwin emptied its contents into his pail. ”Whoever wants coffee,” he cried, ”must fill this at the geyser.”

Nga-Hepé lifted his head from the ground where he had been lying, apparently taking no notice, and said something to his wife. She moved slowly amidst the group until she reached her old friend the coachman. ”Go,” she whispered. ”The boiling spring is choked by the mud. The men are scattering to find another. Go before they return. In their hearts they love you not as we do. Go!”

He put the remainder of his stores into her hands, sprang upon Beauty, and caught up Edwin behind him. They looked back to the old man and the children, and waved their hands in farewell, taking nothing away with them but the bovril and the tea in Edwin’s pocket.

They rode on in silence until they felt themselves beyond the reach of the excited crowd. Both were looking very grave when at last they reached the tent where Mr. Lee was lying. The lowering skies betokened a change of weather.

”Rain,” said Ottley, looking upwards; ”but rain may free us from this plague of dust.”

Hal, who had heard their steps approaching, came out to meet them. Whilst he was speaking to Ottley, Edwin slipped off the horse and ran into the tent. He found his father lying on the ground, apparently asleep. He knelt down beside him and listened to his heavy breathing. The dreamy eyes soon opened and fastened on his face.

”Don’t you know me, father?” asked Edwin, taking the hand which hung down nervelessly in both of his.

”Where are the little ones?” asked Mr. Lee.

”Safe by this time with Mr. Bowen’s grandson, father,” answered Edwin. But the reply was hardly spoken when the dreamy eyelids closed, and Mr. Lee was fast asleep again.

Edwin looked out of the door of the tent, where the men were still talking.

"If it had not been for those surveying fellows," Hal was saying, "who hurried up from the south with their camp, what should I have done? They lent me this tent and gave me some bread."

"Where are they?" asked Edwin, glancing round. "I want to thank them all."

"Why, lad," exclaimed Hal, "they are miles away from here now. They say the mud has fallen from Taheka to Wairoa. Not your little bit of a place, but a big village. We've lots of Wairoas; it is a regular Maori name."

"Yes," added Ottley, "they have gone on; for the mud has fallen heavy for ten miles round the mountain—some declare it is a hundred feet deep at Te Ariki—and there may be other lives to save even now."

"Ah, but you have done a bad day's work, I fear," persisted the old rabbiter. "You have brought back to life a dangerous neighbour; which may make it hardly safe for us to stay where we are. His people will follow the horse's tracks, and come and eat up all my little hoard; and how can an old man like me defend himself? They would soon knock me over, and what would become of poor Lee? He will sleep himself right if we can let him lie still where he is; but if these Maoris come clamouring round us, it will be all over with him."

Edwin grew so white as he overheard this, Ottley urged him to go back to his father and rest whilst they lit a fire and prepared the tea.

He gave Beauty his feed of hay, and gathering up the remainder he took it in with him, to try to make his father a better bed than the old rug on which he was lying.

It would be a bad day's work indeed if it were to end as Hal predicted. He trembled as he slipped the hay beneath his father's head, wondering to find him sleeping undisturbed in the midst of such calamities as these. "If he could only speak to me!" he groaned.

He had found at last one quiet Sunday hour, but how could he have knelt down to pray that night if he had refused to help Whero? His fears were for his father, but he laid them down. Had he to live this day over again to-morrow he would do the same. His heart was at rest once more, and he fell asleep.

He was wakened by Hal and Ottley coming inside the tent. It was raining steadily. There was no such thing as keeping a fire alight in the open. The tea had been hastily brewed. It was none the better for that; but such as it was, they were thankful for it. They roused up Edwin to have his share. It was so dark now he could scarcely see the hand which held the cup. Hal spread the one or two remaining wraps he had, and prepared for the night. They all lay down for a few hours' sleep. Edwin was the nearest to his father.

The two men were soon snoring, but Edwin was broad awake. Mr. Lee moved uneasily, and threw aside the blanket which covered him. Edwin bent

over him in a moment.

”Is there anything I can do for you, father?” he said.

Mr. Lee was feeling about in the blanket. ”Where is my belt?” he asked.

Edwin did not say a word to rouse the other sleepers; but although it was perfectly dark, he soon satisfied himself the belt was gone.

It was a wash-leather belt, in which Mr. Lee had quilted his money for safety. Edwin knew it well. He realized in a moment what a loss it would be to his father if this were missing. Hal had set Mr. Lee's leg with splints of bark; whilst he was doing this he might have taken off the belt. Perhaps it would be found in a corner of the tent when it was light. Edwin felt he must mind what he said about it to Hal, who was taking such care of his father. He saw that more clearly than anything else.

No; he would only tell Ottley, and with this decision he too fell asleep.

He was so tired out, so worn, so weary, that he slept long and heavily. When he roused it was broad daylight, and Ottley, whose time was up, had departed. Hal had made a fire, and was preparing a breakfast of tea. He agreed to save the bovril Edwin had brought for his father alone.

They made a hole in the floor of the tent, not deep enough to break the crust of the mud, and lined it with bark. Here they kept the little jar, for fear any of the Maoris should see it, if they came across to beg for food.

Whilst the two were drinking their tea and watching the lowering clouds, which betokened more rain, the other rabbiter whom Ottley had surprised in the ford-house strolled out from among the leafless trees and invited himself to a share. Edwin and Hal, who knew he needed it as much as they did, felt it would indeed be selfish to refuse him a breakfast.

As they sat round the fire Hal took counsel with his mate, and talked over the difficulties of their position.

Ottley had promised to try to send them help to remove Mr. Lee to a safer place. But Hal, who was expecting one of those torrents of rain which mark a New Zealand winter, feared they might be washed away before that help arrived.

Lawford—as he called his mate—was of the same opinion, and offered, if Edwin would accompany him, to go across to the ford-house and see if the Hirpingtons had returned.

This seemed the most hopeful thought of all, and Edwin brightened as he ran off to catch Beauty.

He had left his father comfortably pillowed in the hay, which he had made to serve a double purpose, but he was now obliged to pull a bit away for the horse's breakfast.

As he started with Lawford, Hal called after them to be sure to wrench off a shutter or a loose bit of board. They must bring back something on which poor

Mr. Lee could be laid, to move him.

Beauty trotted off briskly. After a while Lawford looked over his shoulder at Edwin, who was riding behind him, and said shortly, "Now we are safe, I have something to tell you."

CHAPTER XIV.

RAIN AND FLOOD.

Edwin felt a cold shiver run over him as Lawford made this announcement.

"Something to tell me!" he exclaimed. "Oh, please speak out!"

"Do you see those spades?" replied Lawford, halting beside a tree, against which two spades were leaning. "Whero has sent them to you. He wants you to show me where he buried that bag of treasure. I am to dig it up and take it to Nga-Hepé. He means to use it now to buy food for the people about him. You know the place: it is between the two white pines by the roadside. As soon as Nga-Hepé has got his money, he will row down the river in his canoe and bring it back with a load of bacon and flour, and whatever he can get in the nearest township."

This seemed so natural to Edwin he never doubted it was true. There were the spades, just like the two he had seen in the whare.

"Oh yes," he answered, "I can find the place. I saw the trees only yesterday."

"Nga-Hepé sent you a charge," added Lawford, "to mind and keep a still tongue; for if it gets air whilst he's gone for the food, there will be such a crowd waiting for the return of the canoe, it would be eaten up at a single meal, and his own children would be starving again."

"I shall not speak," retorted Edwin. "Nga-Hepé may safely trust me."

They reached the road at last, and made their way along it as before, until they came to the two tall tapering trunks—not quite so easily identified now they had lost their foliage.

"This is the spot!" cried Edwin, slipping off the horse, and receiving a descent of mud upon his shoulders as he struck the dirt-laden tree.

Lawford gave him the spades he was carrying, and got down. They tied Beauty at a safe distance, and set to work. It was comparatively easy digging through the crust, but when they reached the soft mud beneath it, as soon as they cleared a hole it filled again.

Their task seemed endless. ”I don’t believe we can get at the money,” said Edwin, in despair. ”I must go on and see if Mr. Hirpington has returned, for I want to get back to father.”

”All right,” answered Lawford. ”Leave me at the work. A boy like you soon tires. Take your horse and ride down to the ford; but mind you do not say anything about me.”

”You need not fear that,” repeated Edwin, as he extricated himself from the slime-pit they had opened, and mounted Beauty. It was not very far to the ford, but he found it as he had left it—desolate and deserted. No one had been near it since yesterday, when he visited it with Ottley. The good old forder neighed a welcome, and came trotting up from the river-bank to greet him. He pulled out more hay to feed both horses, and whilst they were eating he examined the house.

The river was swollen with last night’s rain. It had risen to the top of the boating-stairs. Once more the house was standing in a muddy swamp, from which the tall fuchsia trees looked down disconsolate on the buried garden. It was past anybody’s power to get at the store-room window. In short, the river had taken possession, and would effectually keep out all other intruders.

Edwin chose himself a seat among the ruins, and turned out his pockets in quest of a little bit of pipe-clay which once found a lodging amongst their heterogeneous contents. He wrote with the remaining corner, which he was happy enough to find had not yet crumbled to dust, ”Lee, senior, waiting by lake, badly hurt, wants food and help.”

He had fixed upon the shutter of the hay-loft window for his tablet, and made his letters bold and big enough to strike the eye at a considerable distance. He tried to make them look as if some man had written them, thinking they would command more attention. Then he hunted about for the piece of loose board Hal had charged them to bring back.

Edwin wrenched it off from the front of the hayloft, and discovered a heap of mangel-wurzel in the corner. He snatched up one and began to eat it, as if he were a sheep, and then wondered if he had done right. But he felt sure Ottley would say yes.

He balanced the board on his head, but found it impossible to mount Beauty, and equally difficult to make him follow a master with head-gear of such an extraordinary size. So he had to drive Beauty on before him, and when he reached the white pines Lawford was gone.

”He ought to have waited for me,” thought Edwin, indignantly. ”How can I get across the bush with this board? The men care nothing about me; they drive me along or they leave me behind to follow as I can, just as it happens. It is too bad, a great deal too bad!”

Beauty heard the despairing tone, and turning softly round, tilted the board backwards in spite of Edwin's efforts to stop him.

There was no such thing as getting it into position again. All Edwin could do was to mark the spot and leave it lying on the ground. Then he jumped on Beauty and trotted off to the tent, for the rain which Hal had predicted was beginning fast. The sodden canvas flapped heavily in the storm-wind. The tent-poles were loosened in the softened mud, and seemed ready to fall with every gust, as Edwin rode up disheartened and weary, expecting to find Lawford had arrived before him. No such thing. Hal was worn out with waiting, and was very cross.

It is only the few who can stand through such days of repeated disaster with patience and temper unexhausted. There has been some schooling in adversity before men attain to that. Edwin was taking his lesson early in life, but he had not learned it yet.

Hal would have it Edwin had lost himself, and called him a young fool for not sticking close to his companion, who was no doubt looking for him.

He started off in high dudgeon to "coo" for Lawford, and bring on the board Edwin had left by the way.

Father and son were alone. The rain pouring through the tent seemed to rouse Mr. Lee to consciousness.

"I am hurt, Edwin," he said; "yet not so much as they think. But is there not any place of shelter near we can crawl into? This rain will do me more harm than the fall of the tree. If this state of things continues, we shall be washed away into the mud."

Edwin's heart was aching sorely when Hal returned with the board. Mr. Lee looked up with eyes which told them plainly the clouded understanding was regaining its power.

The old man saw it with pleasure, He knew even better than Mr. Lee that the steady rain was changing the mud to swamp. They must lose no time in getting away, at least to firmer ground.

He was looking about him for the nearest hill. He had made his plan; but he wanted Lawford's help to carry it out.

"He will come back soon," said Edwin confidently, feeling pretty sure Lawford had gone across to the lake to give Nga-Hepé his bag.

Hal was more puzzled than ever at his mate's disappearance, and again he wanted to know why the two had parted company. Edwin was so downhearted about his father, and so badgered by Hal's questionings and upbraidings, he knew not what to say or do.

Hal wrapped Mr. Lee in the blanket, and with Edwin's assistance laid him on the board. It was a little less wet than the sodden ground. He bound him to it with the cord which had tied up Beauty's hay.

”There,” he said, as he pulled the last knot tight, ”we can lift you now without upsetting my splints. They are but a bungling affair, master; but bad is the best with us.”

Try as Edwin would he was not strong enough to lift the board from the ground. The old man saw it too, and pushed him aside impatiently.

”See what you have brought on us all,” he said, or rather muttered.

”I could not help it,” repeated Edwin bitterly; ”but I don’t mind anything you say to me, Hal, for you have stuck by father and cared for him, when he would have died but for you. Don’t despair; I’ll go and look for Lawford.”

”You!” returned Hal contemptuously; ”you’ll lose yourself.”

But Edwin, who thought he could guess where Lawford was to be found, could not be turned from his purpose.

”Can’t I cross the bush once more, for father’s sake,” he asked, ”whilst I have got my horse?” He called up Beauty and told him to go home. Edwin found the whare by the lake deserted. After his abrupt departure with Ottley, Nga-Hepé had roused himself to assist his father-in-law in making an equal distribution of the food; and then they gathered the men around the fire and held a council.

With two such leaders as Nga-Hepé and Kakiki, they reached the wise decision to seek a safer place beyond the anger of the gods, and build a temporary kainga, or unwalled village, where food was to be obtained, where the fern still curled above the ground, and the water gushed pure from the spring. The men of the pah yielded as they listened to the eloquent words of the aged chief; and though they passed the night in speechifying until the malcontents were overawed, the morning found them hard at work digging out their canoes.

As Edwin approached the lake he saw the little fleet cautiously steering its way through the mud-shoals and boulders towards the river.

The wind was moaning through the trees, and the unroofed whare was filling with the rains.

While Edwin surveyed the desolate scene, he perceived a small canoe coming swiftly towards his side of the lake. He watched it run aground amongst the bent and broken reeds, swaying hither and thither in the stormy wind. Suddenly he observed a small, slight figure wading knee-deep through the sticky slime. It was coming towards him.

A bird flew off from its shoulder, and the never-to-be-forgotten sound of ”Hoké” rang through the air.

”Whero, Whero!” shouted Edwin joyfully; and turning Beauty’s head he went to meet him.

But Whero waved him back imperiously; for he knew the horse could find no foothold in the quagmire he was crossing. He was leaping now like a frog, as Edwin averred; but there are no frogs in New Zealand, so Whero could not

understand the allusion as Edwin held out his hand to help him on. Then the kaka, shaking the water from his dripping wings, flew towards Edwin and settled on his wrist with a joyous cry of recognition.

"Take him," gasped Whero; "keep him as you have kept my Beauty. The ungrateful pigs were to kill him—to kill and eat my precious redbreast; but he soared into the air at my call, and they could not catch him."

Edwin's boyish sympathies were all ablaze for his outraged friend. "Is that their Maori gratitude," he exclaimed, "when it was your kaka which guided me to the spot?"

"When I told them so," sobbed Whero, "they laughed, and said, 'We will stick his feathers in our hair by way of remembrance.' They shall not have him or his feathers. They shall eat me first. I will take him back to the hill which no man cares to climb. I will live with dead men's bones and despise their tapu; but no man shall eat my kaka."

During the outpouring of Whero's wrath, Edwin had small chance of getting an answer to his anxious question. "Are not those your people rowing across the lake? Is Lawford with them? Did he bring the bag to your father all right?"

Whero looked at him incredulously. Edwin waved his hand, and the Maori boy leaped up for once behind him. He took the kaka from Edwin's wrist and hugged it fondly whilst he listened to his explanations about Lawford.

"It was I," interposed Whero, "who was staying behind to dig up the bag by the white pines. Did my father think I would not go when I ran off to call away my kaka? Where could he meet this pakeha and I not know, that he should trust him to look for his hoard? as if any one beside me or my mother could find it. Kito!" (lies.)

But the pelting rain cut short his wonder, as Edwin urged everything else must give way to the pressing necessity of finding some better shelter for Mr. Lee. It was useless to look for Lawford any longer.

"You will help me, Whero?" entreated Edwin earnestly, as they turned the horse's head towards the small brown tent. It was lying flat, blown down by the wind in their absence. Hal had folded up the canvas, and was pacing up and down in a very dismal fashion.

"Father," said Edwin, springing to the ground, "I can't find Lawford; but this Maori boy was going to a sheltered place high up in the hills. Will you let us carry you there?"

"Anywhere, anywhere, out of this pond," replied Mr. Lee.

"Have at it then!" cried Whero, seizing hold of the board; but Hal called out to them to stay a bit. By his direction they lifted Mr. Lee on his board and laid it along the stout canvas. Hal tied up the ends with the tent ropes, so that they could carry Mr. Lee between them, slung, as it were, in a hammock. Hal

supported his head, and the two boys his feet.

It was a slow progression. Whero led them round to another part of the hill, where an ancient fissure in its rugged side offered a more gradual ascent. It was a stairway of nature's making, between two walls of rock. Stones were lying about the foot, looking as if they might have been hurled from above on the head of some reckless invader in the old days of tribal violence.

Edwin had well named it an ogre's castle. It was a mountain fastness in every sense, abandoned and decayed. As they gained the summit, Edwin could see how the hand of man had added to its natural strength. Piles of stones still guarded the stairway from above, narrowing it until two could scarcely walk abreast, and they lay there still, a ready heap of ammunition, piled by the warrior hands sleeping in Tarawera.

Whero sent his kaka on before him. "See," he exclaimed to Edwin, "the bird flies fearless over the blighted ground, and you came back to me unharmed. I will conquer terror by your side, and take possession of my own. Who should live upon the hill of Hepé but his heir! Am I not lord and first-born? Count off the moons quickly when I shall carry the greenstone club, and make the name of Hepé famous among the tribes, as my mother said. This shall be my home, and my kaka shall live in it."

They were trampling through the dry brown fern on the hill-top, and here Whero would willingly have bivouacked. But Hal, who knew nothing of the traditionary horrors which clung to the spot, pushed on to the shelter within the colonnade. No tent was needed here. They laid their helpless burden on the ground and stretched their cramped arms. Whero's tall talk brought an odd twinkle of amusement into the corner of Hal's gray eye as he glanced around him humorously. "It is my lord baron, as we say in England, then," he answered, with a nod to Whero: "but it looks like my barren lord up here." Whero did not understand the old man's little joke, and Edwin busied himself with his father.

Whero descended the hill again and fetched up Beauty, who was as expert a climber as his former owner, and neighed with delight when he found himself once more amid the rustling fern. Dry and withered as Edwin had thought it, to Beauty it was associated with all the joys of early days, when he trotted a graceful foal by his mother's side. Like Whero, he was in his native element.

The proud boy rolled a big stone across the end of the path by which they had climbed up, and then feeling himself secure, began to execute a kind of war-dance.

"Stop your antics," said Hal, cowering against the gigantic trunk which was sheltering Mr. Lee from the keen winds, "and tell us what that means." He pointed to a huge white thing towering high above his head, with open beak and out-stretched claw—a giant, wingless bird, its dry bones rattling with every gust.

"It is a skeleton," said Edwin, walking nearer to it to take off the creepy feeling it awakened.

"It is a moa," said Whero, continuing his dance—"the big old bird which used to build among these hills until my forefathers ate him up. They had little to eat but the fern, the shark, and the moa, until the pakeha came with his pigs and his sheep. There may be one alive in the heights of Mount Cook, but we often find their skeletons in desolate places." Then Whero went up close to the quivering bones, and cried out with exultation when he discovered the hole in its breast through which the spear of the Hepé had transfixed this ancient denizen of his fortress.

"It is an unked place," muttered Hal, "but dry to the feet."

He lit his pipe, and settled himself on the roots of the tree for a smoke and a sleep. He had been existing for so many days in the midst of the stifling clouds of volcanic dust and the choking vapours from the ground, through which chloride of iron gas was constantly escaping for a space of fifty-six miles, that the purer air to which they had ascended seemed like life, and robbed the place of its habitual gloom.

Even Whero, with the Maori's reverential horror of a dead man's bones, coiled himself to sleep in the rustling fern by Beauty's side, his dream of future greatness undisturbed by the rattling bones of the moa, and the still more startling debris which whitened amidst the gnarled and twisted roots.

But it was not so with Edwin. He sat beside his father, feeding him with the undiluted bovril—for water failed them on the rocky height—and wondering how long the slender store would last. He refused himself the smallest taste, and bore his hunger without complaint, hiding the little jar with scrupulous care, for fear Whero should find it and be tempted to eat up the remainder of its contents. So he kept his silent vigil. The storm-clouds cleared, and the grandeur of the view upon which he gazed banished every other thought. He could look down upon the veil of mist which had hidden the sacred mountains, and Tarawera rose before him in all its grandeur. He saw the awful rent which had opened in the side of the central peak, and from which huge columns of smoke and steam were fitfully ascending. He watched the leaping tongues of flame dart up like rockets to the midnight sky, once more ablaze with starshine, and a feeling to which he could give no expression seemed to lift him beyond the present,—"Man does not

live by bread alone."

CHAPTER XV.
WHO HAS BEEN HERE?

"Edwin," said Mr. Lee, when he saw his son shivering beside him in the gray of the wintry morning, "what is the matter with you? Have you had enough to eat?"

"Not quite. Well, you see, father, we have to do as we can," smiled Edwin, in reply.

"Certainly; but where on earth have we got to?" resumed the sick man, as he glanced upwards at the interlacing boughs.

"We are high up in the hills, father, in one of the old Maori fastnesses, where the mud and the flood cannot reach us," answered Edwin.

"And the children?" asked Mr. Lee.

"Are all safe by the sea," was the quick reply.

Mr. Lee's ejaculations of thankfulness were an unspeakable comfort to Edwin.

"Did not I hear the splash of oars last night?" asked his father.

"You might when Whero came. He guided us here," said Edwin.

"Then," resumed his father, "try to persuade this Maori to row you in his canoe down the river until you come to an English farm. The colonists are all so neighbourly and kind, they will sell or lend or give you what we want most. Make the Maori bring you back. You must pay him well; these Maoris will do nothing without good pay. Remember that; but there is plenty in the belt." Mr. Lee ceased speaking. He was almost lost again, and Edwin dare not remind him that the belt was gone. But Edwin knew if Whero would do it at all, he would not want to be paid.

"With this leg," sighed Mr. Lee slowly and dreamily, "I—am—a—fixture."

Sleep was stealing over him, and Edwin did not venture to reply.

A sympathetic drowsiness was visiting him also, but he was roused out of it by seeing Hal busily engaged in trying to capture the kaka.

"It is a good, fat bird," whispered the old man; "they are first-rate eating in a pie. We can cook him as we did the duck I found; put him in the boiling mud as the natives do!"

Up sprang Edwin to the rescue. ”No, Hal, no; you must not touch that bird!”

He caught the old man’s arm, and scared the kaka off. The frightened bird soared upwards, and concealed itself in the overarching boughs.

Whero was awakened by its screams, and got up, shaking the dry moss from his tangled shock of hair, and laughing.

Edwin called off attention from the kaka by detailing his father’s plan.

The breakfastless trio were of one mind. It must be tried, as it offered the surest hope of relief. The river was so much safer than the road. Ottley might never have it in his power to send the promised help. Some danger might have overwhelmed him also. What was the use of waiting for the growing of the grass, if a readier way presented itself? Hal spread out the canvas of the tent to dry, and talked of putting it up in the new location. Legs and arms were wonderfully stiff from keeping on wet clothes. But the most pressing want was water. Dry ground and pure air were essential, but thirst was intolerable. They took the cup by turns and went down to a spring which Whero pointed out. Beauty had found for himself a little pond, which nature had scooped out, and the recent rains had filled with greenish water which he did not despise.

Whilst Hal was away, Edwin intimated to Whero that it was not very safe to leave his kaka with him; for he feared the bird would be killed and eaten as soon as they were gone, although he did not say so to his Maori friend.

Whero’s eyes were ablaze with rage in a moment. ”Let him touch it!” he snorted rather than hissed. ”I’ll meet him. If it’s here on the hill, I’ll hurl him over that precipice. If—if—” Edwin’s eye was fastened on the boy with a steady gaze. Whero raised his clinched hand, as if to strike. ”Tell him,” he went on—”tell him in our country here the mud is ever boiling to destroy the Maori’s foes. I’ll push him down the first jet we pass.” He looked around him proudly, and kicked away the skull beneath his foot, as if to remind his listener how in that very spot the threats in which he had been indulging found plenty of precedent.

Edwin exerted all his self-command. He would not suffer one angry or one fearful word to pass his lips, although both anger and fear were rising in his heart. But the effort to keep himself as cool and quiet as he could was rewarded. Whero saw that he was not afraid; and the uncontrollable passion of the young savage expended itself in vain denunciations.

Edwin knew how the Maoris among themselves despise an outburst of passion, and he tried to shame Whero, saying, ”Is that the way your warriors talk at their councils? Ours are grave, and reason with each other, until they find out the wisest course to take. That is what I want to do as soon as we have caught the kaka.”

The catching of the macaw proved a safety-valve; and Whero went down to the lake to get the canoe ready, with the bird on his wrist.

Edwin ran back to beg Hal to return to his father, as he and Whero were hurrying off to the lake. He had saved a dangerous quarrel, but it left him very grave. He was more and more afraid of what Whero might do in a moment of rage. "Oh, I am excessively glad, I am thankful," he thought, "that I was not forced to leave him alone with Effie and Cuthbert!" It was well that Whero was rowing, for the exertion seemed to calm him. Edwin escaped from the difficulty of renewing their conversation by beginning to sing, and Whero, with all the Maori love of music, was easily lured to listen as "Merry may the keel row" echoed from bank to bank, and the splash of his paddle timed itself to the words of the song.

Edwin assured him he was singing to keep the kaka quiet, which had nestled on his folded arms, and was looking up in his face with evident enjoyment. As they paddled on the old ford-horse stepped out into the water to hear him, so they stopped the canoe and went ashore to pull him out his hay. He followed them for nearly half-a-mile, and they lost sight of him at last as they rounded the bend in the river. He was fording his way across the huge bed of shingle, over which the yellow, rattling, foaming torrent wandered at will. The tiny canoe shot forward, borne along without an effort by the force of the stream. With difficulty they turned its head to zigzag round a mighty boulder, hurled from its mountain home by the recent convulsions.

Even now as the river came tearing down from the heights above, it was bringing with it tons upon tons of silt and shingle and gravel. The roar of these stones, as they rolled over each other and crashed and dashed in the bed of the flood, was louder than the angry surges on the tempestuous shore when Edwin saw the coaster going down. The swift eddies and undertows thus created made rowing doubly dangerous, and called forth Whero's utmost skill.

But the signs of desolation on the river-banks were growing fainter. Between the blackened tracts where the lightning had fired the fern broken and storm-bent trees still lifted their leafless boughs, and shook the blue dust which weighed them down into the eyes of the travellers.

Here and there a few wild mountain sheep, which had strayed through the broken fences of the run, were feeding up-wind to keep scent of danger. But other sign of life there was none, until they sighted an English-built boat painfully toiling along against the force of the current. They hailed it with a shout, and Edwin's heart leaped with joy as he distinguished Mr. Hirpington's well-known tones in the heartiness of the reply. "Well met, boys. Come with us."

They were soon alongside, comparing notes and answering inquiries. Dunter, who plied the other oar, nodded significantly to Edwin. He had encountered Ottley, and received his warning as to the depredations likely to ensue if the ford-house were left to itself much longer. He had started off to find the governor.

The good old forder was still scraping amongst the shingle, and when he saw his master in the boat, he came plunging through the water to meet him with such vehemence he almost caused an upset. But the stairs were close at hand, and as Mr. Hirpington often declared, he and his old horse had long ago turned amphibious. They came out of the water side by side, shaking themselves like Newfoundland dogs. It was marvellous to Mr. Hirpington to discover that his old favourite had taken no harm.

"He is a knowing old brute," said Dunter. But when they saw the writing on the shutter, they knew where he had found a friend. The pipe-clay was smeared by the rain, but the little that was legible "gave me a prick," said Mr. Hirpington, "I cannot well stand."

A great deal of the mud had been washed on to Ottley's tarpaulin, which had been pushed aside by the fury of the storm, as Mr. Hirpington was inclined to think. But there were footprints on the bank of mud jamming up doors and windows—recent footprints, impressed upon it since the storm. Dunter could trace them over the broken roof. They were not Edwin's. Dunter pointed to the impression just left by his boot as the boy climbed up to them. That was conclusive.

"If it were any poor fellow in search of food under circumstances like these, I would not say a word," remarked Mr. Hirpington.

Dunter found a firmer footing for himself, and getting hold of the edge of the sheet of iron, he forced it up, and with his master's help dislodged a half-ton weight of mud, which went down into the river with a mighty splash. To escape from the shower-bath, which deluged both them and the roof, the three jumped down into the great farm kitchen. There all was slime, and a sulphurous stench vitiated the atmosphere.

"We can't breathe here," said Mr. Hirpington, seizing Edwin's arm and mounting him on the dining-table.

The muddy slush into which they had plunged was almost level with its top. The door into the bedroom was wrenched off, and lodged against it, forming a kind of bridge over the mud. But there was one thing which the earthquake, the mud, and the storm could never have effected. They could not have filled the sacks lying on the other end of the long tables. That could only have been done by human hands.

They were all three on the table now. Mr. Hirpington untied the nearest sack, and pushed his arm inside.

"Some of our good Christchurch blankets and my best coat," he muttered. "I have no need to make them in a worse state with my muddy hands. Leave them where they are for the present," he continued, turning to Dunter, who began to empty out the contents of the other sacks.

Mr. Hirpington looked about for his gun. It was in its old place, lying across the boar's tusks, fixed like pegs against the opposite wall. It was double-barrelled, and he knew he had left it loaded for the night as usual.

"You must get that down, Dunter," he said, "and mount guard here, whilst I take young Lee back to his father. That must be the first concern. When I return we must set to work in earnest—bail out this slush, mend the roof over the bedroom to the river, where it is least damaged, and live in it whilst we clear the rest. Light and air are to be had there still, for the windows on that side are clear. More's the pity we did not stay there. But when that awful explosion came, my wife and I rushed into the kitchen, and so did most of the men. I was tugging at the outer door, which would not open, and 'cooing' with all my might, when the crash came, and I knew no more until I found myself in the boat."

"I was a prisoner in my little den," put in Dunter; "and I kept up the 'coo' till Mr. Lee came, for I could not open door or window though I heard your groans."

"Yes, Lee must be our first care. We owe our lives to him alone; understand that, all of you. He had us out before anybody else arrived," Mr. Hirpington went on, as he heaved up the fallen door and made a bridge with it from the table to the back of the substantial sofa, over which his gun was lying. From such a mount he could reach it easily. Was there anything else they required? He looked around him. Dunter had got possession of a boat-hook, and was fishing among the kettles and saucepans under the dresser. The bacon, which had been drying on the rack laid across the beams of the unceiled roof, had all gone down into the mud; but the solid beams themselves had not given way, only the ties were dislodged and broken, with the iron covering. All the crockery on the shelves of course was smashed. A flying dish had struck Mrs. Hirpington on the head and laid her senseless before the rain of mud began. But her husband had more to do now than to recount the how and the why of their disaster.

He was hastily gathering together such things within reach as might be most needed by the sufferer on the hills. A kettle and a pan and a big cooking-spoon, which Dunter had fished out, were tied up in the Christchurch blanket dislodged from the sack, and slung across Mr. Hirpington's shoulder. Dunter made his way into the bedroom, and pulled out a couple of pillows. Here, he asserted, some one must have been before him; for muddy footsteps had left their mark on the top of the chest of drawers and across the bed-quilt, and no mud had entered there ere the Hirpingtons fled. Yet muddy fingers had left their impress high up on wardrobe-doors and on window-curtains, which had been drawn back to admit the light. Over this room the roof had not given way. The inference was clear—some one had entered it.

Mr. Hirpington glanced up from the bundle he was tying, and spoke aside to Edwin: "You knew the man Ottley surprised in the house?"

”Yes,” answered Edwin; ”he was one of the rabbiters. I thought he was looking for food, as we were. Mr. Ottley did not say anything to me about his suspicions. Somebody else may have got in since then, Mr. Hirpington.”

”Certainly, certainly,” was the answer, and the three emerged again into daylight.

As they stood upon the roof shaking and scraping the mud from each other, Edwin looked round for Whero.

”Whoever filled these sacks,” observed Mr. Hirpington, when he was alone with Dunter, ”means to come back and fetch them. Be on the watch, for I must leave you here alone.”

Dunter was no stranger to the Maori boy, and invited him to share in the good things he was unloading from the boat, thinking to secure himself a companion. Whilst he was talking of pork-pies and cheese, Edwin suggested the loan of a spade and a pail.

”A' right!” exclaimed Whero, with a nod of intelligence; ”I'll have both.”

”Ay, take all,” laughed Edwin, as he ran down the boating-stairs after Mr. Hirpington, who was impatient to be off. Whero followed his friend to the water's edge to rub noses ere they parted. The grimaces with which Edwin received this final token of affection left Dunter shaking with laughter.

”I go to dig by the white pines,” said Whero.

”But you will come back to the hill of Hepé. We shall have food enough for us all,” returned Edwin, pointing to the boat in which Mr. Hirpington was already seated.

CHAPTER XVI.
LOSS AND SUSPICION.

The great hole which Lawford had made in the mud was not yet filled up. He had walled the sides with broken branches, damming up the mud behind him as he dug his way to the roots of the white pines.

Of course the mud was slowly oozing through these defences, and might soon swallow them up. But Whero felt he was just in time. He dipped out a pail or two from the bottom, and felt about for the original hole in which he had hidden the bag. His foot went into the hole unawares. He was not long in satisfying himself that the treasure was gone. It was too heavy to float away. However

great the depth of mud might be above, it should still be in the hole where he had hidden it. He had covered it over with bark. The bark was there, but the bag was gone.

He went back to the ford. Dunter was at work dipping out the slime from the farm-house kitchen. The boy did not wait to speak to him, but pushed off his canoe and paddled away down the river to find his mother. Dunter had promised to take care of his kaka during his absence. Well, if that were prolonged, he would take care of it all the same, so Whero reasoned, as he was carried along by the rapid current.

He was watching for the first sign of the Maori encampment, which he knew he should find beyond the vast tract which had been desolated by the rain of mud. The canoe shot onward, until the first leaf became visible on the evergreens, and the fish were once more leaping in the water. The terraced banks of the river were broken here and there with deep gulches and sunken canyons. It was in one of these retreats that he was expecting to find the Maori tents.

The river was rushing deep and swift as before, but its margin was now studded with reeds and ti trees. The crimson heads of the great water-hens were poking out of their midst to stare at him, and flocks of ducks rose noisily from their reedy beds.

Whero began to sing one of the wild and plaintive native melodies. But his voice was almost drowned by the roar of the whirling stones, and his passage was continually impeded by the masses of drift-wood—great arms of trees, and uprooted trunks—striking against the boulders and threatening him with an upset.

Yet he still sang on, until a low, sweet echo answered him from the bank, and he saw his mother gathering fern by the water's edge.

The canoe was quickly run aground, and he leaped ashore to join her. Then he saw that his grandfather Kakiki Mahane was sitting on a stone not far off. Whero walked up a little ashamed of his behaviour; but for him Marileha had no reproaches, for he was the bitter-sweet which changed her joy to pain and her pain to joy continually.

She hailed his return, for her heart was aching for her baby, which could not survive their terrible entombment. She pointed to the bend in the ravine, where one or two small whares had been hastily built. Two uprights in the ground, with a pole across, had been walled with mats, roughly and quickly woven from flax-leaf and bulrush. Every Maori had been hard at work, and work could get them all they wanted here, except the hot stone and the geyser-bath.

With her own hands Marileha had cooked them what she called a good square dinner.

But the ideal life of the Maori is one of perfect laziness, and as a Maori lady

Marileha had enjoyed this from her birth. Her old father was trying to comfort her. She should go back with him to her own people. She should not stay where the fish had to be caught, and the wild duck snared, and the wild pig hunted, and then brought to her to kindle a fire to cook them, when he was a rich man, who could live like his kinsmen at Hawke's Bay, hire a grand house of the pakeha, and pay white servants to do everything for them.

The prospect was an alluring one, but Marileha did not believe anything would induce Nga-Hepé to abandon his native hills even for a season.

"Have I not sat in the councils of the pakeha?" argued Kakiki. "Do I not see our people giving place to theirs? The very rat they have brought over seas drives away our kiore [the native rat], and we see him no more. Have I not ever said, Let your young lord and first-born go amongst them, that he may learn their secret and hold his own in manhood against them?"

"I have learned it," put in Whero: "it is 'work.' Was it for this, mother, you sent a pakeha to dig up the bag we buried by the white pines?"

Marileha hushed her son as she glanced nervously around, for none of her Maori companions must know of the existence of that bag.

"Foolish boy," she said softly, "what pakeha had we to send? The bag is safe where we hid it; no one but you or I could find it."

"Then it is stolen," exclaimed Whero, "for the bag is gone."

They questioned him closely. How had he discovered that the bag was gone? As they walked away to find Nga-Hepé, the old patriarch laid his hand on his daughter's arm, remarking in a low aside. which was not intended for Whero's ear, as he did not wish to excite his indignation,—

"It is the farmer's son who has had it; no one else knew of it. Our own people cannot help in this matter; we must go to the pakeha chiefs."

In the meantime, whilst Whero was disclosing the loss of the buried treasure, Edwin was marching over the waste by Mr. Hirpington's side. The heavy load they had to carry when they left the boat made them very slow; but on they toiled to the foot of the hill, when Mr. Hirpington's ready "coo" brought Hal to their assistance.

He looked very white and trembling—a mere ghost of his former self. Mr. Hirpington could hardly recognize him. He was down in heart as well, for his pipe, his sole remaining solace, had burned out just half-an-hour before he heard the welcome "coo" at the foot of the hill.

For a moment the two men stood regarding each other as men regard the survivals of a dread catastrophe.

"Lord bless you, sir," said Hal. "I never thought to see you again, looking so hale and hearty."

"Don't talk about looks, Hal. Why, you are but a walking skeleton!" ex-

claimed Mr. Hirpington. ”But cheer up,” he added,—”the worst is over; we shall pull ourselves together now. Lend a hand with this basket up the steep.”

The climb before them was something formidable to the genial speaker.

Edwin was already lost to view beneath the overhanging wall of rock which shadowed the cleft. They had trodden down a pathway through the fern; but the ascent was blocked by Beauty, who seemed resolute to upset the load on Edwin’s head, as he had upset the board in the bush. In vain did Edwin apostrophize him, and thunder out a succession of ”whoas” and ”backs,” and ”Stand you still, you stupid, or you will roll me over.” It was all of no use. He was obliged to shunt his burden on to the heap of stones; and Beauty, with a neigh of delight, came a little closer, so that he too might rub his nose against Edwin’s cheek.

”Don’t you mean to let me pass, you silly old fellow? Well, then, I won’t turn baker’s boy any more; and what I want to carry I’ll carry on my back, as you do. There!”

But Edwin at last seized Beauty by the forelock, and forcing him to one side, squeezed by.

”Edwin!” called his father, and a feeble hand was lifted to beckon him nearer, ”what are you bringing?”

”Pillows, father, pillows,” he cried, as he stumbled over the twisted roots, half blinded by the sombre gloom beneath those giant trees where his father was lying. Edwin slipped out of his sandwich with exceeding celerity. A pillow was under the poor aching head in another minute, and a second propping the bruised shoulders, and Edwin stood by his father, smiling with the over-brimming joy of a grand success.

Then he denuded himself of the blanket, which he had been wearing like a Highlander’s plaid, and wrapped it over the poor unfortunate, cramping in the bleak mountain air with cold and hunger.

”Father,” he went on cheerily, ”the worst is over. Mr. Hirpington is here. He has come to see after you.”

”Too late, too late,” moaned Mr. Lee. ”I fear I am done for. The activity of my days is over, Edwin; and what remains to us?”

”We don’t know yet, father,” answered the boy, gravely. ”I’m young and ever so strong, and if I’ve only got you to tell me what to do, I can do a lot.”

”But, Edwin, have you seen anything of my belt?” asked Mr. Lee, collecting his wandering thoughts.

Edwin shook his head.

”What has become of it?” repeated the sick man nervously, as Mr. Hirpington appeared above the stones. Edwin went to meet him, and to gather together the remainder of his load, which he had left for Beauty to inspect at will.

”A horse up here!” exclaimed Mr. Hirpington. ”He must have the feet and

knees of a goat."

"I think he has," answered Edwin, backing his favourite to a respectful distance as Mr. Hirpington stepped on to the top of the hill, panting and puffing from the toilsomeness of the long ascent.

He looked around him bewildered, and followed Edwin into the dim recesses beyond the gloomy colonnade of trees, whose hoary age was beyond their reckoning.

"I am the most miserable of men!" he exclaimed, as he stooped over his prostrate friend, and clasped the hand which had saved him at such a cost. "How do I find you?"

"Alive," answered Mr. Lee, "and likely to live, a burden—"

"No, no, father," interposed Edwin.

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Mr. Hirpington, winking hard to get rid of a certain moisture about the eyelids very unusual to him. "To think how I have been living in clover all these days whilst you were lying here, it unmans me. But where on earth are you bivouacking? in a charnel-house?" He ceased abruptly with a shudder, as he discovered it was a human skull he was crushing beneath the heel of his boot.

Hal was busy with the basket, and Edwin ran off to his assistance.

"Sit down, Hal, and begin to eat," urged Edwin. "Now I have come back let me see after father."

But the sight of the longed-for food was too much for the old man. He began to cry like a child.

If the first glance into the full basket had been more than poor Hal could bear, the first taste was a sight from which Mr. Hirpington had to turn away. The one great object before him and Edwin was to get the two to eat, for the starving men seemed at first to refuse the food they were craving for; in fact they could hardly bear it. Mr. Lee put back the cold meat and bread, unable to swallow more; so Edwin at once turned stoker, and lit up a jolly fire of sticks and drying roots.

"We must get them something hot," said Mr. Hirpington, opening one of the many tins of soup which he had brought with him. Soon the savoury contents of the steaming kettle brought back a shadow of English comfort.

Mr. Hirpington had passed many a night of camping out before he settled down at the ford, and he set to work like an old hand. The canvas of the tent was stretched from tree to tree and well pegged down, so as to form a screen on the windward side. The dry moss and still drier fern that could be collected about the brow of the hill where Beauty was ranging, were brought in and strewed over the gnarled and twisted roots, until they gained a warm and comparatively level floor, with an excrescence here and there which served them for a seat. The

basket was hung up to preserve its remaining contents from the inspection of centipedes and crawling things, for which Edwin as yet had no nomenclature.

Then the men pulled up their collars to their ears, set their backs against the wind, lit a well-filled pipe, and laid their plans. The transfer of Mr. Hirpington's tobacco-pouch to Hal's pocket had brought back a gleam of sunshine—wintry sunshine, it must be confessed; but who could look for more? Mr. Lee, too, was undeniably better. The shake his brains had received was going over. He was once more able to listen and understand.

"I have telegraphed to Auckland," explained Mr. Hirpington. "I shall have my store of corrugated iron by the next coaster, and Middleton's barge will bring it up to the ford. Thank God for our waterways, there is no stoppage there! I have always kept to the river. But, old friend, before we mend up my own house we must get a roof over your head. There is not a man under me who will not be eager to help us at that; and we cannot do much to the road until the mud hardens thoroughly, so for once there will be help to be had. We are booked for the night up here; but to-morrow I propose to take your boy with me, and go over to your place and see the state it is in. A wooden house stands a deal of earthquaking. Edwin thinks it was the chimney came down. We must put you up an iron one. You have plenty of timber ready felled to mend the roof, and rushes are growing to hand. It is only the work that has to be done, and we all know how to work in New Zealand."

"Oh ay," chimed in old Hal; "most on us sartinly do, and this little chap ain't no foreigner there."

He was already nodding. The comforting influences of the soup and the pipe were inviting the return of "tired nature's sweet restorer." By-and-by he slipped from his seat upon the soft moss, and was lost to every trouble in balmy sleep. Edwin covered him up, feeling rich in the possession of a blanket for every one of the party.

The wintry twilight was gathering round them, cold and chill. The skeleton of the bird monster rattled and shook, and gleamed in spectral whiteness between the blackness of the shadows flung by the interlacing boughs. A kiore working amongst the dry bones seemed to impart a semblance of life to them which effectually banished sleep from Mr. Hirpington, who persuaded Edwin to come closer to him, declaring the boy looked frightened; and well he might, for who but a clod could lay his head on such a floor?

Assured at last that Hal was lost to all outward perception, Mr. Lee whispered the story of his loss. The belt was gone—taken from him whilst he was unconscious. No doubt about that. Mr. Hirpington described the state in which he found his house—the three sackfuls ready to be carried off. Edwin thought he had better tell his father now of the digging up of Whero's treasure.

"There is a thief amongst us," said Mr. Hirpington, "and suspicion points to the gang of rabbiters."

"No, not to Hal," interposed Mr. Lee; "not to all. We may yet find the belt."

He was growing excited and restless. He had talked too much.

"I must have this matter over with Dunter," was Mr. Hirpington's conclusion, when he saw how unable poor Mr. Lee was to bear any lengthened conversation. Before they settled to sleep he charged Edwin to be very careful, and not let any alteration in his manner put the old man on his guard.

The three arose in the gray of the morning with renewed energy. To take Beauty to water, to light a fire and prepare a breakfast in the solitary fastness, left scant time for any further discussion. But second thoughts told Mr. Lee that in such strange circumstances loss was almost inevitable. If his belt had been taken off when his leg was set, it might have been dropped in the all-surrounding mud and never missed.

"True, true," answered Mr. Hirpington, and leaving Mr. Lee to his son's care, he strolled across to the fire, where Hal was brewing the morning coffee, and began to question him about the accident—how and where the tree fell. But no new light was thrown upon the loss. It was hopeless to dig about in the mud, supposing Mr. Lee's last surmise to be correct. He determined to ride Beauty to the ford and look round the scene of the disaster with Edwin.

The day was well up when he stepped across the sunken fence which used to guard his own domain, and found Dunter fixing a pail at the end of the boat-hook to facilitate the bailing out of the mud.

The Maori boy had deserted him, he said, and a fellow single-handed could do little good at work like his. No one else had been near the place. He had kept his watch-fire blazing all night as the best scare to depredators. In Dunter's opinion prevention was the only cure. With so many men wandering homeless about the hills, and with so many relief-parties marching up in every direction, there was sure to be plenty of pilfering, but who could track it home?

The hope of discovering the belt appeared to grow less and less.

"What shall we do without the money?" lamented Edwin, as he continued his journey with his father's friend. "Trouble seems to follow trouble."

"It does," said Mr. Hirpington; "for one grows out of another. But you have not got it all, my boy; for my land, which would have sold for a pound an acre last Saturday week, is not worth a penny with all this depth of volcanic mud upon it. Nothing can grow. But when we get to your father's, where the deposit is only a few inches deep, we shall find the land immensely improved. It will have doubled its value."

As they drew nearer to the little valley the road grew better. The mud had dried, and the fern beneath it was already forcing its way through the crust. The

once sparkling rivulet was reduced to a muddy ditch, choked with fallen trees and stones, which the constant earthquaking had shaken down from the sides of the valley.

Beauty took his way to the familiar gate, and neighed. Edwin jumped down and opened it. All was hopeful here, as Mr. Hirpington had predicted. The ground might have been raised a foot, but the house had not been changed into a cellar. The daylight shone through the windows, broken as they were. The place was deluged, not entombed.

"You might return to-morrow," said Mr. Hirpington. "This end of the house is uninjured."

The chimney was down, it was true, the sleeping-rooms were demolished, but the workshop and storeroom were habitable. Whilst Mr. Hirpington considered the roof, Edwin ran round and peeped in at the broken windows. Dirt and confusion reigned everywhere, but no trace as yet of unwelcome visitors. A feeble mew attracted his attention, and Effie's kitten popped up its little head from the fallen cupboard in which it had evidently been exploring. It was fat and well. An unroofed pantry had been its hunting-ground; not the little room at the other end of the veranda, but a small latticed place which Mr. Lee had made to keep the uncooked meat in. The leg of a wild pig and a brace of kukas or wild pigeons, about twice the size of their English namesake, were still hanging on the hooks where Audrey had left them.

The leg of pork had been nibbled all round, and the heads were torn from the pigeons.

"Lucky Miss Kitty," said Edwin. "We thought you had got the freedom of the bush, and here you've been living in luxury whilst the rest of the world was starving. Come; you must go shares, you darling!"

It clawed up the wall, and almost leaped into his arms, to be covered with kisses and deafened with promises which were shouted out in the joy of his heart, until Mr. Hirpington began to wonder what had happened.

"My boy, have you gone quite crazy?" he exclaimed. "Why don't you look after your horse? you will lose him!"

Edwin looked round, and saw Beauty careering up the side of the valley. He shut the kitten carefully into the workshop. Mr. Hirpington had just got the other door open, and came out to assist in recalling Beauty to his duty.

Edwin started off after his horse; but he had not gone far when he was aware of another call, to which his Beauty paid more heed than he seemed disposed to show to Edwin's reiterated commands to come back.

The call was in Maori, and in a few minutes Nga-Hepé himself emerged

from the bush and seized the horse by the forelock.

CHAPTER XVII.
EDWIN IN DANGER.

When Mr. Hirpington came up he found his little English friend in earnest argument with the Maori warrior.

Nga-Hepé's looks were excited and wild. He was carrying the famous greenstone club, which he brandished every now and then in the heat of the conversation.

"Come with me," he was saying peremptorily—"come with me and find the man."

"I cannot," answered Edwin, toughly. "I cannot leave my father. Take the horse, if you will, and follow the tracks in the mud. I will show you which is Lawford's footprint."

"Show me the man, and I will believe you," retorted Nga-Hepé, swinging himself lightly upon Beauty's back as he spoke.

Edwin glanced round at Mr. Hirpington. It was a look which said, "Stand by me." The appeal was mute, and he answered it neither by word nor sign. Edwin thought despairingly he had not understood him, but a hand was laid on his shoulder. He almost fancied he was pushed aside, as Mr. Hirpington spoke to Nga-Hepé in his cheeriest tones:—

"Well met, old neighbour. Both of us above ground once again, thank God in his mercy. As for me and mine, we were fairly buried alive, and should have died under the mud but for this lad's father. We left everything and fled for our lives, and so it was with most of us. But now the danger is over, I have come back to look after my property, and find a thief has been there before me. According to this boy's account, I am afraid the same fellow has walked off with something of yours. But I have a plan to catch him, and you are the one to help me."

"A' right," answered the Maori. "You catch your man, I catch my boy. Man and boy go hand in hand."

"No," said Edwin stoutly; "I have nothing to do with Lawford."

Nga-Hepé raised his club. "You, who but you," he asked, "watched my wife dig hole? Who but you set foot on the spot? Who but you say, 'Man dig here'? I'll make you say a little more. Which had the bag?"

”I have never seen or touched the bag since I gave it back to your wife Marileha on the night of the tana’s visit,” answered Edwin.

”A’ right,” repeated Nga-Hepé. ”No, you are not a’ right, or you would go with me to find the man; for who but you knows who he is? If you won’t, you are a’ wrong, and I have come here to kill you.”

An exasperated savage on horseback, with a club in his hand, was no mean foe. Edwin thought of old Hal’s words. Was it a bad day’s work which restored Nga-Hepé to life? But he answered himself still with an unwavering ”No.”

”You are returning me evil for good,” said Edwin quietly. ”Whero would not have dared to follow the kaka over the mud if I had not gone with him; but for me you would have been a dead man. Ask Whero—ask your own son.”

”I take no counsel with boys,” answered the Maori loftily.

”Neither do I think overmuch of boys,” interposed Mr. Hirpington; ”but we will keep young Lee with us, and all go together and find the man if possible. Yet with you on his back that horse will go like the wind. How are we to keep up with you?”

”You have ridden behind me before,” said Nga-Hepé, turning to Edwin; ”you can do it again.”

”Only I won’t,” thought Edwin; but aloud he said, ”So I could, but then there is Mr. Hirpington. What is he to do?”

”Ah!” put in the latter, taking out his pipe and lighting it deliberately, ”the question is not how we shall go, but which way. The relief-parties are beginning to disperse. Now, Nga-Hepé, I am as earnestly desiring to help you as I am to defend myself. Only I see plainly if we try to follow the fellow among these wild hills we shall miss him. He belongs to a gang of rabbiters. I know their leader. Let him call his chums together. I’ll provide the lure—a reward and a jolly good dinner for every one of the poor fellows who came so gallantly to our help at the risk of their own lives. We must bear in mind that after Mr. Lee these rabbiters were the first in the field. If there is a black sheep among them, we shall have him. But I must get my own men about me, and then we will confront him with Edwin Lee, in the presence of them all.”

”Your plan is good,” answered the Maori. ”Try it and I try mine; then one or other of us will catch him.”

”That will be me,” remarked Mr. Hirpington, in a knock-down tone.

”Jump up!” cried Nga-Hepé, turning to Edwin.

”No, no,” interposed Mr. Hirpington; ”it is I who must have young Lee. I have left a watchman at the ford ready to pounce on the thief if he should return there for his booty. I may want this boy any minute. Ride fast from camp to camp. Ask for any of my roadmen among them, and give my message to them. Ask if there are any rabbiters, and give the other in Hal’s name. I’ll make it right

with the old man. We shall throw our net so wide this Lawford can't escape our meshes. He must have got your bag about him, and the other money I suspect he has taken. We'll make him give it all up."

No one was noticing Edwin. He made a slight sound, which set Beauty off trotting, as he knew it would.

The delight of feeling his own good horse beneath him once again induced Nga-Hepé to quicken the trot to a gallop. He did not turn back to prolong the discussion, but only waved his arm in reply.

Edwin thought to increase the distance between them by running off in the opposite direction.

"No, no," said Mr. Hirpington; "just stand still by me. If he saw you begin to run, he would be after you in a minute. If the ape and the tiger lie dormant in some of us, the wild animal is rampant in him. Face him to the last."

Edwin looked up with admiring gratitude at the friend who had so skilfully delivered him.

They watched the vanishing figure as Edwin had watched him on the day of his first acquaintance with the Maori warrior.

"He will never give back my Beauty," he sighed, as horse and rider were lost to view in the darkling bush.

"Your horse may prove your ransom," said Mr. Hirpington, as they retraced their steps. He knew that the boy's life was no longer safe within the reach of the angry savage. What was he to do? Send him off to a friend at a distance until the affair had blown over? Yes; row him down the river and put him on board one of the Union steamers.

He began to question Edwin. "Had they any other friends in New Zealand?"

"None," answered the boy.

"More's the pity," said Mr. Hirpington; "for it will not do for you and your father to remain alone with Hal on that hill any longer. We must separate you from the rabbiters, for the gang will be sure to draw together soon. It is nearly a week since the eruption. I hope and trust some of my men may get my message, and come to us before Nga-Hepé returns."

"If any of the surveying party are about still, they would help us," said Edwin. "Mr. Ottley told me how to signal to them, and they answered at once. They said we were to signal again if we wanted them. The captain of the coaster is with them. He would be sure to come."

Mr. Hirpington knew nothing about the captain, but he assented. "Signal by all means. If we have Englishmen enough about us, we shall carry this through. We must get your father home. One or two men will soon mend the roof. I'll spare you Dunter; he would keep a sharp look-out. As the relief-parties disperse, we shall see who comes our way. Chance may favour us."

Then the two started again for the ford, leaving pussy once more in possession of the valley farm. Mr. Hirpington was struck when he saw the difference a single day's hard work had effected.

"I want to be by your side, Dunter, putting my own shoulder to the wheel, and we should soon fetch the mistress home. But we are in for an awful deal of trouble with these poor Lees, and we can't fail them. Somehow they do not square it with their Maori neighbours," he sighed.

"Not quite up to managing 'em yet, I guess," replied Dunter, as he showed his master a kitchen clear of mud, although a stranger still to the scrubbing-brush. A few loose boards were laid down as pathways to the bedroom doors, which all stood wide, letting in the clear river breeze from the windows beyond. Dunter was washing his hands to have a spell at the bedmaking, as he said.

"We are all relegated to the cellar," sighed his master, "and we cannot stay to enjoy even that. We shall have a row with Nga-Hepé's people if we are not on the alert. I want to get this young Lee out of their way. Where will he be safest for to-night?"

"Here with me, abed and asleep," answered the man unhesitatingly.

Mr. Hirpington glanced into the range of bedrooms, still left as at the moment when their occupants rushed out in the first alarm. "That will do," he assented. "Trust a boy to go to sleep. He will tumble in just as the beds are. Anything for his supper?"

"Plenty, but it is all poisoned with the horrid sulphurous stench. Something out of the tins is best," groaned Dunter.

"Give him one or two to open for himself, and shut him in. Drive that meal-barrel against the door, and don't you let him out till I come back," was Mr. Hirpington's parting charge, as he pushed off in his boat for the lake, to light the beacon-fires on the hills around it, to summon the help he so much needed.

Edwin, who had been hunting up the kaka, was disappointed to find himself left behind.

"All the better for you," retorted Dunter. "Take the bird in with you, and get a sound sleep, now you have the chance."

"Oh, you are good!" exclaimed Edwin, when he saw a jug of river-water, a tin of sardines, and another of brawn, backed by a hunch of mouldy bread, provided for his supper.

The door was shut, and he lay down without a suspicion of the kindly-meant imprisonment on which he was entering. Both men were sure he would never have consented to it had he known of their intentions beforehand. They did not want to make the boy too much afraid of his dusky neighbours; "for he has got to live in the midst of them," they said. "He will let them alone after this," thought Dunter. "He has had his scare for the present; let him sleep and forget

it."

The deep and regular breathing of a sleeper soon told Dunter his wish was realized.

It was a weary vigil for Mr. Hirpington. He kept his watch-fire blazing from dusk till dawn.

It was a wakeful, anxious night for Hal and Mr. Lee, who saw the beacon-lights afar, and wondered more and more over the unlooked-for sight.

"It is some one signalling for help," groaned Mr. Lee, feeling most painfully his inability to give it. It might be Edwin, it might be some stranger. He wanted his companion to leave him and go to see. But the old man only shook his head, and muttered, "There is no go left in me, I'm so nearly done."

Mr. Hirpington had given up hope. He had coiled himself in his blanket, laid his head on the hard ground, and yielded to the overwhelming desire for sleep.

The returning party of surveyors, who started on their march with the first peep of the dawn, caught the red glow through the misty gray. They turned their steps aside, and found, as they supposed, a sleeping traveller. It was the only face they had seen on the hills which was not haggard and pale. In the eyes of those toilworn men, fresh from the perils of the rescue, it seemed scarcely possible that any one there could look so ruddy and well unless he had been selfishly shirking his duty to his neighbour, and the greeting they gave him was biting with its caustic.

"There is no help for me out of such a set of churls," thought Mr. Hirpington bitterly, as he tried to tell his story, without making much impression, until he mentioned the name of Edwin Lee, and then they turned again to listen, for the captain was amongst them.

But as for this stranger, had he not food and friends of his own? what did he want of them? they asked.

"Help for a neighbour who has saved more lives than can be counted, and is now lying on the hills with a broken leg; help to convey him to his home," Mr. Hirpington returned, with increasing warmth, as he showed them there was but one way of doing that. They must carry the poor fellow through the bush on a stretcher. "When did colonists turn their back on a chum in distress?" he asked reproachfully.

"Shut up," said the captain, "and show us where he lies."

They would have set to work on the broken boughs and twisted them into a stretcher; but there was nothing small enough for the purpose left above ground. They must turn the tent into a palanquin once again, and manage as Hal had done before them.

One and all agreed if the Maoris had been using threatening language to

the suffering man's boy, they could not go their ways and leave him behind in the Maoris' country. "No, no," was passed from lip to lip, and they took their way to the hill.

Mr. Hirpington was himself again, and his geniality soon melted the frost amongst his new friends.

"So you have carried him blankets and food?" they said; and the heartiness of the "yes" with which he responded made them think a little better of him.

The steep was climbed. Mr. Lee heard the steady tramp approaching, and waked up Hal.

"Humph!" remarked the foremost man, as he caught sight of Hal. "I thought you said you brought them food."

"Are you sure you did not eat it all by the way?" asked another of Mr. Hirpington.

"Look at that poor scarecrow!" cried a third, as they scaled the hill and drew together as if loath to enter the gloom of the shadow flung by those tremendous trees. They gazed upwards at the giant branches, and closed ranks. More than one hand was pointing to the whitened skeleton.

"Do you see that?" and a general movement showed the inclination to draw back, one man slowly edging his way behind another. It left the captain in the forefront. Mr. Lee lifted a feeble hand.

"Oh, it is all right; there he is!" exclaimed the man of the sea, less easily daunted by the eerie qualms which seemed to rob his comrades of their manhood.

"We've come to fetch you home, old boy," he added, bending over Mr. Lee and asking for his sons. "Have you not two?"

"Yes, I've a brace of them," said the injured man, "Edwin, where is Edwin?"

"Edwin and Cuthbert," repeated the captain. "I have something to tell you about them. They are just two of the boldest and bravest little chaps I ever met with. If my mates were here they would tell you the same. But they have followed the fall of mud, and gone across the hills by Taupo. I was too footsore for the march, and so kept company with these surveying fellows."

The said fellows had rallied, and were grouped round Mr. Hirpington, who was pointing out the route they must take to reach the valley farm.

Two of the men started to carry their baggage to Mr. Hirpington's boat, intending to row to the ford and wait there for their companions. The canvas was taken down from the trees. Mr. Lee was bound to his board once more and laid within the ample folds, and slid rather than carried gently down the steep descent. The puzzle remained how one old man and two boys ever got him to the top alive. The party was large enough to divide and take turns at the carrying, and the walk was long enough and slow enough to give the captain plenty of opportunity to learn from Mr. Hirpington all he wanted to know about Mr. Lee

and his boys. He gave him in return a picture of the deserted coast. "Every man," he said, "was off to the hills when my little craft went down beneath the earthquake wave. It was these young lads' forethought kept the beacon alight when the night overran the day. They saw us battling with the waves, and backed their cart into the sea to pick us up. Mere boys, they had to tie themselves to the cart, sir. Think of that."

Mr. Hirpington was thinking, and it made him look very grave. What had he been doing in the midst of the widespread calamity? Not once had he asked himself poor Audrey's question, but he asked it now as the captain went on: "A shipwrecked sailor, begging his way to the nearest port, has not much in his power to help another. But I will find out a man who both can and will. I mean old Bowen. He is one of our wealthiest sheep-owners, and he stands indebted to these two lads on the same count as I do, for his grandson was with me."

"His run is miles away from here," said Mr. Hirpington. "You cannot walk so far. Look out for some of Feltham's shepherds riding home; they would give you a lift behind them."

The party halted at the ford, where Mr. Hirpington found several of his own roadmen waiting for him. Nga-Hepé had faithfully delivered his message.

"Ah!" said Mr. Hirpington, "I knew he would, and I am going to keep my part of the bargain too. We are always friendly." He turned to Hal, and explained how he had sent to his mates to meet him at the ford. "Until they come," he added, "rest and eat, and recover yourself."

Since the arrival of the boat, Dunter had been getting ready, for he foresaw an increasing demand for breakfast, and his resources were very restricted. But he got out the portable oven, lit his fires, not so much in the yard, correctly speaking, as over it. "Breakfasting the coach" had given every one at the ford good practice in the art of providing. When the walking-party arrived they found hot rolls and steaming coffee awaiting them without stint. It brought the sunshine into many a rugged face as they voted him the best fellow in the world.

They circled round the fire to enjoy them. Nobody went down into the house but Hal, who resigned the care of Mr. Lee somewhat loathly. "I should have liked to have seen you in your own house before we parted," he muttered.

"No, no," said Mr. Lee; "you have done too much already. You will never be the man again that you have been, I fear."

The hearty hand-clasp, the look into each other's faces, was not quickly forgotten by the bystanders.

The air was full of meetings and partings. Mr. Hirpington was in the midst of his men. He was bound by his post under government to make the state of the roads his first care.

"When will the coach be able to run again?" was the question they were

all debating, as a government inspector was on his way to report on the state of the hills; for few as yet could understand the nature of the unparalleled and unprecedented disaster which had overwhelmed them.

CHAPTER XVIII.
WHERO TO THE RESCUE.

The busy sounds of trampling feet, the many voices breaking the silence of the past days, roused Edwin effectually, and then he discovered that the door of the room in which he had slept resisted his most strenuous efforts to open it.

He called to Dunter to release him. No reply. A louder shout, accompanied by a sturdy kick at the immovable door, gave notice of his growing impatience. The kaka, which had been watching his determined efforts with exceeding interest, set up its cry of "Hoké, hoké!"

"We are caged, my bird," said Edwin; "both of us caged completely."

His eye wandered round in search of any outlet in vain. All his experiences since the night of the eruption had taught him to look to himself, and he turned to the window. It was securely shuttered and apparently barred.

"How strange!" he thought, as a sudden shock of earthquake made the iron walls around him rattle and vibrate, as if they too were groaning in sympathetic fear.

The kaka flew to him for protection, and strove to hide its head. Another tremor all around sent it cowering to the floor. Edwin stooped to pick it up, and saw that the thin sheet of iron which formed the partition between that room and the next had started forward. He found the knife which Dunter had left him, and widened the crack. He could slip his hand through it now. The walls were already twisted with the shocks they had sustained. He got hold of the iron with both hands, and exerting all his strength bent it up from the floor. His head went through. Another vigorous tug, another inch was gained; his shoulders followed, and he wriggled through at last in first-rate worm fashion.

"It is something to be thin," thought Edwin, as he shook himself into order on the other side. He was in another bedroom, exactly similar to the one he had left. Both were designed for the reception of "the coach;" but door and window were securely fastened, as in the other room. The sounds which had awakened him must have been the noise accompanying some departure, for he thought he

could distinguish the splash of oars in the water, and words of leave-taking. But the voices were strange voices, which he had never heard before, and then all was profoundly still.

It dawned on Edwin now that perhaps he had not been shut in by accident, but that something had occurred. He was getting very near the truth, for he recalled Nga-Hepé's threats, and wondered whether friend or foe had made him a prisoner.

Well, then, was it wise to keep making such a row to get out? He began to see the matter in a different light. He lay down on the bed in the second room, determined to listen and watch; but in his worn-out condition sleep overcame him a second time.

The kaka missed his society, and followed to perch on his pillow. He was awakened at last by its scream. The window was open, and the bird was fluttering in and out in a playful endeavour to elude a hand put through to catch it. Edwin was springing upright, when his recent experiences reminded him of the need of caution. But the movement had been heard, and a voice, which he knew to be Whero's, said softly, "Edwin, my brother, are you awake?"

"Awake? yes! What on earth is the matter?" retorted Edwin.

"Hush!" answered Whero, looking in and laying a finger on his own lips. "Come close to the window."

Edwin obeyed as noiselessly as he could. Whero held out his hand to help him on to the sill.

"Escape," he whispered; "it is for your life."

His hands were as cold as ice, and his teeth were set. Edwin hesitated; but the look on Whero's face as he entreated him not to linger frightened him, already wrought up to a most unnatural state of suspicion by the tormenting feeling of being shut in against his will.

Any way, he was not going to lose a chance of getting out. It was too unbearable to be caged like a bird. He took Whero's hand and scrambled up. The Maori boy looked carefully around. All was dark and still. Again he laid his finger on his lips.

"Trust in me, my brother," he murmured, pointing to his canoe, which was waiting in the shadow of the rushes.

"Where are we going?" asked Edwin under his breath.

"To safety," answered Whero. "Wait until we are out of hearing, and I will tell you all."

He grasped Edwin's hand, and led him down the bank to the shingly bed of the river.

"Stop a minute," interposed Edwin, not quite sure that it was wise to trust himself altogether to the guidance of the young Maori. "I wish I could catch sight

of Dunter. I want a word with him, and then I'll go."

"No, no!" reiterated Whero, dragging him on as he whispered, "No one here knows your danger. It is my father who is coming to take your life; but I will save you. Come!"

Edwin lay down in the bottom of the canoe as Whero desired, and was quickly covered over with rushes by the dusky hands of his youthful deliverer. A low call brought the kaka to Whero's shoulder, and keeping his canoe well in the shadows, he rowed swiftly down stream.

[image]

ANOTHER FLIGHT.

The brilliant starshine enabled him to steer clear of the floating dangers—the driftwood and the stones—which impeded their course continually.

"Are you hungry?" asked Whero, bending low to his companion. But Edwin answered, "No."

"Then listen," continued the excited boy. "My father has found this Lawford, the rabbiter you told me about. He was with one of the biggest gangs of pakehas, going back from the hills, every man with his spade. Had my father raised his club, it would have been quickly beaten out of his hand among so many. He knew that, and the pakehas talked fair. But this Lawford did not say as you say. He made my father believe it was you who asked him to go with you to the roadside, and dig between the white pines, to find a bag you had dropped in the mud; and so he dug down until you found it and took it away. You then went alone to the ruins at the ford, and he thinks you hid it in the hayloft. It was before the fordmaster and his people had returned. My father wanted these pakehas to come with him, and take it from you; but they all declared that was against the law of the pakehas. They would go their ways and tell their chief, who would send his soldiers for you. It was but a bag of talk. My father has been watching round the ford, waiting for them, yet they have not come."

"But, Whero," interposed Edwin, "Nga-Hepé cannot be sure that I was at the ford, for it was at the valley farm that he met me and took the horse."

"Does my father sleep on the track of an enemy?" asked Whero. "Has he no one to help him? My grandfather was following in the bush when he took the horse from you. The one went after Lawford, the other stayed to watch your steps. My grandfather saw you enter the ford; he saw the master leave it alone. A Maori eye has been upon the place ever since. They know you have not come out of the hole where you went in. Nothing has been done. What were the

fordmaster's promises? what were Lawford's? A bag of talk. My father feels himself the dupe of the pakeha. A geyser is boiling in his veins. If you meet him you fall by his club. He will wait until the day breaks; he will wait no longer. At nightfall the old man, my grandfather, rowed back to the little kainga our people have made on the bank of the river."

"A kainga?" interrupted Edwin, breathlessly. "What is a kainga?"

"That is our name for a little village without a wall," explained Whero, hurrying on. "He came. He called the men together. They have gone up with clubs and spears. They will come upon the ford-house with the dawn, and force their way in to find the bag. The master cannot resist so many. O Edwin, my brother, I said I saved my kaka when they would have killed it; shall I not save my friend? I wanted to go with the men, that I might tell my father again how you have stood by me. And should I not stand by you? But my mother, Marileha, held me back. My grandfather kept on saying, 'I knew from the first it was the farmer's son who had robbed you. Was it he who helped us out of the mud? I saw him not. It was Ottley, the good coachman. Have we not all eyes?' 'Go not with them,' said my mother. 'What is talk? Your father will make you the same answer. Do they know the young pakeha as we do?' So I listened to my mother, and we made our plan together. I knew our men could not conceal themselves in the water; they must all be hidden in the bush. I filled my canoe with rushes. I rowed after them up the river, gliding along in the shadows. I climbed up the bank, under the row of little windows at the back of the ford-house, and listened. I heard my kaka scream, and I guessed it was with you. I was sure you would take care of it. I could see the windows were all cracked and broken with the earthquakes. The shocks come still so often I knew I had only to wait, and when I felt the ground tremble under my feet I smashed the window. Nobody noticed the noise when everything around us was rocking and shaking. You know the rest. We have an hour before us yet. I am rowing for the coast as hard as I can. Once on board a steamer no Maori can touch you. I have plenty of money to pay for our passage. My grandfather came to see me when I was at school, and gave me a lot to persuade me to stay. He was taking his money to the Auckland bank, for fear another tana should come. Then we can go and live among the pakehas."

"But where shall we go?" asked Edwin, struck with the ability with which Whero had laid his plan, and the ease with which he was carrying it out. "I only wish I could have spoken to Dunter or Mr. Hirpington before we came away; for what will they think of me?"

"Think!" repeated Whero; "let them think. Could I betray my father to them? Our hearts are true to each other. We have given love for love. Would they believe it? No. Would they have let you come away with me, Nga-Hepé's son? No. One word, my brother, and you would have been lost. A steamer will

take us to school. They told me at Tauranga there was a school in every great town on the island, so it does not matter where it lands us; the farther off the better."

Marileha was watching for them on the bank. Whero waved his arms in signal of success, and shot swiftly past in the cold gray light of the coming day.

The eastern sky was streaked with red when the first farm-house was sighted. Should they stop and beg for bread? Whero was growing exhausted with continued exertion. He lifted his paddle from the water, and Edwin sat upright; then caution whispered to them both, "Not yet! wait a little longer." So they glided on beneath the very window of the room where Mrs. Hirpington was sleeping. One half-hour later she might have seen them pass.

The ever-broadening river was rolling now between long wooded banks. Enormous willows dipped their weeping boughs into the stream, and a bridge became visible in the distance as the morning sun shone out. The white walls of many a settler's home glistened through the light gauzy haze which hung above the frosted ground. Whero's aching arms had scarcely another lift left in them, when they perceived a little river-steamer with its line of coal-barges in tow.

Should they hail it and ask to be taken on board? No; it was going the wrong way. But Edwin ventured, now that the hills were growing shadowy in the dim distance, to sit upright and take his turn with the paddle, whilst Whero rested.

How many miles had they come? how many farther had they yet to go?

They watched the settlements on either side of the river with hungry eyes, until they found themselves near a range of farm-buildings which looked as if they might belong to some well-to-do colonist, and were in easy hail of the river-bank. They ran the canoe aground, and walked up to the house to beg for the bread so freely given to all comers through the length and breadth of New Zealand.

Invigorated by the hearty meal willingly bestowed upon a Maori boy on his way to school, they returned to the canoe; but the effort to reach the coast was beyond their utmost endeavour. Edwin felt they were now out of the reach of all pursuit, and might safely go ashore and rest, for Whero was ready to fall asleep in the canoe.

They were looking about for a landing-place, when, to his utter amazement, Edwin heard Cuthbert shouting to him from the deck of one of the little steamers plying up and down the river.

"By all that is marvellous," exclaimed Edwin, "if that isn't my old Cuth!"

He turned to his companion, too far under the influence of the dustman to quite understand what was taking place around him.

Cuthbert's shout of "Stop, Edwin, stop!" was repeated by a deep, manly

voice. The motion of the steamer ceased. Edwin brought the canoe alongside.

"Where are you bound for?" asked his old acquaintance the captain of the coaster.

"Come on board," shouted Cuthbert.

The captain repeated his inquiry.

Whero opened his sleepy eyes, and answered, "Christchurch."

"I am a Christchurch boy," cried another voice from the deck of the steamer. "But the Christchurch schools are all closed for the winter holidays."

There were hurried questions exchanged between the brothers after father and Effie. But the answers were interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Bowen.

"Pay your rower," he shouted to Edwin, "and join our party. I am taking your little brother and sister home, for I am going to the hills to make inquiries into the state of distress."

Before Edwin could reply, Whero, with a look at the old identity as if he defied the whole world to interfere with him, was whispering to Edwin,—

"These men are fooling us. They will not take us to Christchurch. They are going the wrong way."

Edwin was as much alarmed as Whero at the thought of going back; but he knew Mr. Bowen had no authority to detain him against his will.

"Our errand admits of no delay," he answered, as he resigned the paddle to Whero.

The canoe shot forward.

"Good-bye! good-bye!" cried Edwin.

Sailors and passengers were exclaiming at their reckless speed, for Whero was rowing with all his might. The number of the boats and barges increased as they drew nearer the coast.

"Lie down again amongst the rushes," entreated Whero, "or we may meet some other pakeha who will know your English face."

Their voyage was almost at its end. They were in sight of the goal.

Black, trailing lines of smoke, from the coasting-steamers at the mouth of the river, flecked the clear brilliancy of the azure sky.

Edwin was as much afraid as Whero of another chance encounter. Audrey might turn up to stop him. Some one might be sending her home by water, who could say? Another of the shipwrecked sailors might be watching for a coaster to take him on board. So he lay down in the bottom of the canoe as if he were

asleep, and Whero pulled the rushes over him.

CHAPTER XIX.
MET AT LAST.

The boys were recovering their equanimity, when the stiff sea-breeze blowing in their faces scattered the rushes and sent them sailing down the stream.

Whero drew his canoe to the bank as they came to a quiet nook where rushes were growing abundantly, that he might gather more.

Whero was out of his latitude, in a *terra incognita*, where he knew not how to supply the want of a dinner. How could he stop to discover the haunts of the wild ducks to look for their eggs? How could he reach the cabbage in the top of those tall and graceful ti trees, which shook their waving fronds in the wintry breezes? Ah! if it had been summer, even here he would not have longed in vain. His bundle of rushes was under his arm, when he noticed a hollow willow growing low to the river-side. A swarm of bees in the recent summer had made it their home, and their store of winter honeycomb had filled the trunk. Swarms of bees gone wild had become so frequent near the English settlements, wild honey was often found in large quantities. But to Whero it was a rare treat. He was far too hungry to be able to pass it by. He scrambled up the bank, and finding the bees were dead or torpid with the cold, he began to break off great pieces of the comb, and lay them on his rushes to carry away.

As he was thus engaged a man came through the clustering ti trees and asked him to give him a bit.

Whero was ready enough to share his spoils with the stranger, for there was plenty. As he turned to offer the piece he had just broken off, he saw he was an ill-looking man, with his hat slouched over his eyes, carrying a roll of pelts and a swag at the end of a stick, which had evidently torn a hole through the shoulder of the wretched old coat the man was wearing.

"Much craft on the river here?" asked the man. "Any barges passing that would take a fellow down to the coast?"

"I am a stranger here," answered Whero; "I do not know." As he spoke, his quick eye detected the stains of the hateful blue volcanic mud on the man's dirty clothes.

"I'll be off," he thought. "Who are you? You are from the hills, whoever

you are.”

He gave him another great piece of the honeycomb, for fear he should follow him to ask for more.

”That is so old,” objected the man; ”look how dark it is. Give me a better bit.”

But he took it notwithstanding, and tried to put it in his ragged pocket. The holes were so large it fell through.

”There is plenty more in the tree,” said Whero. ”Why do you not go and help yourself?” He took up his rushes and walked quickly to the canoe.

Edwin was making a screen for his face with the few remaining rushes. Whero saw that he was looking eagerly through them, not at the honeycomb he was bringing, but at the man on the bank.

”Do you know him?” asked Whero.

”Yes, yes; it is Lawford,” answered Edwin, under his breath. ”Look, he has got his rabbit-skins and his swag. How careful he is over it! He has set his foot on it whilst he gets the honey.”

The canoe was completely hidden by the tall tufts of bulrush growing between it and the willow, so they could watch unseen. The man was enjoying the honeycomb immensely. He was choosing out the best pieces. Whero gave Edwin the kaka, lest it should betray them.

”You are sure it is Lawford?” asked Whero.

”Yes, quite,” replied Edwin, beginning to eat.

The best of the honeycomb was higher up in the hollow trunk, where the rain could not wash out its sweetness. As Lawford was stretching up his arm to get at it, the sweet-brier, now so plentiful in New Zealand, that was growing about its roots caught the ragged old coat. They heard the rent; something fell out of the pocket on the other side.

He picked it up hastily, shaking off the dirt into which it had fallen. ”It is my father’s belt!” exclaimed Edwin. Whero was over the side of the canoe in a moment, and crawling through the bed of rushes with the noiseless swiftness of a wild animal watching its prey.

He saw Lawford unpack what New Zealanders call a swag—that is, a piece of oil-cloth provided with straps, which takes the place of knapsack or portmanteau amongst travellers of Lawford’s description. If a man has not even got a swag, he is reckoned a sundowner in colonial eyes. Swags are always to be bought at the smallest stores. No difficulty about that. As Whero drew nearer, he saw the swag was a new one. Everything else about the man looked worn out.

Lawford was unpacking it on the ground, throwing suspicious glances over his shoulder as he did so; but his recent companion seemed to have vanished. He stood up and looked all round him, but there was no one to be seen.

He took out a small bundle packed up in flax-leaves, which he began slowly to unwind.

Did not Whero know the bag which his own mother had woven? Could anything produce those tell-tale stains but the hateful mud from which it had been dug up?

Lawford wrapped the belt round the bag, and bound the flax-leaves over both as before. When he began to strap up the swag, Whero crept back to the canoe. His eyes were ablaze with passion.

"Pull off your coat," he whispered, "and leave it in the rushes. Take mine, or he will know you."

Edwin eagerly complied.

"Sleep deep; lie on your face!" whispered Whero, covering him over with the rushes he had brought. Then, before Edwin had the least idea of what he was purposing, Whero pushed out his canoe into the middle of the river, and paddled quickly to a handy landing-place a little farther on. He ran up the bank shouting to Lawford, "If you want a boat to go down river to meet a coaster, I'll row you in my canoe. But you will have to pay me."

"You would not work without that if you are a Maori, I know," retorted the other, taking out a well-worn purse.

"Come along," shouted Whero; "that's a' right." The unsuspecting Lawford took his seat in the canoe, and gave Edwin an unwary kick.

"Who have you got here?" he asked.

"A chum asleep," answered Whero, indifferently, as he stroked his kaka.

Edwin was feeling anything but indifferent. He knew not how to lie still. "If we are not dead unlucky," he thought, "we shall get all back—Nga-Hépé's bag, and father's belt too. We must mind we do not betray ourselves. If we can manage to go on board the same steamer, when we are right out to sea I'll tell the captain all; and we will give Lawford in charge as he lands." Such was Edwin's plan; but he could not be sure that Whero's was the same. He dare not exchange a look or sign; "for," he said to himself, "if Lawford catches sight of me, it is all over."

They passed another little steamer going up the river, with its coal-barge in tow.

Edwin felt as if Audrey's sedate face would be looking down upon him from its deck, but he was wrong.

"Nothing is certain but the unforeseen," he sighed; but he remembered his part, and the sigh became a snore, which he carefully repeated at intervals, for Lawford's benefit.

He little thought how soon his words would be fulfilled. The steamer was some way ahead, and Whero was making towards it steadily. The barge behind them was lessening in the distance, when the Maori boy fixed his fingers like a

vice in the strap of Lawford's swag, and upset his canoe.

Whero knew that Edwin could swim well, and that Lawford was unused to the water. Whero had detected that by the awkward way in which he stepped into the canoe.

The two struggled in the water for the possession of the swag. At last the man relinquished his hold, and Whero swam to shore triumphantly, leaving him to drown.

"He shall not drown!" cried Edwin, hastening towards him with vigorous strokes; but before he could reach the spot, Lawford had sunk. Edwin swam round and round, watching for him to rise.

It was a moment of anguish so intense he thought life, reason, all within him, would give way before the dreadful question, "What have I been? An accomplice in this man's death—all unknowing, it is true; but that cannot save him. Oh! it does matter," he groaned, "what kind of fellows a boy is forced to take for his chums."

The drowning man rose to the surface. Edwin grasped him by the coat. For a little while they floated with the current, until Lawford's weight began to drag Edwin down.

"Better die with him than live to know I have killed him," thought Edwin. One hurried upward glance into the azure sky brought back the remembrance of One who is ever present, ever near, and strong to save us to the uttermost. This upheld him. A tree came floating by; he caught at its branches. Lawford had just sense enough to follow his example and cling for dear life to the spreading arms.

A bargee, unloading his freight of coal upon the bank, perceived their danger, and swam out with a rope. He threw it to Lawford, but he missed it. A second was flung from the barge, and the noose at the end of it caught among the branches flapping up and down in the water. Men's lives were at stake, but as the value of the drift-wood would well repay its capture, they hauled it in with the bold young swimmer clinging to its boughs; for the first of the watermen who came to their help had seized Lawford, who relinquished his hold on the tree to snatch at the rope he brought him.

The two men swam to the barge. Edwin was drawn in to shore. He scrambled up the bank and looked around him for Lawford.

He saw the rabbiter half lying on the deck of the barge, panting with rage and fear, and shouted to him, "Safe! all safe!"

But Lawford answered with a bitter imprecation on the son of the cannibal, who had purposely flung him over, tossed him like a bone to the hungry sharks.

"Ask yourself why," retorted Edwin. "And what might not I have done to you, if I had never heard such words as, 'Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more'?"

”Come,” interposed the waterman to Lawford, ”shut up. Such language as this is wonderfully unbecoming from the mouths of fellows scarce snatched back from a watery grave, and we don’t care to hear it. Say what you will to the young ’un, he made a bold fight with the tide to save you. Let him alone.”

”Where were you bound for?” said the bargee aside to Edwin, as the boy poured out his gratitude for their timely assistance.

”I wanted to take a passage on board the steamer for Christchurch, and a Maori boy was rowing me down to meet it. This man was in the same canoe, and had robbed the boy who was rowing us. In the struggle between them the canoe was upset.”

”Go on with him, then,” advised the bargee, ”and give him in charge when he lands.”

”No,” answered Edwin resolutely, ”for the boy recovered his own. But this man is a bad one, and I would rather stay where I am than be in his company another hour.”

”Run off, then,” returned the bargee kindly; ”run until you are dry, and you will take no harm. As for this fellow, we will ship him off to the South Island, if that is where he wants to go.”

Edwin wrung the bargee’s horny hand, and followed his counsel with all speed. Lawford’s jeering laugh was ringing in his ears.

”He thinks I am running away from him; if he fancies I am afraid, he makes a mistake, that is all,” reflected Edwin, racing onward.

But where was Whero? A run of half-a-mile brought Edwin back to the river-brink again, but nearer to the spot where the canoe was upset. Whero had recovered it, and was looking about for his friend. Edwin could see his tiny ”dug-out” zigzagging round the boulders, and still rushing seawards, as he paused to reconnoitre a leafless bush on the water’s edge, which seemed to bear a fancied resemblance to the figure of a crouching boy. Edwin pulled off his jacket and waved it high in the air. He threw up his arms. He shouted. He did everything he could think of to attract Whero’s attention. But his back was towards him. All his signals seemed in vain, but not quite; for the kaka was swinging high up among the top-most branches of an enormous willow near the scene of the upset. From such an elevation it espied Edwin, and recognizing Whero’s jacket, which he was waving flag-like over his head, it swooped down upon him with an angry scream, and seizing the jacket by the sleeve, tugged at it with all its might. If Whero could not distinguish the shout of his friend from the rush of the water, the doleful ”Hoké” of his bird could not be mistaken, and Edwin soon saw him rowing swiftly towards them.

”What for?” demanded Whero; ”what for go bother about a thief? What is he good for? Throw him over, and have done with him.”

”Ah!” retorted Edwin, ”but we never should have done with him. The life we had let him lose would have lain like a terrible weight on us, growing heavier and heavier as we too drew nearer to the grave. For Christ himself refuses to lift the murderer’s load. But you do not know; you are not to blame, as I should have been.”

The overmastering feelings which prompted Edwin to say this shot from his eyes and quivered in his voice, and Whero, swayed by a force he could not understand, reaching him only by words, yielded to the influence of the light thus vibrating from soul to soul.

”Yes,” he said, reflectively, ”there is something greater than killing, and I want the greatest things.”

CHAPTER XX.

JUST IN TIME.

”What an ass Lawford must have been not to put on father’s belt! If he had, we could not have got it away from him,” said Edwin, as the two seated themselves on the sunny bank and unpacked the swag. Whero took out the precious bag, slung it round his own neck, and concealed it under his shirt. Edwin claimed his father’s belt, and as he shook off the mud and dirt which had accumulated upon it during its sojourn in Lawford’s pocket, he saw why the man had been unable to wear it. In his haste to get it off Mr. Lee whilst he lay unconscious, he had not waited to unbuckle it, for fear Hal should see him. He had taken out his pocket-knife and ripped it open. This helped to get it into his possession, and helped him to lose it too. The apparent gain was nothing but the earnest-money of the self-sought calamity which drove him a beggar from the gangway of the San Francisco mail before many months were over.

As the boys weighed the weight of coin in their hands, they nodded significantly at each other. No wonder it wore Lawford’s old pockets into holes before the end of his journey. Reluctant as he must have been, he was forced to buy his swag at one or other of the would-be townships, with their fine names, which dot the lower reaches of the bush road. They turned the poor unlucky bit of oil-cloth over and over with contempt and loathing, and finally kicked it into the river. Edwin folded his father’s belt together, and once more resuming his own jacket—to the great satisfaction of the kaka—he changed the belt into a

breastplate, and buttoned his jacket tightly over it.

To get back to the ford as quickly as they could was now their chief desire. It was aggravating—it was enough to make a fellow feel mad all over—to think that Effie and Cuthbert and the Bowens had passed them just that little bit too soon. Edwin grew loud in his regrets. Audrey would have called it crying over spilt milk. He could do nothing but think of Audrey and her philosophical proverbs. To practise the patience which was their outcome was a little more difficult. To sit down where they were and wait for the next steamer up stream to help them on their way was tantalizing indeed, when nobody could tell what might be taking place at the ford at that very moment.

But they had not long to wait, for the sight of a Maori boy, a Hau-Hau from the King country, in the heart of the hills, had a special attraction for every New Zealander coming from the coast. All were breathless for the particulars of the dire eruption, which had overwhelmed their sunny vales, and changed their glassy lakes to Stygian pools.

Not a sailor who could pull a rope, not a passenger lounging on its tiny deck, would willingly forego the chance of hearing something definite and detailed. The steamer stopped, and the man at the wheel asked eagerly for news, any more news from the doomed hills, looming gaunt and gray in the dim distance.

No sooner did they touch the deck than the two boys found themselves the centre of an earnest questioning group, athirst for the latest intelligence. It was a grave responsibility for both of them. They chose to remain on deck, keeping as near to the master of the vessel as they could without attracting attention. For each one knew that he was carrying his father's hoard, and their recent experiences made them regard the rough appearance of most of the men around them with mistrust.

It was a secret belief with both the boys that they were safer alone in their canoe; but Whero's strength was expended. He leaned on Edwin's arm for support, and was only restrained from falling into one of his cat-like dozes by the fear that another thievish hand might steal away his treasure while he slept. They could not return as they came; rest and food must be had.

A coil of rope provided the one, and the steward promised the other. But before the boys were permitted to taste the dinner so freely offered, Edwin had to describe afresh the strange and startling phenomena appearing on that night of terror, which rumour with her double tongue could scarcely magnify. He described them as only an eye-witness, with the horror of the night still over him, could describe them; and the men stood round him spell-bound. All the while his words were painting the vivid scenes, his thoughts were debating the very practical question, "Ought I, or ought I not, to spend some of father's money, now I have got it back, and buy more meat and flour and cheese to carry home?" He

thought of the widespread dearth, and he knew that the little store he had found unhurt at the valley farm might all be gone on his return, and yet he was afraid to venture with the wealth of gold he had about him into doubtful places. No, he dare not risk it again. They must trust for to-morrow's bread.

When they quitted the steamer the short wintry day had long passed its noon, and the wind blew cold around them as they returned to the open boat. Edwin was rowing now; for when they drew nearer to the hills, both he and Whero agreed that he must lie down again beneath the rushes. The kaka had hidden its head under its wing when the exchange was made. The weary Maori boy could scarcely make his way against roaring wind and rushing water. They were long in getting as far as the ravine where the tiny kainga nestled.

Whero moored his canoe in a little cleft of the rock, where it was concealed from view, and landed alone. Edwin's heart beat fast when he heard light steps advancing to the water's edge. His hand was cold as the ice congealing on the duck-weed as a dusky face peered round the ledge of rock and smiled. It was Marileha.

"Good food make Ingarangi boy anew," she said, putting into Edwin's hand a steaming kumara, or purple-coloured Maori potato. Whilst he was eating it Whero brought round a larger "dug-out," used now by his father. It was piled with savoury-smelling roasted pig, newly-baked cakes of dirty-looking Maori wheat, with roasted wekas or wingless moor-hens hanging in pairs across a stick. Like a wise woman, Marileha had spent the day in providing the savoury meat much loved by one she wanted to propitiate.

"They have not yet come back," said Whero, beckoning to Edwin to join him in the larger canoe, where he could be more easily concealed beneath the mats on which the provisions were laid.

"We are going to take them their supper," added Whero. "When the men are eating I can get my father to hear me; then I put this bag in his hands and tell him all. Then, and not till then, will it be safe for you to be seen."

"The Ingarangi boy lies safely here," whispered Marileha, smiling, happy in her womanly device for keeping the peace. "My skirt shall cover him. I leave not the canoe. You, Whero, shall take from my hand and carry to your father the supper we bring to himself and his people."

Edwin guessed what Marileha's anticipation might embrace when he found his pillow was a bundle of carefully-prepared flax fibres, enveloping little bunches of chips—the splints and bandages of the bush. Edwin had a vision of broken heads and gaping spear-thrusts, and a ride in an ambulance after the battle. What had taken place that day?

But the question was shortly answered. They were not bound for the lake, or the ruins of the Rota Pah, but the nearer wreck of the ford-house.

His visions grew in breadth and in detail; smoke and fire were darkening their background when the canoe stopped at the familiar boating-stairs. What did he see? A party of dusky-browed and brawny-armed fellows hard at work clearing away the last remains of the overturned stables.

Mr. Hirpington, giving away pipes and tobacco with a lavish hand, was walking in and out among them, praising the thoroughness of their work, and exhorting them to continue.

"Pull them down," he was repeating. "We will not leave so much as a stick or a stone standing. If the bag is there we will have it. We must find it."

The emphasis on the "will" and the "must" called forth the ever-ready smiles of the Maori race. Mother and son were radiant.

With a basket of cakes in his hand and a joint of roast-pig on a mat on his head, Whero marched up the landing-stairs, and went in amongst his countrymen as they threw down their tools and declared their work was done.

He was talking fast and furiously in his native tongue, with many outbursts of laughter at the expense of his auditors. But neither Edwin nor Mr. Hirpington could understand what he was saying, until he flung the bag at his father's feet with a shout of derision—the fifth commandment being unknown in Maori-land.

Nga-Hepé took up the bag and changed it from hand to hand.

Kakiki Mahane leaned forward and felt its contents. "Stones and dirt," he remarked, choosing English words to increase the impression.

"Sell it to me, then," put in Mr. Hirpington. "What shall I give you for it? three good horses?"

He held out his hand to receive the bag of many adventures, and then the cunning old chief could be the first to bid Nga-Hepé open it and see. But the remembrance of the tana was too vivid in his son-in-law's mind for him to wish to display his secreted treasure before the greedy eyes of his tribe. He was walking off to deposit it in Marileha's lap, when Mr. Hirpington intercepted him, saying in a tone of firm control and good-natured patience, in the happy proportion which gave him his influence over his unmanageable neighbours: "Come now, that is not fair. Untie the bag, and let us see if it has come back to you all right or not. You have pulled down my stables to find it; who is to build them up again?"

"Give us four horses for the loss of time," said one of the Maoris.

"Agreed, if you will give me five for the mischief you have done me," he answered readily.

"You can't get over him," said Nga-Hepé. "It is of no use talking."

Kneeling down on the landing-stairs, he opened his treasure on his wife's now greasy silk, displaying sharks' teeth, gold, bank-notes, greenstone, kauri gum—every precious thing of which New Zealand could boast. They began to count after their native manner.

Mr. Hirpington stepped aside to Kakiki. ”You took my advice and Ottley’s: you carried your money to the Auckland bank. Make Nga-Hepé do the same.”

”Before another moon is past I will,” the old chief answered, grasping the hand of his trusty counsellor, who replied,—

”It may not be lost and found a second time.”

”True, it may not,” said the old gray-beard, ”if, as he meant to do, he has killed the finder.”

Mr. Hirpington started and turned pale.

”He has not killed the finder,” said Marileha, rising with the dignity of a princess; and taking Edwin by the hand, she led him up to Mr. Hirpington. The ”Thank God” which trembled on his lips was deep as low. But aloud he shouted, ”Dunter, Dunter! here is your bird flown back to his cage. Chain him, collar him, keep him this time, if you brick him in.”

Dunter’s hand was on the boy’s shoulder in a moment. Edwin held out his to Nga-Hepé, who took the curling feathers from his own head-dress to stick them in Edwin’s hair. The boy was stroking the kaka’s crimson breast. He lifted up his face and shot back the smile of triumph in Whero’s eyes, as Dunter hauled him away, exclaiming, ”Now I’ve got you, see if I don’t keep you!”

CHAPTER XXI.
THE VALLEY FARM.

Edwin laughed a merry laugh as Mr. Hirpington and his man led him away between them. A ladder had been found in the pulling down of the stables. It greatly assisted the descent into the ”dungeonized” kitchen, as Edwin called it. But within, everything was as dirty and comfortless as before.

”They laugh who win,” he whispered, undoing a single button of his jacket, and displaying a corner of the wash-leather belt. ”Where is father?” he asked, looking eagerly along the row of open doors, and singling out his recent cage as the most comfortable of the little dormitories. A glance told him it was not without an inhabitant. But it was Hal’s voice which answered from the midst of the blankets, in tones of intense self-congratulation, ”I’m in bed, lad. Think o’ that. Really abed.”

”And mind you keep there,” retorted Edwin, looking back to Mr. Hirpington for a guiding word, as he repeated impatiently, ”Where’s father? Has he seen the

captain?"

"Father," echoed Mr. Hirpington, "is safe, safe at home; and we will follow him there as soon as I get rid of these troublesome guests."

"Sit down, boy, if you do not mind the mud and cold. Sit down and eat," said Dunter kindly. He opened the kitchen cupboard, and pointed to some biscuits and cheese which he had reserved for their own supper. "It is all they have left us," he sighed. "We have fed them a whole day just to keep the Queen's peace. We thought they would eat us up when they marched down on us, clamouring for you and the bag you had stolen from Nga-Hepé and hidden in our hayloft. But master is up to 'em. 'Well,' says he, 'if the bag has ever been in my hay-loft, it is there still; and if it is there, we'll find it. Pull the loft down. Clear out every stick and stone that is left of my stables, an' welcome.' You see, it must all be cleared down before we could begin to build up again," added Dunter, confidentially.

"It was a happy thought," said Mr. Hirpington, rubbing his hands, "and it took. I ran myself to set the example, and knocked over the shaky door-post, and then the work of demolition went forward with a will. Nothing like a good spell of hard work to cool a man down. Of course they did not find the bag. But Nga-Hepé's neighbours have found so many old nails and hooks and hinges they have stuck to their task; they are at it yet, but the dusk will disperse them. Their excuse is gone. Still," he went on, "'all is well that ends well.' You might have found the place a smouldering ash-heap. We know their Maori ways when they mean to dislodge an English settler. They come as they came last night, set fire to his house, pull up his fences, and plough up his fields. The mud preserved me from anything of that sort beginning unawares. Nothing would burn. We have picked up more than one charred stick, so they had a try at it; and as for the fences, they are all buried. When the coast is clear you and I must prepare for a starlight walk through the bush to your father's farm."

"Will they molest father?" asked Edwin anxiously.

"No, no," answered both in a breath. "Your father's farm is on the other side of the river, not on Hau-Hau ground. It belonged to another tribe, the Arewas, who are 'friendless,' as we say. We told you your father was safe if we could but get him home. And so am I," continued Mr. Hirpington, "for I can always manage my neighbours and appreciate them too; for they are men at heart, and we like each other. And there is a vein of honour in Nga-Hepé and his son according to their light which you may safely trust, yet they are not civilized Englishmen."

"But Whero will be—" Edwin began; but his bright anticipations for the future of his Maori friend were cut short by a strange, unearthly sound—a wild, monotonous chant which suddenly filled the air. As the dusk fell around them, the Maoris still sitting over Marileha'a supper had begun to sing to drive away the fairies, which they imagine are in every dancing leaf and twittering bird. Then,

one by one, the canoes which had brought them there began to fill, and as the swarthy faces disappeared, silence and loneliness crept over the dismantled ford.

Nga-Hepé proved his friend's assertions true, for Beauty was honourably returned. They found him tied by the bridle to the only post on the premises which had been left standing. Perhaps it had been spared for the purpose. The gun was loaded, such wraps as Dunter could get together were all put on, and Edwin and Mr. Hirpington started. The first step was not a pleasant one—a plunge into the icy river and a scramble up the opposite bank, from which even Beauty seemed to shrink. But the gallop over the frosty ground which succeeded took off the comfortless chill and dried their draggled coats. Mr. Hirpington got down and walked by Beauty's head, as they felt the gradual descent beginning, and heard the splash of the rivulet against the stones, and saw the bright lights from Edwin's home gleam through the evening shadows. A scant half-hour that almost seemed a year in its reluctance to slip away, a few more paces, and Beauty drew up at the gateless enclosure. A bar thrown across kept them outside. A gleeful shout, a thunderous rain of blows upon the bar, and the impatient stamping of Beauty's feet brought Cuthbert and Arthur Bowen almost tumbling over one another to receive them. The welcome sound of the hammer, the stir and movement all about the place, told Edwin that the good work of restoration had already begun. The bar went down with a thud. It was Cuthbert, in his over-joy at seeing his brother, who had banged it to the ground. The noise brought out the captain.

"It is a short journey to Christchurch," exclaimed Cuthbert. "How many miles?"

"I'm in no mood for arithmetic," retorted Edwin, bounding up the remnant of a path beside the captain, with Cuthbert grasping him by the other hand. Arthur Bowen took Beauty by the bridle.

"I'll see after him," said Mr. Hirpington.

But young Bowen responded gaily, "Think me too fresh from Greek and Latin to supper a horse, do you? I'll shoe him too if occasion requires it, like a true-born New Zealander."

"Brimful of self-help," retorted Mr. Hirpington; "and, after all, it is the best help.— Well, well," he added, as he paused in the doorway, "to take the measure of our recuperative power would puzzle a stranger. You beat me hollow."

He had walked into the sometime workshop; but all the debris of the recent carpentering had been pushed aside and heaped into a distant corner, while an iron chimney, with a wooden framework to support it, had been erected in another.

"In simply no time," as Mr. Hirpington declared in his astonishment.

To which the old identity, Mr. Bowen, retorted from the other room, asking

if two men with a hammer to hand and a day before them were to be expected to do nothing but look at each other.

Mr. Lee was reposing on a comfortable bed by the blazing fire, with Effie standing beside him, holding the tin mug from which he was taking an occasional sip of tea; everything in the shape of earthenware having gone to smash in the earthquake. The kitten was purring on the corner of his pillow, stretching out an affectionate paw towards his undefended eyes.

"I am reaping the fruit of your good deeds," smiled the sick man. "Is not this luxury?"

With a leap and a bound Edwin was at the foot of the bed, holding up the recovered belt before his father's astonished eyes.

Audrey peeped out from the door of the store-room. With a piece of pumice-stone to serve her for a scrubbing-brush, she was endeavouring to reduce its shelves to cleanliness and order.

"You here!" exclaimed Edwin, delighted to find themselves all at home once more; "ready for the four-handed reel which we will dance to-night if it does not make father's head ache," he declared, escaping from Effie's embracing arms to Audrey's probing questions about that journey to Christchurch.

"Since you must have dropped from the skies yourself to have reached home at all, it need excite no wonder," he said.

"Me!" she replied demurely. "Why, I arrived at my father's door, like a correct young lady, long enough before any of you wanderers and vagabonds thought of returning. Our good friend the oyster-captain, as Cuth will call him, sent me a message by one of Mr. Feltham's shepherds that my father wanted me to nurse him, and I hastened to obey. Mrs. Feltham lent me her own habit, and I rode home with my groom, behind me, in grand style for an honest charwoman just released from washing teacups and beating eggs. My wages taken in kind loaded the panniers of my steed, and I felt like a bee or an ant returning to the hive with its store of honey."

"That is my best medicine," murmured Mr. Lee, as the merry laugh with which Audrey's words were greeted rang through the house.

Mr. Lee was slowly counting his remaining coin. He looked at Audrey. Without another word she led her brothers away, Effie following as a matter of course, and left him with his friend.

"Come and look round," whispered Audrey to Edwin.

"And help," he answered. "It does not square with my ideas to let strangers put a prop against the falling roof and I stand idle."

"Conceited boy!" cried Audrey, "to match your skill against our oyster-captain's."

She ran lightly down the veranda steps and pointed to the bluff sailor, ham-

mering at a sheet of iron he had brought from the ruins of the stable to patch the tumble-down walls of the house.

With the rough-and-ready skill of a ship-carpenter he had set himself to the task the moment he arrived.

"No, no thanks, my boys," he said, as Edwin and Cuthbert looked up at the strong framework of beam and cross-bar which he had erected in so brief a space, and burst into exclamations of wonder and delight.

"It was the one thing we could not do; it was beyond us all," added Edwin. "It is true, the poles lay ready on the ground and the nails were rusting on the workshop floor, but the skill that could splice a beam or shore up a rafter was not ours. There was nobody about us who could do it."

"I saw what was wanting when I helped to bring your father home, and it set my compass, so I came back to do it. A Jack-of-all-trades like me I knew could make the old place ship-shape in a couple of days, and when the old gentleman and his grandson saw what I was after, their coats were off in a moment, and they have worked beside me with a will all day," replied the captain.

Finding Mr. Lee awake, Mr. Bowen had taken the opportunity to join the quiet council over ways and means which he was holding with his friend.

"Now just look on me as a neighbour, for what is fifty miles in New Zealand? and remember I do not want anybody to tell me this disaster leaves you both in an awkward strait. If there is one thing we have learned in our far-off corner in the Southern Ocean, it is to practise our duty to our neighbour. Dr. Hector bears me out in thinking that after such an eruption as this there will probably be peace in the hills again, perhaps for hundreds of years. No one remembers such an outbreak of subterranean force, no one ever heard of such an one before, and all we can do is to help each other. If a loan will be of use to you to tide over it, just tell me the figure, and I'll write it down. No counting, Mr. Lee, if you please; I tell you the debtor account is all on my side. Those little lads—"

The thud of the captain's hammer drowned his voice.

"The same feeling," he added, "which lends its ring to that hammer points my pen, and you must just remember, while you are lying here, how we all envy you your quartette."

They could hear the merry laughter from the group in the veranda, where Audrey was singing,—

"What lads ere did our lads will do;
Were I a lad, I would follow him too."

Effie gravely expostulated with her sister. "I really do think, Audrey, we ought

to say now what our lads have done."

"Ah! but I fear they have something more to do," cried Edwin, suddenly catching his little sister round the waist, not in play but in panic fear, as he heard the trampling as of many horses crossing the bush. He whirled her into the house and pushed Audrey after her, as the captain ceased nailing to listen.

Arthur Bowen was by Edwin's side as he spoke. With one impulse the bar was lifted to its place, and the trio retreated to the veranda. A long train of pack-horses came winding down the valley.

Which was coming—friend or foe?

The boys stood very close to each other, ready to bolt in-doors at a moment's warning. Edwin was at once the bravest and the most apprehensive.

"You had better go to father and leave us two to watch," he said to his brother.

"But old Cuth won't go," muttered the little fellow, squaring his shoulders and planting his foot firmly on the ground as he took his stand between them.

"Holloa! ho! oh!" shouted a cheery voice they all knew well.

"It is Ottley! it is Ottley!" was echoed from side to side.

Down went the bar once more. Out ran the trio, leaping, jumping, chasing each other over the uneven ground, strewed with the broken arms from the fallen giants of the neighbouring forest. They raced each other across the valley in the exuberance of their boyish spirits, let loose by the momentary relief from the pressure and the fetters which had been crushing them to earth.

"Until the coach can run again," said Ottley, as they came up to him laughing and panting, "I have started a pack-horse team to carry up supplies. The roadmen are rebuilding their huts, and as I came along they warned me one and all to avoid the ford to-night. They were anticipating a bit of warm work up there with their Maori neighbours, and were holding themselves ready to answer the fordmaster's signal at any moment. They told me of a crossing lower down the stream. The fords were sure to shift their places after such a time as we have had. I found myself so near the valley farm, I turned aside to water my horses at the rivulet, and rest for the night."

"Come along," cried Edwin; "father will be glad to see you. But there has been no scrimmage at the ford; trust Mr. Hirpington for that."

Ottley paused to release his weary team, and let them slake their thirst with the so-called water at their feet, which really was not all sulphur and sludge.

"I am not sure," he said compassionately, as he brought up the tired horses one after another, "that the poor animals have not had a worse time of it than we men; for their food and drink are gone, and it grieved me to see them dying by the wayside as I came."

The boys helped him to measure out the corn and hobble them for the night

in the shelter of the valley.

Then Ottley looked around to ascertain the state of Mr. Lee's new fields. Three men were lingering by the site of the charcoal fires.

"There are the rabbiters," said Cuthbert, "just as usual!"

"Nonsense," returned his brother; "the gang is dispersed."

"Well, there they are," he persisted; and he was right.

They marched on steadily, as if they were taking their nightly round, but instead of the familiar traps, each one carried a young pig in his arms.

Pig-driving, as Pat does it at Ballyshannon fair, is a joke to pig-carrying when the pig is a wild one, born and reared in the bush. On they came with their living burdens, after a fashion which called forth the loudest merriment on the part of the watchers.

"Is Farmer Lee about again?" they asked, as they came up with the pack-horse train.

Ottley shook his head and pointed to the laughing boys beside him, saying, "These are his sons."

"No matter," they replied, with a dejected air. "We cannot get our gang together. Hal is down, and Lawford missing. We've been hunting a pig or two over Feltham's run, and we've brought 'em up to Farmer Lee. They are good 'uns, and they will make him three fat hogs by-and-by, if he likes to keep 'em. We have heard something of what that Lawford has been after, and we are uncommon mad about it, for fear the farmer should think we had any hand in it."

"He knows you had not," returned Edwin. "It is all found out. But I do not think Lawford will show his face here any more. I am sure my father will be pleased with such a present, and thank you all heartily." As he spoke he held out his hand, and received a true old Yorkshire gripe.

"There are three of us," he went on, glancing at Arthur and Cuthbert; "but can we get such gifties home?"

"And what will you do with them when they are there?" asked Arthur; "unless, like Paddy, you house them in the corner of the cabin."

Ottley, always good at need, came to the help, and proposed to lend his empty corn-bags for the transit.

Back they went in triumph, each with a sack on his back and a struggling pig fighting his way out of it.

The kicking and the squealing, the biting and the squalling, the screams and the laughs, broke up the conference within doors, and augmented the party at the supper, which Audrey and Effie were preparing from the contents of the panniers.

"The pack-horse train a realized fact!" exclaimed Mr. Bowen.—"Come, Arthur; that means for us the rest of our journey made easy. We must be ready

for a start at any hour."

"If your time is to be my time," interposed Ottley, who was entering at the moment, "we shall all wait for the morning."

"Wait for the morning," repeated the captain, as he lit his pipe. "There is a bigger world of wisdom in that bit of advice than you think for. It is what we have all got to do at times, as we sailors soon find out."

A light tread beneath the window caught Edwin's ear. Surely he knew that step. It was—it must be Whero's.

He was out on the veranda in a moment. There was his Maori friend wandering round the house in the brilliant starshine, stroking his kaka.

"I cannot live upon my hill alone," said Whero. "I have followed you, but I should cry hoké to you in vain. I will take my bird and go back to Tuaranga—it will be safe among my Maori school-fellows—until hunger shall have passed away from the hills."

Edwin's arm went round him as he cried out gleefully, "Ottley, Ottley, here are two more passengers for the pack-horse train!"

THE END.

* * * * * * * *

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