

*J. R. Gurney's last trip South with A. K. Warren
& Gurney's farewell letter*

I asked for news of Mr and Mrs Lorne Williams, and heard that they were back from their Australian tour and had reached Nelson on the homeward journey. They were expected to arrive back at Weleka within a week or so. We set out again on the five or six miles of level down the flats towards the ford of Cook's River. It was the weekly mail day, and the road was quite busy. We met Bob Foster driving in, with Jim McGuire riding along beside him. We made a date for lunch with Bob on our way back, over at his ranch on the south side of Cook's, and I invited Jim to take a run down for a cup of tea in his old haunt at the Iron Hut. But he didn't seem to hanker after it.

A little further on we met Bill Breeze and Peter Vincent riding in from their bush-falling camp between the Fox and Cook rivers. Then Newman's mail car which had passed us on the way over, had stopped to collect mail, passengers and lunch at the hut by Fred Williams' new woolshed. We met Harry Busch there, doing his best to disguise the smile that wouldn't come off, on his way over to Canterbury to be married. We gave him the assurance of our best wishes.

When we came to the actual ford, there was very little water in Cook's, though, as usual, it was so porridgy that one couldn't in the least tell by merely looking how far the bottom was from the top. However, I'm glad to say it held no surprises for us. The clouds had been piled in a bit round the tops of the mountains, so that we couldn't see the high peaks, which was a pity. Every now and then a gleaming shoulder of Cook or Tasman would show up, but only enough to give a hint of the bulk beyond. But we had a good view of the Fox Glacier, coming cascading down in great crystal ripples from the snow-fields above, to be lost in the dark green of its bush-covered gorge.

It was very hot on the two-mile stretch of stones that is Cook's River-bed, and it was pleasant to be in the shade of the great trees through which the road drives to the Saltwater Creek. I had hoped for a clear view of the peak of Mount Cook from there, but the clouds still hung and all we got was the hint of a great shoulder again. Before we came to Black Creek, with its invisible waterfall roaring away in the bush, we met Tom Toohey on his way up on a rush trip from Okuru. He had been down there fixing up the

cheese-making plant which Nolan Bros. have been installing. He seemed to think Okuru was a long way off by horseback. We gave him directions for finding the ford in Cook's and then travelled cheerfully on to Mrs Scease's expectant teapot, and that day's journey's end. Mrs Scease rubbed her eyes several times to make sure that it was really I who was coming in the sunshine. But I hastened to explain that Mr Warren was in charge of the weather this trip. When we had dealt faithfully with a cup of tea and perhaps a shade less faithfully with the merits of Mrs Scease's skim-milk cow, I left my companion contentedly draped over the length and breadth of a sofa, while I went on to the Scott homestead to report my presence and send my usual wire. As I rode down, I met Harry Scease coming up with the mail, mounted on a gay-looking draught horse. I found Walter and Mrs Scott and their household well, and also passed the time of the day with Charlie Smith who was heading for the Far South in charge of His Majesty's mail. I also met Alec Wilson and Claude Morel, who had come to swell the numbers of the citizens of Karangarua.

We'd service at Mrs Scease's that evening, to which Alec Wilson came up, and Stanley Scott from across the river. And there wasn't a sign of a cloud in the sky when we turned in that night.

Neither was there any sign of one when we turned out for an early Com-

munion Service next morning (Tuesday, 29th) the day was absolutely radiant, and my celluloid dome turned pinker and pinker. Warren, who was much better thatched, escaped with a highly-tinted nose. We turned up the Karangarua River to tell Mr and Mrs Harvey that we were on the road, and to make an assignation with them for our journey back. Then we struck out across the Karangarua river-bed, fording the river with the greatest ease just above the top of the flax island. The water was almost clear—an unheard of thing for this time of the year. We made very good going of the long straight stretches of level over the eight miles to Bob Thompson's, across the little Manakaiaua River. We found all well there and old Sam Fiddian up and about, although he had had a bad turn or two lately. So on we went to Bruce Bay and the sparkling waters of Jacob's River gliding down between the green banks over the only quiet ford in Westland.

We found Bob Ritchie to be away north, but expected any day. Mrs Ritchie entertained us very hospitably to lunch, and while we were there Bill Hawkins happened in, so we were able to get the latest thing in siderial time (which is N.B., not the time derived from Mr Sidey). While we were preparing to go, Bill went over to the Mahuika homestead, and when we met him on the road later on, he told us of a little conversation that had taken place there. They'd asked him who it

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was that had come along to Mrs Ritchie. "That's Mr Young," said Bill. "Oh," said they, gazing at Mr Warren, then turning their eyes on me, "And who's the little fellow with him?" Well now! I ask you! The "little fellow" indeed! I'd have ridden by very proud and haughtily with head held high if I hadn't had such a crick in my neck myself from continually having to look up to my companion.

So we rode cheerfully along the three or four miles of good springy going to the sands of Bruce Bay. The said sands were really very loose fine gravel and exceedingly heavy going, but the sea was such a wonderful blue (almost purple) and the breakers so crisply white, and the long dark headlands so clear and sharp cut against the sky that who would want to hurry? Certainly not I.

But we made good time again up the lovely track by the Mahitahi River, and through the beautiful miles of pack-track towards the Paringa River. At the Paringa swamp hut, before we came to the river, we found the four stalwart keepers of the road camped. Tut Mahuika, George Bannister, Dick Trevallan and Billy Wilson. We passed the time of day with them and were much entertained by a natural caricature of a pack-horse which they had found in the bush—a tree trunk with appropriate branches for legs and wanting nothing but a suitable head. They'd fitted it up with the remnants of an old pack-saddle and declared it to be at the disposal of tourist parties for a reasonable fee. However, we didn't engage its services, but travelled on across the Paringa River and along the mile or so of track to the Paringa Hut. On the way we overtook Alec Gunn, who was returning from his bushfelling to this same hut, where he had his abode.

While we awaited the boiling of the billy, Warren and I strolled over to the river for a dip. Though the sunshine was still hot, the water came straight off the ice, and the millions of sandflies declared most eloquently by their attentions that they considered us to be gentlemen of very good taste. It was one of the occasions when I did not grudge my companion his superiority in bulk. He could entertain a wonderful number of sandflies!

That evening there were odd wisps of cloud drifting about and I made gloomy prophecies for the morning. However,

we didn't let them affect our appetites, and sat in front of the fire afterwards swapping stories and projects for the culling of deer.

Next morning (Wed. Nov. 30th) we were astir early. And sure enough the sky was heavily overcast. However, it hadn't yet begun to drip any drips by the time we'd breakfasted and (by a combination of skill and luck) caught our horses. So we gave Alec our thanks for his hospitable entertainment and took to the pack-track again for the eleven long, rough, stony miles to the Blue River and the foot of the Big Hill. These same 11 miles, by the way, are immensely improved in going and reduced in length by the attentions that Tut Mahuika and his merry men have been paying to them during the last three months. The removal of outstanding boulders has made them much less uncompromising for the horses' feet. So much easier is the going that it seems as if they've cut a length or two out of the track here and there. Nevertheless its any amount long enough still.

The wild little Blue River was looking very picturesque cascading among its dark boulders. But I never saw so little water in it in the springtime. We walked a good bit of the way up the steep five miles climb of the Big Hill. The clouds had been gathering up all the time and we met a misty shower or two when we reached the "top going" which necessitated the donning of our oilskins for the first

time on the trip. I was sorry it was happening just then, as it spoilt the seven or eight miles of track, niched as it is, away up on the Matakaitaki Range, and from a height of 2,200 feet overtaking a tumble of picturesque gorges and hills away six miles to the sea.

But the time we reached Chasm Creek the rain was much heavier and began to come down in the long straight streaks so familiar to travellers on that track. It kept up all the way to the Iron Hut at the top of the long eight mile descent. But it was purely a local shower, and by the time we'd crossed Slippery Face (which was in splendid order) we began to get out from under it, and by the time we were coming down to the top crossing of Copper Creek, even the drizzle had stopped and the track was quite dry again. As we entered the last straight heading down to the Copper Creek we were confronted by a moving picture of light and shade passing swiftly over the landscape. It materialised into Tommy Duggan mounted on a young piebald mare which he was breaking in. His mount had got the idea that she was being pursued by her crupper and that she'd like to leave it behind. However, the only thing she did succeed in leaving behind was Tommy's disreputable old felt hat, to his wearing of which she had a marked objection. At least she took him out from under it as often as she could. However Tom, persuaded

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