

COLONIAL MEMORIES

I

OLD NEW ZEALAND

It has so chanced that quite lately I have heard a good deal of this beautiful and flourishing portion of our "Britain-over-sea," and these reports have stirred the old memories of days gone by when it was almost a *terra incognita*—as indeed were many of our splendid Colonial possessions—to the home-dweller. But the home-dweller proper hardly exists in this twentieth century, and the globe-trotter has taken his place. Even the latter sobriquet was unknown in my day, and I was regarded as quite going into exile when, some eight-and-thirty years ago, I sailed with my husband for his sheep-station on the Canterbury Plains. As far as I was concerned, the life there afforded the sharpest of all sharp contrasts, but it was none the less happy and delightful for that.

The direct line of passenger-ships only took us as far as Melbourne, and then came a dismal ten or

A

2 COLONIAL MEMORIES

twelve days in a wretched little steamer, struggling along a stormy coast before the flourishing Port Lyttelton of the present day (a shabby village in 1865) was reached. Yet the great tunnel through the Port Hills was well on its way even then, and the railway to connect the port and the young town of Christchurch was confidently talked of. Even in those early days, the new-comer was struck by the familiar air of everything; and, so far as my own experience goes, New Zealand is certainly the most English colony I have seen. It never seems to have attracted the heterogeneous races of which the population of other colonies is so largely composed. For example, in Mauritius the Chinese and Arab element is almost as numerous as the French and English. In Trinidad there are large colonies of Spanish and German settlers, without counting in both these islands the enormous Indian population which we have brought there to cultivate the sugar-cane; and in all the principal towns of Australia the "foreigner" thrives and flourishes. But New Zealand has always been beautifully and distinctly English, and the grand Imperial idea has there fallen on congenial soil and taken deep root.

Even in the days I speak of, Christchurch, though an infant town, looked pretty on account of its picturesque situation on the banks of the Avon. The surrounding country was a sort of rolling

OLD NEW ZEALAND

3

prairie, ideally suitable for sheep, with the magnificent Southern Alps for a background. And what a climate, and what a sky, and what an air! The only fault I had to find with the atmospheric conditions was the hot wind. But hot winds were new to me in those days, and I rebelled against them accordingly. Now I begin to think hot winds blow everywhere out of England. In South Africa, in Mauritius, in all parts of Australia, one suffers from them, to say nothing of India, where they are on the largest possible scale.

The first six months of my New Zealand life was spent in Christchurch, waiting for the little wooden house to be cut out and sent up country to our sheep-station in the Malvern Hills. How absurdly primitive it all was, and yet how one delighted in it! I well remember the “happy thought”—when the question arose of the size of drawing and dining-rooms—of spreading our carpets out on the grass and planning the house round them. And the joy of settling in, when the various portions of the little dwelling had been conveyed some seventy-five miles inland to our happy valley and fitted together. The doors and window-frames had all come from America ready-made, but the rest of the house was cut out of the kauri pine from the forests in the North Island.

The first thing I had to learn was that New Zealand meant really *three* islands—two big ones

4 COLONIAL MEMORIES

and a little one. Everybody knows about the North and the Middle Islands, which are the big ones, but the little Stewart Island often confused me by sometimes being called the South Island, which it really is. A number of groups of small islets have been added to the colony since then, such as the Cook and Kermadec Islands, but I do not fancy they are inhabited. The colony was really not a quarter of a century old when I knew it, as it had been a dependency of New South Wales up to 1842, and it owes its separation and rapid development to the New Zealand Company, which started with a Royal charter. The Canterbury Association sent out four ships which took four months to reach Port Cooper in the Middle Island (now the flourishing seaport of Lyttelton), only sixteen years before I landed there.

The cathedral had not risen above its foundations in 1865, but I was struck with the well-paved streets, good "side-walks," gas-lamps, drinking-fountains, and even red pillar-boxes exactly like the one round the corner to-day. And it seemed all the more marvellous to me, who had just gone through the lengthy and costly experience of dragging my own little possessions across those stormy seas round the Cape of Good Hope, to think of all these aids to civilisation having come by the same route. Now I am assured you can get anything and everything you might possibly

OLD NEW ZEALAND

5

want, on the spot, but in those days one eagerly watched a *déménagement* as a good opportunity for furnishing.

We had brought all our goods and chattels out with us, and the wooden house was soon turned into a very pretty comfortable little homestead. The great trouble was getting the garden started. The soil was magnificent, and everything in that Malvern Valley grew splendidly if the north-west winds would only allow it. Hedges of cytiscus were always planted a month or so before sowing the dwarf green peas, in order that they might have some shelter, and this plan answered very well. I could not, however, start a hedge of cytiscus all round my little lawn, and the consequence was that the blades of grass on that spot could easily be counted, and that I discovered a luxuriant patch of "English grass" about a mile down the flat, where a little dip in the ground had made a shelter for the flying seed. And the melancholy part of the story was that English grass-seed cost a guinea a pound! I was quite able to appreciate, three years later, the ecstasy of delight of a little New Zealand girl, who, beholding the Isle of Wight for the first time, exclaimed to me: "How rich they must be! Why, it's all laid down in English grass!"

Other flower-seeds, of course, shared the same fate, and it was indeed gardening under difficulties. But in the vegetable-garden consolation could be

6 COLONIAL MEMORIES

found in the potatoes, strawberries, and green peas, which were huge in size and abundant in quantity.

Indoors all soon looked bright and cheery ; and besides the books we brought out, I started a magazine and book club in connection with a London library, which answered very well, and gave great delight to our neighbours, chiefly shepherds. These men were often of Scotch or north of England birth, and of a very good type. Their lives, however, were necessarily monotonous and lonely, and they were very glad of books. We had a short Church service every Sunday afternoon, to which they gladly came, and then they took new books back with them.

The only grudge I ever had against these men was that they all tried to provide themselves with wives among my maids, and by so doing greatly added to my difficulties with these damsels. Far from accepting Strephon's honourable proposals, Chloe would make these offers—which apparently bored her—an excuse for giving up her place and returning to the gay metropolis.

I honestly think those maids (I had but two of them at a time) were the chief, if not the only, real worry of my happy New Zealand life. Nothing would ever induce them to remain more than four months at the station. In spite of the suitors, they found it “lonely,” and away they went. Changing

OLD NEW ZEALAND

7

was such a troublesome business and always meant a week without any servants at all, for the dray—their sole means of conveyance—took two days on the road each way, and then there were always stores to buy and bring back, and the driver declared his horses needed a couple of days' rest in town. Some of the various reasons the maids gave for leaving were truly absurd. Once I came into the kitchen on a bright winter's morning to find them seated on a sort of sofa (made of chintz-covered boxes), clasped in each other's arms, and weeping bitterly. With difficulty I got out of them that their sole grievance was the sound of the bleating of the sheep, a "mob" of which were feeding on the nearest hillside. It was "lonesome like," and they must return to town immediately.

These girls, as well as their predecessors and successors, were a continual mystery to me, and I never could understand why they became servants at all. Not one of them ever had the faintest idea of what duties she had to perform or how to perform them. A cook had never, apparently, been in a kitchen before, nor had the housemaid ever seen, or at least handled, a broom or a duster. I was only an ignorant beginner in those days, and yet found myself obliged to teach the most elementary duties. They were nearly all factory-girls; and when I asked "Who did these things for you at home?" always answered "Mother." They had

8 COLONIAL MEMORIES

never held a needle until I taught them how to do so ; and as for mending or darning, that was regarded as sheer waste of time. The first thing they had to learn was to bake bread, and as, unfortunately, the best teacher was our head shepherd — a good-looking, well-to-do young man — the “courting” began very soon, though it never seemed successful, and poor Ridge’s heart must have been torn to pieces during those three years of obdurate pupils.

I must, however, say here that, ignorant to an incredible degree as my various “helps” were, I found them perfectly honest and perfectly respectable. I never had the slightest fault to find on either of these counts. Sobriety went without saying, for it was compulsory, as the nearest public-house was a dozen miles away across trackless hills.

It was a real tragic time, for me at least, that constantly recurring week between the departure and arrival of my maids ; but I am inclined to think, on mature reflection, that my worst troubles arose from the volunteers who insisted on helping me. These kindly A.D.C.’s,—owners or pupils on neighbouring stations,—all professed to be quite familiar with domestic matters. But I found a sad falling-off when it came to putting their theories into practice in my kitchen. It generally turned out that they had made a hasty study of various para-

OLD NEW ZEALAND

9

graphs in that useful work "Inquire Within, &c.," and then started forth to carry out the directions they had mastered. For instance, one stalwart neighbour presented a smiling face at our hall-door one morning and said :—

"I've come to wash up."

"That is very kind of you," I replied ; "but are you sure you know how ?"

"Oh yes—just try me, and you'll see. Very hot water, you know : boiling, in fact."

Well, there was no difficulty about the hot water, which was poured into a tub in which a good many of my pretty china plates and dishes were standing. The next moment I heard a yell and a crash—and I am very much afraid "a big, big D——"—and my "help" was jumping about the kitchen wringing his hands and shouting for cotton-wool and salad-oil and what not. It seemed a mere detail after this calamity to discover that half-a-dozen plates were broken and as many more cracked. "The beastly thing was so hot" being the excuse.

The first time the maids left I thought I would, so to speak, victual the garrison beforehand, and I had quantities of bread baked and butter churned and meat-pies made and joints roasted ; but at the end of a couple of days the larder was nearly empty, partly on account of the gigantic appetites we all had, and partly because of the addition

10 COLONIAL MEMORIES

to our home party of all these volunteers who always seized the excuse of helping. As a matter of fact, my "helps" generally betook themselves to a rifle-range F. had set up down the valley, or else they organised athletic sports. I should not have minded their doing so, if it had not, apparently, increased their appetites.

Never can I forget an awful experience I went through with one of my earliest attempts at bread-making. I felt it was a serious matter, and not to be lightly taken in hand, so I turned my helps, one and all, out of the kitchen, and proceeded to carry out the directions as written down. First the dough was to be "set." That was an anxious business. The prescribed quantity of flour had to be put in a milk-pan, the orthodox hole in the centre of the white heap was duly made, and then came the critical moment of adding the yeast. There was only one bottle of this precious ingredient left, and it was evidently very much "up," as yeast ought to be. Under these circumstances, to take out the cork of that bottle was exactly like firing a pistol, and I do not like firing pistols. So I was obliged to call for an assistant. All rushed in gleefully, declaring that opening yeast-bottles was their show accomplishment, but F. was the first to seize it. He gave it a great shake. Out flew the cork right up to the rafters, and after it flew *all* my beautiful yeast,