

CHAPTER I

BETWEEN two and three hundred miles to the north of the city of Auckland stands a lonely inn. No other house is in sight, and the nearest building worthy of the name is removed from it a distance of seven miles.

This inn, which, with that disregard of probabilities for which houses of entertainment are famous all the world over, is called the ‘Scarlet Man,’ stands in a hollow by the roadside among the undulations of an extensive gumfield. In every direction the field stretches itself out to the horizon, and in the whole vast circle it meets the skyline saving at two points. The first of these lies immediately in front of the door of the inn, at a distance of five or six miles, where it is to be discerned the dark roof of the forest, the trunks of the trees being concealed by a low, level ridge considerably more in the foreground and running like a rampart from the extreme right to the extreme left. The trees, chiefly kahikateas, stand motionless and sharply defined against the clear sky, forming pyramids of black foliage suggestive of the wooden toy trees of childhood. The only other point where, as viewed from the neighbourhood of the inn, the gumfield fails in its clear line on the skirts of the sky is to the left of the building, where the mountain ranges of Waimea and Waimamaku are visible like a blue and unchanging cloud, their peaks delicately plumed with foliage of the same unsubstantial appearance. Through the low brushwood, with its undergrowth of coarse, stunted fern and patches of green and orange-coloured moss, runs the Great North Road. Here, where it crosses the gumfield, it presents from the inn door the appearance of a chalk line drawn unsteadily but in one direction from the extreme right of the rampart before the forest to the summit of a low tableland on the skyline to the left, where its sharply defined edge, under the motion of the atmosphere, glitters and sends forth spokes of light continually fading and springing into existence. For it will be found on lifting some of the chalk-like soil of which the gumfield is composed that the whole basis of the vegetation is a white and infinitely fine sand like the dust of porcelain. At this period of the year—the beginning of the summer—the road is rough and hard as iron. The traffic of winter-time, when horses and bullock drays moved along a track apparently metallised with cream cheeses, has left ruts and holes, subsequently baked and solidified by the sun. Later on in the season, before the advent of the winter rains, the track will be pounded smooth by the scurrying feet of native riders, who have passed all the summer and autumn through to and from the gum store on the edge of the rich vale of Parawai; but during the month of December it has more the appearance of a ploughed field than the main road which it purports to be.

The gumfield might also be described as an immense fallow suffered to become clothed with a weedy vegetation. Throughout the vast circle hardly a spot can be found which shows no trace of the digger’s spade. Yet so invincible is the manuka—or tea tree of the settlers—that despite the constant interference to which it is subjected, it covers the field from horizon to horizon. All the year round the manuka may be seen putting forth its pretty white flowers and ripening its purple pods of seed. Seen from a distance and in masses, the white flowers give to the vegetation a grey look, the effect of which is enhanced by the dust which accumulates on the leaves in dry weather. The brilliant sunlight is powerless to redeem the colourlessness so created, and the effect is that of a wide sea of vegetation withered by the fierce beams of the sun.

Beneath this dreary-looking carpet is concealed the precious gum.

One or two thousand years ago this sun-bathed plain was shadowed by a forest of gigantic trees, as certain other parts of the province of Auckland are to this day. These trees reached an elevation of two or three hundred feet. Many of them were sixty feet in girth and built up in tremendous columns for eighty feet without a branch. Their trunks were tan-coloured and curiously dimpled, as the bark continually peeled and fell to the ground in small hard flakes. Here and there on these huge pillars the gum exuded, pearly and plastic, and crept slowly earthwards. There was no undergrowth of any size, but the handsome umbrella fern spread its tender carpet along the aisles, rejoicing in the shadow which preserved a continuous moisture at its roots. Such was the kauri forest. As centuries went by many unrecorded disasters befell it. Strong gales blew from the east and the west, and the aged giants on the highlands fell into the hollows, crushing the young trees in their fall. The earth, exhausted by the demands of its children, grew less and less able to support them; the young trees starved and died, the older became more economic of leaf and branch. Occasionally at rare intervals the god of fire drew his toll from the forest, devouring some, wrecking many. Still more centuries went by. Slowly the forest withdrew like the shadow of a cloud. Splitting itself into two battalions, it traveled westward and southward, and the manuka crept down from the highlands to the north and burst into impudent flower at its very gates. The inexorable march of the centuries continued, the dogged withdrawal of the forest went on. At length there came a day when the last dolorous giant disappeared over the hill and the tiny manuka held the land from sky to sky. Still the centuries continued their march, countless generations of manuka sprang and bloomed and died, and nothing further appeared from over the hills. The forest had been long gone and forgotten; no imagination could, unassisted, have conjured from the barren wilderness a dream so majestic, yet the proofs of its previous existence lay all the while indelibly written in the earth. Beneath the white and exhausted soil, carefully piled in heaps, lay the nuggets of amber-coloured gum, petrifying and perfecting itself against the day when it should again come to light.