

NEW ZEALAND STORIES.

[The Editor desires to state that New Zealand Stories by New Zealand writers, will be published on this page regularly. The page will be open to any contributor, and all accepted stories will be paid for at current rates. Terms bright sketches of Dominion life and people, woven in short story form, are required, and should be headed "New Zealand Stories."]

The Rock in the Path.

By S. HENDERSON.

IS the doctor busy?" Mrs. Boyle pushed tentatively with her hand on the surgery door, as the nurse rustled through the hall in her stiff print uniform. "No, Mrs. Boyle, the last patient has just gone, the doctor is only writing up his cases."

With a smile of thanks the doctor's wife turned the handle of the door and went into the surgery.

Dr. Boyle (who, at forty years of age was regarded as one of London's rising surgeons) was standing at a table behind his desk; his whole body bearing the weary droop that testified to another day of close and unremitting labour.

"Is that you, nurse?" the question was hardly put when the doctor seemed to feel his wife's presence, and wheeled round to greet her.

"A rock in the path," murmured the doctor absently as he leaned back in his chair.

"Oh, Denham, you've seen it before then, I am disappointed."

"No, dear, I've not seen it. What do you mean?"

"That is the name of the picture, I saw it in a dealer's and knew you would like it. I was so pleased with it that I brought it home with me just before I came to the surgery for you."

"I like it immensely, come and be thanked properly." The doctor drew his wife down on to his knee as he spoke, "you could have given me nothing that would have pleased me so much. Do you know the artist's name, I don't recognise the work."

more like her old work than the Italian pictures of last year. I am glad she has done so well, poor Maud."

"You're sounding quite sentimental. Tell me all about her and why you have never seen or heard from her all these years, for you evidently knew her well."

Avril drew a small chair near her husband's as she spoke.

"Oh, I believe," she continued, "that I have struck on a hidden romance. Was she the girl whom you loved in those New Zealand days?"

The doctor laughed. "Trust a woman for finding things out."

"I'm not finding out," retorted Avril indignantly, "I only guessed, but tell me if I am right. I've always felt a little jealous of that girl," she continued,

"A milestone instead of a rock," murmured Avril softly.

"Poor Maud, she was always an artist, her one desire from childhood had been to go to Paris and study painting. She did eventually gain her wish, but it was dearly gained."

"How?"

"Well, it was when her parents and sister died and she was five in the world that she was free to go. Her parents died while I was in England, and four years later, when I had been back a couple of months, Jeannie died too. Poor Jeannie was an invalid, and very querulous. She was always complaining that she was a burden, that she knew Maud wanted to go to Paris, that she wished she could die and then her path would be clear. Maud was very tender with her, gallantly suppressing all signs of her desire to go to Paris. For Jeannie's sake she even pretended that now that she was grown up an art life did not present the same attractions."

"It was then, I suppose, after her sister's death, that you wanted her to marry you?"

"Yes; but she refused me. I have always laughed at Jeannie," she said, "when she declared that she was a rock in the path, but she was one, dearly as I loved her. Now I'm free to follow my desire I shall not willingly place any rocks between me and my goal."

"But you don't call my love a rock," I exclaimed, angrily.

"All love that bars me from my art is one," she answered.

"Mine would not be. I respect your desire too much to stand in the way."

"I could not marry you and study

"What, you, sweetheart! this is flagrant disobedience."

"Even the laws of the Medes and Persians were occasionally set at naught," and Avril Boyle slipped her hand inside her husband's arm.

"So why not mine? Well, I'm just through," and the doctor closed his books and rang for the nurse to give her some parting instructions.

"That's over, come and give me some tea," and husband and wife left the surgery with a courteous goodbye to the nurse.

"What made you look me up, little woman?" said the doctor as they entered the library, where a tea-table was set by a bright fire in evident anticipation of their coming.

"Because I've such a lovely surprise for you and I couldn't wait any longer."

"You baby, but another surprise! It was only last week that you gave me those new curtains for the consulting rooms. What an extravagant young person," and the doctor's voice took on a mockingly-serious tone, as he surveyed his wife's dainty form.

"Now, don't scold, Denham, surely you remember what day this is? No! Why it's your birthday, goose, so my extravagance is justified."

"By jove! I had forgotten."

"You always do, and you'd forget mine too if I didn't write it in your engagement book."

"No, don't get up," Avril added, as Denham half rose to get his tea. "You shall be spoilt to-day because it's your fortieth birthday."

"Forty, good lord! I am getting into the sere and yellow leaf, you shouldn't remind a chap so brutally of his years."

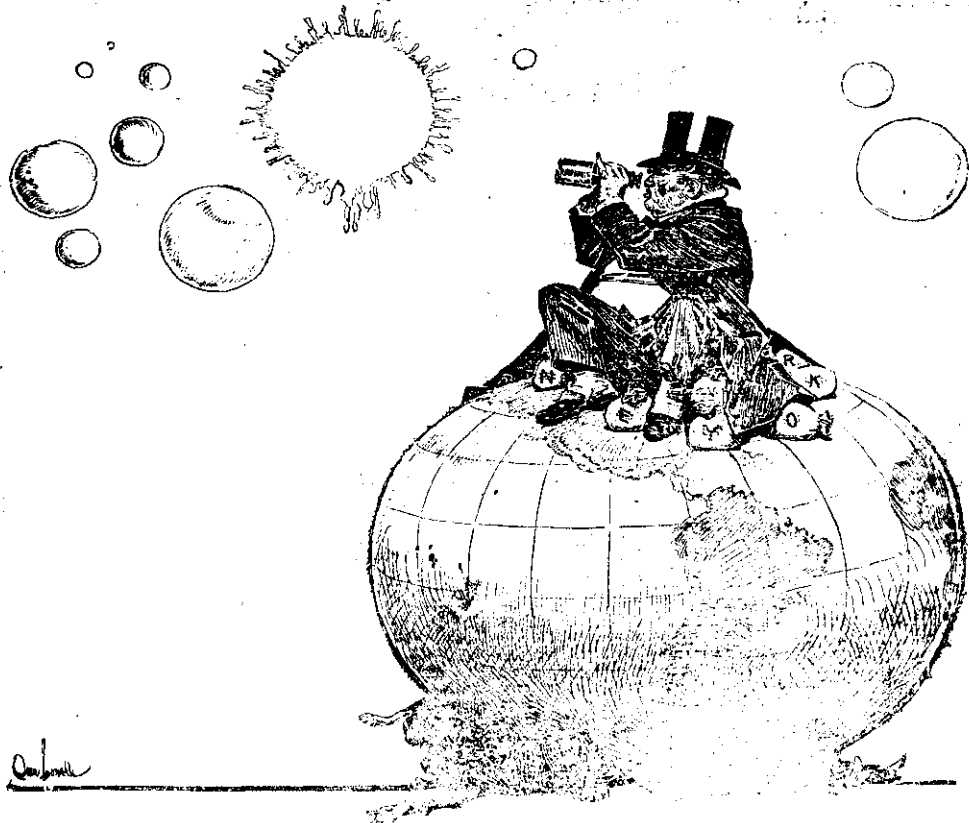
"And you shouldn't be vainer than the proverbial woman; but look," Avril wheeled a chair in front of her husband, on which she placed a water-colour picture framed in black. "Is that in a good light, shall I move the chair?"

"Yes, move it a little to the left and turn that light higher."

Avril obeyed and watched her husband anxiously as he silently gazed at the picture.

Denham Boyle's hobby was pictures, and he prided himself not a little on his judgment of them. Landscapes particularly appealed to him, and in this little sunset picture his wife felt she had secured something he would like.

It was a simple thing, yet painted with such breadth and judgment that one knew and loved the quiet, country path bordered on each side by masses of golden gorse. Across the middle of the path just as it neared the hill-top lay an outcrop of grey lichen-covered stone; the doctor could see, as he bent forward, the smooth places where countless feet had crossed the obstacle. The background was a radiant sunset sky and in the foreground a solitary, black-faced sheep nibbled the tender shoots of the gorse.



American financier (fifty years hence): "Interesting, but needs development. Wish I could get over there, I could harness that hot-looking one and make it run the whole 'shootin' match."

"You should remember it, for it is painted by that New Zealand artist who made her name at the Academy last year with her Italian pictures."

"Maud Gell?"

"Yes, and you said you had known her for years."

"So I had, it was from her that I quoted those words 'a rock in the path.'"

"How curious, Denham. Did she paint when you knew her?"

"Yes, but she has improved immeasurably since then. I think though I ought to have recognised that, it is

as the doctor answered her question with a silent gesture of assent, "and how I see how clever she is I feel quite afraid of her."

"You've no need, dear," the doctor stroked the little hand that lay on his knee. "I have known Maud Gell since I was a boy, we were always the greatest pals before I went to England for my medical course. When I went back to New Zealand I had only a year there before I took up an appointment in Egypt; because of Maud's refusal to accompany me there I had a few lonely years—seven years ago though Maud Gell became for me but a part of the past."

art as well. No, don't say any more," she added, as I started to argue again. "I know what I am doing. I care for you too much to marry you longing and intending as I do to carry out my desire of years."

"I urged in vain; that was Maud's final answer. At the time I was grieved and wounded. It seemed incredible that a woman should throw away love for art. That she cared for me I knew, but evidently not to the extent she loved her painting. Now," and the doctor stroked his wife's cheek, "I am more than glad that my persuasive powers failed."

"And I, too," whispered Avril; "but go on, you must tell me the end."