

NEW ZEALAND STORIES,

The Editor desires to state that New Zealand Stories by New Zealand writers, are published on this page regularly. The page is open to any contributor, and all accepted stories will be paid for at current rates. *Texas bright sketches of Dominion life and people, woven in short-story form, are required, and should be headed "New Zealand Stories."* Stamps for return of M.S. must be enclosed

"Hard-case Jimmy"

By F. B. DOWDING

JIMMY was a local celebrity. Along a hundred miles of the Great North Road his name was a frequent household word, his latest exploits the topic of conversation at many a milking-shed and round many a winter-evening card-table.

He was a great six-foot stock drover, with a figure so enormously square and heavy-looking that the tales of his remarkable agility seemed simply incredible. His big, red, clean-shaven, straight-nosed face, though it bore the plain marks of drink and vice, and was spotted by a dirty livid scar across the left cheek, had yet, at odd moments a certain reckless and heroic beauty. Under a brow wide and high, his bulging grey eyes gazed boldly, full of truculent, unbridled power. His hair was reddish, and fiercely curly.

A born wit and story-teller was Jimmy. On occasion, and when he was in the humour, he could keep a bar parlour full of men all laughing uproariously for hours while he recounted his experiences, real and imaginary, on the road, or measured his razor-keen wits against all-comers. His wit it must be confessed, was often gross; his language would not often bear repetition in polite circles, but his sallies were real wit, nevertheless, sharp, pithy, telling, and very often screwing Jimmy. No one was ever known to beat him in a wit-contest.

Another of Jimmy's specialities was swearing. His profanity was original; it bore the stamp of genius; it bit into one's soul like acid. The man or beast to whom its current was directed was apt to leap to do Jimmy's bidding as if driven by red-hot irons. People who heard it for the first time were often observed to stand transfixed, gazing open-mouthed after Jimmy till he disappeared with the herd of tired cattle along the dusty white road. It was jokingly said that when the women of a village saw him on the horizon, they all inconspicuously double-locked doors and windows, and put their affrighted head under piles of pillows till he passed.

The most astounding, the most utterly unexpected thing about Jimmy was his very real, if somewhat unorthodox love for Shakespeare. What strange freak of circumstances had first started him on this hobby no one ever knew. Probably he had picked up the book at some auction sale, and then taken to reading it in odd moments. Certain it is that he always carried an old coverless India-paper edition in his saddle-bag, and when the spirit seized him, he would retire from the drinking-dike at the bar, and sit in the billiard-room, clumsily thumbing pages, and reading, slowly and painfully, but with very evident keen relish. "Jimmy's reading his Bible!" the billiard-marker would say, winking with the innumerable jaunty cunning of all billiard markers known to history; but no one ever molested him; it had been found to be dangerous.

His education was, to say the least, very defective, so it is more than probable that a good one-half of what he read was beyond his understanding; nevertheless he had surprised more than one man of fair culture by his acquaintance with the characters and the plots, and by the wealth of quotations he had always at his tongue's end. Often, when half-drunk, he would recite long passages; and one could notice then that in spite of his uncounted utterances and his strange mispronunciations, he still had an ear for the pomp and majesty and music of the language. Once he started, harassed bar-tenders were often hard put to it to get him to stop his quotations before closing time.

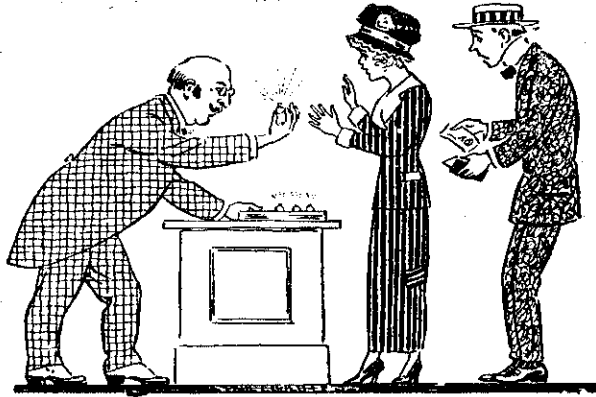
But most of all, with a love intense and high, Jimmy loved fighting. Once in what he called a "good scrap," and the pride of life sang and leapt in his veins, and his face beamed with a serene and perfect joy. He loved to fight as a born musician loves to play. But he would never fight a lighter or weaker than himself; and as men of his herculean stamp were hard to find, he had often to content himself with two men of average size. After cheerfully, and without malice, smashing them both into submission, he would "shout" them both, and make them his friends for life by his commendation of the various good bits they had "got on to him." Once he rode thirty miles to meet and fight a drunken Englishman, who was reported once to have been a heavy-weight prize-fighter of repute. Jimmy fought six hard rounds with him, "put him to sleep" for half an hour, and when he recovered, made firm friends with him, and thereafter helped his unworthy and drunken carcase out of many an unsavoury scrape.

Somewhere deep down in Jimmy's rough-hewn nature there was a rich vein of softness and charity. He loved children—loved to play with them, to make

and he had been carried into the station-master's house with a fractured skull.

There, many days afterwards, Jimmy awoke into a new world. Dimly he was aware of a new atmosphere—an air sweeter, cleaner, although different, from all he had ever known before. Away in the shadows of his thoughts he could perceive a gracious female figure that gently tended him, appearing, as it seemed to him, out of nothingness, and as mysteriously fading away again, leaving him with a choking sense of loneliness such as a little child sometimes feels in the hissing silence of the night.

Jimmy had never known a home, never realised the sweet experiences that every child should be heir to. His mother had died almost before he could remember; his father, a drunken, vicious loafer, had camped with him on the gunfields, carried him with him to bushfallers' camps, thrashed him, cursed at him, worked him, kept him in continual fear of blows. Jimmy had stood at his graveside with stony eyes, and had turned away a man of twelve, to fight his world alone. The school teacher had obtained work for him at a neighbouring farm, where the



A MODERN MIRACLE—TURNING PAPER INTO STONE.

them toys, to buy them little presents when he went to town. Children loved him, too, and would swarm to the front gates at his approach, despite frenzied appeals from scandalised mothers. Once he was approached by the Wesleyan parson, who asked him to aid in a subscription that was being raised. A bushman had been pinned under a log and crushed out of all semblance to humanity; and the widow was left with no means of support, and with six tiny children to rear. Jimmy swore at that parson, so that, it was said, the poor man looked pale for an hour afterwards. Then Jimmy rode down past the widow's house, gave a cheque for twenty pounds to a dirty little bare-footed mite of eight to give to her mother, and when he had once seen it delivered, galloped on his way whistling. There were many such actions recorded of Hard-case Jimmy.

He rode a black mare, a fine-built, nervous piece of beautiful palpitating life, who would allow no one but Jimmy to ride, or even to approach her. Jimmy habitually swore at her viciously; but he had never been known to use whip or spur on her glossy black hide, and the jade would follow him, without rope or bridle, to the end of the world. When he had first bought her, and before she had been brought to be his dotting slave, she had thrown him against a fence post,

it dangerous to move him. She was, like her mother, a woman who, without great beauty, without brilliance, without even a compelling fascination, yet emanated gentleness, and serenity and quiet power as a bed of violets gives forth sweet odours. Not that she was a passionless waxen angel. She could box her little brother's ears on occasion; she had a very pretty pride in her person; she could indulge in a very feminine envy of a girl better dressed than herself. For all that she was a true, gentle, sweet, woman, in whose company one found rest and calm and renewed faith in life.

When Jimmy at last penetrated the mists of half-consciousness, and could see clearly once more, he began to watch his nurse out of his great eyes with a reverence that amounted to absolute awe. The women Jimmy had been well acquainted with, either on his visits to town or on the road, were not such that he could reverence them; and his reputation had naturally debarred him from the companionship of women of any natural refinement. Lillian Anderson seemed to him a new strange creation. As his great body took his strength again, his reverence grew until it was almost ludicrous to see the dog-like glances of adoration he cast on her. With a fine womanly tact she affected to be unconscious of his admiration, and used her evident influence over him to give him some good advice, which Jimmy shamefacedly listened to as a big unruly lad might listen to a chiding from his Sunday school teacher. When he was able to sit in an arm-chair before the fire, he would watch the happy family life round him with tense wonder; and sometimes a look of poignant regret would creep over his face, as if he were realising for the first time how much of life he had missed.

When he at last went back on to the road again, Jimmy soon drifted into his old course; but he never lost his reverence for the family, nor his respect and dog-like adoration for Lillian Anderson. If he met her on the road he would flush like a schoolboy, and address a few diffident shy words of greeting to her before he rode on, half relieved, half grieved, to be once again out of her company. If he were riding past the swearing or his ribald songs, and make his companions do the same till they house at night, he would cease his swearing, and would cease his ribald songs, and make his companions do the same till they house at night. He would cease his swearing, and would cease his ribald songs, and make his companions do the same till they house at night. He would cease his swearing, and would cease his ribald songs, and make his companions do the same till they house at night.

Time passed on, and a young, fair-haired Englishman—a distant cousin—came to live with the Andersons. He was an athlete, a fine boxer, and without fairly well educated, gifted with many talents, and a thorough good fellow at heart. He had come, with a small capital, to seek fugitive fortune in this new land. The constant companionship of two such spirits as Eric Hathaway and Lillian could have but one ending, and in the time of the peach blossoms they were married. After a brief honeymoon they settled down at the village store, which Eric had bought.

It was observed that at the time of the wedding that Jimmy indulged in an unusually long and reckless spree, even for him, and that thereafter, for some time, he was more subdued than was his wont, finding consolation in the constant companionship of his Shakespeare. But his wedding present was by far the most expensive one given, and in time he took again to his old course, and even made fast friends with Eric, who, like his sweet and radiant wife, saw and revered the good beneath the rough exterior of Jimmy.

Two uneventful years, and a feeble wail began to be heard at intervals through the partition dividing the store from the house. From the very first there seemed to be a strong friendship mounting to love, between Jimmy and this golden-haired, blue-eyed morsel of humanity. Even at a very early age she would go to him with outstretched arms, and nestle down to his great breast with a little sign of content. As she grew older, and could first speak, she loathed about and chatter, she began to look forward to Jimmy's frequent visits with chuckling joy. If his itinerant duties took him anywhere within miles

And Jimmy awoke in a house that was truly a home. From the genuine, cheery-voiced stationmaster and his sweet, serene, gentle wife, to the youngest toddler of two, the family was swayed by love, upheld by family pride, and employed daily in constant acts of consideration and kindness one to another. The little tempests of misunderstanding and temper that sometimes rattle the surface and cloud the skies of all families, passed over this one, but to leave its love more sweetly calm, and its sunshine more cheery and bright.

The flower of the whole family was the eldest daughter—she whom Jimmy had seen, as a misty vision, appearing and reappearing at his bedside. It was she who had pleaded that he be allowed to stay when the doctor had pronounced