

# 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. Terec 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

## The Touch of Nature.

By F. B. DOWDING, Hukerenui.

She was a bespectacled, white-faced university graduate, and thought she knew everything; was certain of everything, and would have argued about anything under heaven with the Archangel. She took an unaccountable pleasure in proving by intricate and bewildering reasoning that two and two make four—which is perfectly obvious anyhow, or in demonstrating, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that X equals a fearsome conglomeration of complications—which no one in his sense cares a tin-tack about. Fairy castles of abstract nothingness, founded on the great word "Perhaps," she was a master architect—an M.A.

Because of these things, she thought herself a superior person, and constantly implied in her conversation that the common herd—you and I, my friends—would have to evolve a long, long way out of monkeydom before the serene height attained by herself and her college professors, and Ibsen, and Browning, and Meredith, and—well, just a few select others—could be attained. She likewise thought her own reasoning infallible! Incidentally it may be mentioned that she was a genius, but a genius in a fair way to kill her body by overwork, and to starve the soul by allowing it but palmy rations of human emotions.

Well, as a precaution against her quite snapping the bonds that linked her to her kind and soaring prematurely to regions ethereal, she had been sent after her university examination, to pursue fugitive health at a North Auckland farm—a dairy farm in the making. She fast caught up on health; but suffered painfully in the chase. Her soul was raw with the wounds she daily, hourly received. She had not imagined there could be so much raw, uncut ugliness in the round world.

She could have sought out beauty, and have found it too; for not in the eye but in the soul doth beauty dwell. To her it was all ugly, hideous, repellant. These gaunt, fire-blackened dead trees, straining poor despairing skeleton arms to heaven, or lying in mouldering-stricken heaps; these sombre, sullen fern hills invaded by living tongues of green, or splashed by great black blotches where burn had been; the staring white house in the centre of the stubble ten acre paddocks, without fence or tree or flower to soften and humanise its contour; these dirty, mouth, children round the back-door; these loud voices, this conversation redolent of dairy cows, and fat pigs—Oh! it was ugly, unspeakably painfully ugly, and she hated it.

The people, too, seemed to her rough, boorish and unbelievably ignorant. Their interests seemed to wander no farther than their boundary fences, their intellects to tread a dreary circle of cows and dance and show, and show and dance and cows. She could find no interest in the things they gave to her, nor could she interest them in the subjects with which she was well acquainted. Her "brilliant conversation" concerning literature and art and music, here fell on stony ground, and blossomed not into the flowers of sympathy and friendship. She felt isolated, unloved by her fellows, a stranger to her kind.

Not that a more balanced temperament would have felt those pangs, for the rough good nature of the people more than made up for their lack of surface refinement, and there was much both of beauty and of culture in unheard-of corners, had she cared to look for them. But she had been turned out of her protected hothouse life too suddenly, and

she shivered in the cold blasts of this actual world. Had she only realised it, there were some interesting and intensely human characters round her. "Boss" Jennings, the political oracle of the country side; "Doc" Ferguson, the tender-hearted high-souled, drunken store-keeper, who acted as doctor to the district; Miss Stevens, the quaint, shy eighteenth-century old maid, who kept the post office; "Hard-case Jimmy," the wit of the road—these and a dozen others might have repaid her sympathy and her study a hundredfold. But her eye had not learned understanding nor her heart the love of her kind.

By the family where she boarded she was tolerated only. That is as far as the friendship between the country man and the towns man ever goes, unless the one changes his habits and his circle of ideas and becomes in some measure the other. Between Norah the eldest daughter and the college girl there was the unreasoning but inveterate enmity of opposing temperaments and training. The two things combined made these two daughters of Eve almost creatures of different worlds. Almost, but not quite.

Norah was a typical colonial, healthy rosy, vigorous, and almost as strong as a man; fond of excitement and of the country amusements, somewhat free and easy in her converse with "boys," an inveterate flirt, but at heart a good girl, in the human sense of the word good. Her education was that of the fifth standard of the country school—most of

it cheerfully forgotten; but for all that she had a quick perception and strong common-sense brain of the world's works.

Of course she had a "boy." He was another common country type; rough, hearty, blunt, sincere, with his whole soul-looking fearlessly through his clear grey eyes; a straight, strong man such as any woman might be proud of. He swore a little, drank a little, and was no innocent generally; but children sprang into his arms, women trusted him and the other "boys" of the district all called him a "d— fine chap."

Norah liked him none the less for his peevishness; she would have despised him if he had been a "goody-goody." She was right, too; for under the mere surface coating due to environment Jim Wilson was of the type of young Englishman that seems to embody and express the very soul of the race.

They were very much in love, and the college girl derived considerable half-conscious amusement from their amours. One evening in the sunset calmness she was sitting near the window, her soul aglow with the western splendour, when the two came past from the milking-shed. They were talking in the low, half-cooing murmur of all lovers, and he was telling Norah that she always looked like a queen. He meant it too, for, you see, that poor fellow was in love. But the sight of Norah, fresh from milking, her hair ruffled, her sleeves rolled up, her red freckled arms, her dress untidy and torn seemed so utterly opposed to his declaration that the college girl just

had to laugh. Norah heard her, of course. A woman is never too engrossed not to notice things like that, and from that day hostilities were opened; hostilities of the feminine order, hidden under fair and civil speeches, and sugar-coated; but with the poison lying hidden all the same.

When visitors came the college girl flaunted her superior accomplishments till Norah sat in miserable eclipse, but Norah "cut the college girl out" at the local dances. "This was not a hard thing to do, for the young fellows could not admire, and did not try to understand, so rare and strange a creature as a girl who could not joke and talk trifles with giggling enthusiasm. For her part the college girl looked down on the country boys from an immense height of superiority, yet was feminine enough for Norah's flouted victories to cut her to the heart. A little of common human clay at the core, you see!

Her conversion to humanity and the cessation of hostilities came about some what dramatically.

An agricultural show, fourteen miles away had drawn the whole family, except Norah, to its boisterous joys. She had stayed at home to look after the household and to milk the few cows in the evening, and would of course go to the big dance at night. The college girl, who had no interest, even theoretical, in dairy cows, fat pigs, and farm implements, had refused to go, thereby unconsciously widening the rift between herself and the family.

"Hi," said Norah to her mother, as she fastened that portly person's dress. "She's too high and mighty to go in our sort. 'Praps she'd like a carriage and pair or 'praps a motor car to take her. Mighty fine notions she's got, I must say!"

The family had departed early in the morning, and after dinner Norah decided to drive the sulky to Doc Ferguson's store some seven miles in the opposite direction, to get some necessary provisions. With characteristic self-dependence she caught the horse, a young and flighty animal; harnessed him to the sulky and drove off unaided.

The two girls had indulged in some sharp passages during the morning, and she declined to ask the college girl to help her or to come with her, surely astonishingly ungenerous, as she passed the verandah, where the other was reading, that she would not be gone long.

About three o'clock the college girl, who had been lounging on the verandah all day reading, and thinking she was enjoying Browning, decided to go for a



ENTHUSIASTIC RECEPTION OF DICK'S FIANCEE