

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. Terms 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 MS. must be enclosed

Billy Billington, Matchmaker.

By V. AUGUSTA ROCHE, Auckland.

I HAD just had a bad attack of appendicitis, but am getting well now. At first, the only person I saw besides the nurse and doctor, was the mater, who was frightfully worried, but as soon as I started to pick up, they allowed other people to come and see me. All the form fellows came, also old Blinker, let's the master at the second form at Prince Edward College. He was most fearfully nice to me, and thought it very hard luck for a fellow of ten to have such a serious illness. He brought me some illustrated "Punches" and some jelly from his wife. The best part of being sick is getting well—everyone makes a point of being so decent to you.

They allowed me to go home from the hospital after I had been there five weeks, and after I had been home a fortnight, the mater decided to send me to Hamilton, to recuperate, as she called it, the doctor having said the country air would do me up. Aunt Mary wrote down from Hamilton that she would be delighted to see me, so the next Saturday I left Auckland by the express. The mater and mater both came to see me off. A lot of fellows from the college were going home for the term vacation, and I had Wallace L., Wallace H., Morrison, and Foxy Whittaker, who all lived in Hamilton, for company.

At Hamilton, Cousin Letty met me. I recognised her at once, although she had put her hair up since I last saw her. She was always pretty looking, but when I saw her at the station I thought she was prettier than ever; she's a sensible sort of girl too—didn't go kissing me before all the form chaps, but just shook hands and said she was awfully glad to see me, like she would to any grown-up person. She helped me with my bag over to where the trap was waiting. Sitting on the seat in a very solemn sort of manner, was a big, fat pug, who was introduced to me as Abes; you pronounce it "A-bees." Cousin Letty seems to talk to him nearly as much as she did to me.

Aunt Mary gave me an awfully kind welcome. She is very like the mater, but not as pretty. They have a very nice home, right on the banks of the Waikato River, and sloping right down to the water's edge from the side of the house, there's a tip-top orchard. For the next few days I explored the place thoroughly, though I had still to be careful what I ate. Although there were only Aunt Mary, Uncle George, and Letty in the family, I did not find it a bit dull. Besides, they were always having lots of visitors. After I had been there about a week, I discovered a fellow named Kenneth Walton, was most frightfully gone on Cousin Letty.

He's really an awfully nice chap, but Letty doesn't seem to care much about him. Next to her father and mother, she loves Abes better than anyone, which is a shame. I think he's a most unlovable dog; he's fearfully greedy, and is that fat, that he cannot walk far without panting like an asthmatical engine—that's not my expression, but it is a great one of Foxy Whittaker's when any of the fellows are out of form or soft in sport. He Abes, I mean—lives for nothing but his Little Mary, and the fat simply hangs on him in rolls. He's very jealous, too, and if any children come to the house and are teased, he goes away and sulks in a corner. However, cousin Letty can see no faults in him; he's just perfect in her eyes, and would you believe it, half the spic bag chocolates that Mr Walton brings her go to the dog.

Well, the more I saw of Mr Walton, the more I liked him. He's a decent fellow and a great sport. He has been teaching me how to ride and has been very kind to me in lots of ways. He would often talk to me about Letty, and told me in great confidence that he wanted to marry her. That will show you how pally we had become. The thing I wondered at was why my cousin didn't marry him, and then one day I accidentally heard Aunt Mary say:—

"You ought to accept Kenneth, Letty. You are breaking the poor boy's heart."

"I'm not fond of him enough, mamma," said Letty.

"No," said Aunt Mary in a sharp sort of voice, "you waste all your love on that wretched dog. I have no patience with you."

I did not hear any more, but that was enough to make me think a bit. Now, if it weren't for Abes, Mr Walton ought to stand a very good chance. Then an idea came into my mind. I would get Abes out of the way for a time. Of course that would mean upsetting Cousin Letty, which I would be sorry for, but without the dog she would find more time to give to Mr Walton.

I took Tommy Hogwood into my confidence. He is a schoolmate of mine, and lives just two miles from Aunt Mary's, but he has been home for some time on account of his throat. He is getting better now, and often rides over to see me. He said he would take charge of Abes, and look after him for as long as I liked. So one afternoon, when Letty had gone off to play tennis, and Aunt Mary was lying down, I managed, after a lot of trouble and plenty of chocolates, to coax Abes off the verandah into the garden, and as soon as I had got him a little way from the house I grabbed him in my arms and hurried to the side gate, where Tommy was waiting in his little pony trap.

Abes struggled a good deal, but we managed to put him into the box which Tommy had underneath the seat, and then we drove off. Tommy had fixed up a nice place to hide Abes in, at the far end of their back garden. There was an old kennel, and a bit of a yard round it, which Tommy had fenced in, and he had put wire netting across the top, so that the dog could not jump out. Of course, I had promised Tommy a reward for doing all this.

Well, we shoved Abes into the yard, and he nearly bit me. We left him in a very bad temper, and growling like anything. Tommy drove me home again, and I found Aunt Mary still lying down, and everything quiet.

I will not dwell on Cousin Letty's grief when she could not find Abes that night. I never thought she would take it so badly, although I knew she would worry to a certain extent. I felt a frightful cad, and was nearly going to fetch Abes home, but I thought of Mr Walton, and of the good turn I wanted to do him, so I didn't. Letty must have cried all night, as her eyes were red and swollen next morning, and she had lost her prettiness. She sent for Walton, and the came riding over. Letty cried all the time she was telling him that Abes was lost, and that she thought he might have tumbled into the river, and got drowned. Walton said the dog would turn up all right, and that he would put an advertisement in the "Argus," and offer a reward. They scurried all round the place, and I had to pretend to look too. Mr Walton stayed until quite late that night to comfort Abes' mistress. As he was saying good-night, and telling her not to worry, Letty said:

"Oh, Ken, only fetch my Abes back, and I'll do anything for you."

"Do you mean that?" he said, in a quick, funny sort of voice, and he caught hold of her hand.

"Yes," said Letty. "I'll remember that," he said, and went off.

Next day I biked over to Tommy's place. I am strong enough to ride a bike now. I thought Abes had been missing long enough, but I wasn't going to bring him back—that was for Mr Walton to do.

Tommy and I had arranged to drive over to Walton's place, which was just about a mile past Hogwood's, and I was to sneak up and leave Abes near the house. He knows the place quite well, as he often used to go with Cousin Letty when she went to visit old Mrs. Walton.

Well, we put Abes into the box once more, and started off. Tommy said he had been giving him plenty of grub, but that he would not eat much—he did more howling than eating. But, fortunately, he was too far from the house for Tommy's father and mother to hear.

We pulled up near Walton's place, and, once more grabbing Abes in my arms, I sneaked along the hedge until I came to the gate. Under the shelter of some bushes I crept up near the house, and then let the dog go. He knew the place at once, and went barking up to the front door. I didn't wait for anything more, but simply tore back to the trap, and Tommy whipped up the horses and we drove quickly away. I felt satisfied that Abes would be brought home all right. If Mr Walton wasn't home at the time, Mrs. Walton would be sure to know about his being lost.

When we got back to Tommy's place, I jumped on my bike, and was only home about ten minutes when Walton came driving proudly up the avenue, with Abes sitting beside him. Cousin Letty rushed out.

"Oh, Ken, you darling!" she said, and she took Abes in her arms and simply smothered him in kisses, Walton looking on as if he wished he were the dog. If I were a girl, I would far rather kiss a nice-looking chap like Walton than a beastly little pug.

Of course, they all wanted to know how Abes was found. Ken explained that the first thing he knew was the sound of Abes' barking, and when he opened the door, he found him on the mat. Cousin Letty said she could not understand why he had wandered so far from home. She said how then he was, and supposed he was starving, which was Abes' own fault, as Tommy had offered him enough food. He was very disagreeable to me, and growled so that I began to think he might give me away, but he was never very fond of me at any time, and Letty said he was cross because he was hungry. However, I decided to give the animal as wide a berth as possible.

That night, after Ken and Letty had been out in the garden for some time, Ken came in to the dining-room, where I was reading by myself. "Congratulations, my Billy, old chap," he said. "Your cousin has made me the happiest fellow in the world—she has promised to marry me."

Of course, I was delighted, and told him so.

"That blessed dog settled the matter," he went on. "I have never had much time for him, but he has done me a good turn this time, bless him. If I had not been lucky enough to have loved him, and brought him home, I don't know when Letty would have said yes."

I did not say anything, but I was simply jumping with delight inside. My plan had worked successfully—it could not have been better. My holiday was drawing to a close, and a few days later, Walton and Letty came down to the station to see me off. Uncle George drove us all down in the big buggy. Abes, thank goodness, was not with us this time. While Letty went to speak to some other people who were also going away in the express, Walton strolled up to the carriage window that I was looking out of, and said, in a drawing sort of voice:

"By the way, Billy, can you explain the unusual antagonism Abes has displayed towards you during the past few days?"

Just then the train began to move, and, as Letty came hurrying up, I didn't say a word, but grinned for all I was worth. Walton must be a pretty cute chap.

"You young scamp," he said, laughing, and his eyes were twinkling like anything as he followed the train along the platform. Then, as the train began to get faster, he pressed something into my hand, and stood back, and I waved to him and Letty until they were out of sight.

When I opened my hand, there were two lovely bright sovereigns.

I always said that Walton was one of the best.

The "Bolton Chronicle" contained this week a letter from "J.H.G.," a gentleman apparently employed in the milk trade in some unstatic portion of the Dominion. Had to say, J.H.G. is of opinion that New Zealand is not a great country, because "it is ruled by the working man, who has no consideration for capital, and no capitalist will stop there to be dictated to as they are at the present time."

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