

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. Terse 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

CONQUEST

By A. WHITAKER, Tauranga.

DO doctor yet," muttered Jim, "and two days since Bill took the message. Twenty miles from a township. Cuss it!"

Jim looked anxiously within the whare of the sick man, and then turned again to look down the road through the bush clearings. He heard the sound of horses' hoofs on the road at last, and up to the door came the doctor and with him a boy of about sixteen years of age.

"The crisis will be to-night," said the doctor, after examining his patient. "It would be as well to let this boy stay and help you. You look worn out, man."

"Oh! never mind that," said Jim brusquely. "Will Martin get better?"

"Certainly, with care," replied the doctor.

The boy now came forward, and in a singularly soft, low voice, said: "I want a job up in the bush. Can I stay with you for a while? I could help you with your mate."

"Anything if it will help him," and Jim's hard face softened.

Next morning, very early, the sick man opened his eyes and gazed around him. Jim was preparing breakfast, whilst the boy slept in the inner room, after staying with the patient nearly all the night.

"I thought someone was here," he said. "Someone I know." This very feebly and wistfully.

Hearing the voice, Jim sprang forward with a smile upon his plain face. "Now, old chap, no talk. I'm so glad the worst is over. Here's your medicine, and we'll soon have you felling trees again. The doctor came and has gone off as soon as it was light. He says all you need is a good nurse."

"But who has been here?" feebly inquired Sidney Martin again.

"Oh, the doctor and a young lad who has stayed up here in search of work—and found it, by Jove! He's going to nurse you better than I can I do believe. Such a handy little man he is. He cleared up this room and waited on you like a woman. But I must be off to milk Betty. Just be quiet now. I won't be long." Jim went off.

The door of the inner room opened, and the boy came softly forward to the bedside.

"So you are the boy! Why, why I dreamed of someone I knew."

"Don't—don't talk, please," urged the boy, interrupting him.

"Her voice, too!" muttered the man. Then raising himself with an effort he commanded sternly: "Come here, boy! Kneel down." The boy obediently fell on his knees, his face whitening, his lips quivering, his eyes dark and shining with excitement, whilst Sidney held his chin upwards and looked into his face earnestly and searchingly.

"Dearest, dearest," the boy whispered, "you know me!" And the voice was full of quiet exaltation.

The sick man smiled gladly, and lying back on the pillow calmly once more, said: "So you came when I called you. My love! My love!" and tears filled his eyes, as the boy covered his feeble hands with kisses.

"Yes; and you must get better quickly."

"Oh, I shall do that now, and I'm too happy to care how you came and, Charlie, I don't ask you why you did this, in fact, why—" and he pointed to her boy's attire and shorn head—"I will just be glad that I have you, whilst I may, and ask no questions. But you won't leave me? You are real?" he continued.

For answer the real womanly Charlie, with the boyish face, closed his mouth with her fingers first, and kissed him afterwards, playfully and yet lovingly. Then with a brisk air she took command

and began her duties of nursing this man whom she loved and for whom she was risking so much. She forbade him to talk, she sang softly and went about the room, cleaning it, and making ready the next meal, whilst the man's eyes smiled upon her watchfully.

It was wonderful how well the boy character suited her. She was 20, but now looked 16. Her slim form was trim and neat in the knickers and Norfolk suit she had managed to procure. Her hair was cut quite nicely. Sidney even wondered who had been a party to robbing his darling of her beautiful dark brown hair, and he was resentful. But her face, clear cut and firm, was sweet, and the eyes wide-set and frank in their innocent gaze, were beautiful to behold. And so the days passed very happily.

Jim suspected nothing, but often speculated about this wonderfully clever boy with the refined manners and speech. Sidney had said: "We shall hear his story soon, only wait." And he himself recovered with wonderful rapidity, so Jim was content.

It was a week later. The patient was seated in the big wicker chair, fully dressed. He had been very particular that Jim should officiate very often when his nurse was out and around the settlement, and so she was to have the great surprise of seeing him sitting up and dressed when she returned. It gave Jim a shock to see her when she entered and looked at Sidney with a sudden joyous smile and greeting, half fear, too, as she ran forward to his chair.

"Are you sure you are well enough?" and she gazed anxiously at him.

Jim muttered as he went out: "Strange boy; he fairly loves Sidney already. So do I. One can't help it. But still, I've known him two years now, and he only a week."

Late in the afternoon Clarice and Sidney were alone. Jim had left them to visit some other camp about ten miles away and would not be back till late in the evening.

"Now, dear," said Clarice, "I must confess. Shall I?"

"I suppose you must, and this cannot go on long, I know," and Sidney sighed deeply and stroked the cropped head of "Boy," as he called her now resting between his knees.

She was squatting on the rug and looking abstractedly into the burning logs, clasping her knees with both hands. Suddenly she turned round and, kneeling on the floor, reached her hands up to Sidney's shoulders and looking into his eyes said: "Remember, I'm not going away. You shan't send me away. Where thou goest I will go, and where thou dwellest I will dwell." She said these last words in a low whisper and with adoring eyes. "You need me. I need you. Now say it shall be so. Say it, dear." And she pleaded with agony of apprehension in her voice. Then breaking off, she suddenly said: "No, you shan't even give an opinion; just wait until I have finished my story."

She returned to her former position—the man trembling with the sudden wave

of temptation to accept—this girl—to throw away convention. Ah! how he loved her. And he was weak yet from his illness. He closed his lips firmly, glad she had turned away her pleading face and prepared himself to listen to her story, reserving his decision. Ah, no, it must not be. He had decided.

"When you left me," she began, "that night, and I had listened speechless to your confession, I was broken-hearted. You said it was good-bye forever; you said, 'I have done you an injury which I can never efface; but, God helping me, it shall end here.' I knew it was little Ethie, your father's good name, and your own honour which must stand first with you. I could not have wished you to act otherwise. No, no indeed. I went away to my uncle's home and went on with my life as if I had never met you on the voyage out from England. And somehow, a year passed—but I could not forget. My uncle died, I was left absolutely alone, with just a small income. A friend of uncle's who had gone from Canterbury to Auckland invited me to visit her for a while and there in her house was little Ethie. Ah! the joy of meeting the darling!" Clarice's voice trembled. "She was staying with my friend awaiting the new term at school, and what news she had for me of her father! I listened to it eagerly. That you should lead this life, convinced me that not only were you seeking consolation and comfort in hard work out in the beautiful bush; but that you must be—anxious about a means of support. You had told me that your father disapproved of emigration, and, in fact, disapproved of all you had done since your marriage."

At this word Clarice's voice broke, and she put her head on her knees, and her form shook with sobs. The man leaned forward.

"Dear, I know. I know you feel full of pity for me. I know that's how it all began!"

"Yes." And Clarice looked up once more at the logs burning. "Then came news of your illness. Jim had to write the weekly letter to Ethie, and this was the first sign. I had expressly forbidden Ethie to mention me in her letters to you. I used to go to the school to visit the child and to take her out. It used to please me as much as it pleased her. One day I left Mrs. Bailey to stay in Tauranga. A relay of Mrs. Bailey's wanted a companion—help there, and I thought it would be better to absorb myself in work. I was anxious about you, and had coaxed Ethie to write a little letter telling me how you were getting on."

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