

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. Teres 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.

The Gift.

By ANNIE WHITAKER, Tauranga.

DORA sighed wearily as she sank on to the sand in a sheltered nook and leaned back against the rocks. Cheltenham Beach was nearly deserted. It was mid-winter, yet the day was lovely. There was sunshine and cool breezes, shimmering water, and white-winged yachts out near where Rangitoto reared its dark head.

Yet Dora was depressed and discontented; life to her was just now disappointing. She was young, and wondered if this sort of thing would last. This "sort of thing" meant the ever-widening breach between herself and Jim—Jim, her husband. She took a letter from within the pages of the book which she was reading. It ran as follows:—

The Bush.

Dear Dora,

I am glad to hear you are well and appear to be enjoying the change to city life. If you wish it, Susan will take you to Rotorua. I may be here three months yet, so that there will be plenty of time for you both. Will Bailey, the manager from Wellington, cannot relieve me just yet, and it is slow work building the mill short-handed. I may run over to Auckland soon.

Your affect. husband,
JIM.

"And this is all," thought Dora; "how cool and indifferent. What a mistake it was our marriage, and now we both seem unhappy." She shivered and a kind of fear gripped her heart. Dora's father was a well-to-do farmer, who believed in giving his children a good, sound education. Each of the seven had been in turn to the college in Auckland. Dora returned to the far distant farm in Dargaville with her small head full of new ideas. She found, however, no scope for them on the busy farm. She must share the work, and numerous household duties. The house was crowded; there were four men living there too, and Dora's mother and two elder sisters were for ever busy, cooking, cleaning, and mending.

Dora seemed different to the rest. She was dreamy and romantic. Her sisters often teased her, and she wept bitter tears at what she considered her hard lot.

Then Jim came. Jim loved Dora at once, calmly, firmly, and with a love unchangeable like himself. Jim was plain to look upon. Jim was fifteen years Dora's senior; but Jim adored her. Jim meant freedom; Jim was going for a trip to England.

So Dora listened wistfully, her big eyes full of wonder as he plainly put the question. "Will you come away with me?" Dora tremblingly said, "Yes." And later on during their brief engagement she had acknowledged that she really did not love him, and asked him to go away and forget her.

Jim had said, "Do you dislike me?" No. "Is there anyone else?" No, with a little blush.

"You wish to leave this place and see something of the world? And I can make you happy, you think?"

"Oh, yes!" Dora had said; "but it is not fair to you."

"You will love me soon. That will come," he had replied.

And so they married, but the wedding trip to England was indefinitely postponed, for Jim had a sad misfortune. His sheep took a disease and died off in dozens. He worked night and day, but nothing could save them.

Dora had a nice home, with every little luxury suited to so dainty a wife, and

Dora now was free, if she wished to dream, swinging in the garden hammock, on sunny afternoons under the acacias, with the books she was fond of reading beside her, and none reproached her.

Susan, Jim's sister, was an excellent housekeeper. She had kept house for Jim for years. Why should Dora trouble her head about it?

But after a few months Dora found her new freedom was but a new bondage. She was almost as dissatisfied as ever. Jim's kindness palled upon her; his silent ways, his apparent cool indifference hurt

And so she pondered, until a voice roused her.

"What good fortune, Dora, to find you here," and a young man of about 23 years stood smiling down upon her. He was handsome, and carried himself with a jaunty air. He was just a smart city youth with rather too much dash and assurance about him.

Dora looked up, and a sparkle of interest came into her face. "Come and sit down, Frank," she said, making room in her sheltered nook. "I was feeling 'blue.' I'm so glad you came."



She softly stepped up behind him.

her, and Susan's perfection in cooking and household ordering gave her pangs of jealousy. She was treated as a child—a pet child—not as mistress of the nice new home. Whereas Dora was developing fast and awakening from her girlish dreams, she was demanding the woman's share of life, her place, her rights.

Two years had passed, and now Jim was out in the bush near the Wairoa, one hundred miles from Auckland.

For three weeks now the holiday had passed pleasantly enough. Both Susan and Dora had enjoyed the change; the life of Queen Street, with its gay shops, the Art Gallery and the organ recitals, was a pleasure to both. Yet somehow Dora was strangely restless. She had time to think about Jim now that he was away from her, time to wonder why he had grown so indifferent to her, and why his calm, kind letter hurt her. At least, her indifference was melting away. She did not see to care that Jim did not love her.

"What's up? More boredom? By Jove, if you'd married me I guess you wouldn't be here all alone for hours."

"Hush, hush, Frank; I won't hear you speak like that. You know it is my own wish, and I don't mind having a few hours alone a lovely day like this." Dora rebuked Frank.

"Well! Cousins are privileged, and I can't help but have an outburst at times; and how you endure living on that lonely sheep-farm with those two slow, elderly folk I don't know."

Dora prepared to rise; she looked rather pale.

"Frank, I will not listen. I'm sorry I told you I was depressed. It was just a headache, and now I will go home."

Frank looked gloomy. "Just a minute, Dora. I didn't mean to talk like that. You know your own business best, but we were such chums at Col., and you told me all your thoughts, and we are still staunch friends. Arg we?"

"Oh, yes," said Dora, rather indifferently, and then, as she saw the eyes beseeching her forgiveness, she said: "Yes, Frank, and I do enjoy your company still. But keep off the subject of my married life. You offend me."

And so they talked of the college days again, and the rare times they had had, and of their numerous mutual friends. Dora waxed enthusiastic, and she liked to see Frank's eager eyes and hear his glib remarks. He entertained her and amused her so much! She soon forgot her sad mood. If only Jim could talk like this.

"I wish you would go with me to the play to-night. 'Kismet' is lovely, I hear," said Frank, with studied carelessness.

"I can't leave Susan alone," said Dora, "and you know she thinks plays wicked."

Frank controlled a rising oath. "Susan again, Dora," said he under his breath and looking down. "Have I no claim upon you at all?"

Dora ignored the question. "I should love to go. I wonder if she would mind." "Don't ask her," said Frank. "Really, Dora, is it fair that you should be treated like a child? It is absurd."

Dora's look rebuked him; yet she was sorry for Frank. What was the matter with the boy lately? He seemed out of temper and jealous of her thoughts of others. She laughed out:

"Come and I will show you Susan does not always treat me as a child. You shall have the pleasure, the joy and felicity of taking your married cousin Dora to the play."

Frank's eyes shone with triumph and he did not mind the little banter in her tone. Susan received the news of the proposed visit to "Kismet" in grim silence and with a pursing of her thin lips.

Dora was hurriedly arranging her pretty dark hair and putting on her daintiest blouse before the mirror. But Dora needed little adornment; she was sweet, petite and very beautiful this evening.

"Will you mind being left, Susan?" said Dora, in her anxiety to please everyone.

"Not at all," Susan replied slowly; "but, if you want my opinion, I think you ought not to go."

"Why?" inquired Dora, wincing and turning pale.

"That cousin of yours comes round here too often. You might consider Jim a little—"

"Jim! Jim! What does it matter to Jim where I go—or what I do?" and Dora's voice broke with sudden passion. Then, turning, she hurriedly took her cloak from a peg and ran out into the road, meeting Frank on the way up to the house.

Just as they were going onto the deck of the smart *Peregrine*, which stood at the pier head, Jim landed from it and passed them unseen and unseeing. He was paying a flying visit to Auckland, and had been transacting business in the city all the day. Now he was coming across to see his little wife and his sister before returning to the bush. Jim's disappointment was bitter, though no one would have guessed it, to find that Dora was out. He sat gripping the arms of the easy chair at one side of the hearth, where a bright fire burned, while Susan sat opposite working her crochet needle rapidly and telling her tale.

Susan thought it her duty to explain what she considered the position of affairs. And when Susan knew her duty not all the forces in the Kingdom could have turned her aside from it.

So Jim listened, sitting there quaking and trembling for love of little Dora, never doubting her for one moment, but deploring the fact that he could not protect her from such attention as Susan had hinted at. He had never deserved such a rare, sweet wife. He had not known how to win her; he could not even entertain her and amuse her as another man could. Jim was fighting the demon of jealousy, too. Outwardly he looked unmoved.

"You are mistaken. I feel sure, Susan," he said, severely. Dora's cousin is quite the proper man to take her to the theatre, and anywhere, in fact."

"I tell you, Jim, he's too flash," said Susan in the rapid colonial way. "Why, he worships the ground she walks on. Anyone with half an eye can see that, and if you take my advice, you'll get up out of this quickly!" and Susan waved her arm as if to denote Devonport and Auckland.

"I don't think that necessary," said Jim, and he sighed.

Susan retired to bed at her usual hour, 9.30, which was as unalterable as the law of the Medes and Persians, and Jim sat