

"He seems to be near me," she sighed; and she disregarded the unkind looks and words of those about her.

The fire was cruel, but not more cruel than those who stood there without pity; and most cruel of all seemed the cold bright eyes of the young countess. The heart of the fay beat wildly; her brows throbbed; the flames leaped about her; she swooned away.

She seemed to awaken as from sleep. She looked around, she remembered nothing;—but who was it that stood there, smiling kindly, hands held towards her? — whose were the words that said,

"Come, then, my dear, my lovely fay; O loving heart,—here it is better than earth or sea; here is peace and love and happiness."

All else melted away, as night melts before the rosy day; and such joy entered her heart as she had never known.

—Was it said the prince was dead?—oh, no; the prince was living, and the fay; for goodness and loveliness never die; they may change, but are bright and youthful for ever.

The Home-coming.

I LAY on the hill-side, at the edge of the cliff, looking out over the broad sea that fringed the curve of the bay with broken billows. The tide was making, and as it swept among the rocks below it swirled the long tangles of kelp till they looked like brown, gleaming, writhing serpents. Overhead, in a sunny blue sky, flew a seagull, crying mournfully as it circled round and round. I seemed to catch a meaning in its cry, and listened.

"Yes," said the bird, "the cuckoo told me. She left for the land she loved; left with the cuckoos, journeying over the wide seas for the lands of her home."

I had heard the cry of the cuckoo the day before, so knew the journey was over; the journey to the green, flowery islands of the south, delightful in the young summer days. But who was it of whom the seagull spoke? I watched the bird, but asked no question; for everyone knows that the teller of tales is only irritated by questions; and I felt sure that the seagull had a tale to tell, and was about to tell it if only I would listen quietly. And presently it went on:

"It was the time when the Earth-spirit opens her windows in that great land; when people say that the flowers are blossoming; but they cannot see through the coloured windows of the flower-petals, or they would see behind them the lovely Earth-spirit herself, and her fairy kingdom from which the flowers come. And the young girl was lying among the yellow flowers, her face hidden on her arms.

"If only I could return to my own land," she sighed, and her eyes were wet with tears;—"my own land, with its greenness and its sweetness and its love. My homeland! my homeland!"

"And she heard a low voice that spoke to her gently from among the flowers, saying: 'Is not this, then, a lovely land, where the bright unclouded sun calls the whole earth to flash into flower—yellow and sweet in the wattle, yellow and pink and orange in the great wealths of everlasting daisy, and odorous in the sweet-breathed boronia?'"

"Yes," said the girl, "it is lovely; but it is not like my own land. It is too great, and the people are strangers; it

is not gladdened, night and day, by the song of the lulling sea, but instead there is the voice of the drifting sands of the terrible desert. Oh! to be in my own land, if only for a day!

"The Earth-spirit was not unkind, even though the girl did not love her flowery land.

"How would you return?" she asked.

"I do not know," the girl answered. "I am there in my dreams, but that only makes it harder when I wake—harder to find I am still in this great lonely land."

"The cuckoos will soon be leaving," said the Earth-spirit; but they always return to me. Would you go with them, and come with them again?"

"If I only could!" said the girl eagerly; "if I only could! Can you wonder I wish to go, when the very birds do so?"

"But they never remain there," said the Earth-spirit, smiling, "they always return to me, unless the sea calls them; for you must know the dangers are great, and many fall in the sea from weariness, and are lost. Would you dare the dangers as the birds dare them?"—"I would," answered the girl; "for one day in my own land I would dare the dangers of many days."

"Do you then love your land more than you love your life?"

"I believe I do," said the young girl, and the tears came again.

"I have heard that there are such people," said the Earth-spirit, as if to herself. "At one time there were many, but they grow few in number, and to most one land is as good as another." Then to the girl she said; "If to-morrow you still wish to return, you shall go, clothed as a cuckoo, in the company of the cuckoos. In a day and a night they cross the seas between, and for a day and a night your bird shape will clothe you. If then in that time you have not reached your land—alas! the pitiless sea will bury you in its waters."

"But the young girl was filled with hope; she thought nothing of the dangers; and her desire being undiminished when again day dawned, the Earth-spirit clothed her in the shape of a cuckoo. She left with the others, flying towards the dawn—the dawn of day, the dawn of joy."

The seagull ceased for a time, and I could not refrain from asking, "And did she reach her land—her own loved land?"

"The ngaio will tell you," answered the bird as he flew off with a mournful cry.

That comes of asking questions, I thought. What did I know of the ngaio? There was no such tree near. The

hill swelled gently upwards from the edge of the cliff, tussocks clothing it to the deep blue sky-line. Among the tussocks nodded bluebells, swaying on long slender stalks. Here and there were breaks in the cliff, where tussock-clad gullies dipped down; some, with steep yellow sides—for the tussock was in full flower,—almost pitching upon the confusion of rock at the foot of the cliff. I remembered; in these gullies grew occasional ngaio trees, and sometimes whispering flax bushes. But of which ngaio did the seagull speak? Had I been quiet he would probably have told me more. For long I thought of the young girl and her desire to return to her own land, and I wondered if she reached it, and if she found the joy she expected; for, alas! many hearts yearn thus for their homeland, but, coming to it, they find only change and disappointment. I left the cliff edge and climbed down one of the gullies to the sea-washed rocks, and there, among the rocks, an old ngaio leant out over the sea—a twisted old tree, that yet seemed to enjoy the beating of the winds and the dashing of the spray when the seas were stormy. Perhaps, I thought, this is the tree of which the seagull spoke; and as if in answer to my thoughts, the tree nodded in the wind that blew from the sea.

"Yes," murmured the tree, "they rested in my branches, wearied after their long journey. They spoke among themselves of the difficulties they had encountered, of the parching day, of the many that had perished from weariness; and one of their number had not even been able to reach shelter; she had sunk lower and lower, and alit on a rock out in the sea, where she lay panting whilst her sisters flew a little further to the cliff-side, where they rested."

I waited, and soon the tree continued: "They sat in my branches as day dawned. But when I looked out to the rock where the tired bird had lain, I saw no bird; in its place sat a young girl, and her eyes were turned towards the cliffs, near at hand. There was fear in her eyes; for the tide was rising, and the great arms of kelp writhed higher and higher, and some of their coiling fingers were flung up the rock, as if towards her. She cried out, but there was no one to hear her.

"My own land!—so near, and cannot I reach you? And I see a dear bluebell, nodding as if in welcome.' Her own eyes were as blue, and as full of heaven.

"But a gruff voice asked: 'Are not the sea anemones as lovely?' It was the kelp-king, and he commanded the writhing arms to seize her and bear her to his sea cave, bright with anemones and pearl and floored with finest sand.

NEW ZEALAND TALES.

"There were no people on the shore; there was no one but the kelp-king to answer her cries as the arms, like serpents, came nearer and nearer.

"'Surely I can reach the shore,' she cried, plunging from the rock into the water swirling with the gleaming kelp; but the king laughed, and she sank as the arms seized her and drew her down to the silent caves of the sea. Soon the waves covered the rock, and in the later morning, children on the sandy beach beyond the cliffs found the dead body of a cuckoo.

"They carried it to their parents. 'Yes,' said they, 'it is a cuckoo; it was probably too weary to reach the shore, and has been drowned in the sea, the poor thing.'"