

The House in the Dunes.

1.

IT was a hot calm day of January; one of those sultry days, when the nearness of the Alps tells the people of Christchurch that a nor'wester is brooding behind the gorges, and presently will sweep his dust across the plains and through the city.—But,

“Every white will have its black,
And every sweet its sour,”

and the nor'wester is the sour in the sweet of Christchurch.

Seated on the deck of a jolty horse-car, a youth left Christchurch for the coolness of the seaside. Though there was yet no wind in the city, further out there was a light cool breeze off the sea; and as the car creaked round the last sharp curve, he saw the gentle fluttering of the Lombardy poplars among the pines of Sandilands, as their aspen leaves caught the breeze from the east. Opposite Wainoni, the red gold of the gorse met his eye; and he thought of how Linnaeus, the great botanist, fell on his knees in admiration on seeing, for the first time, a bush of English gorse in full bloom. Around and among the thickets of gorse shewed the paler flower of the broom; and crowning wider, greener expanses, the still paler flower of the riotous lupin, in all shades between sulphur yellow and white. The catching of the scent from these masses of brilliant bloom, first roused the youth from a depression in which he brooded.

Once the inland dune-belt was passed, the car ran more smoothly on the low swampy flat between it and the sluggish river. He looked from the folded ranges away in the north and west, the foot hills and outer spurs of the great Alpine ridge,—to the less wild range of low Port hills in the south: then his eye rested on the raupo lagoon along the line of rails,—an artificial lagoon caused by the removal of clay for the sea-front esplanade. Ducks, and an occasional bittern frequented the lagoon, and artists had found it not a clay pit, but a gold mine.

Over the bridge spanning the sluggish Avon rumbled and clanked the car, reaching the terminus in a few minutes, where the way to the sea was apparently cut off by a great hoarding of crude advertisements. The youth turned to the right, past a small enclosure struggling to become a garden, and gained the beach; and looking first to north, then to south, set off in the direction of the distant Cave Rock.

The tide was ebbing, and the water was almost smooth. A low slow swell would approach the shore, cresting and breaking with apparent effort, and lipping up but a short distance on the dark, wet sand. The afternoon seemed asleep; the sea-front and the dunes seemed deserted; everything was quiet; and as he walked on, he might have supposed himself in an uninhabited country, were it not for distant trails of smoke, at sea and inland. He enjoyed the loneliness, for in him the gregarious instinct that makes men cluster together in cities, villages, hamlets, was not strongly developed; his was rather the pioneer instinct, that urges men into the unknown, the untamed,—urging them further yet as others follow and occupy what they have tamed and reclaimed.

When the old wooden pier at the terminus had been left some two miles behind, he trudged up through the loose sand to the dunes, and lying on one of these gazing seawards, an hour or more passed in drowsy thought. Then he shook himself free from meditation. He looked in the direction from which he had come. The pier, running out to sea behind the hoarding, seemed much further away, and the mountain beyond much nearer, than in reality they were. “A usual deception,” he thought with a sigh; “always the near seems far, and the far seems near.”

Instead of retracing his steps, he struck into the dunes, and soon he was in the midst of their ever changing wilderness. The east wind off the sea had freshened, and he found a pleasure in plunging down the leeward side of the dunes, where the white, clean sand lay in deep, soft drifts. At the foot of one of these drifts he stood and saw how a continual fine feathering of sand was borne by the wind over the top of the dune, lodging on the leeward side, the dune thus slowly moved inland. It was these travelling dunes that made difficult the building of homes among them: plants were smothered, fences buried, houses themselves ridged up. But the dunes might be anchored, and many were anchored by a stiff, yellow, harsh-bladed grass that rooted deep and would not be smothered; and lupin, with its deep driving tap root and bushy, beautiful fan-shaped foliage, and scented flowers.

There were great almost impenetrable thickets of lupin at some distance from the sea, away from the full force of the salt east wind.

He had walked north for some time, and was nearing a lupin-thicket beyond which he caught sight of the tops of two or three macrocarpa pines, and of stunted pollard willows bending away from the prevailing east wind. Suddenly he heard a clear young voice singing apparently from the midst of the thicket. So unexpected was the sound, for he had seen no human being for two hours or more, that he at once thought of the singing sprite Ariel, and he stopped to listen:

From the rippled seas
Arose the moon,
While sang the breeze
An old sea-tune;
There's a maid, and across the water
The sea-prince comes to court her.

Where flashed and glanced
The golden waves,
His light boat danced
From treasure-caves;
From beamy dimness ringing,
Came sounds of elfin singing:

"From seas of gold
To the gleaming sand,
My course I hold
To the splendid land;—
The flashing seas are parted,—
I come, I come, true-hearted."

There was a pause:—elfin singing; fairy singing;—could he catch a glimpse of the singer?—or was she indeed, like Ariel, invisible? Yet where look for her? The lupins were closely grown, and even were he able to penetrate them, she would be away like a bird long before he could reach her or even see her.—But hark again—

The prince has wooed,
The prince has won;—
But he's at feud
With the royal sun:
His golden moon hung palely
In blinding sun-glow daily.

His path across
The rippled waves,
Where sea-winds toss
Gems from his caves,
No more lay soft and golden,
In night's star-light beholden.

The full moon twice
Kissed ocean's breast;
The full moon thrice
Was quenched in the west;
Nor once returned to court her
The prince from the gleaming water.

The fourth moon gleamed
On the sea-kissed strand:
And had she dreamed
Of a face, a hand?—
In a skiff, heart-wounded, bleeding,
She drifted on tide receding.

"To seas of gold
From the gleaming sand,
My course I hold
To the splendid land."
Ere the sea by the sun was lighted,
Their troth was once more plighted.

As the song went on, he skirted the growth of lupin, his footfall making no sound. Down one soft dune-slope, and up the harder slope of another,—and he reached the top as the song finished. There, below him, on the landward side of the dune, at the edge of the lupin, sat a girl, sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her back was towards him, and she sat facing the ruins of an old home: so much he could see without taking his eyes from her white-robed figure. Part of an old chimney was standing; a fragment of the woodwork, hidden in ivy and convolvulus; under the macrocarpa pines was a pink rose, run wild; out in the open were mallows; and under the willows was an old artesian pipe, the water no longer flowing.

The girl sat silent for some time, as if lost in thought, when she murmured, very softly, the opening words of another song:

I stood at the steps of her home, but she was gone;
And the night came in with cloud from the windy sea;
The bents on the drift-sand shivered, . . .

As if becoming apprehensive, she broke off; and taking up the sun-bonnet that lay on the sand beside her, she stood up;—and turning slowly, she was face to face with the intruder.

He looked down upon her, still thrilled with the pleasure the voice of the singer had given him,—a pleasure increased by her appearance as she stood there, poised on the slope of the dune, brown-eyed, clear-skinned, slim, and graceful, slowly swinging her bonnet at her side. It seemed a minute

or more; it probably was but a second or two, when she turned as if to go;—nor did her look betray offence,—only a startled surprise.

Her turning found his speech for him;—"It was altogether chance," said he; "but hearing the song I naturally wondered,—” He paused; and as she gave no reply, he continued quickly "Had I been familiar with the place,—” and again he paused.

"Yes?"

It was no more than a word, but its tone was not unfriendly, and he completed his sentence, — "I might also have known the singer."

"I can see you are a stranger."

"Yes; and one would suppose that most people are strangers to these wilds; for I have seen no one but yourself all this afternoon."

"It is true few come among the dunes; they prefer the easier walking of the beach."

"Even there I saw none;—there was once a home here?" he said, indicating the few vestiges remaining.

"Yes," she answered; "and I like the place;—it is very rarely I am disturbed, either," and she glanced at him quickly.

"I am sorry," he said, smiling,—"yet I cannot even say that with truth."

"Better say something else, then," she rejoined, moving away slowly, he following almost at her side.

"I never before heard that little sea-song," said he.

"There are many things you may hear and see in these dunes that you will hear and see nowhere else.—It is a wild place at times;—when the nor'wester comes across the plains and tears up the sands, whirling them in great waves and with them blinding the very seas, it is a place of dread;—but there are times when the peace and beauty of Paradise are over all;—and from the dunes by my home we may look over the wide waters, and see the great moon lift up and up, while the waves dance and glimmer in the golden sea-way."

"Your home is near here?"

"We shall see it before long," she answered.

They went on, and he was content enough to listen as she spoke of the wild seas, the wandering sands, the beauty of the mornings and evenings, the changing life of the dunes.

"We shall see it from the next ridge," she said, as they reached one of the firm-floored, basin-like depressions that lie here and there in the midst of the mounded sands.

In a few minutes, the house was in view. It lay at the extreme end of the inhabited part of the village, and was

separated by some distance from the last of the scattered houses. The sand around was partly anchored with lupin, insignis and macrocarpa pines, and in front of the house with a new plant, which the girl told him was called marram grass: it shewed luxuriant, soft growth, pleasing to the touch and to the eye. A thick hedge enclosed an area which, kept moist by a continually flowing artesian, allowed the growing of flowers and vegetables. Mesembryanthemum, too, the commonly-called ice-plant, spread its thick-leafed trails over the slopes here and there, and was now bright with its large yellow flowers. The house was built up on piles, and steps led up to it from the path, formed of clay and strewn with shells. It was not fenced from the roadway, nor indeed was it easy to see that there was a roadway; for it led no further, and was half, or more than half, buried in shifting sand.

"There's father, still with his book," said the girl as they neared the house. An elderly man sat on the small verandah, which was glassed in so that the sun might be enjoyed though keen easterly winds should be blowing. Old fashioned flowers, fuchsias, geraniums, drooping musk, stood on shelves at either end, and baskets of ferns hung from the beams. The glass was in sliding doors, and these now stood open to the cool afternoon breeze. "He's always travelling somewhere,—in his books, I mean," continued the girl. He has a whole row of voyages by a dreadful name that took me ever so long to learn,—Hakluyt;—there are stories of roving and adventures in all parts of the earth;—and I believe dad would like to be one of them again,—for at one time he was a rover."

She called a greeting as she waved her sun-bonnet,—she had walked bare-headed, and her thick wavy brown hair seemed always on the point of escaping its ribbon and pins and tumbling over her shoulders,—and he waved his book in return.

"You must come and see father," she said in half-surprise as he seemed to hesitate; "he likes to talk with strangers;—thinks perhaps he may meet another rover," she added with a smile.

He followed, without remark, and with less reluctance than he usually felt at the prospect of meeting a stranger.

As they approached, the girl chatting away, calling out now and again to her father, the elderly man rose from his chair and came down the steps to meet them. He was tall, if slightly bent, and broadly built; his hair was thick, though sprinkled with grey, as also was his short square beard: he walked firmly, and with deliberate step.

"We two are alone here," she was saying, "but loneliness cannot find houseroom to make a third; for father has his books, and I have the dunes, and all kind of things, and we both have the garden and the flowers,—and they need lots of attention; — I found him at the old house," she broke off, addressing the father.

"I thought it was I who found her," said the youth smiling as he shook hands with the elder, who looked at him with keen but kindly grey eyes. "I heard a singing; and having seen no living being on the sandy wastes, I wondered. I thought of Ariel as I looked for the singer;—but I do not know what I thought when I saw her."

"I suspect," said the girl, "you thought nothing; for you said nothing;—and I began to think you must be a ghost, who had to be spoken to before he could speak; and so I spoke to you."

"But—" said the youth hesitating.

"Oh I didn't say anything; but I turned away,—and that said a great deal."

The eyes of both were on her, and both laughed as she ran up the steps, saying, "I'll leave you two together for a minute; I have sung my song, and the kettle wants its turn:" and she was gone.

"Without telling me who her friend is," said the father.

"That is my fault," said the youth, hastily but without confusion; "for I am afraid I did not even tell her."

"Well you evidently did better," returned the other heartily; "if you did not tell her who you are, you told her what you are;—oh, perhaps not in words," he continued as the youth was about to speak; "but in the same sign-language way that she spoke to you; she would never have had so much as half a dozen words with you if she had had any doubts about you.—Come, we will take a turn about the place, and talk as we go."

The elder, whilst open enough, rather encouraged the younger to speak; for he gathered from his manner that he had had trouble, and knew it is often a relief to speak around a subject if not about it.

The two became engrossed in talk; and the afternoon tea to which the girl called them only interrupted for a time, but did not break the conversation, which was continued afterwards. Nor was the youth conscious of the flight of time until the elder said, "Well, we will see what our girl has got for tea."

He started to his feet;—they had been sitting in an arbour shaded with feathery pink-flowered tamarisk, — and with apologies—

"Tut, tut, tut; we could see well enough you were not tied to time, so supposed you would not object to sharing with us;—though you need not say 'Yes' until we see what there is to share," and he laughed as the confusion of the other increased. "Never mind the chaff of an old man, but take an old man's good will," said he; "come along then;—you're as welcome my boy as you'd be in" — he was about to say "your own home," but added instead—"in the house of your best friend."

It was a pleasant meal: the father was hearty, the girl was merry; and under their influence the guest responded, like young growth of a belated spring to the warmth of leafy weather. The conversation took them, on the Arabian carpet of imagination, here and there over the wide world; and it is wonderful to think how much a man may see in a lifetime.

"I am sure," said the girl after a time, "that romantic and strange things may happen in quiet out of the way places, as well as in palaces or in thronging cities."

"True," said her father; "and some will hunt up and down for happiness, searching oceans and continents in vain; and others find it, almost without the searching, at their very door."

"Or among sand-dunes," she said laughing;—"and think of the old house," she said, suddenly serious; "in how little a space was there romance, and joy, and sorrow, and mystery."

"The old house?" said the young man.

"Tell him, father—or would you rather not?"

He was serious, and looked seriously on his daughter, and his hand rested on her hair a moment, as he said, "A sad story;—without doubt, romance and mystery. But there is not much of it, that story of the house in the dunes." He mused a moment;—then he began:

"It will be sixteen years this summer since there came to these wilds, — for they were real wilds then, — a young couple, and built a tiny home amid the dunes. He chose a site overlooking one of the low flat basins, and being a most energetic man he soon had a cottage up, a well sunk, shelter trees and hedge planted; and in very short time the home was cosy enough, were it not so far away and in such desolate surroundings. That is, it seemed so to others; but those two evidently knew that happiness lay there in hiding, and there without doubt they found it.

"A man must have his reasons for his actions, strange as these may seem to his neighbours; and he must have had his own reasons, simple enough no doubt, for seeking this retreat, a mile from the nearest human habitation. The neighbours talked, as neighbours will, and talked more because they could learn so little to talk about; but none could deny that day by day he was winning a beautiful home from the sands, and had a beautiful young wife to live in it to make it attractive with her love. And in this nest they reared their young babe.

"They had been some three years in their oasis when my wife and I came to this place; their home blossomed, the well of happiness flowing abundantly. He sowed deep-rooting lupin over the dunes, and surface-rooting mallow; and soon there were thickets over the dunes round about his dwelling, so his home was in no danger of invasion from the wandering sands.

"But there is one from whose invasion no home is secure, and whose steps traverse the wild wastes as often as the populous cities;—the wife suddenly sickened and died; and that was the breaking of all. My wife and I had our own little one, and we helped him with his as we could, but he seemed unable to rouse from the blow. He came and went as one dazed; and on our trudging over the hills one evening we found the little girl, then something over four years of age, crying on the doorstep. The father was not about the house, nor did he return though we waited through the dusk. We left a note on his table and took the girl home, but he did not come that night, nor next day, nor ever. Friends adopted the child, but the home was abandoned; and the sands, that had so long left that hollow free, started one year when long continued easterlies prevailed, drifted over the hollow, over the hedges and around the house, as if to bury all from sight. The house itself was burnt one night, and is now as you to-day saw it."

There was a pause,—when he added, in a softened voice, "My own wife was taken four years later,—and since then,"—as the girl nestled close in to his side, "since then, this has been my little helpmate;" and his arm lay lovingly on her shoulders. He looked down into her eyes for a moment;—then his eyes rested on the youth before their love-glow had faded.

"Yes," he said after a long pause, "the dunes give joy as well as sorrow;—and you have helped them in giving me joy, little friend," he said to the girl.

"And to me you have been both father and mother," she answered, clasping him impulsively and kissing him; "you have taught me something of the mystery and the beauty of the dunes and the sea.—Can you wonder," said she, turning to her new friend, "can you wonder that I love the dunes and the old house in the dunes?"

When the youth left, it was with cordial invitations to return: he went with a new sadness in his heart; but the sadness was not heavy;—rather it was the sadness that touches on the borderland of joy; the greyness that at any moment may break to morning.

2.

During the days following, many a wish to return to the dunes entered his heart; but, partly because he had taught his wishes obedience, partly because opportunity did not offer, he refrained. Then all chance of opportunity passed; he left Christchurch; he travelled up and down the Islands; he travelled to and through Australia. The months flew; the years; yes, it was six years before he found himself again in Christchurch, and that on the very day he saw her, so long ago.

"An anniversary;" he thought. "A day can ill be spared for idleness," said a voice that he took to be the voice of duty. "How often have you said that, and deprived me of a pleasure?" he asked. "Only when circumstances demanded it," answered the voice. "Circumstances may demand too much; and this time circumstances must stand aside." "As you wish." And this reply perturbed him more than if the voice had continued its objections. It was usually he who surrendered; not the voice. Yet a desire urged him; and this time the voice of desire was stronger than the voice of duty.

He had noted on coming into the city, how much change had taken place; the Square seemed transformed; old buildings were gone and new ones stood in their place; the old cars were gone, and electric cars rumbled and clanged and sparked; the Godley statute was gone,—no, it was only hidden by a modern tramway shelter. It was another Christchurch. And change after change met him as the car took him speedily through the suburbs:—the fields that once lay under water were now thickly clustered with houses;—the tram-line had been diverted, so that the sharp curve at the sandhills was avoided, and one of the pretty vistas of the journey lost.

Among the dunes especially he noted the change. Old Flemington,—though who knows it by that name now?—was dotted with bungalows; insignis pines had been felled, and dwellings built;—there was change everywhere. But the gorse and the lupin, still riotous and unreclaimed here and there, were the same, and he welcomed them like old friends. The bridge over the river was new; the untidy bank was transformed to a trim embankment;—most wonderful of all, the great hoarding with its advertisements was gone, and the pier-front with its flanking gardens and rotunda looked most inviting. But the many changes struck cold on his heart; yes, even he, who had not known the old place well, could see and feel the changes.

How the village itself had spread!—village? it was no longer a village, but a Borough, with all the attendant worries of Mayor and refractory Councillors — or Councillors and refractory Mayor. The houses were confusing; they had sprung up everywhere; the streets were cleared of sand,—one could hardly tell one from another, the channeling made them all the same. He moved along the old street, recognizing it by a house here and there; but the houses had gone beyond the house of his friends; they pressed closely around it. The steps had disappeared; the road was level with the threshold. He was filled with foreboding. He knocked, and as he had almost expected, a strange face appeared at the door that was only half opened, and even that with apparent reluctance.

“Have I—have I come to the wrong house?” said he.

“I couldn’t say.”

“Did not the old man and his daughter live here?”

“That’s long ago.”

“Where are they now?”

“I couldn’t say,” and the door began to close.

“Have they left the village?”

“I couldn’t say,” and the voice left no doubt that she did not wish to be troubled with idle questions;—so he thanked her and went away.

The poet was surely inspired who gave duty the name of woman, for the voice within him said, “I told you you should not have come,” but he returned it no answer.

Nevertheless, his first impulse was to catch the car back; but that would be yielding to the voice, he thought; so he took the nearest way to the beach; and before he left he would enquire at the Post Office, the store, the chemist,—any of these local directories who know everybody in the village and everything about them.

But first he would go over the old walk, for the pleasure of the memory it might awaken. Even the beach was changed: a high protective bank, grown with marram grass and sea-lyme, extended along the sea front; and beyond the bank marram was planted, to catch and stay the beach drift. The sea was much rougher this day, and huge breakers came tumbling in with seething masses of foam, sliding high up the gently sloping beach. Many bathers shouted in the surf; many people walked the sands, or sat in the marram of the artificial dune;—how different from the solitude he remembered.

He walked on, and after a time entered the dunes, looking for the tops of the macrocarpa pines;—but what a poignancy was in the pleasure that rose in his breast when at last he saw them above the yellow lupin. The afternoon was very like that of six years ago,—hot and still. The sand was burning, especially on the soft leeward slope, and the air quivered above it. The sound of the sea was almost lost down in the hollows of the dunes, the faint murmur swelling and dying as he climbed and descended. He wondered if, among the general change, the old ruins themselves had disappeared; for towards the river he saw the roofs of houses; habitations were pressing close on the old solitude. Among the dunes themselves no change could be seen; mutability was their characteristic; and with them, the greatest change would be unchangeableness. The lupins had extended, and it was some time before he found a way in to the old house in the dunes.

There it was; the half fallen chimney, the mounded ivy and convolvulus, the willows leaning to the west as if they themselves would depart with the sun. From a bush of wall-flower he picked a deep red warm-scented flower, inhaling its fragrance in a long-drawn breath. Memory took possession of his thought, till he could almost hear the song again; could almost see the singer. He threw himself on the sand in the shade, living over again every moment of that long past afternoon. Two butterflies appeared over the tops of the lupins; they fluttered, one after the other, over the ivy, around the chimney, up and down, back and forth, as if they were the spirits of the young couple, haunting the scene of their short-lived happiness. They were gone; but again they returned, hovering above the mauve flowers of a tall mallow. His eyes grew tired with watching as they danced against the intense blue of the sky, and against the hot white sand; and as with a whirling flutter they disappeared, he closed his eyes, and the thoughts thronged. The faint murmur of the sea lulled him; the scent of the lupins seemed to intoxicate him; a light waft

of wind sighed;—his thoughts became blurred;—he was in that land of unreality, entered between sleeping and waking, between waking and sleeping.—

He was walking over the dunes that far day, but now with expectation; his heart swelled; his breath trembled at each inspiration; he was almost in an agony of desire. Everything around was the same,—the sea, the sky, the dunes,—but one absence changed all. In his half-dream he saw her again as he then saw her; heard the faint far song; there was the pause, and she commenced the second song, softly, softly;—he strained to listen; to lose no murmur of her voice:

“I stood at the steps of her home, but she was gone;”

How his heart pained at the words; how his whole being longed for her,—

“And the night came in with cloud from the windy sea;
The bents on the drift-sand shivered,”

Now he could see her face; her quiet brown eyes; now.—
but hark—

“and on their blades
The blown sands beat with a voice through the heart of me—
You stand at the steps of her home, but she is gone.”

She had not sung those words;—how then should he know them?—but they ceased abruptly.—He started up; for a sound may lull, but its cessation may awaken;—so the ceasing of the song awakened him. He glanced about, his heart beating painfully, and as he turned his head he caught sight of the flutter of a vanishing dress.

In a thought he was on his feet; what wild hope was this that beat in his breast so tumultuously?

. . . . There she stood, looking towards him as he came over the dune, wild-eyed, with parted lips, and heaving breast. They stood face to face, their eyes drawn to each other,—two young beings almost distraught with desire. Her eyes misted; her lips quivered; she sank to the sand, hid her face in her hands, and sobbed uncontrollably. Bond after bond of restraint snapped within him; floods of pent-up feeling gushed in his breast; and he sank beside her, no longer weak, but a man made strong with his emotion; and he took the yielding form to his breast, speaking love and comfort.

Then the glorious glow of her eyes when at last she raised them;—her cheeks were wet, her lashes beaded, her eyes still wet with tears, but nothing could hide their glow. Her lips still quivered, but the sobs were now trembling sighs.

“But why did you run away, you dear?” he asked.

“I was not certain—if it was you, and—and—I feared it might not be,” she replied, and the tears welled again.

She became calmer, and in his heart, too, the surging was less painful.

“I stood at the steps of your home,” said he, “and you were gone;—and you cannot imagine my aching disappointment.”

“Yes I can,” she said quickly, with a quaver in her voice though she smiled.

“Do you live here now?” he asked.

She shook her head, and drooped so that her face was hidden as she said, “No, we left the old home;—father died, two years ago now, — — — and before he went he told me — — — that I was the little girl of the house in the dunes.”

“You!—then this was your home!”

“Yes;” and he could feel her trembling; “that must have been the reason I so liked to come here; and it is the reason why I still come;—one reason.”

“I have never, until I saw you here with your father, known what a home was; nor have I desired one of my own;—but now,—will you help me to find, to make a home — — for us?”

For him only was her reply;—and it is a joy thus to leave two young beings everlastingly on the flood-tide of happiness; a pure joy.