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

Billy Hart: Going to Jericho.

By E. N. G. POULTON.

THERE are times in a man's life when there comes a hankering for something new — something that will change his outlook of things, and sometimes something that will obliterate the past. Billy Hart had a large desire to change his life—bury his past, in fact, and start afresh clothed with new ideals. And before the Main Trunk railway had carried settlement into the Waimarino—before the deep-chested forest had sniffed the axe, he had wrung out of his memory the ups and downs of twenty years of his life.

It was Sunday morning. Billy Hart lay a-bunk in the fo'c'sle miserable and unhappy. The night before he hadn't gone further than the hotel at the end of the jetty. The sting of the liquor he had overnight left him unpleasantly remorseful—he had "the blues," and his brain was a-whirl. He wished he were at the bottom of the Red Sea. Even the brightness of the day had no reviving effect on him. The large gay rays that the sun threw into the fo'c'sle tormented him viciously. He tried to coax a little sleep, but that was impossible. So he lay a-bunk thinking, whilst some horrible little incidents in his life tortured him relentlessly.

For some years Hart had sailored in a small packet guilty of trudging the northern coast-line so long that now her engines shook the ribs of her frame with clock-work precision. The crew nicknamed her the "Katzenjammer Castle," which was fully descriptive of her ailment. But Hart revered the old craft with a real warmth. He had got accustomed to her eccentricities.

A month ago Hart could register his age at fifty. At two score and ten, he considered, a man commenced to curl himself into a groove—a groove most men found difficult to elude. He felt himself sliding into a groove, and the fearsomeness of it made him squirm. Unmarried and without personal obligation, he had always pampered and satisfied all his whims and moods, common and uncommon. The life he had led in the past had softened his will, but his face still bore the lines of a determined man.

When "turn-to" bells rang out on Monday morning, Hart was slow in rolling on deck. His mates were quick in recognising the change.

"Keep yer pecker up, Billy, old sport. Ain't she playin' the game with yer?" shouted long MacCauley, as he twisted the lever to test the steam pressure in the winch.

Hart took little notice of the remark. He was in a dream. His mind was so saturated with his plans for the future as to leave room for nothing else.

But MacCauley was something more than a friend of Hart's. Both were men of opposite temperaments, and, singularly enough, mated like a couple of doves. So keenly cut was MacCauley with Hart's morose condition, that he absent-mindedly allowed the winch to rattle away at top-speed. Clouds of steam from the exhaust soon enveloped the decks, and much of it floated into the cabin of Captain Maitland, who was in the act of donning his coat. This brought the old skipper out on deck with uncharacteristic promptitude.

"What's the trouble, there, anyhow?" inquired Captain Maitland, with a look of surprising expectancy. "Ain't things——"

As MacCauley sprang to switch off the steam, Billy Hart came out of the fo'c'sle jauntily, with a swag tossed over his back. The sight of him cut Maitland's speech abruptly.

Tossing a strange jerky nod to his mates as he passed, Hart climbed the bridge-deck steps and sidled up to Captain Maitland's cabin.

Captain Maitland stood up against his cabin door with a friendly look in one eye and an uncertain glare in the other. It was a typical way the old man had of surveying things that perturbed his mind.

"Mornin', Cap'un," said Hart as he reached the cabin door. "Here's me papers—I'll thank yer ter tick 'em off now, skipper. I want ter get on the road this mornin'."

The rest of the deck hands had bunched in a position that kept the Captain and Billy Hart in view.

"What's up, Billy, old man?" said Captain Maitland in the softest tone he could squeeze into his voice. "Ain't things what they should be?"

Captain Maitland hadn't long to wait for a reply. Like a flash Billy Hart answered: "Sign me papers. I'm off—renouncin' everythink and everybody—going to Jericho!"

The skipper was electrified. Hart was his right-hand man, and the prospect of his leaving, and under such peculiar circumstances, made the coins in the old man's pockets jingle with the trembling of his frame. And, absent-mindedly, he signed the papers. Hart grabbed them, and, leaping on to the jetty, disappeared.

Below the crew caught the skipper's words as he walked into his cabin: "Poor old eccentric Billy!"

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Rodgers, along with Seymour, was returning to camp. Darkness had come on before they cleared the bush, but it was a moonlight night, and it wasn't difficult to keep to the track—a track they had many times used. "Dan"—a cunning old retriever—led the way, hunting up a kiwi one moment and a pig the next.

When about two miles from the clearing, Rodgers and Seymour got the shock of their lives. Andy Seymour—the bigger man of the two—was still visibly trembling. His face, usually high-coloured, was now ash grey. Both had seen something—something resembling the outline of a man, but ridiculously clad. They were men of iron nerve, and liked to display it occasionally; but the strangeness of the figure that had scared them completely knocked them off their equilibrium.

Rodgers was a surveyor, and Seymour, when he wasn't filling pigeon with shot, carried the "furniture" for Rodgers. For six months they had been engaged in the Waimarino pegging out sections under contract with the New Zealand Government. That day they had practically finished their work, and both were talkatively happy in anticipation of getting back to city life.

It all happened suddenly. Coming along the track, Rodgers stopped abreast a heavy pine to knock the ash out of his pipe and refill. Seymour, with a bundle of instruments thrown over his back, was a few yards behind humming an American ditty. Presently, "Dan," who had been lost sight of for ten minutes, came suddenly into view, bounding through the thick undergrowth yelping excitedly.

"Say, Andy, there's something special going on here. Let's follow the old terrier, and see what he has on hand."

"Reckon we'll get along to camp and see what Mac has in the pot," replied Seymour lazily. "Guess Daniel has run up against an old 'tuskie' and been assaulted, and want's the aid of the rifle. Let the old beggar settle his own troubles: it's his 'funeral!'"

Seymour had just unburdened himself of his swag when an apparition whizzed across the track a few yards from the spot where Rodgers was standing, with "Dan" in hot pursuit. So quickly did the figure pass—it came so unexpectedly—that Rodgers and Seymour were struck bewilderingly speechless. It took them both some minutes for their nerves to steady.

Rodgers was the first to speak. "I tell you, old man, he's a mystery—an inscrutable mystery right enough," he said, with a beautiful imitation of coolness.

"Gad—what do you—what do you—make of it? Have we—have we—darted back to the dark ages?" said Seymour with jerky pauses.

"But did you spot his hair, Andy? It's as long as old Kit's mane! Anyhow it can leap some, whatever it is."

"Dan" had just returned to the track panting and snorting like a locomotive. He had been eluded in the chase. A piercing glare from Rodgers made him whine uncomfortably.

With difficulty Seymour picked up his swag. He was still painfully nervy. "I reckon we'll skedaddle; we'll be running into a bloomin' moa shortly, and be kicked into next year, if we linger about here!" he shouted to Rodgers with recovered nerve.

As they walked along the track Seymour continually espied imaginary objects. The big shadows which the moon tossed promiscuously among the giant timbers got on his nerves, and for the rest of the journey he stuck pretty close to Rogers.

On reaching camp they found MacCauley sprawling on his bunk, asleep. An old pot on the fire was spluttering viciously at the red embers, and the old sandy cat was doing a wren below some eels suspended from the hut.

PUZZLE PICTURE.

Find the man who suggested a short cut.

"Garn! It's another of yer 'pinkun's'; get a little of this out of the way—it'll stop yer romancin'," said MacCauley as he spread a heavy meal before Rodgers and Seymour.

Seymour had given a glowing account of their adventure, but it was difficult to get MacCauley to swallow anything of the 'remarkable man' or of his manœuvres. MacCauley would believe none of it. He had heard Seymour's yarns before. He knew the amount of imaginary detail Seymour was want to put into everything. But, however, when Rodgers, whose composition hadn't even a small mixture of romance, started to wax excited about the scare, an illuminating interest expanded MacCauley's eyes.

"Queer, very queer," said MacCauley unthinkingly tapping the bowl of his pipe on the top containing the remainder of the evening meal. "It wasn't lookin' into: we should square it in the interests of natural history," he suggested after deep meditation.

That night the camp slept well, excepting Seymour. He was in a perfect nightmare half the night. Unlovely ob-