

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

Compounding a Felony.

By L. M. EASTGATE, Auckland.

THE doctor was making the best pace he could down a narrow country road which ran between wide wastes of tī-tree scrub land. In the midnight loneliness of the desolate surroundings the motor-car looked curiously incongruous, for there was neither sight nor sound of human habitation. Imagining that he was the sole traveller at the time and place, the doctor, regardless of speed limits other than those compelled by the condition of the road, was intent only on making his machine lick up the miles which lay between him and the city with as little loss of time as possible. Suddenly, into the whir and hum of the motor broke a shout from in front, followed by another more insistent, and, with a short impatient word the doctor slowed down, for the car took the whole width of the narrow road. Slowing down was not enough, for the man who had shouted stood fairly in the middle of the road and seemed in no hurry to move.

The doctor, whose name was Harris, felt irritated, for after a long day he had been called out to an urgent case in an outlying district, and now, with work well done behind him, home and bed loomed invitingly. The car stopped, and Harris said shortly, "Well, what do you want, whoever you are?"

The reply came, perhaps quicker, and certainly with more brevity than he had expected. "I want your car," said the man.

"You want—what—?"
The cool impudence of the act and speech was like a match to the doctor's hot temper, which was generally well under control; but the next minute the man had stopped to the side of the car, and by the strong light of the lamps the doctor saw that he was dealing with something that was neither impudence nor child's play. His keen eyes dropped from the square-jawed face, white and set under the rough, tanned skin, to the powerful hand gripping the side of the car as though taking possession of it by right. The action did not affect the owner of the car, as the other man had hoped it would; it only stirred his anger again and made him more watchful. He was a young colonial himself, generally equal to any emergency, whether it called mind or muscle into play. His survey of the man brought him to the conclusion that he would probably need both. He was quick at reading faces, and there was something else on the hand besides mud.

"Want a doctor?" he asked quietly, watching his man all the time.

"What makes you think so?" came the quick reply, in a suspicious and defensive tone.

"The blood on your hand," said Harris, prepared to repel boarders if necessary.

The man looked down with an involuntary start. "That's from a tī-tree scratch," he returned, sulkily.

"Pretty bad scratch to bleed to that extent. Let me see it. I'm a doctor."

"You a doctor—is that true?" Harris looked steadily into the fierce, anxious eyes.

"It is," he answered quietly. "What's wrong?"

"The man drew a long breath before he spoke. "It was to fetch a doctor I wanted the car. Will you come along with me?"

"Jump in and tell me where to go," was the laconic reply. He still had his doubts about the man, but a call to his work always found him willing, and he was prepared to deal with things as they came along, and not cross his bridges before he came to them. Besides, he

didn't doubt his capability of dealing with this one man should the occasion arise, but he could see no particular reason for expecting foul play.

"You might shake her up a bit," said the other, as he hastily entered the car, and the doctor complied, though the rough road made him groan inwardly over his tyres. They presently came to a cross road, and turned to the right leading away from the one which led to the city. The road they were on went from bad to worse, until finally the car had to be abandoned.

"She's safe enough," said the man. "We shall be only a hundred yards off, and, anyway, there's no one here to interfere with her."

Harris said nothing in answer to this piece of gratuitous information, but kept his thoughts to himself. Bag in hand, he followed his guide down a narrow track until they reached a cluster of rough shanties and tents—a gundigger's camp. It was a wretched-looking place, and though the occupants might well have all been sleeping at that hour, the doctor knew instinctively, that they were not there, and that the camp was empty, though possibly only temporarily so. The doctor wondered who and what his patient would prove to be.

"Stay here while I fetch a lantern," said his companion quietly, and without waiting for an answer disappeared. It was a doubtful situation, and the doctor's every sense was on the alert as he waited. The atmosphere of the place was sinister enough. Bad things had been done there, and had left their silent testimony. Harris felt he had stumbled on one of them now.

Presently the gleam of a lantern showed through the darkness, and the man rejoined the waiting doctor and, with a brief word, led him through the camp to a tent on the far side. His guide motioned him to enter, and it said something for the doctor's nerve when he calmly did so, with his gundigger acquaintance a foot behind him. A knife between the shoulder blades would not have been an unlikely end to the business, provided there had been a motive for the murder. Once inside the man raised his lantern and, with a gesture, showed the doctor the work awaiting him.

A man lay on the ground, his great uncut frame senseless and inert, his head bound round with cloths that were not only soaked but dripping with blood. It was a horrible sight, for his face,

chalk-white under the dirt, was so evil, so bestial, that even the evidences of suffering and unconsciousness could not wholly mask it. But he had been badly punished for something. The doctor drew his breath with a whistle, and looked from his face to the other one. Rough it was, and flint-hard, but it was the face of a man—not a brute. The doctor wasted no words—the case before him, after a swift examination proved too urgent. Opening his bag and taking a rapid survey of the means at his disposal, he set to work. The man who was responsible for his presence there helped him in a silent, resourceful fashion, obeying the doctor's curt orders with a deftness and intelligence that presently caused the latter to glance at him curiously.

"You've looked after a patient before this," he remarked, and noticed the dull red that suddenly burned the tanned face. "There was no reply, but the doctor had waited for none, and was again absorbed in his work. It was an ugly job, and though Harris worked with his usual rapid skill, it was some time before he rose to his feet with the remark: "That's all, for the present. How did you come to cut his head open like that?"

The face, into which he was looking keenly, set like iron. "I'd risk breaking my neck to get a doctor to mend a chap's head if I had smashed it, wouldn't I?"

The doctor gave him a keen, steady look. "Yes, I think you might," he said coolly. "To go back to my question, it would depend on how you came to do it."

"Who said I'd done it?" said the man half-sulkily, half-angrily.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to his own hands. "Got any more water? I'd like to wash my hands."

Picking up the bucket of blood-stained water, the other went out without replying, returning in a few minutes with it freshly filled. The doctor washed his hands and then turned to his companion abruptly. "I'll have to report this, you know?"

The other turned swiftly. "No!" he said, suddenly and violently.

"Yes," said the doctor, with emphasis. "If you didn't do it, what does it matter to you?"

A sudden spark lit in the man's sombre eyes, and his great fists clenched. "You won't improve matters by cut-

ting my head open. Besides, you mightn't manage it." He cast a look at the coarse bulk on the floor. The man looked too. "Curse him!" he said, low and bitterly.

"That's as you feel," went on the doctor, cheerfully; "but I've got to get him into hospital and have him properly looked after."

"I can look after him here. I swear to you I'll nurse him night and day, and do exactly what you tell me."

"There was some pity in the eyes that met the passionate pleading ones. "He hasn't much chance as it is," said the doctor very gravely. "and if he 'goes out,' what does it mean to you?"

"The man drew his breath with a gasp and went blindly to the open flap of the tent. "My God!" he muttered brokenly, "what'll become of my little girl?"

Harris went up to him. "Here," he said sternly, "you had better make a clean breast of it. It won't make things any worse and may help."

The man looked at the clever, determined face lit by a wonderful kindness, and after a moment's hesitation spoke. "He's my little girl's brother," he said hoarsely, pointing to the man on the floor. "A low drunken brute that's plagued the life out of her. I took her away from him and married her because I loved her and because I knew she would be happier with me even in a gundigger's hut than she was with him and she was—as happy as the day was long, and I—." The passion of love in the man's face was a marvellous thing to see, and the doctor turned his eyes away, wondering at such intensity of feeling displayed by this digger of gum.

After a pause the voice went on, low and hard.

"I was nearly brooking my heart to get enough gum to take her out of this life. I wanted to settle on a bit of land. The Austrians here do it. I know several who have got vineyards and they've done it all with kauri gum. So that's what we were working and saving for and happy all the time until he found us out—damn him. He'd come along to our place when I was away digging and plague Kitty's life out. He joined this camp but he did precious little work wanted me to dig enough for him too—I swore to him that if he came near Kitty when she was ill I'd knock the life out of him." He looked down at the evil unconscious face and drew a hard breath.

"To-night—last night—it's near morning isn't it? I came home very late from work. I always work as long as the light lasts and last night I had to go and see about a bit of gum I had happened on some distance away. I thought someone might have found out about it but they hadn't, and I promised myself something good out of that particular bit of ground. Before I had finished it was nearly dark and when I got home I found my poor little girl half-crazy. The brute had come to her for money and because she couldn't give it (to him, had gone off with a sack of my best gum. He was mad for drink of course, I went made then—it wasn't only the gum, though I valued every lump of it because it brought that home for Kitty nearer, but to find my little girl, that had to be alone a day until I could get back to her; sobbing herself into a fever with her baby in her arms—I went fair mad. I followed him without stopping to think—

—I think I meant to kill him then, and when I came up to him outside his tent with my sack of gum put up into two smaller bags so that he could carry it more easily, I couldn't help myself and went for him with my fist. He picked up

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