

do you know about the **KUMI?**

A KORERO REPORT

The Kauri-gum Industry Bill, the rehearing of the Dreyfus case, the splendid trials of Sir Thomas Lipton's Shamrock, concern with the enormity of the National Debt, the Kumi. So ran the headings to the Front Page news in New Zealand newspapers of 1898. Everyone knows something about kauri-gum ("Gotny gum, mister"—popular query). The Dreyfus case is known generally for its celebre and for the "sensitive portrayal" by a well-known Hollywood actor, if for nothing else. Lipton, in these materialistic days, may be associated more with tea than with international yachting, but the America's Cup still has not been forgotten. The National Debt—its "enormity" to-day is just too great to worry about anyway.

But the Kumi. The Kumi was in the news, but what is, what was, the Kumi? *Korero* didn't know either. References were found, dusty newspaper files read.

It all started, it appeared, in 1874, when the Otago Museum authorities cleared a cave in Central Otago to find among the debris of centuries a jawbone of a reptile, a lizard that was definitely not a tuatara. It had completely different dental conditions from the tuatara, its teeth fixed inside the jaw (which seemed to be a good place for teeth to be fixed anyway) were extraordinarily strong. The bone was supposed to belong, the reports stated, to the Kumi, an extinct (that's only what they thought) lizard of great size and ferocity, a species of the Ngarara, the Reptile Gods.

In 1892 Captain F. W. Hutton, of the Christchurch Museum, received more bones from this cave. Among them was one small riblike-looking specimen, which, after investigation and research he supposed to belong also to the Kumi. It was, he propounded, a left rib, much stouter and flatter than any known reptile

bone and more like the rib of a mammal. It was different from anything he had ever seen before. The Kumi began to sound interesting. In fact, it was so interesting that for a reason not stated the *Otago Daily Times* printed the story of Captain Hutton's findings twice, word for word.

But the announcement in September, 1898, of a Kumi, very much alive, seen near Gisborne, was much more interesting than bones, jaw or rib. It was sensational. The Kumi had chased a bush-feller; for several days it chased the Kauri-gum Industry Bill and the like to the back pages.

The story: this bush-feller, a Maori—known as a steady young man not given to colourful exaggeration—working about 50 miles from Gisborne had surprised a strange animal surprising him in the bush. It quickly disappeared into the trunk of an immense rata tree. The man's mates were called. The party bravely advanced, found a track deeply rutted leading to the tree. Up the trunk, marked spirally from the creature's hideout, were deep clawmarks; on the ground were footprints much larger than a man's hand.

The description given by the bushman, of a huge lizard with four legs and long powerful claws, tallied exactly, according to well-informed Maoris, with that of the reptile Kumi. The Kumi, seen for the first time for three generations, used to live in trees and among boulders, grew to 12 ft. long, had huge jaws with curved teeth (like the one seen), and used to lie in wait for its prey.

Kumis, the stories went, used to be found walking out with Moas, with whom they were on the best of terms, a distinction claimed by no other person, insect, bird, or animal. They climbed trees in a spiral fashion (making claw marks similar to those seen by the