

The Wonderful Wanderings of Wiremu Double-you Weka By E. H. C.

Chapter 9. CARELESS GIANTS

WIEMU walked whistling along the path; it was a lovely morning; the sun filtered through the leaves, filling the bush with soft greenish light. You could not help singing on such a morning as this!

Then he stopped! His face clouded as he gazed in perplexity at a tree which stood barring his way. Again the many puzzling things that had worried him for the past few days flooded his mind. This tree, sick and bedraggled like so many others, its bark cut and scarred as if some huge monster, with razor sharp claws, had scratched its trunk across and across. Other trees had vanished leaving only their stumps—smooth stumps that showed none of the jaggedness of a fallen tree—something must have taken those trees. There were wide paths never seen in the deep dense bush from which he came; there were clearings, too, where the undergrowth had been broken and trampled as if some great animal had used them for a stamping ground. All about him the bush was thinning; the number of young trees coming on to take place of the old were few; the dense impenetrable tangle of creeper and fern, which Wiremu knew, gave place to just a few scattered plants. Surely some gigantic creature was invading the bush, damaging, breaking and retarding its growth, and threatening the bush folk by reducing their homes and larder. What could it be? Could Wiremu do anything against someone strong enough to remove whole trees?

Just then he heard voices. But what voices! Wiremu shivered; they were far louder than the voices of any bush creature and with them came a rhythmic pounding as of huge feet. Was he about to see the monster? He shrank behind a fern, curiosity mastering his wish to flee, and gazed in fascinated terror at the bend round which this new horror must come. The voices grew louder, nearer and nearer tramped the heavy feet; the bushes shook; Wiremu froze in dreadful expectation.

Then the bushes parted, leaving Wiremu staring straight into the faces of two of the biggest and queerest animals he had ever seen. They were straight and thin like tree trunks. They had two legs like a bird but with great clumsy blocks for feet, and thin featherless wings with claws at the ends that flapped as they walked. On their heads grew tufts, like limp grass, which hung about their white featherless faces.

Wiremu stared in amazement; could it be true? Surely they fitted his mother's description. Yes it must be, Wiremu was sure of it. They were men! Men like Mr. McGillicuddy, who had given his ever-so-many-greats-grand father the name that Wiremu now bore.

Wiremu was fascinated. Now they were gazing at the tree—perhaps it worried them too to see the bush being spoiled; perhaps they would help him drive out the cause of the damage. Men were the birds' friends, Wiremu remembered how good they had been to Wiremu the first, he remembered his little friend Sydney Silvereye's stories of the scrumptious food they put out on their bird trays in the great city.

What were they doing now—what was that sharp thing one had brought out. On No! Not men—it couldn't be! But sure enough there right before his eyes one of the two was cutting deep into the already sick tree.

Just then Piwakawaka, the fantail, flew out of the bushes and darted and twisted about the two men. Wiremu called him. "Are they really men," he asked. "I thought men were our friends." "Oh, these are only young ones, boys they call them," answered Piwakawaka. "They're my friends all right, see how the clumsy things have disturbed all the insects for me." "But look what they are doing." Piwakawaka looked grave. "They're not purposefully hurting the tree, they're cutting their names. They just don't think. They leave their rubbish about too, they don't realise how horrid it looks—come and see."

Piwakawaka led Wiremu to a pretty clearing. Wiremu almost cried as he gazed about him. Rubbish lay everywhere. "It's the stuff they wrap their food in and the food they don't want," said Piwakawaka. "It's such a shame the way a few careless people spoil places for everyone else."

With that Piwakawaka flew off leaving Wiremu to examine the horrible mess. If it was food perhaps he could eat it and tidy things up a little. He scratched and poked about for an hour, eating all he could, and certainly the glade looked much better. Then he stopped—what was that? Then again! Repeated by many voices, cries of terror rang everywhere. Hundreds of birds flew past him straining their wings to the uttermost in frantic haste. Piwakawaka flew close to Wiremu, his eyes starting with fright. "Fire," he shrieked, "Fire."

"What is it?" "Where?" said Wiremu. "Fire," gasped Piwakawaka, casting a terrified glance behind him. "It's hot, hotter than the sun, men use it to make their food hot and if they don't stamp it out or pour water on it to kill it, it grows and grows and eats everything, all the trees and us too if we don't fly fast enough, run!" and Piwakawaka darted into the bush.

Wiremu looked round. Where was this new enemy? All he could see was a low cloud or perhaps mist, hanging over the trees. But in another minute he too was fleeing for his life, for bursting through the cloud and rushing towards him came a great roaring monster that grew bigger every minute.

(And in next issue you will read what happened.)

