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Tales of Rotorua and Legends of the Lakes.

(Specially written for the "Graphic" by J. Cowan.)

[In this series of historical and descriptive sketches dealing with the Rotorua district, an entirely new, hitherto unrecorded group of Maori folk-tales and traditions is brought to light. Many a familiar spot in the Thermal Springs country abounds with Maori song and story, handed down by word of mouth, but very few of these are known to the white visitor. The notes which follow, gathered from the old people of the Ngati Whakane, Tahononui, and Ngati-Pikiao tribes of the Arawa Country, will, it is hoped, give our readers additional interest in the lakeland scenes with which they deal.]

NO. VII. AN ENCHANTED VALLEY. IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF IHENGA.

SWIMMING along the shore of Lake Rotorua, westward and northward, from Ohinemutu, and passing the mouths of the Waiotiro and Waikuta streams, and the Ngongotaha River, Tana and I beached our boat one morning at the mouth of the Waiteti ("Cabbage-tree Stream"), a beautifully clear little trout-river winding down from the fern hills on the western side of Mt. Ngongotaha. On a green hill on the left (northern) bank of the river, close to the lake, is the site of one of the most ancient villages of the Arawa people, the old pa, and little Kainga Weriwiri. Here I saw the remains of what must have been a very strongly fortified pa, in the pre-musketed days. Five hundred years ago the explorer-chief Ihenga settled on this spot, set up his stone altar, or taahu, as every pious Maori should, and built the great pa, whose massive mairori, or walls, stand even to this day. The great trench which runs across the land side of Weriwiri is wide and deep, and the top of the earth wall, along which a row of pakeha pine-trees now grow, is fifteen feet or so above the bottom of the fosse; it must have been more in ancient days, and it was also formerly crowned by a stout stockade. Within the lines of the old pa is the little home of Matehaere and his wife, two old folks who are mines of information for the folk-loreist. It was Matehaere who took me to see the various places sacred to the memory of his ancestor Ihenga, and showed me the resting-place in a curious little valley, the very tapu stone "Hine-tua-hoanga," on which stone weapons and ornaments were sharpened by rubbing in the brink of the sacred stream Wai-oro-toki, of which no Maori may drink and live.

This clear little Wai-te-ti stream winds down like a silvery ribbon through the ferny hills and manuka-clothed levels. A small Maori village, known also as Waiteti, stands on its banks, a short distance up-stream, near the Rotorua-Tauranga coach road, from which a wheeled vehicle can be driven down to the village or right into the walled marae of Weriwiri. The Waiteti is a magnificent trout-stream. It is an incredibly tempting sight for the angler to stand on the bank just above some still, clear pool, alive with beautiful fish, particularly if it be just before the fishing season opens. In the spawning season the upper parts of the stream are full of the big fish; you will see them lying there on the bottom in the sun-warmed reaches, as still as so many rocks, until, perhaps, you are tempted to drop a stone into the stream for the fun of seeing them scatter, like a shoal of mullet before a shark.

Up the valley of the Waiteti, turning off sharp to the left from the coach road that leads towards the Mangorewa forest and Tauranga, there are some picturesque little valleys, beautifully sheltered nooks that held Maori hamlets in other days, but now all deserted and overgrown, gone back to the wilds again. Leaving the rock-belted "lightning-mountain" of Te Kanea on the left, we can ride along the old Maori track up to the main source of the Waiteti, where it springs up in a deep puna, or fountain, from under a cliffy wall. These tracks twist in and out all over this lonely country, through the high fern and the glossy green tupakihl within its black clusters of elderberry-like fruit, and the thickets of manuka that in springtime are showered with delicate white blossom till they look as if a snowfall had powdered the face of the country, and diffuse an aromatic fragrance that is the most insistent of the grateful odours of the bush.

Walking up this quiet valley, old Matehaere took me to the old home of his hapu, where generations ago burned the home-fires of his tribe, where their raupo huts dotted the river banks, and human voices livened the now desolate places. About two miles up the valley from where the stream intersected the main road we came to a place where the little river took the character of a mountain-stream, and ran in rapids quite excitedly, whitening itself in cataracts and spray; on either side the banks were clothed with fern and flax, and here and there with groves of the cabbage palms, from which the river took its name. On a ferny knoll that commanded a good view of the stream, bending round in an arc below, and sending its water-music far through the still summer-day air, my old guide halted and said:

"Let us rest here awhile, and I will show you the sacred place of my ancestor Ihenga."

Pointing across the valley, he indicated an unusually large ti-palm, or whanake, as it is more often called here, that grew on a tiny flat on the opposite or right bank of the stream. It was really a monster of the cordylinae tribe, a palm with a trunk of remarkable height and an immense bunchy head.

"See vonder whanake tree," he said, "and the smaller trees that grow around it, in a clump? That spot is called Te Motu-tapu-a-Ihenga (the sacred grove of Ihenga). It was close by there, by the foot of the palm, that Ihenga once had his dwelling-place; and in that grove of trees was his sacred place, where he, as an Ariki and priest of his tribe, retired to invoke the gods and to work divinements. That great palm and tree is said to have been planted there by the hand of man; this our people frequently did, because the whanake gave a pleasant shade, and a kind of rough pueru, or garment, was made from its long leaves. That tree is tapu to the Maori, because of Ihenga, and also because the place was afterwards used as a burial place by Ihenga's descendants."

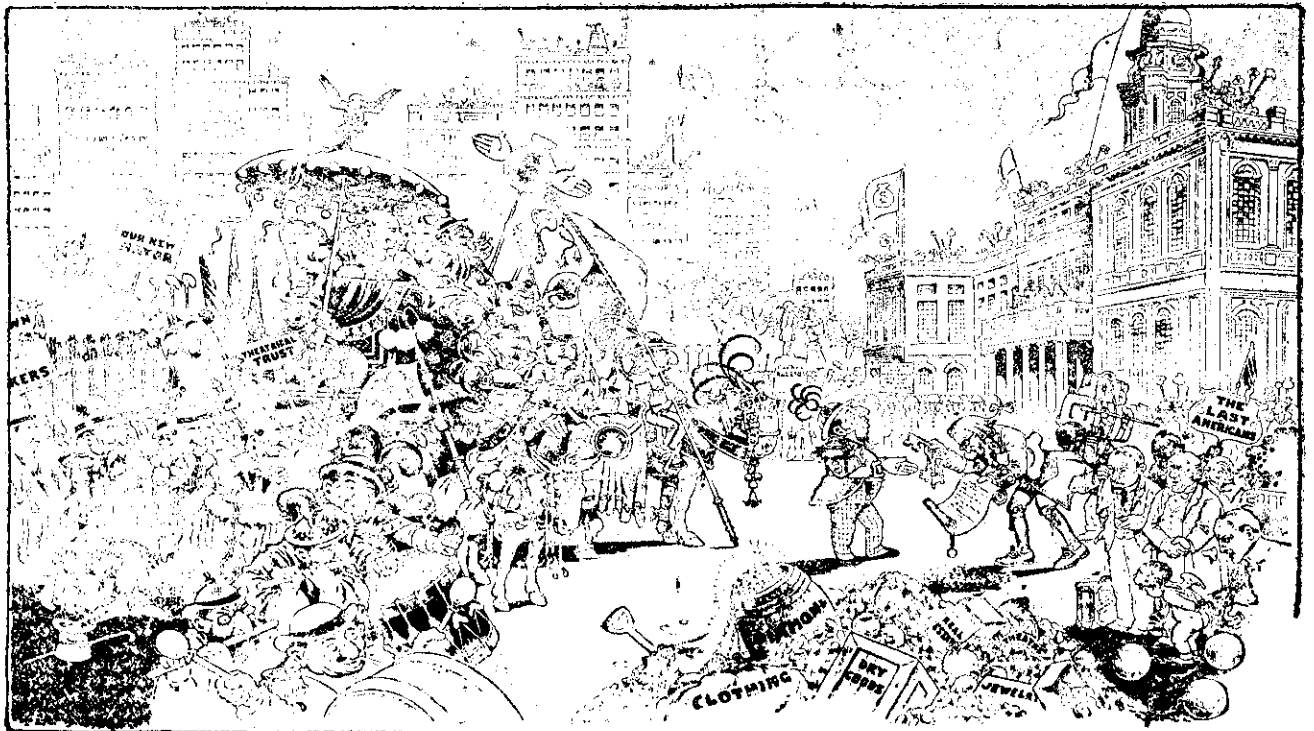
Then, turning to the right, Matehaere pointed down into a little valley that dipped abruptly at our feet, a palm-dotted dell through which a tiny stream crept down and searched its way to the Waiteti. The valley was shaped very like a shallow cup; one side opened to allow the creeklet to reach the river. That little stream, said the old man, was the sacred river Wai-oro-toki. On the opposite side rose a steep fern-covered hill; its name was Te Whakaeke-tahuna; it was the first fortified hold which Ihenga built in this Lakeland, and was occupied by him for some time before he went to live at Weriwiri and constructed his waterside fortress there.

"Now, friend," Matehaere continued, "Ihenga the chief had three treasures. One was his god Utupawa, a stone carved in the semblance of a human being; it was brought to this country from Hawaiki. Hither Ihenga brought his god, and he sought for it a resting-place, and he set it up on yon ferny hill above the Waiteti, not far away from his home. His second treasure was his mokai or pet, called Kataora, which was a creature in the form of a tauhiwa or lizard-like monster. He fed and cherished this strange creature, and it lived in a fountain-well which you will see in the bed of the Waiteti. Long afterwards it was killed at Lake Tikitapu. And his third treasure was the sacred rubbing-stone, Hine-tua-hoanga, which I will show you lying by the brink of that very tapu stream in the valley below us. And Ihenga's friends, and neighbours here were the fairies, the Patupaiarehe. They belonged to the fairy tribe of Mount Ngongotaha."

"But now let us go down into the valley and look upon the sacred waters and the hoanga stone of power."

The old man led the way down through a tangle of shrubbery to the bottom of the little cup-valley, till we reached the Wai-oro-toki. The name means "Axe-sharpening Water." It was a rivulet of coolest, clearest water that welled up—like most other streams in this district—from a little gushing fountain spring under the side of the hill, where a thicket of native shrubs almost hid it from view, and invested it with a mystery and gloom that to the Maoris heightened its mana-tapu, its sacred character. Tall whanake palms rose over all, and gently swished their long sword-leaves, and now and then a soft air stirred the grey and dried dead leaves that drooped in bunches below the crown of green. The stream, only a few feet wide, but deep and still, flowed very silently, just moving the cresses and waterweeds that fringed it; it was so clear that you could see every stone and pebble on its sandy floor. It was a slumbrous spot; and old Matehaere, as he stood on the bank, seemed half-afraid to break the supernatural quiet of the sacred valley.

"No Maori will drink of this stream," said he, after a while. "Its waters are tapu, for two reasons. One is that the sacred bones of Whakaue, one of our great ancestors, from whom the Ngati-Whakaue tribe takes its name, were buried in its source, dropped down into the puna, the river-well there under the hill. The other reason is that the very sacred axe-rubbing stone Hine-tua-hoanga lies by the river brink. It is death to drink of this water, though it looks so clear. The tapu would kill any Maori. Once two men drank of it unwitting of its history, and they quickly died when they discovered what they had done. You Pakehas would say it is fear,



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