

The Poetic Side of the Maori.

By JAMES COWAN.

ILLUSTRATED BY T. RYAN.



It has sometimes been said that New Zealand has not as yet evolved a characteristic literature, or a noticeable collection of writings of artistic worth truly typical of the country and people, and racy of the soil. It is true that so far the busy nation-making life of the colonist has given small opportunity for the building up of a special literature, but it is quite incorrect to suppose that the many sources of inspiration for the poet and the story-teller which these islands afford have been neglected. Sir George Grey, Domett, Manning, John White and C. O. Davis have handed down to us priceless contributions to an appreciation of the literary treasures which are embodied in the poetic language of the Maori. The New Zealand poet or prose writer could go to no better source than the love-romances, the stirring tales of adventure and war which pertain to the Maori and the past days of strife with the European. They could derive inspiration from the number of poems, couched in the most beautiful language and expressive imagery, which are either preserved in print, or to be heard to-day in any Maori village. These fine poems contain the noble thoughts of a vanishing race. The dominant note of the songs of the Maori is their sadness; a sombre cast is over most of them, due doubtless to the fact of many of them being composed on occasions of public mourning for the deaths of great people, or of some private or tribal disaster. The "Waiata-aroha," or love-songs of the Maori are often similarly tinged with sadness. The song sprang from the heart of the singer bewailing the absence of her lover, and appealing to the soft breezes and the fleecy clouds to carry her message of affection to the

distant one. The imaginative Maori felt in the cool breeze which fanned his face and saw in the drifting clouds or the sea-bird's flight, a message from his far-removed clan, his wandering relatives, his child or wife. In the lightning's glare over the sacred tribal peaks, he read disaster and death, and the thunder was to him the rolling voice of the gods.

These town-dwellers who only know the Maori race from the few unpicturesque and often slovenly specimens whom they occasionally see in the city streets, and have never gone amongst them at their festive gatherings, or when they mourned the death of a chieftain of rank, travelled with them, or seen them at their work, will find it hard indeed to understand how poems of such delicate feeling and wealth of imagery should be found in the native language. The Polynesian aboriginal was certainly a savage, but withal a poet. And here I would repeat that in the study of native songs and story, incantations and wild tradition—in the great work of colonisation—the struggles of pakeha and Maori—fierce forays and deeds of chivalrous courage—there is the widest of fields for the epic poet and the song-maker of the future. And what more effective setting could the poet or the romance-writer desire than that which lies around him in this noble country of ours—snowy ranges, deep forests, burning mountains, sheltered, fertile valleys and wide, shining rivers? The land is here and the material. The men and women who will turn that material to account are wanted.

I was long ago attracted by the picturesque imagery and expressive language of the Maori songs and laments, especially as heard at native gatherings of festivity or woe. One