

THE BLIND FISHERMAN.

STOREROUSES was sitting in the sun, and performing his toilet. With the aid of a couple of cockle-shells, which he used as tweezers, he was pulling out the scanty hairs of his grizzled beard.

"Well, how does that look?" he asked of his wife, who stood by, watching.

"You're getting on," said she, "but there are still some on the left side."

"I can't manage," said Storehouses. "You try, Rua."

His wife took the cockle-shells, and pulled out half-a-dozen hairs at once.

"Ho!" cried Storehouses. "I say, that was awful. That was too much. Come, come, I can't stand that sort of thing, though I wish to appear at my best. Take care. And, Rua, mind what you do with the hairs. Do not drop them. It would never do for my hairs to be left lying about—they are so sacred that any one, excepting yourself of course, who handles them dies at once."

When the plucking process was finished he said, "Now for the head:"—he ran his fingers through his hair—"it's too long; it needs cutting." So Rua took a sharp piece of volcanic glass, and commenced to saw at her husband's locks—a painful process, which brought the tears to the old man's eyes and caused him to cry, "Oh! ah! be careful."

"I'm getting on beautifully," said his wife.

"Oh! But that was a good bit. Take care of it, Rua. Take care of every sacred hair; don't leave one on the ground, lest it should bewitch the whole village, and people should die. All you cut off must be taken to the sacred place where I repeat my incantations."

"I've not lost a hair. I have them all in a little box. Never fear; they shall be taken to your tuaahu as soon as I have finished."

"I'll look well. I shall be quite a catch for the young girls. Have you done, Rua?"

"Almost. There is but one more lock. There, I have finished."

All of which was a piece of comedy, acted for pure love of the thing and the delectation of a group of people who had gathered about the door of the hut. For old Storehouses was the wit of the village. When a man came to him and said, "I've caught a fine big fish," Storehouses would ask, "How big?" "Oh, as long as my arm." "That's nothing. I caught one this morning as long as my body." If a man came in from the plantations and said, "Storehouses, I've got an enormous sweet potato," the old man would take the tuber in his hand, feel it all over, and then he would say, "I don't call that big. I call it small. Why, in my plantation I have got sweet potatoes as big as your head." The humour of the thing lay in the fact that Storehouses was quite blind, and could not see whether one fish was larger than another, or one potato more to be desired than another. But the result of his good-humoured way of taking his affliction was that his friends invariably brought him the pick of their catch and the choicest samples of their crops.

One day when the time for planting had come, his old wife said to him, "What are we going to do about putting in the seed?"

"You plant it," said Storehouses.

"I'm too old," said his wife. "Plant it yourself."

"I'm too blind."

There was a pause in the conversation, during which husband and wife were buried deep in thought. At length the blind man said, "I know how I can get over the difficulty. I will dig the ground—that is easy—then I will put in the seed, and beside each sweet potato I will put in a stick. By and by, when the plants must be separated and transplanted, I shall

easily find them because of the sticks. Wait and see—we shall have a fine crop. Every one will come to see it."

So the blind man dug his ground and carried out the planting according to his plan, but when the young plants should have sprouted Rua said she could not see a single leaf. The sticks were there, but there was nothing in the earth beside them. The rats had eaten the seed.

"Never mind," said Storehouses. "I will catch the rats."

Approaching his friend Piki, he said, "I want you to lend me your dog to kill the rats that eat my potato seed."

Anxious to help the blind man Piki lent the dog.

"Will he catch them quickly?" asked Storehouses.

"Oh yes, he'll catch all of them in one night. He's a good dog."

"Very good then; as soon as the rats are dead I will plant some more seed."

So in triumph Storehouses took home the dog, which proved to be all that its master had said. During the first night he caught eight rats, and the next ten, and the next four, including a big buck rat, the chief of all the others.

"That's very good," said the blind man. "We'll eat that big fellow, and the dog shall have the rest."

But the dog's appetite could not keep pace with the liberal supply of rats, and as Storehouses was digging a hole in which to bury the rodents that were over, Rua said, "Why not use them for bait? The rats ate our seed: at least make them catch fish."

"Certainly," said her husband. "It's a capital idea, and I will carry it out."

So he got out his fishing-line, cut up the dead rats, and went off to the beach.

Now the dog, seeing the last of the rats being carried away, followed the old man, and Storehouses soon heard the dog panting behind him.

"Hullo! What are you doing here?" cried he. "You are a good dog for catching rats, but no good for catching fish. Go back, do you hear? Go home."

The dog paused, cocked up its ears, put its head on one side, watched the old man walking away, and then ran after him.

Soon Storehouses again heard the dog panting.

"Now what did I tell you? Go home! Quick!" and raising his stick the blind man made mighty and ineffectual blows at the dog, which ran back as fast as its four legs would carry it.

"That's all right," said Storehouses. "He's gone. Now I shall catch fish." But above the tussock grass which fringed the dry white sand appeared a head with two prick ears, inquisitively turned on one side.

The blind man carefully baited his hook, and rose to make a cast. Thrice he swung the heavy sinker round his head, but just as he threw the line his foot caught on a stone, and he fell sprawling on the sand. Picking himself up, he drew in the line carefully and prepared to make another cast. This time his foot caught against a piece of drift-wood, and again he fell. By now, what with tumbling about and excitement, he had lost his bearings, and when he made the third cast he was facing the land instead of the sea.

But it was a famous cast: the line fell far beyond the edge of the sand, amid the tussock grass. And the dog no sooner saw the sinker fall to earth than, with loud barks, he ran towards the bait.

"Ha! there's that dog again," cried old Storehouses, and picking up a stone he threw it into the sea. "I'll teach him to go home when he is told." He had flung the stone with his full force, and immediately there was a howling such as only a stricken dog can make.

"Ah!" said the blind man. "I hit him that time. Listen to his howls. I'll teach him to follow me when I go fishing. Why, he might get caught by my hook as I cast the line, and he's a good dog . . . Catches rats well."

The dog's howling continued, but grew fainter and fainter, and the line ran through the blind fisher's hands.

"Hullo!" he cried, "I've got a bite. Now then, steady, steady," and he paid out the line. "I think I've hooked a big hapuku, by the feel of him. Hullo! the line's run out," and he held the piece of wood to which the line was attached.

The dog's howling now sounded far away, and the fish dragged the blind man about the sand. "Ha!" he cried, as he panted with his exertions, "listen to that dog. He's going home as quickly as he can." But after the fisher had played his catch skilfully for quarter of an hour, the line became still, and Storehouses began to haul in his fish.

"My word! he's a big fellow. He's hard to pull in. He must be enormous. Perhaps he's a young shark."

The dog's howling had ceased, and as Storehouses drew his catch to him he broke its head with a heavy stone.

"There, he's dead," and the blind fisherman grunted with satisfaction. "My word! he's fine. He's not a shark, or hapuku, or a kahawai. Ha! what a fish to catch."

He wound up his line, placed his catch in his basket, felt on the ground for his stick, which he could not find, swung his burden upon his back—and walked into the sea.

"Hullo! I'm going the wrong way. That's a very foolish thing to do—to forget the way home." But as his feet were bare, of course the mistake was of no consequence.

When he reached home he found Piki waiting for him.

"Tena koe," said Piki.

"Tena koe," said Storehouses.

"I have come for my dog. There are numbers of rats at my place now. I want the dog to catch them."

"The dog's about here somewhere. He followed

me to the beach, but I sent him back. I've been fishing."

"Did you catch anything?"

"Did I catch anything! When ever did I go fishing and catch nothing? But this time I caught a bigger fish than ever."

Piki smiled. He knew the story that was coming.

"Now what do you think I caught?" asked the blind fisherman.

"Oh, a few rock-cod."

"Better than that. Feel the weight of my basket."

"A stingaree."

"What should I bring home a stingaree for?"

"The oil. They're good to eat, too."

"No, no. Guess again—I don't like stingaree."

"A young ground-shark."

"That's better. That's nearer. But that's not it."

"Well, what is it?"

"Am I the most skilful fisherman of this tribe?"

"Yes, you're a good fisherman."

"Am I the best of all?"

"Yes, the best of all."

"You know that?"

"I know it."

"All right. This will prove it. Look at that!" and he turned the contents of his basket out upon the ground.

Piki laughed. "Come here everybody, and see this fish!"

The people came crowding round, and Piki continued, "Storehouses went out to fish, this morning, and this is what he caught. Isn't it fine?"

The people roared with laughter, so that they drowned the blind man's expostulations.

At last, when they perceived he was trying to speak, they restrained their merriment, and the old man said, "You well may laugh. He's a fine fellow." Upon which the laughter redoubled.

"Now be quiet, all of you," said Storehouses—"he will be enough food for half the village."

Some of the people were now laughing so much that they could hardly stand.

"What are you all laughing at?" asked the blind man. "I see nothing to laugh at. Piki, look again closely. What do you say I have caught?"

"Storehouses, you always were comic!" exclaimed Piki, who could hardly get the words out, he was so filled with laughter. "But this beats all. It's a dog!"

"A dog!" cried the blind fisherman. "Pooh! Your're blinder than I am. Take another look at him. That's not a dog."

"Oh dear, he says it's not a dog!" exclaimed Piki, appealing to the crowd. "I shall be ill with laughing. Here, Storehouses, feel his fur." Taking hold of the blind man's hand he placed it upon the catch.

"That's not a dog!" cried Storehouses. "That's a seal!"

At this the shout of laughter was so loud that people came running from the furthest end of the village.

"Did you ever know anything like it?" Piki appealed to his growing audience. "It's too funny! You're the man to make us laugh," he said, slapping Storehouses on the back. "You're the man for a joke. A seal! The story will be told in every village. Oh dear, I must go and lie down, or I shall die with laughing."

"Wait a minute," said the blind man. "Don't be in such a hurry. If it's a dog, Piki, tell me whose dog it is."

Piki took up the dead creature by the tail. "This is Storehouse's seal," he said; "observe its black-and-white markings." But suddenly his features grew long, and a serious expression came over his face.

"Continue," said the blind man. "Tell me whose dog it is."

Piki turned the animal over, and examined first one side of it and then the other. "Why it looks like . . ." He looked at its head and at its tail. "I believe, really, it is . . ."

"Well, tell me," said Storehouses. "I'm waiting."

"You rascal, I'll teach you to joke!" suddenly cried Piki, raising his hand to strike the fisherman. "It's my dog!"

The laughter which greeted this confession was such that it could have been heard at the edge of the forest. The enraged Piki was held back by a dozen hands, and the blind man said,

"Don't get angry. If it's your dog it's not mine—though I caught it. I don't want it: you can have it. I don't eat dogs. Take your dog." And amid renewed shouts of laughter, Storehouses shuffled towards his hut.

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