

## FISH-HOOKS.

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**R**USHING River, the owner of the hook Taka-tahi, did not begin the trouble. He was really a most innocent person, and his connection with the celebrated instrument for catching fish was merely that of a beneficiary. He had inherited it from his father, who had inherited it from his father, who had inherited it from his father, and so on ad infinitum.

The true cause of the vendetta was the selfishness and ambition of Rea, the principal chief of Wakatu, as the Maoris called the place where the white man's town of Nelson now stands. His pa was situated at the mouth of the harbour, where shipyards and wharves now line the shore, and his co-chief, The Earthquake, had built his pa on the little hill where a wooden cathedral now rears its shingled spire in the centre of Nelson City.

It was the custom of the two "hapus," or divisions of the tribe, to go share and share alike after the communistic fashion of Maoriland. Rea had collected a great store of dried eels, dried shark, potted pigeons and edible parrots; The Earthquake had grown quantities of sweet potatoes, and had prepared much fern-root. So that conjointly they had abundance.

When The Earthquake saw how full Rea's storehouses were, he said, "That's all right. That is very good. We shall have plenty of food for the winter."

"Yes," said Rea, "and when visitors come from Motueka, from Waikawa, or from Takaka, we shall be able to feast them sumptuously, and we shall get a great name for our hospitality."

"That's so," said The Earthquake. "My sweet potatoes will go well with your potted pigeons and dried fish."

"Very well indeed," said Rea.

Soon after this conversation occurred, the people of Motueka, which is on the other side of Blind Bay, visited The Earthquake's hapu. A messenger was immediately sent to Rea, to tell him that a big taua had arrived overland from Motueka, and to ask him to send twenty full loads of dried fish, eels, and pigeons.

When the messenger returned, The Earthquake said, "Well, is the food coming?"

"No," answered the messenger. "Rea says he will want his food when his own visitors come."

"But that will never do!" exclaimed the Earthquake. "I have only got vegetables to give these people."

"Rea says 'Fill them with plenty of sweet potatoes, and then they will soon go away.'"

Now, the soul of the Maori's social life is hospitality. It is a compliment to be eaten out of house and home by your visitors; it is the depth of dishonour to force a strictly vegetarian diet upon your friends. It will be understood, therefore, that The Earthquake's vexation was of the greatest: already he saw himself stripped of his prestige, a mean and contemptible fellow with whom no well-bred person would associate; and he cursed Rea from the bottom of his heart.

In two days the visitors had tired of their poor fare. "This man is no chief," they said. "He has no food; he gives us nothing but sweet potatoes. He is a poor fellow. It is time we moved on." On the third day they went down to Rea's pa beside the sea, where they received a great welcome.

They were served with piles of the choicest food—tender pigeons, delicious eels, dried fish, hapuku, rock-cod, garfish, butter-fish—and Rea was voted a good fellow, a great chief, a man who deserved to have many friends. But the adulation had no good effect upon the recipient. Taking himself and his co-chief at the estimation of the visitors, Rea made so bold as to send a party of people by night to The Earthquake's plantations, and carry off half his crop of sweet potatoes.

After that, relations were strained between the two "hapus."

We now come to the second stage of the story. Rea had a son named Long Girdle, a youth of sixteen. "It's time you got married," said the father to the son. "Make a tour of the neighbouring tribes, and see if you can suit yourself." So Long Girdle went to Takaka, ostensibly to enjoy the fishing, but really to look for a wife.

And this is where Rushing River, owner of the famous fish-hook Taka-tahi, is formally introduced to the reader. He was a benevolent, tattooed old gentleman, passionately fond of fishing, the father of a most beautiful daughter.

Out they sailed upon the glittering waters of Golden Bay—the young man, Rushing River, the girl, and a stalwart crew. When they reached the fishing-ground they let go the anchor, which was a heavy stone with a groove cut round it, and got out the lines. Long Girdle was in the stern of the canoe, with the girl beside him; Rushing River was amidships. All the lines were quickly set, and the fishers were waiting for the fish to bite.

Suddenly Rushing River's line drew taut. "Ha!" he cried, as he drew it in hand over hand, "I have caught the first fish. Hold him, Taka-tahi. Be strong, my good hook! Keep your hold on his jaw, Taka-tahi! Don't let him go!"

Rushing River landed his fish, a big hapuku, and called on all men to admire his skill. But there was a groaning in the stern of the canoe; Long Girdle had been taken ill suddenly. He was holding his hands to his stomach, and rolled from side to side in great agony.

"What's the matter?" asked the old chief.

"Oh! Ah! Oh!" groaned the youth. "I am ill. I feel bad inside. I am going to die."

"Haul up the anchor," ordered Rushing River; "our visitor is too ill to fish. We must get back to the pa and fetch the tohunga to charm away the evil. It

would never do for the son of the great chief of Wakatu to die on our hands. Pull for the shore."

Long Girdle was in great pain when he landed; he was in greater pain still after the priest had pronounced incantations over him. He begged to be taken home:

"Launch your swiftest canoe," he said to Rushing River; "man it with your strongest crew, and take me back to Wakatu before I die."

As was to be expected, Rushing River showed the generous feeling of a true Maori: he himself brought the sick youth to Wakatu, and that without delay.

The entrance to the harbour is narrow, and the people lined the shore as the canoe, with the eight-miles-an-hour tide behind it, shot through the gut. They saw their chief's son lying in the stern; they saw him carried ashore to his father's house, and they wondered what sad mischance had happened.

Rea followed his son into the house, where crying women crowded round the couch of the invalid. When the youth saw his father appear, he said, "Send these women away—they make too much noise."

"Oh, my boy," cried the chief when he was alone with his son, "what evil has befallen you that you come back to me in this state? What malevolent priest has bewitched you? Our tohunga shall say charms over you, and I will tell him to drive away the wicked spirit that has taken hold of you. Oh, my son, do not die, do not die!"

"Die?" said Long Girdle, rising from his bed, and smiling. "Die? I am not even ill. I haven't the smallest pain. I am as well as you are. But I have reached home safely, and I have delivered the villain, Rushing River, and two dozen of his men into your hand."

"Eh? What?" exclaimed his father. "What does this mean? I don't understand. One moment you are groaning with pain, and the next you are laughing. How does this come about?"

"I was in the canoe, fishing," replied his son,

"and Rushing River hooked a big hapuku. 'Hold him fast, Taka-tahi,' he cried. 'You were a good warrior when you were alive: be a good hook now you are dead.' 'Taka-tahi?' I said to myself. 'Taka-tahi was my ancestor. Have his bones been made into fish-hooks by this vile fellow?' And I at once thought of a plan to avenge my forefather. I have brought Rushing River into your hands, and you can wreak your vengeance on him."

"Ah!" exclaimed the chief with deep feeling. "So that is it? He has made fish-hooks of my ancestor. Very good. I will make cinders of this man's flesh and fish-hooks of his bones. You are a good lad, a clever lad; you will become a chief with more fame than your father himself."

Then Rea went out, and welcomed Rushing River and his men with a great display of hospitality. He caused to be served up to them some of the much-coveted birds preserved in their own fat, dried eels, and large quantities of sharks and other fish. And when his guests were feasting, he walked up to the pa upon the little hill, and asked to see his brother-chief.

The Earthquake came sullenly, and when Rea had unfolded his design and had asked for help in executing it, the other said, "What! help you to kill two dozen men? Are you so weak that you are frightened of two dozen men? I thought you were a great chief."

Rea resorted to persuasion, but The Earthquake remained firm. "No," he said, "you refused me food for my guests. You sent men by night and robbed my plantations. Now you have grown fat on my root-crops; you have grown strong with all the eels and fish you have caught; take, then, your brave warriors, a hundred, or two hundred of them, and fight these twenty-four men of Takaka. If you overcome them it will be a great victory." And, so saying, The Earthquake left Rea in scorn and strode towards his hut.

But that night there was a savage tragedy performed in the pa beside the sea-shore. At midnight great bundles of toetoe—a plant not unlike pampas



grass—were piled round the hut in which the Takaka men slept and ruthlessly set on fire. As the terrified victims fled from the burning whare, they were killed in cold blood by the Wakatu men who stood around.

Thus was payment exacted for the matter of the fish-hook. Rushing River, when he was alive, used to say, "Ah, Taka-tahi was a great man—look how the hook made from his thigh-bone catches me fish. My forefathers got all his fame, and I have got theirs. I also have the hook. I am greater than Taka-tahi ever was." So Rea took the dead chief's bones, and from them made full a dozen hooks, and said, "Now things are as they ought to be. Rushing River had my ancestor's mana as well as his own; now I have taken it all from him. I am the greatest chief in the three islands." So it will be perceived how the vendetta grew deeper and more deadly.

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It was a lovely winter day. All was peaceful in Wakatu. The serene atmosphere enwrapping the distant azure hills lay undisturbed by so much as a breath of air. The smoke from the cooking-fires rose gently towards the placid heavens; mountain and forest, shore and sea lay tranquil under the still repose of the midwinter calm.

A solitary messenger, traversing the Waimea plain, came over the low inland ridge of hills into The Earthquake's pa, and changed the prevailing quietude into mad unrest. "Watch," said he, "the calm, blue surface of the sea where it stretches across to Motueka. Look at the advancing canoes of my tribe."

To the seaward fringe of the encircling hills the local chief repaired, and saw six small dots far out upon the sea, and marked them develop into long, thin canoes which landed on the beach, two miles away. Along the sands stole men like ants, and so round concealing cliffs approached the avenging force.

Below, Rea's people were disporting in the waters of the harbour. Children ran along the shore; women

stood round the cooking-fires; men lay recumbent on the sand, telling each other tales of daring deeds: when round the projecting cliff swept a compact column of vindictive warriors, fully armed. There was a rush, a complete surprise, the slaughter of men, the capture of women; and one solitary figure fled inland to The Earthquake's pa. It was that of Rea, the cause of all the bloodshed. He cast himself on the mercy of the man he had hated, he craved protection from him whom he had wronged.

What shall be done with Rea, who killed the guests of his tribe? Run, Rea, into the toetoe and flax which fill the swampy valley between the hills; flee to the uninhabited forest which covers the great mountains. But it is of no avail. He is caught while crossing the river where he so often caught the savoury eel, not far from the very plantations he had robbed.

Let the sequel be brief.

This is a story of fish-hooks. The prestige of Rea was bound up with the fish-hook fashioned from the bone of his ancestor. It is the fate of his family—into fish-hooks also shall his bones be made.