

THE COURTING OF KIRIKA.

TE Pi was a great athlete. He was the fastest runner, the strongest swimmer, the most powerful wrestler in his village, which was situated where the town of Waitara now stands.

It is the fate of the athlete to fall in love. As Samson was bewitched by Delilah, and Hercules by Deianeira, so Te Pi fell under the spell of Kirika, the sweetest and gentlest kotiro of his tribe.

But with that coyness which becomes all women, whether they be brown or white, the Maori girl determined that her lover should give some proof of his devotion. So when Te Pi boasted to her that he was the strongest man in the tribe, she said that to win her he must prove himself the strongest man of all the tribes.

Like the true athlete he was, Te Pi had no wish that his light should be smothered under a bushel; so, getting together a team of young men, he went on tour, challenging all with whom he came in contact.

First he went to Waikato, where he easily won the swimming contest, but was beaten in the flat race by a fleet sprinter named Great South Wind, who, however, when Te Pi challenged him to wrestle, was thrown every time.

The fame of this match reached Kawhia, where there was a celebrated athlete named Hundred Huts. This great man sent a challenge to Te Pi, who delightedly complied, and the meeting was fixed.

In this case, the Waitara heavy-weight came off victorious in every event, swimming, running, and wrestling.

This account of the triumphs of Te Pi may read like a notice in a sporting newspaper, but it shows that the Maori, then as now, had the true sporting instinct.

But things were not always to be rose-coloured with Te Pi. After he had completed his tour and had returned home, loaded with fame and more in love than ever, he was received coldly by Kirika; for during his absence a rival had appeared. This was Manaia, a Hawera chief, who had come from the other side of the mountain* for the express purpose of courting the pretty Waitara girl. And his courting was very captivating. Whereas Te Pi's love-making had been of the boisterous, domineering kind, the "look at me, and resist me if you can" sort of wooing—a method of courtship which, while it may answer in some cases, was not at all to Kirika's liking—Manaia had come with flattery and presents and soft speeches, all of which proved to be sweet as honey to the maiden. So that when, bursting with the glory of his triumphs, Te Pi returned, the indifference that Kirika showed to his successes was like a cold bath after the delights of the steaming hot-spring.

"But I beat all comers," expostulated Te Pi. "No one could stand against me. I am the champion of the Tribe of Mahutu, of the Tribe of the Son, of the Tribe of the River, of all the tribes."

"But not of the Tribe of the Girl"—that was Manaia's tribe—said Kirika.

"The Tribe of the Girl!" exclaimed Te Pi. "Nonsense. I could throw their champion with my left hand. They're a poor lot—let them send their best man, and I will prove my words."

"There is Manaia," retorted Kirika. "He is a splendid wrestler, I'm sure. Besides which he is the most courteous, well-mannered man I have seen. He doesn't bluster or brag, or go vaunting round the country; but you would find your match in him nevertheless."

* The conical Taranaki, called by the English Mount Egmont.

"Manaia?" said Te Pi. "I never heard of him. Who is he?"

"He came on a visit while you were away. You may be strong, but he is handsome; you may be a wonderful wrestler, but he is gentle and accomplished. You should hear him sing, or tell a story. Strength of body isn't everything, but I have no doubt that he would beat you at that also, if he had a mind to try."

In a moment Te Pi guessed how the land lay. "Where does this man live?" he asked.

"At Hawera."

"Good. I will go there. I will find this fellow, and I will show you that he is just a child in my hands. If that doesn't satisfy you, I will challenge him to fight to the death, and you may marry the survivor."

"No, no!" cried Kirika. "If there is bloodshed I will marry neither. Now listen, Te Pi. If you quarrel with Manaia I will have no more to do with you."

"I'll break his neck."

"Then I shall hate you."

"But I'll marry you all the same."

Kirika smiled. "Now you are talking like an overgrown boy," she said. "Of course I admire your strength—every woman must—but this boasting is absurd. If you were gentle in manner, if you could sing, or tell amusing stories, then you would be irresistible, and I should be charmed. But first of all you love your athletic triumphs and the praise of the tribes, and then you love me. Now, the man who marries me must love me beyond everything else."

Hereafter picture this Samson in the toils of his dusky Delilah. Imagine him singing love-songs with a full, deep voice, and cudgelling his torpid brains to tell amusing stories, till all the pa was laughing at his uncouth attempts to be entertaining. His rough manners had given place to a demeanour which was pathetic in its gentleness, his boasting had changed into effusive adoration of his lady-love—so great is the influence of woman—and indifferent to being the champion wrestler

he was ambitious of being thought the most accomplished toa in Maoriland. He would sit for hours beside Kirika, as she wove elegant flax cloaks adorned with bright feathers of birds he had caught. Docile and attentive, he would posture his great body in all the attitudes of love, and with soft sentences and tender speeches he would strive to propitiate the goddess of his choice. He long had ceased to talk of his physical triumphs; the memory of his athletic tour was buried in the oblivion of the past; it was as though feats of strength were naught and wrestling a vulgar pastime: his whole being seemed bent upon acquiring the arts and graces admired by his deity. To sing to her was his delight, to dance before her was perfect joy, to tell her the quaint stories he had heard on his travels gave him the greatest pleasure, till from the rough and boisterous wrestler Te Pi had become indeed the polished toa of the kainga. And then the fickle heart of woman changed. With the fruit in her hand, Kirika had desired to have the flower; possessed of the flower, she now desired the fruit. She had admired the physical powers of her lover more than she had cared to own, but now that she had succeeded in weaning him from his rough and boisterous ways, she was alarmed lest he should lose his reputation for feats of strength.

Imagine Te Pi's surprise therefore when one day she suddenly said, "E hoa, we had almost forgotten Manaia. When do you propose to challenge him?"

"There is plenty of time," replied the infatuated athlete. "What is the good of wrestling? I like the dance now, and the story and the song."

"The fact is that you are getting lazy," said the girl.

The huge fellow laughed. "You help to make me feel so, Kirika. I don't want to go to Hawera: I want to stay with you."

Now while such a confession would indicate an unhealthy state of mind in any man who made it, in such a hero as Te Pi it was deplorable. Though Kirika appreciated the compliment he intended to pay her, she

felt he must not lose the attributes of youth too soon.

"You must go to Hawera," she said. "You must overthrow Manaia, before I marry you."

The athlete's eyes opened in astonishment. The whims of his deity bemazed him, but the humour of the situation amused him. "That is easy," he laughed, "much easier than composing songs to your beauty, and pleasanter than racking my brains for stories. Manaia shall be properly beaten. Then you will marry me. Is that so?"

"That is so," said the girl. "But if he beats you, then I'll marry him."

The huge fellow laughed again. "I will send him the challenge at once," he said; and rising like a behemoth, he walked off.

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The match was arranged, and after a short course of training Te Pi, accompanied by his picked team, was about to set out for the great encounter. He was spending the last remaining hour with Kirika in sweet farewell.

"You'll take care not to get hurt, won't you?" said the girl.

Te Pi laughed. "You need have no fear of that."

"And you will . . . you will, if it's only for my sake . . . you will win the match."

"Have I ever lost one?"

"And you won't stop in Hawera too long? You'll come back soon?"

"As quickly as possible."

"You won't let any of those Hawera girls keep you?—they are so ugly."

The wrestler took Kirika in his arms, and laughed at her apprehensions.

"Tell Manaia, after you have won, that it is no good his coming to Waitara again, for I am your wahine."

"He knows already that you are the prize."

"And I will ask my father to say the proper

incantation that will give you strength and make you win."

"I have beaten all previous opponents without the aid of spells," said Te Pi. "If I have the support of your father's karakia in addition to my own strength, I am bound to be victorious."

When the visiting team reached Hawera there was a great welcome and much speechifying.

Every one in the pa understood that the stake was the belle of Waitara, and the interest in the contest was intense. Quite a dozen Hawera girls were ready to console the worsted wrestler, whichever he might be.

After a day or two's rest, during which the visitors quite recovered from the fatigue of their journey, the match commenced. First, amid the most uproarious merriment, the followers of each chief engaged in friendly bouts. There were foot-races and wrestling, but no swimming, because the Girl's Tribe had no suitable sheet of water near the pa. Then, in the afternoon, the two chiefs stood up to decide the fate of Kirika.

Te Pi threw off his long feather-cloak, and with a flourish of his arm made his challenge.

"I am Te Pi, the great wrestler. I am Te Pi of the River Tribe. I have beaten all Waikato and Kawhia, and every toa I ever met. I am come to challenge Hawera, to challenge Manaia. I will put round his leg a whiri from which he cannot escape, and I will hurl him to the earth. When once I have him in my clutches, he will never get free. A chief named Hundred Huts, of Kawhia, thought he could throw me. He was tall and strong, but I threw him three times. Great South Wind, the Waikato champion, was cunning as well as strong: he wrestled with his head as well as with his body, and used all sorts of tricks for overthrowing me; but I was beforehand with him. I threw him five times, and he acknowledged me to be the victor. Now we come to Hawera. This will be the greatest match of all—the prize is the prettiest girl in Taranaki, in the whole country, Kirika, the charming

kotiro of my tribe. The champion wrestler shall marry the loveliest girl in the whole world. It will soon be decided. Now, Manaia, come on!" And with awful shouts of defiance he sprang forward.

Motionless and scowling, the Hawera chief had listened to this harangue. But now he dropped his cloak, and stood only in his rustling piupiu, which hung from waist to knee. With a voice deep and gruff with rage he cried, "Come on, Te Pi; come on, Tribe of the River! Manaia is waiting."

Cautiously watching his opponent, Te Pi advanced. With his arms stretched out, his body bent forward, and with feet well apart, he crept slowly towards Manaia, who in a crouching attitude awaited the grip of his adversary with apparent indifference.

Suddenly Te Pi sprang forward. At the same moment Manaia stood erect, and drawing a concealed greenstone axe from beneath his piupiu, buried its blade in the bent head of his antagonist.

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The summer night was warm and still, the surface of the sea was flecked with the silvery beams of the full moon. Beside the water paced the figure of a girl, dressed in a feather-cloak. Her dainty footsteps marked the track of her walking backwards and forwards along the glistening strand. Tormented with anxiety, unable to sleep for thinking of the trial to which she had put her lover, Kirika had left her couch in the sleeping-house where her girl companions lay wrapped in repose, to wander on the shore till dawn or drowsiness should end her vigil.

"Oh! Te Pi, come back victorious, the conqueror of the smooth-tongued Manaia. Your rugged ways are more lovely to me than the sweet speeches of all other men; there is a charm in your presence, in the poise of your head, in your manner of walking, which is more to me than the honied words of a hundred orators. You have won me in spite of myself. Come back that I may give you all my love."

Her pretty feet were ankle-deep in the rippling wavelets. She stooped to pick up a lovely shell, washed hither and thither in the frothy brine of the incoming tide; and holding in her hand the scintillating gift of the prolific ocean, she apostrophised it as though it were the object of her love:—

“Oh dear lord and master of my being, as I pace draw near; each step of yours tallying with a step of mine. In the morning when the sun rises let the bell-birds sing, for my lover comes back; when mid-day is at hand, I will prepare pigeons and sweet potatoes, I will dig an oven and bury in it the red-hot stones on which I will cook every delicacy that my conqueror loves. Then, when he shall arrive I will hurry to the edge of the forest, where in a thicket I will await his steps, and as he passes along the narrow track I will pounce upon him, like one of his own wrestlers; my soft arms shall encircle his towering form, I shall feel the strong arms about me, but he will not throw me from him—for love is a greater wrestler than strength. Then hand in hand we will walk to the kainga, and I will open my oven and give my hero food after his journey; and when he has eaten I will stand up before all the tribe and say, ‘I am the wife of the strong man. Te Pi has overcome all the wrestlers in this country, but a weak girl was proof against him. She scorned his sinewy arms and his huge form, she pitted her wiles against his prowess, and the great wrestler fell prostrate at her feet. She laughed, she was glad, but she hid her joy because she loved to hear the giant’s supplications. But when he was absent, she could not sleep for love; she paced the shore, wakeful and yearning for him; she called upon the rivers, she called upon the sky, she called upon the forests and the hills to assist his steps. She was won by the conqueror of men, she was subdued by the great warrior. Te Pi is my lord, and I am become his slave.’ Then I will take his great hand in mine, and lead him to my bridal couch.”

There was a black object bobbing on the waters.

“It is a piece of sea-weed,” said Kirika. “It is a

bit of drift-wood borne on the incoming tide. Oh sea, if my lord chooses your bosom for his way to me, bear him gently, carry him swiftly to my arms. Let not an adverse breath of boisterous wind disturb his coming. What? that floating object is nearer, it is stranded in the shallow water: it looks like the stump of a fallen fern-tree.”

She waded a little further into the tide, and lifted the strange piece of flotsam from the sea. With a shriek she dropped it, and it fell with a splash back into the water.

“It is a man’s head! The tattooed head of a chief!”

But with quaking limbs and chattering teeth, she again stooped and lifted the awful object, and peered into its glassy eyes.”

“Oh how like,” she cried. “Oh if this should be.”

She held the grinning mazard in the full flood of the moonlight, and scanned its clammy features. Then, sobbing, she wrapped it up in her cloak, and ran towards the village.

Having arrived at the door of her father’s hut she called and cried, and hammered on the panel.

The old man, awakened from a sound slumber, told his disturber to go away, but when he recognised his daughter’s voice, he opened his door.

“What is the matter, my child? Why do you cry? Has some one disturbed you? Has any one troubled you?”

“Come! Look! I found it on the beach. It came bobbing on the tide to my very feet. Oh, my father, look! Who is it?”

The old man examined the horrible head, and muttered a weird prayer. He held it where the moonlight beat upon it, and with his crooked finger he traced the spiral lines of its tattoo.

“It is the moko—did not I myself trace the pattern?—it is the mouth, this is the nose, these are the eyes of Te Pi.”

With a low moaning sob the girl fell limply to the ground, and there lay, weeping.

"But this may be the work of some malignant spirit, of some bad tohunga who wishes to deceive us," said the old chief. "We will wait till daylight. We will wait for news."

He lifted his daughter from the ground, he drew her into his hut, and then, leaving the head to stare with glassy eyes at the moon, he tried to comfort her.

At dawn there there came a voice from the forest, and a boy, running to see who called, found amid the dew and the fern a prostrate, wounded man, who was crawling slowly towards the village. He proved to be the sole survivor of Te Pi's team of wrestlers, and ere the sun was up in the heavens Kirika knew that what she had found by the sea was indeed the head of her lover.

"But how did it get here?" the people asked of their chief. "Did the wind blow it?"

"Oh, no," replied the old man, "it was the mana of the head. When Manaia killed Te Pi he cut off his head, and told one of his men to go to the coast and fling it into the sea. Then my spell was so strong and the mana of Te Pi was so great, that it was borne by the sea round the coast to Waitara."

NOTE TO THE COURTING OF KIRIKA.—When he told me this story, I said to Te Whetu, "Isn't that a fiction invented to surprise your hearers?" "Oh, no," said he. "That is true talk. The old chief, Tu-iti, was my ancestor; my mother belonged to the Tribe of the River, whose members often tell the story."

"Then, did Kirika marry the Hawera chief?"

Te Whetu looked at me in astonishment. "There was no fear of that," he answered. "She never married him. My tribe fought him to take payment for the men he had killed at the wrestling match, and he fought us to get the girl. That was the beginning of all the wars between our tribe and his. But he never got Kirika. She married my ancestor Te Koko, whose son was Tengi, who married . . ."

A Maori genealogy is a dreadful thing, so I asked quickly,

"But what became of Manaia?"

"We got him," said Whetu; "that was all right."

For a moment I thought of asking what was done to the treacherous wrestler, but the question would have been superfluous as well as in very bad taste. I knew, dear reader, and I imagine that your wisdom is as great as mine.—A.A.G.