

THE TALE OF THE IMMORAL NGARARA.

URUHAPE was a chief who possessed such powers over the unseen world that everybody thought he would have respected such personal property as he had made tapu, or sacred, to himself. But Tonga was a woman who lacked foresight, a creature of impulse and carelessness, who could not realise the awful responsibility of living in close contact with a wizard, the hair of whose head she was not worthy to comb. And, strangely enough, it was a comb which caused all her trouble.

Uruhape went on a journey to the Urewera Country, where lived relations of his whom he had not seen since he was a child. He left all his belongings in his hut, knowing full well that nobody in Hauraki would be so foolhardy as to rob him in his absence. His mats of ceremony and his weapons he took with him; but such things as his fish-hooks, his mata-tuhua, used for tonsorial purposes, and the combs with which he was wont to deal with the kutu which took refuge in his locks, he left in a carved kumete in his wife's keeping. Everything in the box was sacred to himself, and of that fact Tonga was fully cognisant. However, in the mind of a foolish woman familiarity breeds contempt. Uruhape had treated his wife with such consideration and affection that she had forgotten the gulf fixed eternally between her mediocrity and his sanctity. So that he had been gone hardly a week when, being much troubled with the kutu in her own hair, Tonga lightly seized one of her husband's combs to rid herself of the pest.

She finished the operation without realising the enormity of her offence against her spouse's tapu; she returned the sacred comb to its box; and full of satis-

faction she went down to the sea-shore to eat mussels. There retribution overtook her. While she bent over the succulent bivalves and drank the juice out of their nacreous shells, there hovered on the horizon a dark and ominous object, which flying swiftly over the surface of the sea, rapidly swept down on the misguided woman. Too late she heard the flapping of the great membranous wings, too late she saw the black abhorrent form. She had barely time to cry, "The Ngarara! the Ngarara!" when she was seized, and borne captive over the desolate sea.

That, you will think, was the end of the unhappy Tonga, that was the last ever heard of the woman who failed to respect her husband's tapu. But it was not so. All day the Ngarara flew over the sea with his prey, and as night fell he reached a solitary island, where he had made his home in a dark, unwholesome cave; and there he deposited his living burden.

Of course the terrified woman imagined that she was to be eaten alive; but the Ngarara had preserved her for a fate even more terrible. "You are to be my wife," said the monster in a language which Tonga could not as yet understand, but which she was to speak with fluency ere she had lived out half her days. "I have not the least intention of hurting you; I have brought you here simply to love you," said the Ngarara, and he took her on his knee, and wrapped her in his dreadful pinions.

Now, it so happened that Tonga had been married to the Ngarara only a couple of months—and such was her womanly ability of adapting herself to circumstances that she had become almost resigned to her new manner of living—when she gave birth to a dear little brown girl.

"This," said the Ngarara, "is no daughter of mine—she has no wings, no webbed feet."

"No," replied Tonga; "she is the daughter of Uruhape, my former husband."

"Then I will eat her," said the Ngarara.

"Don't do that," exclaimed his wife. "She will

grow up to be more beautiful than I am, and then you will be able to have two wives."

"I never thought of that," said the Ngarara. "That is a very good idea." And such was his immoral nature that he determined to carry out the plan.

There was one advantage, however, in being married to the Ngarara—he caught plenty of fish, and these Tonga cooked for herself and her child, to whom she had given the name of Kura. And this little girl thrived and grew, but without knowing the fate that was in store for her; for when Kura had grown up, the Ngarara turned the faded mother out of his cave and took her daughter to be his wife.

The aged Tonga wandered over the island till she came to a sheltered cove at the end furthest from the den of the horrible monster, and there she made herself a hut out of flax leaves and manuka boughs, in which she lived a comparatively happy, if lonely, existence.

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Watch, now, how retribution overtakes the evil-doer. In the pa where the story opened was a tohunga, named Raukura, who possessed a hook celebrated far and wide for its magical power of catching fish. This hook was just as tapu as had been Uruhape's comb, and yet an infatuated young man named Kirikiri stole the consecrated implement and took it with him on a fishing-expedition.

In his canoe were twenty other men, his accomplices, and when they were well out to sea, the priest whom they had robbed discovered the theft and cursed the thieves. Then the wind began to blow and the sea to rise; and driven by an awful storm, which lasted seven days, Kirikiri and his companions were shipwrecked on a desolate island, upon whose rocky shore they were cast by the ruthless waves. Kirikiri, the prime cause of the catastrophe, was drowned, and of his twenty comrades but six escaped with their lives.

The shipwrecked mariners took refuge in a cave till the storm was past, after which they set out to

explore the island. As they walked along the beach looking for some place where they might scale the precipitous cliffs which encircled the island, they caught sight of an old woman walking towards them along the sand. When she saw them, she hastened her faltering steps, and clinging to them wept tears of joy, and rubbed noses with them all, one after another.

"You have come at last," she cried.

"Very much against our will," said the man who was the leader of the band now that Kirikiri was dead.

"I know you," said the old woman to the man who had spoken. "You are Kauhata, and you are Tuara, and you are Ririwaka, but the rest of you are strangers to me."

"We come from Hauraki," said Kauhata.

"And I come from Hauraki too," said the old woman; "but the three of you whom I do not know have grown into men since I was brought a captive here. I am Tonga, the wife of Uruhape."

"Oh! we remember hearing of you long ago. We thought you were dead."

"Twenty years ago I was brought by the Ngarara to this island, where I have remained ever since."

"What? The Ngarara!" All the men were struck with horror.

"Yes, he took me in his claws, and flew over the sea till he brought me to his den, which is at the other end of the island, and there I lived with him until my daughter grew up."

"Your daughter? Was she carried off too?"

"She was born soon after I arrived here. She is young and pretty, and I am old and feeble; so the Ngarara has cast me off and married my daughter."

The men muttered the deepest curse, and vowed vengeance on the infamous reptile.

"We will make short work of him," said Kauhata.

"We will free your daughter, and she shall marry which of us she chooses."

"Be not so sure," said the old woman, tremblingly.

"But do this. Make fire, and set a light to this dry

brushwood growing along the beach, so that the smoke may be carried into the nostrils of the Ngarara and prevent him from smelling you. For if he were to discover your presence he would quickly make an end of you all."

So they made fire by rubbing two pieces of dry wood together, and soon set the scrub in a blaze.

"Now," said Tonga, "I will take you to my hut, where I have plenty of food, for you must be well-nigh dead with hunger."

Once inside the old woman's hut they were safe, for the Ngarara never went there, so great was his dislike for his former wife; and they had oysters and cockles and fish and fern-root and pigeons, and sweet potatoes which Tonga had found growing wild and had cultivated till they were large and delicate.

When the men were rested and refreshed, the old woman unfolded her plan for compassing the death of the Ngarara.

"You must understand that he is a great glutton," she said, "and that if he can get food enough he will eat till he can hardly move. After such a debauch he will be stupid and sleepy for days. Now, I propose that you set to work to catch all the fish you can, and when you have taken enough to satisfy the hunger of two or three hundred people, I will ask you to carry them to within a safe distance of the monster's den, and I and my daughter will see that he gets them. When the Ngarara has gorged himself and fallen into a heavy sleep, I will get you to build a taiepa-whare of strong beams, placed close together and roofed with toe-toe, round which you must pile quantities of dry brushwood; and it will be for my daughter and me to decoy him into the trap. But when we have done so it will be for you to accomplish his end."

When the old woman had finished the men with one accord approved of her sagacity and determination, and taking care to keep the scrub constantly burning, so that volumes of smoke were blown towards the Ngarara's den, they began to fish. As luck would have it, they

found their canoe lying upon the beach, and in it they found the magic hook, which had been the cause of all their trouble, tied to one of the thwarts. With it they quickly made a great haul, and before nightfall they had caught more fish than even the gluttonous Ngarara could eat at a sitting. In the meanwhile Tonga had been busy making flax baskets, and into these—one hundred and twenty all told—they put the fish, and began to carry their bundles. In this task the night helped them, and before dawn they had placed all the food within easy distance of the monster's cave. Then Tonga sent them back to her hut to sleep, and as the sun shot its first beam of light above the far horizon she approached the mouth of the Ngarara's den.

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"Good morning, Te Ngarara!" A growl of disapproval came from the recesses of the cave.

"Call him 'Te Wai Rangi'"—the water of Heaven—"he loves that name, and hates the other," whispered a girlish voice.

"Good morning, Te Wai Rangi!"

"Come in, come in," cried the Ngarara.

"I've come to make you a present," said Tonga, for it was she who had awakened the reptile from his slumbers. "I have been fortunate in catching a great number of fish—kahawai, hapuku, snapper, rock cod, and all the best sorts—and I have come to ask you to accept them."

"How many have you caught?"

"About five hundred."

"I cannot count so far as that. Are there enough to make me a breakfast?"

"There are enough for your breakfast, dinner, and supper."

"Very good, then you may bring the food in. I will eat it."

"You are very kind," said Tonga, "but as there is more than I can carry, I must ask Kura to help me."

"Go!" cried the Ngarara gruffly to his young

wife. "Why are you dawdling here when you might be bringing in my breakfast? Go!" and he raised a threatening claw to give emphasis to his injunction.

The women began to carry in the baskets of fish, one in each hand, four at a journey, as quickly as they could. As the baskets were opened before his greedy eyes, the Ngarara began to snap his horrible jaws in expectation of the feast. As the food was placed in a huge heap before him he became so excited that he rose up and stretched himself to see that his gastric apparatus was in working order, and then he went outside his den and rolled in the dust, which is a regular practice with all Ngararas.

"Now I am ready to begin," he exclaimed; but the women said, "Don't be in such a hurry, for as yet we have only brought half."

The Ngarara was delighted. He rolled on his back, he kicked up his heels, and threw the dust, which lay inches thick before the door of his cave, in clouds over his body, but when the women had at last carried up all the food, the Ngarara began to feast. As quickly as they could untie the thongs of the baskets, first Tonga and then Kura emptied the contents into the capacious mouth of the beast, who swallowed with ease a basketful at a time. At length, when the meal was half done, Tonga said, "Dear Te Wai Rangi, hadn't you better finish your meal inside your cave?"

"I'm very comfortable where I am," replied the Ngarara, "I'm getting on famously. Another basket, please—that one there which seems to be full of moki."

"It is very nice here in the sun," said the old woman, "but I was thinking that perhaps you might wish to retire to your cave after you had finished eating."

"Well, why not?" asked the Ngarara.

"It is a pleasure to see you enjoy the food so much, but the more you eat the greater you grow in size. Unfortunately the door of the cave is narrow, and perhaps there might be some difficulty later on."

"Nonsense," laughed the Ngarara. Rising

clumsily, he jocularly waddled towards the mouth of his den, but he found that, as the old woman had surmised, he was already a tight fit.

"Very well," he said, squeezing himself through, "bring all the food into the cave, and I shall be able to finish the meal without fear."

Such, then, was the feast of the Ngarara, and when it was finished the monster was a prisoner in his cave.

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For three days the Ngarara slept. Seizing the opportunity of enjoying a little freedom, Kura went to see the strange beings, of whose arrival her mother had hastily told her. With interest she gazed at Kauhata and his companions. First she dallied with one and then with another, charmed with their presence, till she came to Kauhata, with whom she dallied the longest.

"And to think that I am married to the Ngarara!" she exclaimed. "It will be dreadfully hard to go back to him."

"It will only be till we have killed him," said Kauhata, "and that will be to-day, if you are as clever as you look."

The girl laughed. "What have I got to do?" she asked.

"Everything," replied Kauhata. "We have made the trap, but you must decoy him into it."

They took her to see the taiepa-whare, which they had built in the middle of the island. It was constructed of the trunks of manuka trees, and was thatched with dry toe-toe, and in the middle of the doorway they had dug a hole, beside which lay a strong and heavy post.

"I want you to make a bed of dry fern in that corner," said Kura, "and you must fetch at least fifty baskets of fish and some big gourds filled with water."

"That shall be done," said Kauhata, "and see, there is the hole in the roof through which you are to escape."

Every preparation being made, and the time approaching when the Ngarara should awake from his

heavy sleep, Kura regretfully bade good-bye to her new-found friends, and returned to the den of her dreadful spouse.

"Wake up, Te Wai Rangi, wake up!" she cried, giving the monster's tail a sharp twist. "It's time you had something more to eat."

The Ngarara slowly rose, stretched himself, and opened his eyes.

"Have you had a good sleep?" asked the girl.

"Beautiful, beautiful," replied the monster. "I've had the most lovely dreams. I dreamt that I was in a country where the fish came up out of the sea and walked straight into my mouth as I lay on the beach."

"That was splendid," said Kura, "but I don't expect you feel much the better for it. Now, if you will come with me, I will show you the loveliest feast ever prepared for a Ngarara."

"Who by?" asked the monster suspiciously.

"By my mother," answered the girl. "She loves you so much that she has built a house for you, where she has placed a soft bed of dry fern and fifty or sixty baskets of the choicest fish."

"Does she hope to make herself my wife again?"

"She is wonderfully fond of you—she does nothing but talk about you every time I see her. I believe she has hopes."

"Let her hope," said the Ngarara. "So long as she supplies me with food I hope she will go on hoping," and he laughed as only a Ngarara can laugh.

Just then there was a noise near the entrance of the cave, and a shrill voice cried, "Good morning, Te Wai Rangi! Good morning, good morning!"

"Come in, come in," shouted the Ngarara. "I know the old woman when she calls."

Tonga entered.

"I hope you are well after the little feast I provided."

"Very well," said the Ngarara, "but thirsty."

"I have some bowls of the coolest water and some delicious fish, besides tender pigeons and tui."

"Bring them in," said the Ngarara, "the mention of them makes my mouth water."

"I want you to do me the honor of living in a new house which I have made for you."

"Is it far?"

"Only about half-way to my hut."

"I wish you would accept my mother's offer," said the girl, "for then we could clean out this dirty den while you were away."

"The cave is clean enough for me," said the Ngarara, "and should be clean enough for you."

"I want to clear out all the fish-bones, and get in fresh bedding for you to lie on," said his young wife; "and in order that you shall be put to no inconvenience, I hope you will accept my mother's invitation."

"I promise to provide you with plenty of food while you are my guest," said Tonga.

"Are you sure you have plenty?" asked the Ngarara.

"Quite sure," answered the old woman, "and equally sure that I can get plenty more."

"Very good," said the Ngarara, "I'll come. But I am afraid that my appetite will not be what I could wish after having its edge taken off by the fish I have already eaten."

"Whatever it is I promise to satisfy it," said the old woman.

So the Ngarara arose and squeezed himself through the door of his cave, and the women conducted him to the taiepa-whare.

Around the trap was piled a quantity of dry brushwood and toe-toe and fern.

"Isn't it rather small," said the Ngarara, looking through the doorway.

"When you get inside you will find it large enough and warm and snug."

"Go in first," said the monster to his young wife, "and see if it is big enough for me to turn in, and if the food is there."

Kura entered. "Everything is ready," she said;

"the food is here, and water for you to drink, and the softest of beds for you to lie on."

"I can smell the fish!" cried the Ngarara, and thrusting his head through the doorway he crept slowly inside.

"Are you all right?" asked the old woman.

"Quite right," replied the Ngarara. "Everything is as you said; but it is a little cold," and straightway he began to eat and drink.

"I will close the door," said the old woman, "and so shut out the wind. Soon you will be warm enough."

She placed the door-post upright in its hole, and secured it safely by means of stout crossbars, and then heaped brushwood and toe-toe against the closed entrance, and the Ngarara was trapped.

The old woman went quickly to the place where Kauhata and his companions were hiding, and bade them come to the taiepa-whare.

Armed with heavy spears, six of them stationed themselves about the trap, while Kauhata stood to leeward with a burning brand in his hand.

They could hear the monster grunting with satisfaction over his food, and the voice of Kura soothing him in the Ngarara language. But at length the meal was over; all the birds and all the fish had disappeared into his capacious maw, and with repletion sleep fell upon the greedy reptile.

For a while all was still; then there was a rustling in the thatch, and presently, clambering through the hole in the roof, came the beautiful and resourceful Kura.

"He's fast asleep," she whispered. "Now is the time to begin."

Kauhata thrust his brand into the dry brushwood, and the smoke of the fire began to ascend in a thick cloud. When the flames had caught good hold of the structure there was an ominous movement inside the trap, and soon the Ngarara began to bellow and lash out with all his might, till the entire structure rocked; but the men straightway drove their spears between the

beams of the house, and transfixed the monster as he roasted. Gradually the struggles of the Ngarara ceased, and the flames, feeding on the joists and beams, cremated him where he lay. Thus was Kura freed from her dreadful husband and gained the pleasures of liberty.

Soon after this just and happy consummation, the weather setting fair, Kauhata and his companions placed their canoe in order, and putting the old woman and her daughter on board set out for the mainland. The voyage was long but uneventful, and when they arrived at the pa of their tribe they were welcomed as though they had returned from the grave.

Tonga found that her husband, Uruhape, had long been married to another wife, named Iringa, who, however, was so touched by the tribulations which the old woman had suffered, that she welcomed her as her companion in matrimony, and lived with her harmoniously till death parted them. With regard to Kura, her father declared that she could best show her gratitude to her deliverers by marrying one of them; so she chose Kauhata, who restored the magic hook to its rightful owner and lived happily ever afterwards.

There is, however, a thing I had almost forgotten. The children that Kura bore were half human and half Ngarara, which was a monstrous thing not to be endured. So they called in the aid of old Raukura the sorcerer, who out of gratitude to Kauhata for restoring the magic hook which Kirikiri had stolen, consented to pronounce a karakia over the afflicted wife, and afterwards her children were like those of any other woman.

But what perhaps is stranger than this miracle is the fact that when Kauhata went on a voyage of curiosity to see once more the Island of the Ngarara where his wife had lived so long, he found it did not in reality exist, but had been the work of magic, which had brought it into existence and, when it had served its purpose, had caused it to disappear.