

TITO AND PIRITA.

“**P**IRITA, the way to accomplish our end is simple. Return with me to my pa, and I will recognise you as my wife before all my tribe.”

“Tito, that would be the happiest thing in the world, but think how angry my father would be. He would make war on you and your people immediately he found out what had happened.”

“What would that matter?—we should fight him.”

“But I don’t want men to be killed on my account. No, Tito, we must wait till our tribes are friendly: then perhaps, my father will consent.”

The young brave drew the girl towards him, gave her a long, last embrace, accompanied her to the edge of the scrub wherein the lovers’ meeting had taken place, and watched her to the gate of her pa, which stood but half-a-mile off. When she had disappeared inside the hostile fortress, he heaved a deep sigh, and threaded his way through the thick manuka bushes towards his home.

Ngati-Pou, his tribe, were an evil people. Being notorious thieves, they were rightfully regarded with suspicion by the neighbouring Ngati-Tipa tribe, to which Pirita belonged, but which feared them because of the number of their relations, Ngati-Tahinga, Tainui, and Ngati-Koata, who lived not far off.

The season had been very bad, and Ngati-Pou had planted too little, and too late in the year. But they purposed to fall back on fish, for the prowess of their ancestors had preserved for them valuable fish-

ing rights and the sole use of a sandy beach, situated but three miles from their pa and convenient as a landing-place.

But Ngati-Pou were a lazy tribe. One day, having caught little, they neglected to pull their canoes high and dry upon the sand, before they returned for the night to their pa.

About midnight, a terrific gale struck the coast, and when in the morning Ngati-Pou went to the landing-place, they found their canoes smashed to pieces, and the wreckage strewn along the shore.

Now, a canoe was not built in a day. First, the mighty monarch of the forest had to be laid low, and that merely with the aid of fire and of stone axes. Next, the great trunk had to be rough-hewn, when it would be left to dry till such time as it could be hollowed out by burning, after which the stone axes slowly completed their work. Often the undertaking was delayed by bad omens, and the tohunga would spend much time in incantations and in waiting for propitious signs of the time when each part of the work should be effected. So Ngati-Pou knew that it would be a matter of years before their fleet could be rebuilt; and in the meanwhile winter and starvation stared them in the face.

But their neighbours of the powerful Ngati-Tipa tribe had laid in large quantities of dried fish, and the store-houses in their great plantation were full of food. The men of Ngati-Pou, being of a thievish disposition, wasted no time in making up their minds as to how they should act.

Topographically, the position favoured them. The coast ran north and south. In the south lay Ngati-Koata; north of them lay the Tainui, beside a stream which ran swiftly down to the sea; on the north bank of the stream lay the pa of Ngati-Tahinga; and north of these famous fighting-men lay the thievish Ngati-Pou. But theirs was a strategical position: between it and the nearest Ngati-Tipa pa lay a flat piece of country, covered with manuka scrub through which inroads could be made with equal effect upon the landing-place or upon the plantations of Ngati-Tipa.

Dividing their forces into two bands, Ngati-Pou suddenly swept down on each of these unguarded points, and returned to their pa over-burdened with dried fish and succulent kumara and taro, sufficient to last them till the spring.

The Ngati-Tipa people lay in five strong fortresses, and without giving Ngati-Pou time to seek their allies' assistance, swept down on them, slew ninety per cent. of their warriors, and recovered the stolen food. But among the few who escaped the wholesale slaughter, was young Tito, who owed more to his fleetness of foot than to the strength of his arm.

Perhaps the pakeha mind might judge that there the matter should have ended, but that was not the opinion of the chiefs of Ngati-Koata, Tainui, and Ngati-Tahinga, relatives of the massacred tribe. They determined to make reprisals. It was of no consequence to them that their dead relations had been thieves: it was a pleasure, as well as a duty, to avenge Ngati-Pou.

Kawharu, the chief of Ngati-Koata, was the man for the occasion.

"Ngati-Tipa is a great tribe," he said, "Their five pa are so strong and well-guarded, that we cannot hope to take them by assault. But I have devised a plan which promises success. I want one-hundred-and-fifty men, so brave that they fear nothing, and so strong that not even an onrushing flood of Ngati-Tipa warriors can overwhelm them."

Immediately three-hundred volunteers sprang forward, and amongst them Tito, anxious to do something to prove his bravery, to avenge his relatives, and perhaps to win the wahine of his choice.

"That is good," said Kawharu. "That is as it ought to be; but half the number will be enough. We will now go down to the river of the Tainui, where we will make a whakapuni, and put your bravery to the test."

Now, a whakapuni is a dam, and all his hearers wondered what Kawharu could mean by saying that he would test the men's bravery by means of a dam.

However, all those present, except the three-hundred volunteers, set to work with stones and baskets of earth to make the whakapuni across the stream.

"How are you to test the bravery of men with a whakapuni?" people asked Kawharu.

"Never you mind," replied he. "The quicker you get the whakapuni finished the sooner you will see." So everybody being inquisitive to know what the chief would do, the dam was soon constructed.

When sufficient water had collected to form a lake above the whakapuni, Kawharu ordered the volunteers into the dry river-bed below.

"You say you are all brave men," said he. "You say you fear nothing. Very good: we shall see. You say you can withstand the charge of any number of Ngati-Tipa warriors. We shall see whether you speak truth. It is big mana, great honour, that I offer you, and the names of those who stand this trial will never be forgotten. It will be a thing to boast of. Are you all ready?"

He was answered by a mighty shout from the men in the river-bed.

"Good," said Kawharu. "Link arms along your lines, place your feet firmly on the ground, draw a deep breath, bend your heads, and stand firm."

The people of the three allied tribes lined either bank, and gazed with astonishment.

Kawharu ordered fifty men of the crowd to go to the middle of the dam. "When I have counted ten," he said, "destroy the centre part of the wall, so that the water may rush through. Then run to the banks as fast as you can: the water will do the rest."

All was ready.

"One! two! three! four! five! six! seven! eight! You men in the river-bed, are you ready?—the water is coming. Nine! ten!"

The men on the dam worked furiously, and soon the water broke over the lip of the gap they made in the wall.

“Run!” cried Kawharu, and the men on the dam ran swiftly to either bank.

At first the water came down like a small waterfall, but gradually the breach grew deep and wide, and the volume of onrushing water increased.

The volunteers stood in a solid mass, line behind line, their arms linked, their heads bowed, their left feet forward, their deep voices joining in a stirring war-song.

The muddy water was rushing between their feet; now it was up to their ankles; now it was past their knees; now the great weight of imprisoned water completely burst its barrier. Down came mud and stones and bags of earth in a vast discoloured flood. The men in the river-bed ceased their song, and disappeared beneath the overwhelming torrent. For a space the spectators held their breath; thinking that the dauntless warriors had been swept away amid the debris of the dam, which lay strewn for quarter-of-a-mile down stream.

But now the water was clearer, and in the river-bed could be dimly seen beneath the rushing flood the solid mass of men.

Soon the pent-up water had escaped and spent all its strength, and the stream assumed its usual shallow depth. In the midst of it, with the water up to their waists, stood what were left of the volunteers; their lines broken here and there, their mass rent through in places, but their formation more or less intact.

A shout rose from the onlookers, and a responding cry broke from the volunteers who came ashore in detached groups, panting, but beaming with pride and joy. Of their three-hundred one third had disappeared, but those who had stood the test were fit for the great purpose which Kawharu had in view.

“Never mind the missing men,” said he: “some of them will find their way ashore. I have enough left.”

Among the warriors tried by water stood Tito, the sole survivor of his hapu.

They moved out of the pa in two companies of unequal size. With the larger body was a conspicuous and curious standard, consisting of long streamers of flax covered with the blue feathers of the swamp-bird. With this remarkable ensign some five-hundred warriors marched towards the level country which lay between the ruined village of Ngati-Pou and the Ngati-Tipa strongholds. The intervening country was covered with manuka scrub, tall enough to hide the advancing men, but short enough to allow the tall standard to be seen for miles around.

After the taua* with the flag followed the two-hundred men who had stood the trial by water at the whakapuni, and at their head Tito, who was well suited to act as guide through the scrub which he knew so well, and where he had kept many a tryst with Pirita.

Taking care to keep the standard always in sight, he bore away to the right, while the big taua bore to the left, till the two bodies were fully half-a-mile apart, when they marched towards the chief Ngati-Tipa pa—where Pirita lived—in two parallel columns.

Now, the men of Ngati-Tipa expected that reprisals would be made upon them for the massacre of the Ngati-Pou people, therefore they had mustered a great force at their strongest pa.

When Tapa', their chief, Pirita's father, from the rampart first caught sight of the blue standard, conspicuous above the scrub, he said, "Our foes are brave: they intend to make no surprise. They say, 'We are here. Come, and fight us.'"

As has been said already, the scrub stretched to within half-a-mile of the pa. "We will let them come into the open," said Tapa', "and there we will fight them."

So the Ngati-Tipa men poured out of their stronghold, formed themselves in battle-array, and threw out scouts.

But there was an air of mystery about the blue flag: it seemed to wobble as it advanced. First it

* War-party.

pointed one way, then it pointed another. But when the first men of the enemy appeared in the open, Tapa' thought his foes were about to disclose their strength. Instead, however, a disorderly mass of men stretched along the fringe of the scrub, and the flag was halted some two-hundred yards in the rear.

Tapa' was puzzled. His scouts could not approach the main body with the flag except by first passing through the enemy's skirmishers, and his main body did not dare to enter the scrub till the number of the enemy was known. So the Ngati-Tipa men were irresolute. First they advanced boldly, then they retired. Next their scouts fell back and joined the main body, and the whole advanced to a position on some high ground in front of the flag.

Now Tito, the leader of the little taua, was in complete ignorance of what was happening in his front. His duty was to keep his eye on the blue flag and be guided by its motions. When Ngati-Tipa advanced, it pointed this way; when they retreated towards their pa, it pointed that. Knowing by its motions where the enemy was, Tito advanced till he was directly opposite the pa. Cautiously he reconnoitred the country in front of him. All was clear. On the walls of the pa were a few armed men and numbers of women and children, eager to watch the approaching fight between the two big "tauas."

From where he stood Tito could not see the Ngati-Tipa force, but the flag was plainly visible, lolling like a broken bulrush towards the enemy.

Quietly he reformed the somewhat broken ranks of his little taua, and then he watched the standard till it fell. That was the signal for him to advance. Out into the open he sprang, and after him his men.

The people on the walls of the pa sent up a weird and wailing cry of fear, which could be heard in the still atmosphere by friends and foes alike. Tito lost no time. He knew it was a race for victory. With a rush he started on his wild career, and behind him charged his body of tested warriors.

Hearing the cry from the pa, 'Tapa' and his men were at a loss to know how to act. If they ran back to the pa, the big taua with the flag would pursue them; if they remained stationary, some unknown danger might overwhelm their stronghold.

In hesitating they lost all. Tito had got half-way across the open ground before he was perceived by them; and when his enemies turned to save their pa, the taua with the flag left the scrub and chased them.

The scene which followed was typical of Maori warfare. Tito rushed into the pa, his men slaying all before them.

But amid the tumult and shouting, above the shrieks and groans of the dying, the shrill voice of a woman could be heard calling, "E Tito! E Tito! E hoa!" and, huddled among a group of screaming women and children, the young warrior found Piritā struggling in the grasp of a brave who had spared her for her good looks.

"My wahine," cried Tito. "Let her go."

"Mine," said the warrior.

"She was mine before you got her."

"If she is yours, take her if you can. Fight me for her."

There was a fierce struggle, a tangle of writhing limbs in a cloud of dust, and then one of the rivals rose.

It was Tito: his antagonist lay prone. The victor took the shuddering Piritā by the hand, and led her lovingly away.

Tapa' and his men, caught between the forces of their foes, were well-nigh exterminated; and then the plundering of the plantations began. But in these subsequent proceedings Tito took no part, for he was engaged in comforting the bride he had won.