

CHILDREN'S PAGE

GUARDIAN OF THE FOREST

(By Flora Patie.)

HIGH hills surrounded the clearing in the bush where Pura and Wai lived with their parents, hills that were covered with ever-green native trees. Through a beautiful valley the river ran, and following its windings the new motor road brought tourists to admire some of New Zealand's grandest scenery. In the great scenic reserve the children's cousin, Rehua, was employed, and he often took Pura to the bush with him. The Maori boy loved the trees and flowers and birds of the forest, and he also had a great respect for Tane-mahuta, the forest god. He had heard his grandfather tell many thrilling tales of "Te wao-tapu nui a Tane" (Tane's great sacred forest).

One day Pura and little eight-year-old Wai were left at home while their parents went to visit relatives twelve miles away. The children were to look after the pigs and the fowls and milk the cows at the proper time, but for the rest of the day they could do as they pleased. After their dinner of potatoes and watercress, Wai washed the dishes and tidied up the whare, and then went out to play in the garden. Pura wandered up the hill at the back of the whare and stretched himself full length by the side of the creek that came tumbling down over the stones.

Pura wanted to think about the future. His schooldays would end next year, and then—what? Through the school lending library he had learned that there were many other boys in the world who had the same love for nature as he himself had. (Some had become famous men.) Pura would have liked to ramble with "Edward Wilson, Nature Lover," to visit "Grey Owl," the little beavers' friend, to see the lovely bird pictures painted by Audubon, the artist, but he would be content if he could help to protect Te Wao-tapu nui a Tane.

Pura's day dreams were interrupted by a loud cry from Wai, "Ee Pura, kia tore!" (Pura, make haste!) He bounded down the track to where Wai stood pointing to a thin column of smoke far down the road. "Ahi, kapura" (fire) exclaimed the boy in dismay. He had heard a

car passing and guessed that a lighted match or a cigarette, carelessly thrown out, had fallen on a tuft of dry grass. Pura caught up an axe and quickly cut two branches from a manuka tree. Wai caught their school pony and, not waiting to throw even a sack over his back, they rode off down the road.

The wind was blowing directly towards the forest. Tane-mahuta's children were in danger! Were the birds to be without a home to-night? Would the flightless ones, like the kiwi, die to-night, and what would happen to their babies?

In the distant hills, where he had been staying with friends last year, Pura had seen little charred bodies after a forest fire. In spite of the brave efforts of the Maori people, a great tract of beautiful native bush had been destroyed. It was there that Pura had learned to beat out the creeping flames with the branch of a tree. How the children worked! Little Wai on the edge of the fire while Pura attacked the more dangerous spots. The line of fire, fanned by the wind, spread rapidly; the heat scorched their faces; and the smoke almost blinded them.

Before long Pura sent Wai to a place of safety, for he was afraid of her cotton frock catching fire.

From under a shady tree Wai watched for Rehua, who should be coming home soon. Yes, there he was, his horse at full gallop. "A Rehua e haere mai nei" (Rehua has come), she shouted to Pura.

The smoke was blowing back towards the road, and the boys were able to work swiftly up and down the line, beating out the now smouldering fire. Later, as they rested beside Wai to watch that the fire did not re-kindle, Rehua said to Pura, "The boss says that I am to be promoted and he wants a boy to take my place. How would you like the job?" The burn on Pura's foot kept him awake that night, but he was too happy to care. Was he not to become a guardian of the great sacred forest of Tane?