



"Mahogany brown, and seamed and lined"

SHE was an old, old woman, very small and bird-like. Her straight, wispy grey hair was cut shoulder length and stuck out from the brim of her shapeless black hat. Her skin was mahogany brown, and seamed and lined and wrinkled with some eighty-odd years in the sun and wind of North Auckland.

She came into the little office at the back of the store one morning with her monthly statement in her hand.

PEREHETA OTENE

(Written for "The Listener" by ELIZABETH ANN MILES)

"Look," she said, "you do this wrong. I got the twenty-pound balance, all the time."

I had a vague recollection of hearing about this twenty-pound balance before, but the fact remained that Pereketa's purchases last month had left her with only £17/12/6 on the credit side. I tried to explain this to Pereketa. Together we went over last month's bills. But Pereketa was obdurate. "No," she said, shaking her head decisively, "I got the twenty-pound balance, all the time. I tell George. He know."

"I know, Pereketa," I said, "but you can't always have a twenty-pound balance if you spend more than your pension." Pereketa's pension was paid in to the store through the Post Office and each month she drew her groceries and other goods as she needed them. Pereketa lived with a married daughter and a swarm of grandchildren.

Painstakingly I went over the items again. I added up and subtracted while Pereketa looked glumly on. Finally she said, "I wait for George. He speak the Maori. All right, I wait for George." And so she waited around for George.

George was the proprietor of the shop, and all morning Pereketa was in and out of the office looking for him. Finally George arrived and the old lady followed on his heels into the office. Then followed a long and sometimes heated argument in Maori. Finally George came out of the inner office. "Look," he said, "you'll have to separate this twenty-pound account from Pereketa's working account. She's keeping it for her funeral and she doesn't want it touched. We'll have to cut down on her supplies a bit till she gets up straight again, but for goodness sake give her her twenty-pound balance!"

So I made out another ledger-sheet for Pereketa and I put a twenty-pound balance on the credit side and showed it to her. Pereketa looked at it and nodded her old head and smiled. "It's all right," she said, "I talk to George. He speak the Maori!" And she wandered happily out of the shop. Of course Pereketa's current account showed a debit of £2/7/6, but I didn't show it to Pereketa. She wouldn't have understood it if I had.

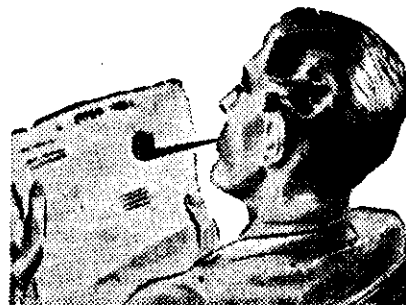
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