

ONE WORLD

ALONG the river bed, in the paddock that ran down from the red clay bank to the edge of the water itself, the grass was high and thick and brown in its summer deadness, so tall that it came to his waist almost, the dry stalks sticking into his bare legs and the pollen dust as he walked rising into his nose in the warm still afternoon air. The track was so overgrown that he was going mainly by instinct, although he wasn't sure what place he was heading for or what his purpose was until suddenly, rising apparition-like above a clump of yellow ragwort flowers, he saw the house. He knew only Maoris could live in it. The river bed was their land, even if they didn't farm it except for a plot of sweet corn which he had passed a moment ago, already stripped and weed infested. A long-maned pony was tied underneath a walnut tree by the sagging fence.

He was still squatting silently when he heard someone approaching. There was no sound of footsteps, nothing but the thin musical hissing of a man whistling to himself between his teeth, when abruptly and so close that he stood up in astonishment came the swish of dry grass being pushed aside, and a yard away from him he saw Jimmy Hotene.

"Hullo, Ken," the man said.
"Is this where you live?"
"That's right. I live here with my mother. Just the two of us and old Bingo. He's probably asleep now or he would have started barking."

"I didn't know the river was your property."
"It isn't mine," Jimmy said. "It really belongs to the tribe. But we live here. What you doing so far from home?"

"Exploring."
Jimmy pushed out with the tip of his tongue the single false tooth that was fixed where he had been kicked in the mouth at a football match. He put a hand up and scratched his hair behind one ear with his little finger, then started whistling again.

"Why don't you come over?" he said.
The boy followed him through the grass towards the house. He went inside. It was only one room, with two beds against the walls and a table of unpainted wood and two broken kitchen chairs. By the cold fireplace, in an arm-chair so decrepit it must have been picked up on some rubbish heap, an old Maori woman was sitting with her eyes closed. A brown dog lay curled at her feet. When Jimmy came in the woman opened her eyes and the dog lifted its head and gave a hoarse, rheumy bark.

"Who you got?" the woman said.
"This here is Ken Roberts," Jimmy said. "Ropata's boy. He's been out exploring."

"What?" the old woman said. She looked at him with her slate-coloured eyes. "He here?"

"He's run away from home," Jimmy said.

"No I haven't."
"He's come to see us," Jimmy said. The woman closed her eyes.

"Not often that anyone comes out here," Jimmy said. He sat down on one of the broken-backed chairs and rested his elbows on the table. "No school today, hay? Saturday."

"You see Mary?" the old woman said.
"She's coming over later. She's bringing you some tea and some beer, maybe."

It was warm in the room. The boy stood in the middle of the floor, by the table.

"Your father know you're here?" Jimmy asked.

"No," the boy said. He looked at the old woman, who had her eyes closed as if she lived in a perpetual state of drowsiness. The dog yawned and stood up, shaking itself with incredible antique slowness.

"Hullo, Bingo," Jimmy said. The dog tottered towards him. "He's fifteen," Jimmy said to the boy. "Ever see a dog that old before? Older than you are."
"No," the boy said.

"Well, this is where I live," Jimmy said. He looked around the room. "It's not much of a place, but I was born here."

The boy stood by the table, resting one hand on it. He said nothing.

"Play football for the school yet, Ken?" Jimmy asked.

"First fifteen," he said. He lifted his head and looked into Jimmy's eyes.

"In the scrum?"

"No. On the wing."

"That's the place," Jimmy said. "That's where I play."

"Yes."
He heard a woman singing outside, and a Maori girl came in. She was small and light-skinned, walked with a springing cat-like swing, and carried a basket in her hand, a flax kit. She took out a large newspaper bundle and two bottles of beer which she placed on the table. She looked at the boy but didn't greet him. He smelt the fish and chips. "This for you, old lady," the girl said.

The woman's slaty eyes slid in her direction.
"You be old one day too," she said. She hadn't raised her voice, but the girl wriggled and looked at Jimmy.

"I'm hungry, by crikey," Jimmy said. The girl unwrapped the fish and chips. She took off the outer layer of newspaper and put some of the steaming pieces of fish and a handful of chips in it and carried them over to the old woman.

"Eat," she said.

Mrs Hotene grabbed a piece of fish and began to chew it, spitting out bones on to the mat. Jimmy placed the cap of one of the beer bottles against the edge of the table top and banged down on it with his fist. The cap flew off. The girl put three cups on the table and Jimmy filled them with beer. He pushed the fish and chips on the newspaper towards the boy.

"Hungry?" he said. "You can have some."

The boy took a chip but didn't put it in his mouth.

"I'd better be going home," he said. Then he put the hot salty chip in his mouth and chewed.

"Yes. Be dark soon," Jimmy said. "You hurry home."

The boy looked at the three Maoris. "Goodbye," he said.

"Good, fun, exploring, eh?" Jimmy said.

"Yes."

"Remember. Go for that corner flag."

He went out and started to run along the almost imperceptible path through the grass. After a while he slowed to a walk. His heart was thumping and his knees were beginning to smart where the dry grass stalks had pricked them. It was still light when he got home. He



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went into the bathroom and washed his hands and sat down at the kitchen table. His father looked up through his spectacles over the newspaper he was reading.

"Where have you been this afternoon?" his father asked.

"Exploring."

"By yourself?"

"Yes," the boy said. "I've been to Jimmy Hotene's place."

"It that so?" His father looked at him for a moment. "Was he home?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"We had fish and chips. His mother was there, and another girl."

"That would be Mary," his father said. He folded up the paper. "You don't want to go there too often, though."

"All right."

"Did you talk about football?"

"Yes."

"Jimmy's the best wing three-quarter this district has ever had," his father said. "Whatever he tells you will be good advice."

The boy began to butter his bread.

"Yes," he said.

[It was winter then and he went to see Jimmy play at Rugby Park, standing in the rain eating a hot meat pie beside his impeccably overcoated father stern and immobile apart from the darting eyes in his bleak puritan face. He watched Jimmy sprint down the sideline with his chin out, his mouth open and his teeth set, and the air whistling through the gap where that solitary denture had been removed before the game began. The crowd cheered him on.

"He's a match winner, that boy," his father said. "We wouldn't be so good without Jimmy to score the tries."

That night from his bedroom he heard his father talking. It was something about a girl, the daughter of a farmer who lived down the Longfern Road. Jimmy had been taking her to dances, and now there were rumours, whispers around the town. It was difficult to make out what was being said

from the darkness of the bedroom, then his father's voice came clearly through. "She likes him because of his football blazer."

Next time at the Park Jimmy wasn't playing. His father said nothing about it, but everyone cheered the new wing three-quarter running towards the corner flag. Later he stood on the corner of the main street, waiting for his father who had gone into the hotel, when he saw Jimmy coming towards him. But he had changed. The boy could see it, the gloom and discontent in Jimmy's face as he half rolled, half limped along the footpath.

"How are you today?" he said.

"I'm like a boot, full," Jimmy said. He breathed beer into the boy's face, pushing out with his tongue tip the single denture. He hiccupped. "Nothing to do on a Saturday afternoon in town these days."

"How's your mother?"

"I think she will die soon," Jimmy said. "She's very tired."

"What are you doing now?"

"I haven't had a job since Friday."

He knew that Jimmy's mother still lived down on the river bed, that she was almost blind now but had somehow endured in defiance of the death which by rights should have been hers, brown and shrunken, occasionally appearing in the streets with a whale-bone walking stick and a black silk handkerchief over her head, moving with slow steps in her cracked black shoes, in an ankle-long gown of black satinette. The blue moko tattoo on her chin was the visible symbol of her age and her authority among the Maoris who lived at the pah, as she talked quietly in a lamenting voice to those who stopped to pass the time of day with her, shaking hands gravely with all, rubbing noses with the older ones, a matriarch and proud of her son's fame as a Rugby player. He could understand that she would be feeling tired now.

"I'm sorry Bingo died."

"Me too," Jimmy said. "He the best dog I had."

(continued on page 22)