

Plant the Wild Fern

by NANCY BRUCE

THE first few days after the letter came old Take was the important man about the place. He sat on the bench outside the store, nodding and smiling and answering them proudly as they hailed him.

"Hey, Take! You the big man now, eh? You go to town!"

"You got the house in town now, eh, Take?"

"Hey, Take, where's your top hat? Big shot now!"

And Take nodded his old grey head and grinned his toothless grin at them all. It was very well for them to tease, but he believed that in their hearts they were jealous. Not one among them had a fine grandson like Rione who had done so well in the town, who had a motor car and a good job, and a house of his own in which to keep his wife and family.

They could laugh and mock him. When the winter came they would still be riding up and down the river tracks to Bill's, their horses squelching deep in mud and their stores rolled up in sacks. But he would be snug in the town, with no mud and no packhorses. Rione had told him. He would sit in a fine chair by the fire and go to the real football games in a green park with seats.

So he nodded and smiled at them from the bench by the store.

"Ae, Kapai the town! He the fine boy, Rione. He send me the letter to come!"

Bill, the storekeeper, heard the voices and the laughter outside his door and smiled as he weighed out the beans and the flour. But he sighed a little, too, and shook his head until his wife, Martha, bustling into the shop, asked him what was amiss.

"Old Take," said Bill, gloomily. "Listen to him out there, pleased as a dog with two tails. But you can't transplant a bush fern into the town, Martha; an' that's a fact."

"Fern?" echoed Martha, chuckling plumply. "Pretty strange kind of fern, if you ask me! He'll settle down, you'll see."

"Maybe," said Bill dubiously, "and maybe not. If only the old man wasn't so almighty pleased about it! I've got a horrible feeling he's going to be badly let down."

"I can't think why. Rione's a good boy, and his wife's kind enough. Old Take'll be looked after there, and he'll be comfortable, which no human being could be in that filthy old whare of his. What's more, he'll have to act civilised."

Bill, wondering who or what was going to teach Take to act civilised overnight, reflected that the bleached totara bench outside the door would seem strangely empty without the bent old figure. He was going to miss Take, and that was a fact.

He did not say so much to Martha, who had her moments of near-exasperation over the softness of his heart. She did not hold, as Bill did, that a kit full of kumara or a brown trout fresh out of the river could be good enough reason for crossing off sections of a growing account. Martha had never got inside the Maori heart in the way her husband had.

It was Bill who had read Rione's letter to the old man, who had written

his answer and watched the thin old hand, brown and wrinkled as a walnut, make its mark at the bottom of the page. The mark that sealed his transplanting to the strange new world of the town. Take had never been in any place bigger than a country township, which had appeared to his wondering eyes a mighty city. He was filled with an overflowing joy that shone like a lamp in his bright old eyes.

WHEN the day came he dug in the battered old box in the corner of the whare and took out the things that Rione had sent. He pulled the blue shirt over his head, puffing a little. He had ripped off the collar to make it more comfortable, and most of the buttons were gone, but, ah, he was still a very fine shirt. He had traded the belt Rione had sent for a plug of tobacco, so he tied a length of flax about the grey trousers and it served very well. The rumpled legs flapped about his thin shanks as he searched in the box for the shoes. The laces were gone, but he thrust his horny, splayed old toes into the shoes and stuck out his feet to admire them.

He looked about the dim, smoke-blackened whare, at his fireplace, with the old black pot hung over it, at his mattress in the corner, the old mattress with the stuffing poking out all over, at the dog Tinny scratching his fleas in the sunlight in the doorway. He was a good kure, Tinny. He would give him to Hopa over at the pa.

He pulled the tattered blanket out and spread it on the floor. Into it went his worldly possessions, his kits and his lines, his eel traps, the worthless alarm clock that Martha had given him in a fit of generosity, an old tin containing a few treasures, a piece of greenstone and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles that the sister at the mission had given him years ago. Take wore them on one or two special occasions, pushed up on the top of his head.

He rolled up the blanket and put it with his precious carved stick in the middle of the floor. Then he called Tinny and took him over to the pa. After that there was nothing to do but to go down the track to the store and sit there on the bench, puffing at his old black pipe and waiting for Rione.

The car bumped and rattled up the rough road to the store and was well splashed from the ford lower down. But there was Rione smiling over the wheel, and the entire district had turned out to see Take off on his great adventure. He looked somehow smaller as he sat in the leather seat beside Rione, smaller and a little wistful, as though he had only just realised that they were not all coming, too. Then the horn blared out, echoing over the river, the car spluttered, jerked, and moved off, and Take's grizzled head turned for a last look as they disappeared round the bend.

Martha, beaming with good will because Rione had unobtrusively paid his grandfather's account, bustled back into the store, but Bill stood very still, looking down the road after the car and rubbing his chin. He wondered how the rich city soil would suit his wicked old fern.

It was early evening when the car rolled over the long ramp and into the City, and the old man was cramped and weary from the journey. The streets swam about him in a bewildering maze of lights and sounds, so that he covered down a little in the seat, hardly daring to look. Rione drove steadily, his eyes watchful, dodging skilfully through the traffic. Take stole a glance at him, proud and marvelling. Could this serious, competent man be the little laughing boy who had played so happily on the mud flats by the river? His old head whirled so that he could barely think. Then the car turned into a wide street full of twinkling lights and slid gently to a stop. Take sat there blinking like a bewildered old owl until Rione came round and opened his door, smiling at him.

"We are here," he said simply, and held out his hand. Take allowed himself to be helped out, jealously guarding his bundle and stick, and walked trembling into the house after his grandson.

It was not very many days before the bush fern began to droop. With the brightness gone from the first childlike wonder and curiosity the old mind was buffeted and bewildered by the strange new world. Manfully he fought it, conscious of the concern in Rione's eyes, but the day came when he stood in the sunny back garden and faced himself.

"The town, he no good for me," he mumbled, and felt the shame creep over him in a tide. He looked round the garden of the wonderful house in town. It was fine and green, and its vegetables grew in orderly rows, but they were strange vegetables. They did not eat the good puha here, they did not plant the kumara. True, Rione brought home such delicacies as pipis and large slabs of fish he, Take, did not know, and the crayfish. But they came out of a shop, they could not taste like the fish out of the river or the crayfish that he himself pulled from under the stones in the creek, carrying them home piled in his old flax kit.

He looked round the garden, longing to take off his shoes and feel the good earth under his bare feet. But here there was no good earth. It was planted in little patches with flowers and vegetables, or it was covered with clipped green lawn or sealed under hard concrete paths. Outside there were only city pavements, hard and hot in the sun; there was no place anywhere for a man to squat quietly on the friendly earth.

And there was no river. What use to bring the lines, the *hinake* to catch his beloved tuna when there was no river? Take felt the tears rise in his sad heart and reach up to prick his eyeballs. He was like a man lost in the desert, thirsting and alone, and there was no way home. He longed to



hear birdsong again, the friendly chitter chatter of the fantails hopping barely out of reach as he pushed through the fern, the deep bell notes of the mako mako and the long call of the pipiharaurua to promise the summer. Here there were no birds. There were no trees to welcome birds, only the few ornamental shrubs permitted in these tidy gardens.

He sat hunched on the end of a box in the sun and chastised himself miserably. He had let Rione down, Rione, who was thinking only of his comfort. And his wife Rewa, calm and capable and running over with kindness. Why could he not be as they wished him to be, content and at peace? He knew deep down in his heart that he would never be at peace here. Rewa's clean and shining house overawed him, he was afraid of the bright taps and mirrors and all the things that belonged to civilisation. And he looked at the kitchen with its shining pots and thought how he had wondered if he would bring his old black billy for them to cook the puha in.

He longed desperately for his tumble-down whare, for the smoking fire and Tinny scratching before it and his old bursting mattress, for the bench outside the store with Bill coming out for a friendly word and giving him the quiet pipeful when Martha was looking the other way.

And at last the longing welled up and looked out of his eyes so that Rione, who had thought much, sat for hours staring at a sheet of white paper, and then covered it with careful, considered words that seemed to be wrung out of his heart.

AND Bill, taking the letter from its envelope, knew before he unfolded the sheet what his eyes were to see, so that he was not surprised but only stood rubbing his chin and looking into the distance while he fingered the green slip that was inside.

It was Bill who, in obedience to the written words, and placing the green slip in the till, put certain things in a bag and followed the track up to Take's old whare, where he spent some time. And it was Bill who, quite by accident, had to make an unexpected trip to town

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