

The KARAKA

By DR. W. R. B. OLIVER, Director
of the Dominion Museum, Wellington

THE GLOSSY dark-green leaves and golden fruit of the karaka make it a striking tree fit to take a place among the best of ornamental plants. The high regard in which it was held by the Maoris certainly was not entirely due to the usefulness of its fruit. The karaka was planted in their villages, and at the present day, when all vestiges of habitations have disappeared, village-sites may be recognized by clumps of karaka trees. In the structure of the flower, the karaka, and its two allies, one in the New Hebrides and the other in New Caledonia, differ so much from all other plants that they constitute a family by themselves. The story, reputed to be of Maori origin, that the karaka was brought from Hawaiki, cannot be accepted, as the karaka is not found outside the main islands of New Zealand, the Chatham Islands, and the Kermadec Group.

The pulpy part of the fruit of the karaka is edible, but the seed is highly poisonous. The poisonous principle, however, can be removed by appropriate treatment. Here we may quote Edward Tregear, who, in *The Maori Race*, writes as follows: "The fruit was soaked in water for months, a dam being formed in a small stream for



that purpose. When ready they are washed by being trampled with the feet, the outer skin and pulp passing away. Then the kernals were cooked in the ovens. Another mode was to gather the fruits in the autumn and steam them in large ovens for a long time; then they were put into loosely-woven baskets which were shaken and knocked about to remove the pulp and outer skin, the large seeds being left: this removed the poisonous qualities. Afterwards they were spread out on mats and stages to dry and then stored away. When used, the kernals still in the husk were steamed again in the oven."

The symptoms of karaka poisoning were violent spasms and convulsions, causing permanent rigidity of the muscles, and sometimes ending in death. The treatment consisted in burying the patient up to the neck with limbs tied in a natural position until the crisis had passed. This, however, was not a cure, but merely assured that the limbs would not remain in an unnatural position.

By Europeans the karaka is mainly used for ornamental purposes. The wood is of little value except for firewood. The leaves are greedily eaten by cattle and horses.



The leaves and bark of the karaka. The leaves are oblong and from 3 to 7 inches in length.