

Roderick Finlayson

## The Totara Tree

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5 People came running from all directions wanting to know what all the fuss was about. “Oho! It’s crazy old Taranga perching like a crow in her tree because the Pakeha<sup>1</sup> boss wants his men to cut it down,” Panapa explained, enjoying the joke hugely.

10 “What you say, cut it down? Cut the totara down?” echoed Uncle Tuna, anger and amazement wrinkling yet more his old wrinkled face. “Cut Taranga down first!” he exclaimed. “Everyone knows that totara is Taranga’s birth tree.”

Uncle Tuna was so old he claimed to remember the day Taranga’s father had planted the young tree when the child was born. Nearly one hundred years ago, Uncle Tuna said. But many people doubted that he was quite as old as that. He always boasted so.

15 “Well it looks like they’ll have to cut down both Taranga and her tree,” chuckled Panapa to the disgust of Uncle Tuna who disapproved of joking about matters of tapu<sup>2</sup>.

“Can’t the Pakeha bear the sight of one single tree without reaching for his axe?” Uncle Tuna demanded angrily. “However, this tree is tapu,” he added with an air of finality, “so let the Pakeha go cut down his own weeds.” Uncle Tuna hated the Pakehas.

“Ae, why do they want to cut down Taranga’s tree?” a puzzled woman asked.

20 “It’s the wires,” Panapa explained loftily. “The tree’s right in the way of the new power wires they’re taking up the valley. Ten thousand volts, ehoa! That’s power, I tell you! A touch of that to her tail would soon make Taranga spring out of her tree, ehoa,” Panapa added with impish delight and a sly dig in the ribs for old Uncle Tuna. The old man simply spat his contempt and stumped away.

25 “Oho!” gurgled Panapa, “now just look at the big Pakeha boss down below dancing and cursing at mad old Taranga up the tree; and she doesn’t know a single word and cares nothing at all!”

And indeed Taranga just sat up there smoking her pipe of evil-smelling torori<sup>3</sup>. Now she turned her head away and spat slowly and deliberately on the ground. Then she fixed her old half-closed eyes on the horizon again. Aue! How those red-faced Pakehas down below there jabbered and shouted! Well, no matter.

30 Meanwhile a big crowd had collected near the shanty where Taranga lived with her grandson, in front of which grew Taranga’s totara tree right on the narrow road that divided the straggling little hillside

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<sup>1</sup> a white New Zealander as opposed to a Maori person.

<sup>2</sup> Tapu is the strongest force in Māori life. Tapu can be interpreted as sacred. A person, object or place that is tapu may not be touched or, in some cases, not even approached.

<sup>3</sup> Home-grown tobacco, native-grown tobacco.

35 settlement from the river. Men lounged against old sheds and hung over sagging fences; women squatted in open doorways or strolled along the road with babies in shawls on their backs. The bolder children even came right up and made marks in the dust on the Inspector's big car with their grubby little fingers. The driver had to say to them, "Hey there, you! Keep away from the car." And they hung their heads and pouted their lips and looked shyly at him with great sombre eyes.

40 But a minute later the kiddies were jigging with delight behind the Inspector's back. How splendid to see such a show – all the big Pakehas from town turned out to fight mad old Taranga perching in a tree! But she was a witch all right – like her father the tohunga. Maybe she'd just flap her black shawl like wings and give a cackle and turn into a bird and fly away. Or maybe she'd curse the Pakehas, and they'd all wither up like dry sticks before their eyes! Uncle Tuna said she could do even worse than that. However, the older children didn't believe that old witch stuff.

45 Now as long as the old woman sat unconcernedly smoking up the tree, and the Pakehas down below argued and appealed to her as unsuccessfully as appealing to Fate, the crowd thoroughly enjoyed the joke. But when the Inspector at last lost his temper and shouted to his men to pull the old woman down by force, the humour of the gathering changed. The women in the doorways shouted shrilly. One of them said, "Go away, Pakeha, and bully city folk! We Maoris don't yet insult trees or old women!" The men on the fences began grumbling sullenly, and the younger fellows started to lounge over toward the Pakehas. Taranga's grandson, Taikahu, who had been chopping wood, had a big axe in his hand. Taranga may be mad  
50 but after all it was her birth tree. You couldn't just come along and cut down a tree like that. Ae, you could laugh your fill at the old woman perched among the branches like an old black crow, but it wasn't for Pakeha to come talking about pulling her down and destroying her tree. That smart man had better look out.

55 The Inspector evidently thought so too. He made a sign to dismiss the linesmen who were waiting with ladders and axes and ropes and saws to cut the tree down. Then he got into his big car, tight-lipped with rage. "Hey, look out there, you kids!" the driver shouted. And away went the Pakeha amid a stench of burnt benzine leaving Taranga so far victorious.

60 "They'll be back tomorrow with the police all right and drag Taranga down by a leg," said Panapa gloatingly. "She'll have no chance with the police. But by golly! I'll laugh to see the first policeman to sample her claws!"

"Oho! they'll be back with sodgers," chanted the kiddies, in great excitement. "They'll come with machine guns and go t-t-t-te at old Taranga, but she'll just swallow the bullets!"

"Shut up, you kids," Panapa commanded.

65 But somehow the excitement of the besieging of Taranga in her tree had spread like wildfire through the usually sleepy little settlement. The young bloods talked about preparing a hot welcome for the Pakehas tomorrow. Uncle Tuna encouraged them. A pretty state of affairs, he said; if a tapu tree could be desecrated by mere busy-bodies. The young men of his day knew better how to deal with such affairs. He remembered well how he himself had once tomahawked a Pakeha who broke the tapu of a burial ground. If people had listened to him long ago all the Pakehas would have been put in their place, under the deep  
70 sea – shark food! said Uncle Tuna ferociously. But the people were weary of Uncle Tuna's many exploits,

and they didn't stop to listen. Even the youngsters nowadays merely remarked "oh yeah?" when the old man harangued them.

75 Yet already the men were dancing half-humorous hakas<sup>4</sup> around the totara tree. A fat woman with rolling eyes and a long tongue encouraged them. Everyone roared with laughter when she tripped in her long red skirt and fell bouncingly in the road. It was taken for granted now that they would make a night of it. Work was forgotten, and everyone gathered about Taranga's place. Taranga still waited quietly in the tree.

80 Panapa disappeared as night drew near but he soon returned with a barrel of home-brew on a sledge to enliven the occasion. That warmed things up, and the fun became fast and more furious. They gathered dry scrub and made bonfires to light the scene. They told Taranga not to leave her look-out; and they sent up baskets of food and drink to her; but she wouldn't touch bite nor sup. She alone of all the crows was now calm and dignified. The men were dancing mad hakas armed with axes, knives and old taiahas. Someone kept firing a shot-gun till the cartridges gave out. Panapa's barrel of home-brew was getting low too, and Panapa just sat there propped up against it and laughed and laughed; men and women alike boasted what they'd do with the Pakehas tomorrow. Old Uncle Tuna was disgusted with the whole business though. That was no way to fight the Pakeha, he said; that was the Pakeha's own ruination. He stood up by the meeting house and harangued the mob, but no one listened to him.

90 The children were screeching with delight and racing around the bonfires like brown demons. They were throwing fire-sticks about here there and everywhere. So it's no wonder the scrub caught fire, and Taikehu's house beside the tree was ablaze before anybody noticed it. Heaven help us! But there was confusion then! Taikehu rushed in to try and save his best clothes. But he only got out with his old overcoat and a broken gramophone before the flames roared up through the roof. Some men started beating out the scrub with their axes and sticks. Others ran to the river for water. Uncle Tuna capered about urging the men to save the totara tree from the flames. Fancy wasting his breath preaching against the Pakeha, he cried. Trust this senseless generation of Maoris to work their own destruction, he sneered.

95 It seemed poor old Taranga was forgotten for the moment. Till a woman yelled at Taikehu, "What you doing there with your old rags, you fool? Look alive and get the old woman out of the tree." Then she ran to the tree and called, "Eh there, Taranga! Don't be mad. Come down quick, old mother!"

But Taranga made no move.

100 Between the woman and Taikehu and some others they got Taranga down. She looked to be still lost in meditation. But she was quite dead.

"Aue! She must have been dead a long time – she's quite cold and stiff." Taikehu exclaimed. "So it couldn't be the fright of the fire that killed her."

105 "Fright!" jeered Uncle Tuna. "I tell you, pothead, a woman who loaded rifles for me under the cannon shells of the Pakeha isn't likely to die of fright at a rubbish fire." He cast a despising glance at the smoking ruins of Taikehu's shanty. "No! but I tell you what she died of," Uncle Tuna continued. "Taranga was just sick to

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<sup>4</sup> a Maori ceremonial war dance

death of you and your Pakeha ways. Sick to death!" The old man spat on the ground and turned his back on Taikehu and Panapa and their companions.

110 Meanwhile the wind had changed, and the men had beaten out the scrub fire, and the totara tree was saved. The fire and the old woman's strange death and Uncle Tuna's harsh words had sobered everybody by now, and the mood of the gathering changed from its former frenzy to melancholy and a kind of superstitious awe. Already some women had started to wail at the meeting-house where Taranga had been carried. Arrangements would have to be made for the tangi.

"Come here, Taikehu," Uncle Tuna commanded. "I have to show you where you must bury Taranga."

115 Well, the Inspector had the grace to keep away while the tangi was on. Or rather Sergeant O'Connor, the chief of the local police and a good friend of Taranga's people, advised the Inspector not to meddle until it was over. "A tangi or a wake, it's just as sad and holy," he said. "Now I advise you, don't interfere till they've finished."

120 But when the Inspector did go out to the settlement afterwards – well! Panapa gloatingly told the story in the pub in town later. "O boy!" he said, "You should have heard what bloody Mr Inspector called Sergeant O'Connor when he found out they'd buried the old woman right under the roots of the bloody tree! I think O'Connor say to him, 'Sure the situation's still unchanged then. Taranga's still in her tree.'"

125 Well, the power lines were delayed more than ever and in time this strange state of affairs was even mentioned in the House of Parliament, and the Maori members declared the Maoris' utter refusal to permit the desecration of burial places, and the Pakeha members all applauded these fine orations. So the Power Board was brought to the pass of having to build a special concrete foundation for the poles in the river bed so that the wires could be carried clear of Taranga's tree.

"Oho!" Panapa chuckles, telling the story to strangers who stop to look at the tomb beneath the totara on the roadside. "Taranga dead protects her tree much better than Taranga alive. By golly she cost the Pakeha thousands and thousands I guess!"

(1940)