

## At Hiruharama

(2000)

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Mr Tanner was anxious to explain how it was that he had a lawyer in the family, so that when they all decided to sell up and quit New Zealand there had been someone they could absolutely trust with the legal business. That meant that he had to say something about his grandfather, who had been an orphan from Stamford in Lincolnshire and was sent out to a well-to-do family north of Auckland, supposedly as an apprentice, but it turned out that he was to be more or less of a servant. He cleaned the knives, saw to the horses, waited at table and chopped the wood. On an errand to a dry goods store in Auckland he met Kitty, Mr Tanner's grandmother. She had come out from England as a governess, and she too found she was really wanted as a servant. She was sixteen, and Tanner asked her to wait for three years while he saved his wages, and then to marry him. All this was at a Methodist social, say a couple of weeks later. 'What family have you got back home?' Kitty asked him. Tanner replied just the one sister. Younger or older? Older. She probably thinks I'm a skilled craftsman by now. She probably reckons I'm made. – Haven't you sent word to her lately? – Not lately. – Best write to her now, anyway, said Kitty, and tell her how it is between us. I should be glad to have a new relation, I haven't many. – I'll think it over, he said. Kitty realised then that he could neither read nor write.

They had to start in a remote country place. The land round Auckland at that time was ten shillings an acre, a third of the price going to build the new churches and schools, but where Tanner and Kitty went, north of Awanui, there weren't any churches and schools, and it was considerably cheaper. They didn't have to buy their place, it had been left deserted, and yet it had something you could give a thousand pounds for and not get, and that was a standpipe giving constant clear water from an underground well. But whoever lived there had given up, because of the loneliness and because it was such poor country. Don't picture a shack, though. There were two rooms, one with a stove and one with a bedstead, and a third one at the back for a vegetable store. Tanner grew root vegetables and went into Awanui twice a week with the horse and dray. Kitty stayed behind, because they'd taken on two hundred chickens and a good few pigs.



Tanner turned over in his mind what he'd say to his wife when she told him she was going to have a child. When she did tell him, which wasn't for another two years or so, by the way, he didn't hear her at first, because a northerly was blowing and neither of them could expect to hear each other. When he did catch what she was saying, he hitched up and drove into Awanui. The doctor was at his midday dinner, which he took at a boarding-house higher up the main street. When he got back and into his consulting-room Tanner asked him what were the life statistics of the North Island.

'Do you mean the death statistics?' the doctor asked.

'They'll do just as well,' said Tanner.

'No one dies here except from drink or drowning. Out of three thousand people in Taranaki Province there hasn't been a single funeral in the last sixteen months and only twenty-four sick and infirm. You may look upon me as a poor man.'

'What about women in childbirth?' asked Tanner.

The doctor didn't have any figures for women dying in childbirth, but he looked sharply at Tanner and asked him when his child was due.

'You don't know, of course. Well, don't ask me if it's going to be twins. Nature didn't intend us to know that.' He began to write in his notebook. 'Where are you living?'

'It's off the road to Houhora, you turn off to the right after twelve miles.'

'What's it called?'

'Hiruharama.'

'Don't know it. That's not a Maori name.'

'I think it means Jerusalem,' said Tanner.

'Are there any other women about the place?'

'No.'

'I mean someone who could come in and look after things while your wife's laid up. Who's your nearest neighbour?' Tanner told him there was no one except a man called Brinkman, who came over sometimes. He was about nine or ten miles off at Stony Loaf.

'And he has a wife?'

'No, he hasn't, that's what he complains about. You couldn't ask a woman to live out there.'

'You can ask a woman to live anywhere,' said the doctor. 'He's a crank, I dare say.'

'He's a dreamer,' Tanner replied. 'I should term Brinkman a dreamer.'

'I was thinking in terms of washing the sheets, that sort of thing. If there's no one else, can you manage about the house yourself for a few days?'

'I can do anything about the house,' said Tanner.

'You don't drink?'

Tanner shook his head, wondering if the doctor did. He asked if he shouldn't bring his wife with him for a consultation next time he drove over to Awanui. The doctor looked out of his window at the bone-shaking old dray with its iron-rimmed wheels. 'Don't.'

He tore the prescription out of his notebook. 'Get this for your wife. It's calcium water. When you want me to come, you'll have to send for me. But don't let that worry you. Often by the time I arrive I'm not needed.'



Other patients had arrived and were sitting on the wooden benches on the verandah. Some had empty medicine bottles for a refill. There was a man with his right arm strapped up, several kids with their mothers, and a woman who looked well enough but seemed to be in tears for some reason or other. – Well, you see life in the townships.

Tanner went over to the post office, where there was free pen and ink if you wanted it, and wrote a letter to his sister. – But wait a minute, surely he couldn't read or write? Evidently by that time he could. Mr Tanner's guess was that although Kitty was a quiet girl, very quiet, she'd refused to marry him until he'd got the hang of it. – Tanner wrote: My darling old sister. Well, it's come to pass and either a girl or a boy will be added unto us. It would be a help if you could send us a book on the subject. We have now a hundred full-grown hens and a further hundred at point of lay, and a good stand of potatoes. – After mailing the letter he bought soap, thread, needles, canned fish, tea and sugar. When he drove out of Awanui he stopped at the last homestead, where he knew a man called Parrish who kept racing-pigeons. Some of them, in fact were just arriving back at their loft. Parrish had cut the entrances to the nests down very small, and every time a bird got home it had to squeeze past a bell on a string so that the tinkling sound gave warning. They were all Blue Chequers, the only kind, Parrish declared, that a sane man would want to keep. Tanner explained his predicament and asked for the loan of two birds. Parrish didn't mind, because Hiruharama, Tanner's place, was on a more or less direct line from Awanui to Te Paki station, and that was the line his pigeons flew.

'If you'd have lived over the other way I couldn't have helped you,' Parrish said.

A Maori boy took the young birds out as soon as they were four months old and tossed them at three miles, ten miles, twenty miles, always in the same direction, north-north-west of Awanui.

'As long as they can do fifteen miles,' said Tanner.

'They can do two hundred and fifty.'

'How long will it take them to do fifteen miles?'

'Twenty minutes in clear weather,' said Parrish.

The Maori boy chose out two birds and packed them into a wicker hamper, which Tanner wedged into the driver's seat of the dray.

'Have you got them numbered in some way?' Tanner asked.

'I don't need to. I know them all,' said Parrish.

He added that they would need rock salt, so Tanner drove back into the town once more to buy the rock salt and a sack of millet. By the time he got to Hiruharama the dark clear night sky was pressing in on every side. I ought to have taken you with me, he told Kitty. She said she had been all right. He hadn't, though, he'd been worried. You mean you've forgotten something at the stores, said Kitty. Tanner went out to the dray and fetched the pigeons, still shifting about and conferring quietly in their wicker basket.

'Here's one thing more than you asked for,' he said. They found room for them in the loft above the vegetable store. The Blue Chequers were the prettiest things about the place.



The sister in England did send a book, although it didn't arrive for almost a year. In any case, it only had one chapter of a practical nature. Otherwise, it was religious in tone. But meanwhile Kitty's calculations couldn't have been far out, because more or less when they expected it the pains came on strong enough for Tanner to send for the doctor.

He had made the pigeons' nests out of packing-cases. They ought to have flown out daily for exercise, but he hadn't been able to manage that. Still, they looked fair enough, a bit dishevelled, but not so that you'd notice. It was four o'clock, breezy, but not windy. He took them out into the bright air which, even that far from the coast, was full of the salt of the ocean. How to toss a pigeon he had no idea. He opened the basket, and before he could think what to do next they were out and up into the blue. He watched in terror as after reaching a certain height they began turning round in tight circles as though puzzled or lost. Then, apparently sighting something on the horizon that they knew, they set off strongly towards Awanui. — Say twenty minutes for them to get to Parrish's loft. Ten minutes for Parrish or the Maori boy to walk up the street to the doctor's. Two and a half hours for the doctor to drive over, even allowing for his losing the way once. Thirty seconds for him to get down from his trap and open his bag. —

At five o'clock Tanner went out to see to the pigs and hens. At six Kitty was no better and no worse. She lay there quietly, sweating from head to foot. 'I can hear someone coming,' she said, not from Awanui, though, it was along the top road. Tanner thought it must be Brinkman. 'Why, yes, it must be six months since he came,' said Kitty, as though she was making conversation. Who else, after all, could it have been on the top road? The track up there had a deep rounded gutter each side which made it awkward to drive along. They could hear the screeching and rattling of his old buggy, two wheels in the gutter, two out. 'He's stopped at the gully now to let his horse drink,' said Kitty. 'He'll have to let it walk the rest of the way.' — 'He'll have to turn round when he gets here and start right back,' said Tanner.

There used to be a photograph of Brinkman somewhere, but Mr Tanner didn't know what had become of it, and he believed it hadn't been a good likeness in any case. — Of course, in the circumstances, as he'd come eight miles over a rough road, he had to be asked to put up his horse for a while, and come in.

Like most people who live on their own Brinkman continued with the course of his thoughts, which were more real to him than the outside world's commotion. Walking straight into the front room he stopped in front of the piece of mirror-glass tacked over the sink and looked fixedly into it.

'I'll tell you something, Tanner, I thought I caught sight of my first grey hairs this morning.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

Brinkman looked round. 'I see the table isn't set.'

'I don't want you to feel that you're not welcome,' said Tanner, 'but Kitty's not well. She told me to be sure that you came in and rested a while, but she's not well. Truth is, she's in labour.'

'Then she won't be cooking dinner this evening, then?'

'You mean you were counting on having it here?'





'My half-yearly dinner with you and Mrs Tanner, yis, that's about it.'

'What day is it, then?' asked Tanner, somewhat at random. It was almost too much for him at that moment to realise that Brinkman existed. He seemed like a stranger, perhaps from a foreign country, not understanding how ordinary things were done or said.

Brinkman made no attempt to leave, but said; 'Last time I came here we started with canned toheroas. Your wife set them in front of me. I'm not sure that they had an entirely good effect on the intestines. Then we had fried eggs and excellent jellied beetroot, a choice between tea or Bovo, bread and butter and unlimited quantities of treacle. I have a note of all this in my daily journal. That's not to say, however, that I came over here simply to take dinner with you. It wasn't for the drive, either, although I'm always glad to have the opportunity of a change of scene and to read a little in Nature's book. No, I've come today, as I came formerly, for the sake of hearing a woman's voice.'

Had Tanner noticed, he went on, that there were no native songbirds in the territory? At that moment there was a crying, or a calling, from the next room such as Tanner had never heard before, not in a shipwreck – and he had been in a wreck – not in a slaughterhouse.

'Don't put yourself out on my account,' said Brinkman. 'I'm going to sit here until you come back and have a quiet smoko.'

The doctor drove up bringing with him his wife's widowed sister, who lived with them and was a nurse, or had been a nurse. Tanner came out of the bedroom covered with blood, something like a butcher. He told the doctor he'd managed to deliver the child, a girl, in fact he'd wrapped it in a towel and tucked it up in the washbasket. The doctor took him back into the bedroom and made him sit down. The nurse put down the things she'd brought with her and looked round for the tea-tin. Brinkman sat there, as solid as his chair. 'You may be wondering who I am,' he said. 'I'm a neighbour, come over for dinner. I think of myself as one of the perpetually welcome.' 'Suit yourself,' said the sister-in-law. The doctor emerged, moving rather faster than he usually did. 'Please to go in there and wash the patient. I'm going to take a look at the afterbirth. The father put it out with the waste.'

There Tanner had made his one oversight. It wasn't the afterbirth, it was a second daughter, smaller, but a twin. – But how come, if both of them were girls, that Mr Tanner himself still had the name of Tanner? Well, the Tanners went on to have nine more children, some of them boys, and one of those boys was Mr Tanner's father. That evening, when the doctor came in from the yard with the messy scrap, he squeezed it as though he was wringing it out to dry, and it opened its mouth and the colder air of the kitchen rushed in and she'd got her start in life. After that the Tanners always had one of those tinplate mottoes hung up on the wall – Throw Nothing Away. You could get them then at the hardware store. – And this was the point that Mr Tanner had been wanting to make all along – whereas the first daughter never got to be anything in particular, this second little girl grew up to be a lawyer with a firm in Wellington, and she did very well.



All the time Brinkman continued to sit there by the table and smoke his pipe. Two more women born into the world! It must have seemed to him that if this sort of thing went on there should be a good chance, in the end, for him to acquire one for himself. Meanwhile, they would have to serve dinner sometime.

