

At Hiruharama – *Penelope Fitzgerald*

George Tanner was an orphan from Stamford in Lincolnshire. At the turn of the century he 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 nothing more than a servant. On an errand to a dry goods store in Auckland he met Kitty. She had also come out from England as a governess, and she too found she was really just a servant. She was sixteen, and Tanner asked her to wait for three years while he saved up his wages, and then marry him.

Three years later Kitty and George were married. They started their married life in a remote country place. They didn't have to buy their place, it had been left deserted. Whoever lived there before had given up because of the loneliness and because it was such poor country.

George Tanner grew root vegetables and went into Awanui twice a week with the horse and dray to sell the surplus.

Awanui was their closest town. It was twenty five miles away.

Kitty always stayed behind because they'd taken on two hundred chickens and a good few pigs.

When Kitty told George she was going to have a child, George was a worried man. He drove into Awanui to see the doctor. He asked the doctor about the statistics for women dying in childbirth. The Doctor didn't have any statistics but looked sharply at Tanner and asked him 'Where are you living?'

'It's off the road to Houhora," George told him "you turn off to the right after twelve miles. And then follow the dirt track for another ten miles or so.'

'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 woman 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 lived about nine or ten miles off at Stony Loaf.

'And he has a wife?'

'No, he hasn't, that's what he complains about. He wants a wife more than anything else but you couldn't ask a woman to live out there. And he's not the easiest man.'

P.2

Tanner then asked the doctor if he should bring his wife for a consultation. The doctor looked out of the window at George's bone-shaking old dray with its iron rimmed wheels.

"No, don't" he said emphatically.

The Doctor tore a 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 it'll take some time to get to you. Often by the time I arrive I'm not needed.'

This worried George. He didn't feel at all confident that he could deliver a baby. Then he had a thought.

On his way home George stopped at the last homestead, where he knew a man, called Parrish who kept racing-pigeons. George explained his predicament and asked for the loan of two birds. Parrish didn't mind, because Hiruharama was on a more or less direct line from his station, so the pigeons would not have a problem getting home.

When George got home to Hiruharama he and Kitty found room for the pigeons in the loft above the vegetable store. The pigeons were a breed called Blue Chequers. They were the prettiest things about the place.

More or less when they expected it, Kitty's pains came on strong enough for George to send for the doctor.

George took the pigeons out into the bright air. He opened the basket, and before he could think what to do next they were out and up into the blue. Apparently sighting something on the horizon that they knew, they set off strongly towards Awanui.

George thought to himself 'twenty minutes for them to get to Parrish's loft. Ten minutes for Parrish 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 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, they are coming along the top road.'

George guessed it must be Brinkman. It was. Their bachelor neighbour 'dropped in' every six months.

When Brinkman came in, he looked round and said, '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. Truth is, she's in labour.' George expected Brinkman to take the hint.

But Brinkman made no attempt to leave.

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

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

'My half-yearly dinner with you and Mrs Tanner, yis, that's about it. Last time I came here we started with canned toheroas. 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 have dinner with you. No, I've come today, as I came formerly, for the sake of hearing a woman's voice.'

At that moment there was a terrible crying from the next room such as Tanner had never heard before.

'Don't put yourself out on my account,' said Brinkman. 'I'll just sit here until you've finished and have a quiet smoko.'

Sometime later the doctor finally drove up bringing with him his wife's widowed sister, who was a nurse.

George 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 the baby in a towel and tucked it up in the washbasket. He was very pleased with himself.

George also told the Doctor that he'd thrown the afterbirth out with the waste into the yard.

The doctor went into the bedroom. 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 my dinner. I think of myself as one of the perpetually welcome. Will you be making tea?’

Before she could answer the doctor emerged from the bedroom, moving rather faster than he usually did.

‘I’m going to take a look at that afterbirth’ he said

Tanner had made one oversight. It wasn’t afterbirth.... it was a second daughter, smaller, but a twin.

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 warmer air of the kitchen rushed in and the little girl got her start in life.

After that George and Kitty always had one of those tinplate mottoes hung up on the wall – “Throw Nothing Away.”

Their first daughter never got to be anything in particular, but this second little girl grew up to be a lawyer with a firm in Wellington, and she did very well.

Back to that evening. Throughout all the drama the ‘perpetually welcome neighbour’, Brinkman continued to sit by the table smoking his pipe, and thinking, ‘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.