WHY does the civilization of the white race always act upon a primitive people and their culture like a foul wind? The devastation and degradation which have been wrought among the Maoris of New Zealand by two generations of contact with the white man are one of the worst examples of that invariable result. It must be admitted that the ideals, methods and results of that civilization have been pretty hard on the white race itself, and perhaps it is not to be wondered at that any people less vigorous and forceful should have succumbed under its influence. The Maori has gone down before its breath until, in numbers, he has become a mere handful, in character, the pale shadow of his former self, while of his culture there is left nothing but a folk-lore which he has almost forgotten and a knack in wood-carving out of which has gone all meaning and spontaneity.

The early traders, missionaries and settlers in New Zealand found a savage race, cannibals, in the Stone Age of development. But they were brave, high-spirited, chivalrous and noble far beyond the character of the most savage races, and they won from their white conquerors a loyal admiration, affection and respect which to this day one finds ardently voiced among those New Zealanders who knew the Maori as he was a generation ago.

It is, however, his endowment of artistic feeling and its development along the line of wood-carving that make the Maori of the pre-civilized day especially remarkable among savage races. He seems to have been possessed by a passion for the beautiful to which he was able to give, even with his primitive tools of stone and shell, an expression of genuine artistic worth. He surrounded his fortified villages with palisades, which he surmounted, at a distance of a few yards, with huge wooden figures, their faces carved in intricate patterns to represent tattooing and their bodies covered with decorative carved patterns. He made beautiful with carving and inlaying of shell, his war canoes, his weapons of war, his implements of labor, even the fishhook which a big capture might at any time wrench from his line and carry away. Upon his war canoes and certain
CARVED STORE HOUSE BUILT FORTY YEARS AGO FOR A MAORI CHIEF
CARVED FIGURES DECORATING AN OLD MAORI HOUSE

A CALABASH, FISHHOOKS AND COMBS, CARVED BY ANCIENT MAORI ARTISTS
kinds of his houses he lavished an amount of beauty, loving labor
and care that fill the modern white man with amazement.

In the museum in Auckland is a war canoe which was built some
seventy years ago and taken by the colonial troops in a war with
the Maoris thirty years later. It is eighty-two feet long by
seven feet in its greatest beam, and would easily carry a hundred
paddlers and fighting men. Others were known to the early settlers
that were much larger, varying from a hundred to almost two hun-
dred feet in length. But they were all made after the same model
and carved and decorated in the same way. The hull of this museum
specimen is made of one huge log of totara—a native tree, peculiar to
New Zealand—hollowed out with fire and stone axes. Top-sides,
elaborately carved from end to end, are lashed to the hull with flax
fiber through holes bored with a wooden drill pointed with quartz.
But it was upon the figurehead and the tall stern-post of the canoe
that the Maori love of decoration chiefly spent itself. The stern-
posts were always six or eight feet tall, the pattern of solid carving
pierced through, so that they had a very delicate, lacy look. The
pattern is always in spirals, accurately measured, and finely cut,
while down the center runs a double, heavier line. Mounted on the
top of this is a small, distorted figure, apparently representing a
human being. In Maori folk-lore there is a story of a prince, the
Lord of Fishes, who had a pet whale that bore him safely and swiftly
on ocean journeys whenever he wished to go. It is possible that this
long line, made double for the purpose of increased decorative effect,
represents Tinirau and his whale, Tutunui. At the base of the bow-
piece, carved also in spirals and curves, there was, in all the large
canoes, a prostrate figure of Maui, hero and demi-god especially
beloved and admired by the Maori. He was as crafty and resource-
ful as Ulysses, and was accustomed to turn off tasks by the side of
which the labor of Hercules were mere child’s play.

The preparation of these exquisitely carved stern and bow-pieces
required time and patience. They were made of totara wood, the
stern-pieces from slabs hardly more than an inch in thickness, and in
order to prevent the timber from cracking, only a little could be done
at a time. Love of the beautiful must indeed have been deeply
ingrained in the hearts of these people when they could work for
MAORI WOOD-CARVING—A LOST ART

years, with infinite pains, their only tools, bits of shell and pieces of sharp stone, upon these decorations which added no whit to the efficiency of their war-ships, and whose only purpose was to satisfy their artistic cravings. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about their work is that so much of it is beautiful even to the civilized and cultivated eye.

THE two kinds of houses which were most carved and decorated were the assembly halls or council chambers and the store houses belonging to the chiefs and nobles. The store houses were smaller and for them the labor was all spent upon the outside. They were set upon posts two or three feet high, to protect their contents from the visits of the native rat, and even these posts were often elaborately carved into representations of human faces and bodies. In one of these houses that has been preserved in the Auckland Museum, the sides and ends of the structure are made of slabs of totara wood set upright, each one solidly and elaborately carved to represent a human form grotesquely conventionalized. These figures, used in all their houses and palisades, represented either heroes from their mythology and folk-lore or historical characters, the ancestors usually of the persons owning the house or of the leading men of the tribe. The faces were tattooed, and the arms, legs and entire bodies covered with an elaborate carved pattern of zig-zag lines, curves and spirals. Almost always the male human figure has its tongue thrust out. For in Maori custom this was the act of defiance and told of high spirit and indomitable courage. In the later carvings, even of the old time, as the figures became more and more conventionalized, the tongue was split, or doubled, doubtless with the idea of introducing variety and of making it more decorative, and it also was covered with a carved pattern.

In none of the old carvings is the figure given its full complement of toes or fingers. Three is the usual number. There are some students of Maori lore who trace the reason for this far back to the beginnings of the Polynesian race—of which the Maori is a division—in the valley of the Ganges river, before the Aryan race had come down from its primal home to drive out the Gangetic races and send them forth to their wanderings through the Islands of Indonesia and the Pacific Ocean. And they find in it only another form of that
wide-spread, symbolic expression of the idea of the trinity which speaks alike in the three fingers of Buddha and in the three fingers which the Catholic Priest holds up as he pronounces the benediction.

Every house, for whatever purpose, had a verandah in front, made by continuing the sides and roof several feet forward from the front end. The interior of this was solidly and richly carved and decorated with feathers. The human figures had always eyes made of pieces of iridescent haliotis shell—the abalone of our own Pacific coast—fastened in with wooden pegs. The barge-boards and another set on edge across the front of the verandah were solidly carved, usually with a pattern in which a mythical, nondescript figure called “manaia,” a sort of spirit of evil, was repeated over and over again in combination with parts or whole of the human figure. In a small, carved store house, made about seventy years ago with primitive tools, this pattern—illustrated in the tail-piece of this article—shows “manaia” whispering temptations into the ear of man, who, with most commendable moral courage, has thrust his tongue far out in scorn and defiance of his tempter. One of the human figures in this carving is male and the other female, and there are some who find in it a sort of Maori Garden of Eden episode. But in my study of Maori myths and legends, I could find no warrant for such an explanation.

A

m immense amount of labor must have been involved in the carving of their tribal meeting houses, of which there was one in every village. They were often of large size—one that has been preserved at the Thames is eighty feet long, thirty-three feet wide and twenty-four feet high. Each of its side walls is formed by twenty elaborately carved figures of ancestors or heroes alternated with exquisitely woven panels of reeds and flax in varied patterns. The rafters are gaily painted, red, black and white, in graceful patterns that show both an artistic eye and a careful hand, and the space between them is filled with the woven reeds and flax.

The lintel of the doorway was always richly carved, and often the whole doorway was made very massive and imposing with carvings and decorations on each side. One lintel that I saw was a Dantesque dream of twisted and distorted human bodies, tossed arms
and dismembered limbs, all intertwined and woven together with graceful curves and spirals.

Their wooden bowls, urns and boxes, used for serving food to chiefs, for holding preserved birds, the feathers of the "huia," and articles of personal adornment, were often beautiful in both form and decoration. Sometimes the box was held in the grasp of grotesque human figures upon which the carved spirals were made to accentuate the appearance of muscular development and strength. Or the handle of the cover was made of two such figures, faces upward, heads together, knees bent and bodies braced. The entire surface of boxes and figures was covered with carved combinations of spirals, short waved lines, and straight horizontal and vertical lines.

In the Maori carving, a decorative figure that occurs over and over again is a double curve, very suggestive of two serpents with bodies loosely coiled around the heads. They are usually covered with fanciful decorations of short lines and curves combined into patterns, and two small figures on the head apparently are meant to indicate eyes. But snakes are unknown in New Zealand, and there is nothing to indicate that they ever existed upon the Islands. A carefully carved burial case, in the form of a lizard, exhumed from a cave and believed to be about two hundred years old, offers an equally inviting vista for speculation as to the origin of the idea. For there is no reptilian form on the Islands that is like it in shape. The Maoris are the only branch of the Polynesian peoples who developed wood-carving, and in their ornamentation, both in woodwork and in tattooing—which with them was really a carving upon flesh—spirals and scrolls were a local invention. And yet, a keen Maori student told me that when a wood-carver of to-day starts to make a scroll pattern he begins it by making a Swastika and develops his scroll from that figure. He does not know why, except that he gets a truer result.

In Auckland I saw a number of carved slabs recently exhumed from a cave where they had been buried for almost a hundred years. They are part of a house, originally composed of eighty pieces—so says the tradition of the tribe to which it belonged—which was taken apart and hidden to prevent its being destroyed by a warring enemy. The pattern on one of the slabs is a marvelous and
DETAIL OF CARVED FIGURES FROM SIDE OF A MAORI HOUSE
bewildering combination of designs, part human, part animal, intertwined and superimposed, but all full of meaning, if one only had the key to the symbols. The other slabs represent either mythological or historical characters. One, which can be made out in the illustration—the slabs are about ten feet high and the figures of more than life size,—shows a man playing the flute. He is TutaneKai, whose lady-love, Hinemoa, had been forbidden to see him. But he played his flute on the island where he lived, knowing she would hear and be assured of his loyalty. And on the shore of Lake Rotorua she listened, until finally, in the dead of night, she sprang into the water and swam to the island—about three miles. There, after romantic adventures and quaint instances of primitive resourcefulness, she discovered herself to him, and they lived happily forever after. On the shores of Rotorua you can find many descendants of this pair of lovers, now in the ninth generation. For the well-born Maori, even now, can recite his genealogical tree for seventy generations.

These slabs are excellent examples of the Maori’s art of wood-carving as it was in the days when it was the spontaneous expression of his religious feeling, his artistic sense, and his passionate desire to make things beautiful. Nowadays, with the best of steel tools, he makes fairly good copies of what his ancestors did with bits of shell and stone. But he no longer even knows the meaning of the forms he cuts upon the wood. His ancestor was a cannibal and ate the enemy he had killed in battle and offered up human sacrifice, perhaps even his own son, when he dedicated a new house. But the work of his hands was art. The descendant is civilized and a Christian. But the work of his hands is the merest pot-boiling, without meaning or interest for him, except as a means of getting money, and with but little charm for others.