

## *Discoveries*

By *Elsie Locke*

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Our family of six children (I was the youngest) had no way of going places except on our own feet. We lived in Waiuku, which in the nineteen-twenties was a small town with more horses-and-buggies than motor-cars. We could afford neither; but Mother had a treasure to give us, and that was her love of the great outdoors.

When we were small she took us to off-the-road picnic places that other people didn't seem to notice. One of the first I remember was a quiet pool under willow trees made beautiful with water-hyacinths. We didn't know that this was a rogue weed liable to block up water-courses. We went to tiny beaches with a little patch of sand and a lot of mud where we gathered cockles and lit fires to cook them in tin billies. When we were old enough to walk to more exciting places, like the wild ocean beach behind the high sandhills, mother's feet weren't up to it and we went exploring without her.

In the summer holidays we went camping. Father, who had to keep on working, took the tents and gear and groceries on a dray, and left us at the camping place until the day fixed for our return. Mother rigged up a sheltered fireplace to keep the wood dry, and made bread in a camp oven. It made no difference if the weather turned bad. We stayed in our tents and sang and read books and played cards and pencil-and-paper games; or we put on our swimming togs and played in the rain. One year when the clay road was either washed out or flooded, Father could not get in. We had nothing left to eat but some tins of salmon (cheap in those days) and plenty of potatoes, which had to be boiled in sea-water for lack of salt. For variety we went out after eels and shellfish.

Mother had grown up in Oxford, North Canterbury, where her father was bush-felling. She talked about the clear-running streams where they caught eels and kokopu, the kakas which swung comically from the branches while they whistled, and the parakeets flying overhead in great flocks and making havoc in the orchards. "That was real bush," she would say.

We didn't have any "real bush" left. We only had patches in the gullies where the farmers had never cleared them out, although many were large enough to deserve a name and attract picnic parties - Hull's Bush, Cochrane's Bush and so on. I began to wander abroad to see what I could find. I went alone because no one else wanted to come, and because I enjoyed finding my own trails and thinking my own thoughts. I couldn't be lonely because there were always people or farm animals about. Often a farmer or his wife would show me round their bush with real pleasure, as if they were showing off a garden.

At the very beginning I discovered some new flowers and brought a spray of them home. Festooned over the manuka at the edge of a gully were clusters of creamy little bells, as perfect as the lilies-of-the-valley so admired in our home garden. Mother was delighted. She called them "Maori jasmine" and said they were common around Oxford. I found out later that they were common all over the country on the fringes of native bush; but the

first sighting gave me a special joy which comes back to me whenever I see those creamy bells.

My parents, being South Islanders, could not always put a name to the specimens I brought home, so I toted them round till I found some one who could. In the shady parts of the bush I found a shrub with bright orange flowers, taurepo; in the sunshine, climbing ratas in various shades of white, red and gold; in the spray of pink the coastal surf, blue lobelia and/native iceplant; and on open hillsides, small orchids and the native iris, libertia. We didn't have kakas or parakeets but we had tuis, fantails, moreporks and harrier hawks as well as English birds, and plenty of waterfowl. On the coast I saw seagull rookeries and the hollows in the sand that terns use for nests. Enormous albatrosses were sometimes washed up on that beach, but they were always dead.

There was no high life in our little town. Silent movies, sports, school concerts and flower shows were the main entertainments for us children. We were highly excited when the circuses came, much more often than they do today. The big marquee and the smaller tents were pitched in a flat paddock very close to our house. We watched them setting up, and we ran messages or did odd jobs go as to earn free tickets for the show. For months afterwards we kept the circus ring well trodden playing circus games.

One summer there arrived a very different kind of show with a big marquee to erect in the same paddock. It was an educational team from America called Chataqua\* That doesn't sound exciting, but it was. They used a magic lantern with coloured slides to illustrate their talks on astronomy, biology, distant lands and so on, with speakers full of humour and enthusiasm. They organised the local grown-ups to help them make music, and they set up a children's choir which practised every afternoon.

Through the school they announced a competition with first and second prizes. It was quite simple, and we children were pledged to do our own thinking without adult help. In no more than ten words we had to answer the question: "What is the most beautiful thing in the world?"

I took it for granted that "beautiful" meant beautiful to look at. So did all my friends. The more I thought about it, the more difficult it became to choose. There were so many beautiful things.

In the end I put all my outdoor joys in one package and wrote, "The world of nature."

What, indeed, could be more beautiful? On those summer evenings I sat on our front verandah and watched the sun go down over the western sandhills, leaving a few fluffy clouds in a pink glow. Across the road a young bluegum stood out of an old stump like a green candle flame. The birds sang their goodnight songs, and in the grass, starred with white daisies, the crickets were tuning up. This simple everyday scene was quite enchanting. I was sure I was right.

But I did not win the prize. The two winners were girls who never seemed to notice the beauty around them. And their answers?

First: "A mother's love."

Second: "A kind heart."

I felt cheated. Any of us could have quoted those phrases so freely tossed round at Sunday School. I asked the winner how she'd guessed that this was the kind of answer they wanted.

"My Dad told me," she said.

Now I felt more than cheated - I felt disgusted at her dishonesty. I still think I had a better claim to that prize. But it didn't matter when we came to the final concert, where the grown-ups surprised us with flutes and fiddles and peculiar instruments for percussion; and we children in the choir dressed up in improvised costumes and sang our hearts out as we never did in school.

That was better than a prize, any day.

\*An American Indian word, pronounced Sha-TAW-qua.