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By "SUNDOWNER"

DETOUR BY RUATORIA

IT would be stretching words a little to say that all roads north of Gisborne lead to Ruatoria, but most of them do. It is possible to go to Hick's Bay without passing through Ruatoria at all. To reach the town you must in fact leave the main road and deviate a couple of miles. But

RUATORIA

you do that. Everybody does it unless he is driving against time or by accident takes the wrong turning.

And I think everybody who does it gets a surprise. Ruatoria has almost no resemblance at all to the wild-west town of legend. It is neither wild nor west; neither a circus town nor Hollywood. I reached it on a Friday afternoon and had to drive right through before I could find parking space for my caravan. The main street is not wide enough for angle-parking, and there must have been a hundred cars that day standing end to end on both sides of the road. The number was not quite as great on my second and third visits, but there was a rodeo (everybody called it *ro-dayo*) the fourth day, and most of the cars were on the sports ground. The horses were there, too, of course; 31 the first day, 23 the second, only seven or eight the third day, and I don't know how many on the fourth day since the circus had taken them, too, to the sports ground or dispersed them about the town.

But if three days and nights in the hotel are evidence, Ruatoria is not especially noisy; it is certainly not drunken; it does not spend its days and nights trying to get to Texas. I am writing this note in the hotel, and all I can hear is a burble of voices in the bar that is precisely like the burble at half-past five in every other hotel, and the clink of cutlery in the kitchen. I can smell dinner, and when I sit down to it the table will be decorated with flowers, the waitresses will be Maori girls in spotless white, no one will be making a nuisance of himself at the table, and the guests will be the usual wholesome group you find in every hotel a hundred miles from a city—public servants, commercial travellers, garage hands, stock and station agents, and farmers who are having a night in town. There will be the usual coming and going after dinner, but the chief event will be the supper at nine, which every guest will be waiting for if he is not at the pictures or a visiting show, attending a meeting of the people he came to Ruatoria to see or organise or sell something to, or playing billiards in the local saloon. It is no more American than I myself am an American when I drive a Ford car or read *Life* and *Time*. It is New Zealand—our own country in its colour (a little drab and dull), its contentment (dull again, but independent of stimulants), its friendliness (every

man says *hallo* to you), its wholesomeness (Professor Sinclair's psycho-boys are still a long way off), its naturalness (the painter comes down from the roof and has morning tea with the bank manager), its untidiness (drifting paper, empty tins, dusty hedges, flyblown shop windows). I don't know what a comparable American town is like, but I know that if I visited one I would not think I was in Ruatoria. I suspect, too, that I would wish I were.

THAT is Ruatoria from the outside—the impression you get when you arrive and look about you with your ordinary eyes. But there is another Ruatoria that it takes you a day or two to discover unless you are lucky. I happened to be lucky. The day

UNDER THE SURFACE

I arrived two Samoan inspectors of schools arrived, and a young native teacher from Rarotonga. They had come to see for themselves how our system of education worked among the Maoris, and the Maoris turned out almost to the last baby to welcome them. But Pakehas turned out, too, at the invitation of the Maoris, and the local hall was not nearly big enough for the occasion. There were people on the stage and on the window ledges, on forms, steps, chairs, and one another's knees, and no race barriers. The farmer who called for me at the hotel took me first, when we reached the hall, to Sir Apirana Ngata and Mr. Awatere; then to a group of Pakehas; then to Pine Taiapa, the Maori carver who was working on the panels for the new meeting-house now being built with both Maori and Pakeha money. And in a little while I began to see the other Ruatoria—the settlement not built with hands but with tolerance and understanding and goodwill; the town that is neither Maori nor Pakeha but a little of both; Maoris who speak and think in English, Pakehas who speak, and even think, some Maori; a social system dying and a social system being born; Maoris asking themselves how much of the Pakeha way of life they really want, Pakehas wondering

what the situation would be if they were as little troubled as the Maori is about the future and as capable of enjoying the present; snobbery dying or dead; dignity coming from within and not bolstered up from without; men no longer judging one another by the size of their houses, women no longer hating one another for wearing better or worse clothes. It was not as simple as that, or as clear as that, or as sharp as that, but I felt that it was beginning to be like that in shreds and patches, and it all interested me so much that I lingered on looking at it days after I should have been a hundred miles farther on my way.

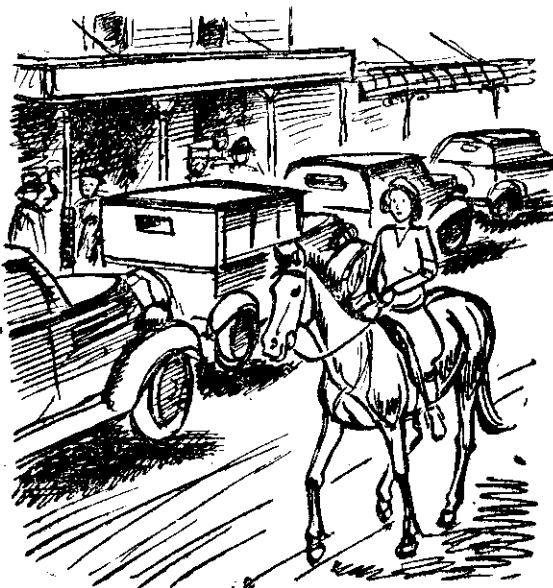
Ruatoria may have been Wild-West once. It may have been drunken, riotous, noisy, even a little alarming. There may have been a time when all the things happened that sensationalists 300 miles away tell you, and perhaps think, are happening to-day. But you will be disappointed if you go looking for them. The young bloods that you expect to see galloping madly down the main street and firing rifles in the air, riding their horses into shops, or holding up your car at some lonely bridge, are nearly all returned soldiers wondering, like your own sons, how to get a farm or a house or a truck or a steady job, and in the meantime rearing families whom you may, if it comforts you, deceive yourself into thinking that you are supporting.

GAUL, we know, was divided into three parts, but I'm sure that the people of Gaul were in two groups only and that the division still stands. I think it stands all over the world, and that ethnologists waste their time. There are people whom fleas bite and people whom they don't, and I don't think there are any others. It may therefore happen

BIG FLEAS AND LITTLE FLEAS

some day that the East Coast will be populated wholly from the second group, and that the only members of the first group it will ever see will be daring or innocent travellers. I found myself watching the people I met and wondering to which group they belonged. If our meeting was brief I let them go. If we spent half-an-hour together I thought I knew when we parted what label to give them. In the end I decided that the first group is smaller than the second, even when I made allowance for breeding and the social disciplines. But it exists; and if three weeks are a sufficient test, the members of it live adventurous lives. I found that I got through fairly well by day, though some days were better than others; but I don't think I had three unbroken nights all the way from Gisborne to Ootiki. I found living so pleasant on the Coast in all other respects that I hated to hurry, but it was trying to be told again and again by the kind people who entertained me that I looked tired and must be ready for bed. I am sure I often looked tired, but I was never ready for bed until I was too tired to react to formic acid injections.

And I hope no reader will think I'm being frivolous. It may be vulgar to talk about fleas, but no subject can be ignored that bears so heavily upon human peace. Sheepfarmers must have dogs. As a rule their wives must have cats. A



"The main street is not wide enough for angle parking"