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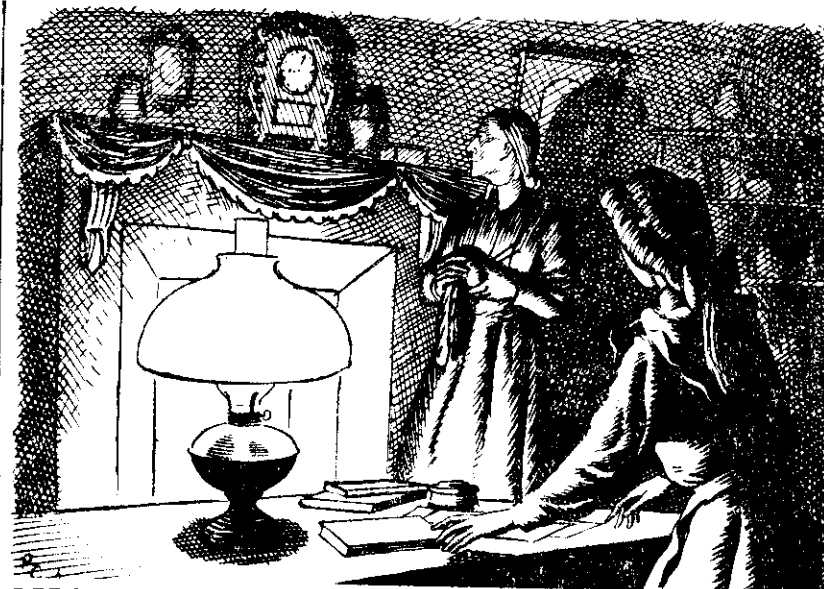
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SHORT STORY

THE CLOCK

Written for "The Listener"
by RUTH FRANCE

IN those days I lived with my grandmother and my Aunt Mary. I don't know that they were very pleased about it, but there was nowhere else for me to go, and grandmother always did what she considered her duty. Her duty in this case was to bring me up, but quite early on I decided I wasn't going to be brought up in the same mould as Aunt Mary. Aunt Mary hadn't had a chance. When she was young they had lived way back in the hills of the peninsula, and she wasn't clever, like my mother, to win scholarships and become a teacher. Not that it ever did my mother any good, Aunt Mary was fond of telling me. Look where she was, in her grave. You always felt that Aunt Mary thought a lot. She couldn't say much, not with grandmother, but she didn't need to. She could express herself quite well without. It was her only weapon, but even at that it didn't do her much good. Not against grandmother.

Grandmother was small and neat and straight. She was meticulous in her dress, and the white lace ruffles at her neck and wrists were always snowy. She had a little gold watch that hung round her neck on a gold chain and tucked into a pocket on the inside of her black bodice. She always wore a jet brooch, and her skin, though wrinkled, was as soft and white as that of a baby. When we went out she wore little black toques, like Queen Mary's, trimmed with jet and with feathers, and she used to send me back to polish the heels of my shoes, of which she was always critical.

You'd never think, to look at her, that she'd raised a family on a small peninsula farm in the 'seventies. You'd never think she knew all there was to know about pioneering until you looked again, and saw how straight her back was, and, though small, how firm her chin.

She spent her time playing patience. On Sundays she walked a mile to church, and every morning and evening recited the rosary. This was for the repose of the soul of my Uncle John, who had been killed in the first great war. His

portrait, painted from a photograph, hung in the dining room; and because he had been looking at the photographer, his eyes followed you all round the room, and haunted you. This pleased grandmother in a morbid sort of way, but I found it horrible. But then I had never known my Uncle John. He had a long and sensitive face, like my mother.

NEITHER grandmother nor Aunt Mary were that type at all. They were both battlers. The pity of it is, when you have a battle somebody has to win, and in this case it had been grandmother. Aunt Mary was a bad loser. She had gone sour in the process.

Sometimes when I realised how grandmother had dominated the lives of her children I grew afraid. It was only the thought of my youth, and her age, which comforted me. I wasn't too close to her, and too bound, as Aunt Mary was, so that dislike, and even hatred, drowned all other feeling. Sometimes since then I've been shocked at the intensity with which I could dislike a person, but never has my life been so bound to the hated one that I could not admire and respect him for some of his qualities.

I can still admire grandmother for living in the fowlhouses, though Aunt Mary added it to her list of grievances. This was before I went to stay with them. The peninsula farm had been sold, and grandmother was building a house on the outskirts of the city. But being grandmother, she had to see every piece of timber and roofing that was used, and, as soon as the stove was installed and the water laid on Aunt Mary was hauled, willy-nilly, to the site, and grandmother's large feather beds were squeezed into the swept-out fowlhouses, which were already on the property.

"And it's a great deal more comfortable we were than when I first came to New Zealand," said grandmother.

(continued on next page)