

THE WHIRLPOOL

A short story written for "The Listener" by RUTH FRANCE.

IT'S a strange thing how I bought a coat the other day and it reminded me of things I'd forgotten, and it was like opening a door, or going back to a place you haven't seen for years. You seem out of time, and the present grows hazy. It wasn't till after I brought the coat home, though, that it reminded me. It's funny how everything goes in tides, and comes full circle. Lives, and civilisations, and fashions.

The coat had a double cape, like a coachman's, and it wasn't till I tried it on at home that I remembered the other coat I had when I was five years old. It had three capes, and a tight collar band, and I wore with it a cap of the same grey material, with a fur border. Perhaps this coat is special in my mind because it's the first one I remember. I was beginning, womanlike, to take an interest in my appearance. It pleased me when my teacher, on a bitter day, seeing her brood were well wrapped up when they left school, remarked "Now there is a warm coat."

But that was a bit later. The coat was bought, in the first place, for the holiday. Meggie and I were going for a holiday, all on our own, to our aunt's place in the country. Meggie, who was a year older than I, had a new coat, too. Hers was blue. She always had blue, because she was very fair with blue eyes, and so I had to have grey, or rose, or apricot. In fact, it's only recently I've worn blue at all, having gained the implacable conviction in childhood that it didn't suit me.

I don't remember the train journey at all, whether we were taken, or just met at the other end. I was in that stage of childhood when you remember things very vividly or not at all. I don't remember my aunt's house, and a few years later she moved to Puaha. The house there I do remember, chiefly because, in country fashion, the front door was seldom used, in fact, it was rarely opened.

Our two cousins, Annie and Mary, were the same age as we were. Annie was dark and forceful, Mary was fair, plump, and placid. But we were all fond of our own way, and inclined to argument, and I remember my aunt trying to make peace between us.

Perhaps because I was used to the plains, the sense of being folded in by hills impressed me deeply, even then. It seemed comfortable. Young as I was, I noticed how green everything was in the valleys, though it was late in the season. I was used to the bare northern slopes that fronted on to Canterbury.

THE stream was another thing that impressed me. It bubbled down from the hills and wound along the valley. Sometimes it chattered among shingles and rocks, and you could pick your way across quite easily on the



boulders. Here, in the open, mint grew in the water. Its wild, pungent scent fitted so well with the crystal of the water that nothing man could have planted there, you felt, would have been so suitable. Watercress grew in more shady places, under the trees, where the water ran dark and placid, but mint belonged to the sunlight and the breeze blowing and the broken water that had curved, a moment before, like a bent back over a boulder. The stream curved in front of my aunt's house over a rush of boulders. You had to go over a bridge to reach the house, which was closed in by a fence and a white gate. The fence was only a wire one, but it was so grown over by gooseberry bushes and sweet peas and the passion vine they'd brought down from Kati-Kati that you hardly noticed it.

Then, in the lower end of the paddock, in a wooded hollow, the stream curved, turned back on itself, and made a second hairpin bend before it ran under the fence into the property of Mr. Monahan. Mr. Monahan had a bull, which reason alone should have kept us away from that area, but the lower end of the paddock was doubly cursed, for in the second hairpin bend of the stream was the whirlpool.

Whether it really was a whirlpool I now couldn't tell you. I know the children were sure of it, and made our city-bred flesh creep with the telling of what would happen to us if we fell in the water. Annie was especially good at telling of the horrid suck and whirl which slowly but relentlessly drew its victim to the centre of the vortex, and down to uppermost depths from whence the body could never be recovered. I was only a little girl, but I can remember to this day the horror with which Annie invested that pool, the way in which she told us that the Maoris believed it was the home of the taniwha, who had claimed one Maori child as his victim in recent years, and doubtless many more in distant ages. Certainly the pool was shunned, but then, it was in an unattractive spot, damp, and shadowed by trees, with the near-by bull to further discourage one. And then again, the pool was deep, and dark, with an evil flavour.

DURING the weeks we were there we seldom visited the pool. Quite likely we were forbidden to do so. But there came a day, one of those days which seem, on looking back, to have worked

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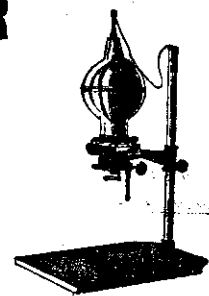
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