

I EXPLORED — ALONE

(Written for "The Listener" by "JOHN")

IT happened on my fifteenth birthday. My father owned six acres of bush about nine miles from the town in which we lived. It was our custom to spend most of the summer Sundays there. In a clearing there was a small hut where we had our meals, and in the afternoons we would either read or wander up and down the cool bush tracks, sometimes varying the procedure by removing our footwear and walking for miles through the gurgling water-courses. Or, perhaps, being in a competitive spirit, we would rival each other to see who could ford the stream on the slippery boulders at its most hazardous points. All very entertaining ways of getting rid of a Sunday afternoon. But my favourite pastime was to explore alone.

The thing to do was to force an entrance through the densest part of the undergrowth. There were hills to be climbed. Hills, on the surface of which there didn't appear to be the slightest foothold. Fern, old tree roots, lawyers (and how they clung) all ready and waiting for a strong hand to clutch and help the ascent. But sometimes the help wasn't as willing as it looked and then the few feet that had been gained in perhaps half an hour, would be lost in a matter of a few seconds. I would find myself in an undignified position, still grasping the fern, or whatever it might be that had let me down. I always did reach the top eventually, and after surveying the surrounding country from my point of vantage as if it were my own special work of art, I would wend my way back to the rest of the party rehearsing the tale of my feat all the way. But one day I didn't go back.

It Happened Quickly

As I said, it happened on my fifteenth birthday. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when I set off. I was pleased with life, pleased that I had reached the age of fifteen, pleased with the weather for presenting me with a fine day as a birthday gift, pleased with the bell-birds and tuis for their songs of welcome. I suppose I got a bit above myself, and that was why I made the mistake. I lost my foothold, my bearings and my courage. I had hurt my foot—all in a few seconds. One moment I was climbing happily, the next I was a stranger in a strange land, nursing an already swollen foot, my mind a confused whirl of thought.

It hadn't looked very treacherous, that hill. But I really think that I must have stepped on an illusion. I mean, walked on something that wasn't there. You see sometimes the undergrowth is very thick above the ground, and if you tread on it you just go through, sometimes up to your waist. I've often done it. Apparently, I did it once too often.



I had hurt my foot and fallen several feet. I was bruised, shaken, sick and alone. I didn't know what to do next. And it was my birthday. I'm thinking now, that I enjoyed my misery. If only for a little while. I tried to walk, but I couldn't put my foot to the ground. I tried to crawl but I made no progress, and I couldn't think properly for the pain. I called out but no one answered. They wouldn't hear me, of course. I was a long way from them and in the thickest part of the bush. I became panic-stricken. It would be six, perhaps seven o'clock before they would begin to wonder about me, and probably twilight before the silly creatures would begin to search. It wouldn't occur to them that anything could happen to me. It's funny, that. People never think things can happen to their own families. And then they're always surprised when they do. But I didn't bother to think that out at that time.

Terrors of the Night

I don't know how long I sat there. It wasn't exactly sitting either. I didn't even think to get into a comfortable position. I just stayed as I was when I stopped crawling about. And I don't know quite what happened next. I think I must have sobbed myself to sleep, because I remember crying and the next thing I knew, I was wide awake to darkness. Such awful darkness! It's dreadful being lost in the day-time, but the night has undreamt-of terrors. Suddenly I heard voices calling. I answered several times, but the voices came no nearer and finally stopped. Desolation!

I was hungry too. All I had with me to eat was chewing gum. I don't much like chewing gum when I am hungry. I found out something. There are birds that don't sleep at night. Or maybe my presence disturbed them. I could hear them fluttering and once something flew against my face. Gentle little friends in the daylight, but gigantic, black enemies at night. There were animals too, animals that scuttled and whispered about me. And the awful, frightful shadows! That black shape—the ghostly creakings—I screamed and the most dread-

ful sound of all was my own voice. The more I screamed the more I had to scream. Until my voice came out in the merest squeak, which made it worse. What, if on the top of my other troubles, I had lost the power of speech? The power of speech. But I might never need it again. I might never have anyone to speak to again. But I would. I would speak to the birds. I did. But

the birds didn't answer. I spoke to the trees, but they only moaned with their great age.

When They Found Me

I prayed a little then, I think. But it was so hard to concentrate. They would never find me. How could they in this great expanse of shadows. All crowding round me, all conspiring to keep me hidden from my kind. How long would it be? How long? Two, three days—and nights—and then—

They found me at about ten o'clock next morning. Those voices coming nearer and nearer! And then a face through the shrubs. Such a beautiful face it seemed (I found out afterwards it belonged to an old Maori bush-ranger), and it was seamed with the years of nearly a century and grimed with the dust of three hundred and sixty-five days a year walking over land. The tale went that he had never seen a piece of soap.

Two men got me out. They dragged and pushed me through the undergrowth and then when we came to the track, carried me. I can't remember the man who carried me, but I can remember the warm comforting contact of the human shoulder that I sobbed into, I, who had turned fifteen!

1000 FRED AND MAGGIES



"FRED AND MAGGIE EVERYBODY," the popular ZB feature, made radio history in Australia last month when the 1,000th performance was broadcast from Station 2CH. Fred and Maggie have provided continuous entertainment from 2CH since March 16, 1936, when they began their adventures. To celebrate the occasion they once again presented Episode 1. In private life the two main characters are Mr. and Mrs. Edward Howell, and their 12-year-old daughter, Madeline, plays the role of Daisy Sproggins. Edward Howell, who also writes the script, says that nearly half a million words have been written for the 1,000 performances, and nearly 400 well known Australian radio players have played parts, big and small, for them. Fred and Maggie (and Daisy Sproggins) visited New Zealand last year.