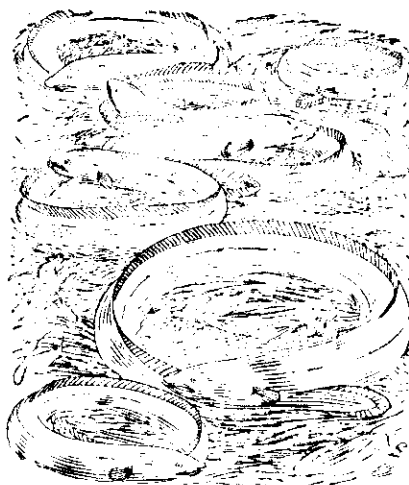


# ISLANDS OF EELS

by HELEN WILSON



A DROUGHT was sore in the land—quite a severe one for the Manawatu coast; and Levin, then a small bush settlement, had no provision against it, but tanks of water for man and beast. The farmers were obliged to bring their stock to the lake, or rather they opened their gates about four or five o'clock and the poor beasts galloped headlong to water. To us, living as we did near the Horowhenua Lake, the day-long "diamond weather" was not so distressful; yet we scanned the sky when it clouded over and hoped for rain.

I had taken my small family on the lake—three children, my "help," and a schoolboy who had been spending his holidays with us. We rowed to the further side, boiled the billy, and returned. The clouds seemed this time to mean business; they had come right down among us and we found ourselves in a soft Scotch mist. We pulled to what we called the Mint Bank: the "help" took the children home, and the schoolboy and I went to put the boat away. He said, looking wistfully at the calm water, "Wouldn't it be bosker to go and have a look at the Islands!"

I hesitated. His holidays were at an end, he had been a pleasant guest,

helpful on the farm, delighted with everything, and very amusing. Surely I could spare a little time.

We rowed slowly to the south end, talking about the islands. They were interesting because they were artificial—built by the Maori as a defence against the terrible raider, Te Rauparaha. The labour must have been prodigious and was done chiefly by the women, who carried countless baskets of sand (there was no rock in the district), loaded them into canoes, rowed to the spot and tipped them into the water. It is almost unbelievable, but

there were those still living who, as children, had seen the work being done. A foundation had first been laid of flax and poi roots held down with sharpened stakes. All round the islands—there were three of them—submerged stakes were driven to trip up enemy canoes and, as with the modern minefield a passage way, known only to the defenders, was left clear.

The story of the disaster is well known. Not only did the enemy manage to drag a couple of canoes up the reed-infested stream that was the outlet to the lake, but they came armed with muskets, unheard of by this tribe, who were shot down as they defied their foes from their "impregnable island fortresses."

The sheltered, southern end of the lake was covered with a red water-weed we called duck-weed, and through the mist we could see large brown piles that we didn't understand till we touched one with an oar. It splashed, wriggled and submerged, an enormous eel!

We now saw what we had failed to notice among the weed and the larger mounds—hundreds of thousands of smaller eels, all coiled in exactly the same tight pattern, like an inverted soup-plate, and all apparently fast asleep. We gazed in wonder at the incredible numbers. The Scotch mist had turned to rain and they seemed to be enjoying the soft drizzle. Eels, we said, must be deaf, for the noise we

made did not disturb them. Then we rowed in among them, trying to lift the largest coils with our oars to see how long they were. Some of them were monstrous. They were surprisingly slow to move and did not slip silently below. They wriggled and showed their white bellies. At last the ripples roused them and they disappeared, and we rowed home wet through and full of our experience.

I have read and been told some miraculous stories about the eel—some local ones of this lake, and of the behaviour of the eels of two smaller strips of water a few miles north of Horowhenua, but never have I heard that the whole eel population was in the habit of surfacing to take the air on a warm afternoon before rain. Nor have I ever met anyone who has seen the phenomenon. My schoolboy friend, the only one who saw it, has recently died full of years and honour and very deeply regretted. Perhaps some reader can tell of a similar experience, and explain it.

("Something new to me, if she has recalled it correctly, and she is usually an accurate observer," was how one fisheries research worker in Wellington described Mrs. Wilson's eel-story. Eels have often been observed en masse, coiled together under weed or other shelter; sometimes (generally at the start of migration) completely out of the water, on narrow gravel bars separating coastal lagoons from the sea—as at Lake Ellesmere. Anglers, too, occasionally stumble over individual eels lying half out of the water at night, among the damp stones at the riverside; but what Mrs. Wilson saw does not appear to have been recorded by anyone else.)

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