

PAKI WAITARA/Short Stories

THE HAT

A long time ago, when I was a very young girl, visitors came. They were of my father's family and although they both looked very old, they seemed still young. In my memory, he is a shadowy figure, but she is a real character. Auntie Panapana was my grandmother's sister. We children called her by that name — but whenever the adults were certain she would not hear them, they would speak of her as 'The Kaiser'. She was so strong-willed they reckoned she would have been an equal match for the German Leader!

Three things remain clear in my mind when I think of her — strong voice speaking emphatic Maori, eyes which saw everything and a bee-yoo-ti-ful hat.

The crown of that hat had been pushed downwards and then the centre curved upwards again over Auntie's head, so that a fold like a small wall ran round and joined itself above the brim. And the brim was sheer joy to my eyes. It was wide, to give shade from the sun, and a pattern had been woven right round — a pattern of holes. The day of arrival was bright, sunshine-filled, so that as Auntie spoke and moved, tiny dots of light slid, leapt, danced across her brown skin.

I loved that hat instantly.

So did my mother.

She hugged my father's aunt, kissed her, welcomed her. Then, still with her hands on Auntie's shoulders, she leaned backed and said, "Oh, what a bee-yoo-ti-ful hat".

A smile that matched the beauty of the hat spread right across Auntie's face. She lifted both hands from my mother's shoulders, removed the hat and settled it firmly on my mother's head. Then, the voice that nobody ever argued with, said quietly, overflowing with pleasure, "It is yours".

The whiteness of that kiekie hat sat so prettily on my mother's dark hair, although the dancing dots of sunlight were not so easily seen on her Pakeha skin.

I grew older and was sent to boarding school far from home. I

was taught taniko weaving and brought my first piece home for my mother. It was patterned in red and black wool on soft white string which showed as a fringe on the bottom edge, because I hadn't yet learned how to finish off. My mother was pleased. She sat smiling at this effort of mine. "I know just what to do with this," she said, "fetch the hat." And soon my taniko stood upright against the small wall of the crown, the white fringing lying softly at its base. "Oh," I thought, "What a bee-yoo-ti-ful hat."

My school years over I went to training college to be taught how to teach.

I fell in love, and later both families agreed that we should marry.

When my mother-in-law came for our wedding, she was welcomed by my mother wearing the hat woven so long ago by the clever fingers of Auntie Panapana. The two women embraced. And then it happened again. The visitor (this time) leaned back and said, "Oh, what a bee-yoo-ti-ful hat". My mother smiled her lovely smile, lifted the hat, passed it over saying happily, "It is yours".

The years passed.

We were blessed with three children and had youth, health, happiness when a great sadness struck us. Both of my husband's beloved parents died suddenly. In the sorrow and the great loving of the tangi, I did not think of the hat.

More years passed.

Our fourth child was born. A tiny, puny infant, not expected to live, just a frail skeleton, loosely skin-covered. But after one anxiety-filled year, he began to thrive and give us much joy. He was the first child born to the family after the death of his grandparents so he was given his grandfather's name.

Now and then I would think of the hat and wonder where it was. At each hui I would look eagerly at the heads of the women, but was always disappointed.

So the years passed. I became a grandmother.

The once sickly son was a sturdy, handsome sixteen year old when I

began photographing fine examples of Maori weaving. One night, when I was visiting one of my husband's sisters, and we had been discussing this work, she said, "I've got something you might like to see," and disappeared into her bedroom. When I next looked up, she was standing in front of me and on her head was the hat! In silence I sat and stared until she asked nervously, "Don't you like it? It's Mummy's hat."

"I love it," I said, "but it's not Mummy's hat. That hat was made by my grandmother's sister — my Auntie Panapana."

And I told my astonished sister-in-law the whole story. When I finished speaking, she tried to give the hat back to me. I refused. I knew that that hat brought pictures into her mind — comforting pictures of her mother. I coveted the hat, but she needed it. We compromised. We agreed that when her time came and she joined her parents, the hat would go not to her only daughter, but to mine.

It is still white, the kiekie is still flexible, the pattern still causes dots of sunshine to slide and dance across a brown face. For many years yet, people will see it and say in delight, "Oh, what a bee-yoo-ti-ful hat".

Toi Te Rito Maihi

THE FORTUNES OF YOUR WHEEL

No earth did sire
This fragile sprig of young
Unblessed with raiment
For your winter quarters
Forgiving not
The innocent there flung,
The end of harvest come
New wine in cellars old
Not far from soil
That gave our grapes new gold
And our sun, new lovers
Loyal, full betrothed.
Young vines grown with love
Do in their time
Fight towards the sun
We can keep away the weed
The foreman's heel
But who can hold back
Your closed hand
The fortunes of your wheel.

Al Joseph W.