

PLACE OF ADORNING

by
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HURRY UP, Mum!”

From somewhere beyond the pines, I am being called. We are on holiday in Taupo; the sun is contending with the cloud; we are going sight-seeing. I put away my book and hurry to join Susan and the girls. The car starts up, we pass quickly through the town, and before long we are coming into Wairakei with its immense geothermal bores roaring out.

We are on our way to Orakei-Korako, a place I've always wanted to see since, years ago, we toured this scenic area in a Ford tin truck on a few pounds apiece, and stopped at the turn-off to weigh our cash—and find it wanting. On my knee is the tourist pamphlet. “*See the unbelievable Place of Adorning... THERMAL WONDERLAND. ... FANTASTICALLY beautiful! alive in colour; outstanding; amazing; A MUST!!*” And, alas, an up-to-the-minute appendage. “See before it's too late! as Orakei-Korako will be flooded by the new Ohakuri Dam.”

We stop at the Aratiatia Rapids. The paths are beaten hard by the shoes of thousands of tourists; matchboxes and chocolate wrappers litter the broom and fern. But when we stand on a lookout rock above that magnificent weaving torrent, that great river fighting its way between and over the ancient boulders with bush and mosses tipping the foam, I am lost in the sight and sound of it all, and I was when first I saw it thirty years ago.

Susan appears at my elbow. “Take a good look,” she says. “It'll probably be your last. Unless you come at tourist-time to watch it turned on at 3.30 in the afternoon or something, like monkeys being fed at the zoo. What price electricity!”

I share her feelings as we return to the car. It's as if there were a hoarding at the parking place: “See before it's too late! as the Rapids will be drained dry with the operation of the new Aratiatia Dam.”

After the main road there is the side road through miles of low-growing, white-tipped heath, and then the charming flashing of the Whakeheke Rapids. But now our pleasure in this miniature Aratiatia is also dimmed by the thought: “See before it's too late! as Whakeheke will be smoothed out by the new Ohakuri Dam.” We hurry on, and come to the gates and the lawn and the house and the sweet-shop: *Souvenirs, Cigarettes, Ice-Cream, Soft Drinks*.

We pay our money to enter, Of course, explains the woman in charge cheerfully, you *must* buy the guide-book otherwise you won't know what you're seeing. And you must be sure to see The Cave, there's a legend about it, look, here it is, but don't read it now, sit down and read it when you are in The Cave.

Susan used to come here when old Rameka Henare, then in his nineties, would ferry sightseers across the Waikato River in his canoe. I look at its swiftly curling waters and try to imagine this. You wouldn't find, today, either the canoe or the man who could handle it in such a current. Even as it is, there is excitement to spare with the cable-ferry in which we are taken over by a pakeha.

Curious and intriguing like all Thermal Wonderlands, Orakei-Korako has its specialties. According to another visitor who has been a guide, the weather has failed us; we need bright sunshine to reveal the varied colours of the Artists' Palette.

The geysers are dozing or merely grunting and spurting in a sullen fashion. The tourist leaflet invites us, "Consider now the marvellous sculpture of the world's greatest silica terraces." The Guide Book captions a picture, "Pudding Pool Geyser. The Maori maiden displays a natural reluctance to extract the pudding while the boil is on."

Why do they call young Maori women "maidens" while young pakehas are "girls", I wonder?

Little notices stuck here and there indicate "RAINBOW TeRRACe" and "LooKinG ACROSS To COLOuRFuLL STeAMING CLIFFs" and the inevitable "LoVeRS LANE". Why do they have to be so off-hand, both in naming the attractions and in writing the notices carelessly? I am beginning to feel oppressed, but there's more in it than this feeling that, having paid our money and bought the guide-book, we don't have to be considered any further. There is a discordancy somewhere.

I look again at that carefully posed photograph with the "Maori maiden" and then what is missing dawns upon me.

It is like going into a Museum and viewing the cooking-pots of peoples far distant or long since dead. This is Maori country; and in the ancient times, before they were offered wages for such work as building dams, the Maoris found their food in this wilderness. Before puddings were heard of or pudding-pools photographed, the precious kumaras were cooked and eaten in this inexhaustible steam. The Guide Book shows the Rock of Refuge where Hatu Patu hid from the ogress Kurungaituku. Every pool bubbles with a history that we cannot catch.

With my thoughts drifting along, we cross the famous terraces and view them from the Panoramic Heights, rejoicing that this at least will be above flood level when the dam is closed. Then we climb the track through the scrub to that other major attraction, which shares the coloured cover—the Sacred Maori Cave.

It is now late afternoon, and we have already dined so well on curious sights that I am not expecting anything at all. I am tired of words. Even so, it sets me back on my heels when the next notice shouts at me, "ALAddiN'S CAVe."

Why, in heaven's name, Aladdin's Cave?? Here, in Maori country?

I don't know whether to curse or to laugh. But I've paid my money to see; so on I go, and here is a pleasing notice asking me respectfully not to disturb anything in the cave. Here we are inside. The cave is deep, deep, deep. The roof is high with a noble natural arch. Treeferns stand at the entrance. Far below is the clear green pool in which we are supposed to place our left hands while we make a wish, to be kept secret until it comes true. Rock, pool, ferns, air ... a harmony.

Yes, there is a presence here. A feeling. A peace. Something that can't be "got at" by tourism. The subtle atmosphere of the days when this Cave was truly Orakei-Korako,

the Place of Adorning, the pleasure ground of the Maori girls to which no man might come because of tapu? And perhaps something nearer and more real to our own time? A woman passes me, coming up. “It was lovely,” she tells her companion, “when the Maori guides were here. Boy, how they could sing...”

She moves on; and I see a tablet set into a boulder. Susan and the girls are running downhill, but I am reading:

“WAIHO TE RIRI ME TE KINO I MURI LEAVE WAR AND STRIFE BEHIND YOU

Erected to the Memory of
ATAMA (ADAM) MIKAERE

His spirit hovers in this lovely cave where as a lad he guided and delighted visitors with his manly bearing. He rests in the far Libyan Desert.

Killed in action, 1941; aged 22 years.

Also in memory of his brother,

WITAINA MIKAERE

Killed in action, 1941; aged 19 years.”

How appropriate, how dignified, how delicate! Suddenly I feel I could put out my hand and touch his, the Maori boy with the golden voice who lies—tragic symbol of man's inhumanity—in the far Libyan Desert. “Waiho te riri me te kino i muri...”

“Mum! Come down and have your wish!” my little girl is calling.

Of course I'll play the game and have a wish, though doubtless this wishing-pool idea is a pakeha invention. I'll wish for some trivial thing that I'll probably get for my birthday, so that I can tell the children that it really did come true. I run down the path and slip my hand in the water. Why does it surprise me that this blue water should be so warm to the touch, relaxing and caressing my hand?

I turn without taking it from the pool, and see the treeferns against the sky far above me. In a moment the trivial wish, the last trivial thought falls from me... and I find my heart sobbing out a desire both unexpected and overwhelming.

Do not ask me to tell you my wish. Never before would I have dared to wish it. Nowhere else would I have dared.