

ANCIENT ARCADY—or Arcadia—was a rustic sylvan retreat from the inanities and cruelties of the world of foolish and vindictive humans. At least so the idea goes. The original Arcady was supposed to have been an actual place where innocence, pleasures and delights as well as good honest work was done, in the absence of a blasé and sophisticated spirit. It was a world of peace and joy, games and dancing.

No Arcady exists—as such—but Geoffrey Bingham does write of an Austral Arcady. We are not sure whether it is tongue-in-cheek or cheek-in-tongue, or both! Anyway he writes, and *The Days and Dreams of Arcady* is an amusing and entertaining collection of short stories. Only the unthinking will miss their point—a message to modern man that he has perhaps missed the richest and most fulfilling of lives in his busy technological world.

In any case, it may be just good fun to read Bingham. Entertainment is what good literature is about, and to read a master of pen and humour is no great burden for any reader to bear.

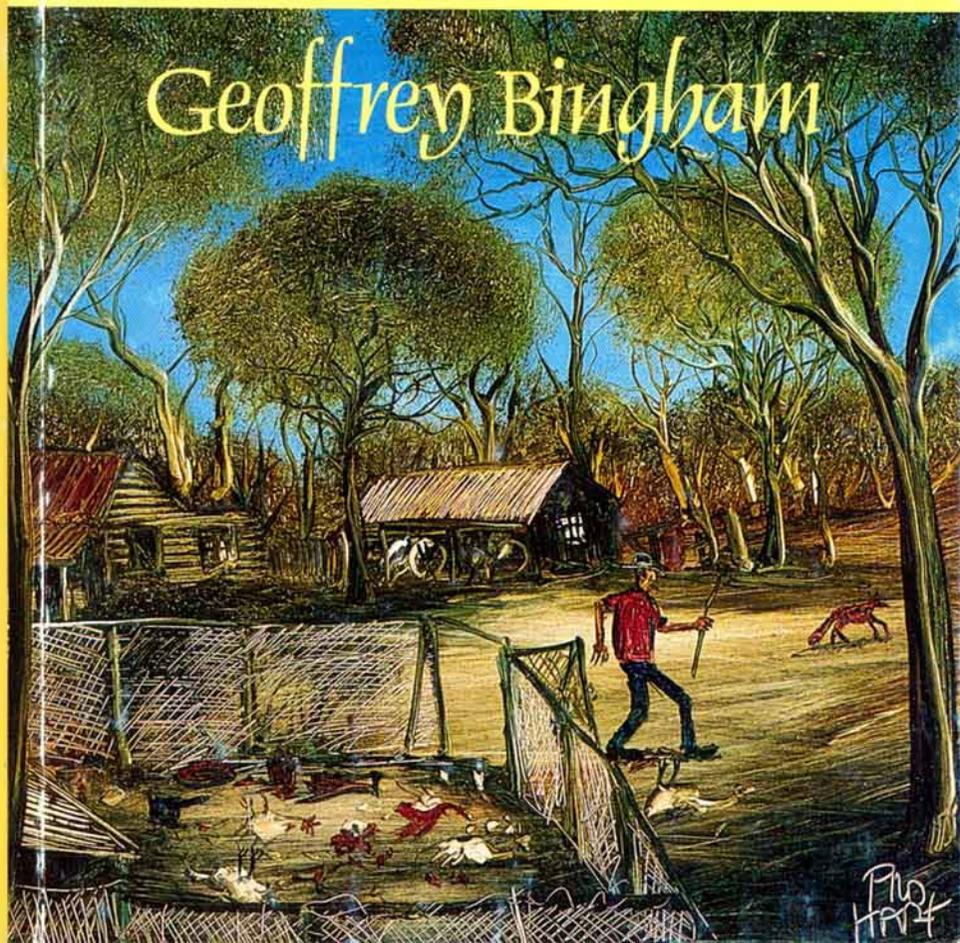
PRO HART. As rich in whimsy—if not richer—is Pro hart, famed for his bush and rural paintings. He has taken one story from the many about Arcady, 'Tally-Ho the Red Fox', and faithfully interpreted it. Pro Hart has his own Aussie Arcady—wider than Wirril Creek, but much in the same idiom.



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# The Days & Dreams of Arcady

## Geoffrey Bingham



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# The Days & Dreams of Arcady

by

Geoffrey Bingham

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*To Douglas Stewart, a friend,  
and to rich memories  
that his person and work evoke  
in those of us who knew him,*

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# PREFACE

## An Explanation of Compilation

When the Wirril Creek stories were originally written in the early 1950s, they were simple separate studies of persons and events without any attempt to rationalise them as a whole. Consequently when some thirty years later my first volume of short stories (*To Command the Cats*, 1980) was published by Angus and Robertson, some of the Wirril Creek stories were included. These had originally been published in the *Bulletin*. In addition, the *Bulletin* had published a large number of stories in the Wirril Creek setting. It was thought that very few of these yarns would stand on their own in a second volume: they did not have this quality.

I had been urged by friends to create a special volume of Wirril Creek stories, in which the stories could stand together. I was reluctant to do this, but when I read through them-after so many years-I felt the project to be valid. However, those stories could not stand without the ones included in *To Command the Cats*. Having gained agreement to include them, I have also added some new stories written for the same setting.

Writing the new stories was a curious but wonderful experience. A friend of mine who lectures in Australian history at university level believes that the period of the Second World War and immediately following is a rich one, and he encouraged me to fill out that era. It was a bit uncanny seeing a period of my life suddenly come to life. I was living back in that 'Arcady' with great zest. I say this because readers may detect differences in my mode and quality of writing. I hope, however, that the stories present themselves

as an integrated block of writing, of persons, events and characterisation. Of course, I had to invent the unusual format, and apologise for its deficiencies.

The stories published firstly in the *Bulletin* and then in *To Command the Cats* are 'Mr. Hicken's Pears', 'The Sons of Nim', 'Private Amnig, V.C.', 'Dolly', 'Grandma Sells Persimmons', 'Tallyho the Red Fox', and 'Need a Wife' (published in shorter form as 'The Inspector'). 'Concerning Grass' was originally published in *Southerly* and included in *To Command the Cats*. The new stories are 'Entrance into Arcadia', 'Mr. Hicken's Letter', 'Ralph Hicken Comes Home', 'Ralph Hicken's Revelation', 'A Matter of Asparagus', and 'Terry Hickey's Dream'. The remaining stories were published in the *Bulletin*.

GEOFFREY BINGHAM

## ESSAY ON ARCADIA

Who of these days has lived in Arcadia? Many seek to do so, including a whole race of people who espouse 'the alternate lifestyle'. What they are seeking is an ancient life-style, that of the original Arcadia. The dictionaries tell us that it was a mountainous and picturesque district of Greece in the heart of the Peloponnesus, whose people were distinguished for contentment and rural happiness. It has become a synonym for any place where rural simplicity and happiness prevail. Doubtless there are many such places throughout the world, where people are of simple manners and tastes, i e. places 'whose people are primitive in manners and given to music and dancing.'

The reason I mention the subject is that Douglas Stewart in his foreword to my collection of short stories *To Command the Cats*, speaks firstly about my war and prisoner-of-war stories, then says:

'The Wirril Creek sketches, which followed the Malayan stories, or perhaps were mingled with them, were necessarily lighter in tone They had affinities with the comedies of the earth which such admirable writers as Brian James and E O Schlunke were publishing in the *Bulletin* at that time, but had an odd, elusive charm of their own almost a touch of fairytale, as if, after Changi, Geoffrey Bingham was seeing the Australian countryside as Arcady; which I suppose it was.'

Arcady is of course the poetic form of Arcadia. When thinking about Stewart's assessment of these stories, I remembered that a medical specialist doing honorary work with the Repatriation people had said to me, 'Oh, you're the

man who has retired into an ivory castle and is writing stories.' I was more than mildly shocked at the time, especially because my skin is of exceptionally thin tissue. In fact, the criticism has been, 'This man does not deal with the toughness of life. He isn't out there where it is all happening. He isn't out in the big league.' They mean of course the blockbuster novels with rape, mayhem, nepotism, and— oh!—the grim sexual scene with its many perversions and twists, involving hatred and violence by the score.

Maybe; and I do not wish to defend myself against this charge. What has always concerned me is human beings. The tough and twisted ones have their place, but generally they impress me as people who are in a rage because life hasn't turned out the way they wanted it. They are going out to do something about it. What the Deity has failed to accomplish, especially in the realm of justice, they will bloody well do! Their humility of thought, utterance and act astounds and crushes me. I feel for them in their impassioned but pointless pursuit: some will go to any extreme of injustice to obtain justice! I myself am well aware *of* how human beings think. I have counselled many thousands throughout the years of my life and doubt whether I have not heard it all: nothing shocks me. I doubt, nevertheless, that perversion, violence and twistedness add much to art or to the full literary score. Include it we must, in order to be realistic, but this kind of (so-called) toughness is not really the true score of man. Man has richer and finer things to be chronicled.

Take, for example, the matter of sex. I take it that genuine sexual experience—in the widest context of deep human love—is one of mankind's richest experiences. The bodies of human beings are in no way evil: in fact, rightly understood they are beautiful, or, anyway, quite acceptable. There is nothing suspect in them. Trust human perversion, then, to take certain parts of the body and make them the subject of

twisted humour. Some of us have to vandalise what is patently right and functional. Anything that has nobility seems to be the butt of small and mean minds. Human guffawing—when truly heard— has a sad emptiness in it. Sex in British T.V. humour must be about at rock bottom. Bawdy minds take to it for the moment, but true entertainment is missing. The American T.V. depictions of continuously jumping into bed must take the prize for missing the whole point of the exercise—privatised intimacy.

So then I really do not feel too much guilt for seeking out the humour, the idiosyncrasies, and the delights of human experience. As to Arcady—it has never been a retreat for me. I am wise enough to know Arcady exists only as an ideal of the mind. The Latin inscription on a tomb, *Et in Arcadid ego*, can be taken in many ways, i.e. that the occupant of the tomb was once in Arcadia, or, he sees being in the tomb as Arcadian (being free and simple[?]), or, as it probably means, 'Even in Arcadia, the simplest and most delightful of situations, I, Death, am also there.' This last interpretation is realistic. There is death in all its forms wherever we find a community.

Given in my realism, I still think that Arcady is more truly human than the world of spies, counter-spies, political intrigue, international monopolists, the Mafia, and the sleazy world of tired and crazy sex. The tough characters of the Ludlum novels become boring. Insecure people worship violence, and the justice-mongers are but small and self-appointed gods. Likewise the pathetic craving for Supermen and Superwomen, for people equipped with day-dream powers, fighting—without the religious aid of an outdated Deity—is similarly pathetic. On our screens we can gain empathic power for all events, we can make mighty things happen in the realm of retributive justice, but without the screen we are still human.

Fantasy? What is that? It all depends on the particular

fantasy and the purpose for it. Fantasy may be a way of expressing the reality of life, working it through in allegory and fanciful story, but if it is used as an escape from reality, then it is poor fantasy. It is of the stuff of day-dreams where we fantasise our aims and powers and accomplish nothing but selfdeceit. If it is mental graphics which teach, which imprint the principles of life, which argue the fact of Death in Arcady, and genuine simplicity in a world of tired complexity and unreal sophistication, then I am all for it. It is more real than the bloody-mindedness of blockbuster novelists who are as unreal as their characters in films. We admit they have their place, and their powers, but why toughness should be the criterion for *all* acceptable writing I cannot explain .

What then is this essay all about? It is about human beings who exist in reality, men and women, young and old. There are nervous men like Mr. Hicken, thinking men like Mr. Tracey, idealistic men such as Denny Walters, and practical men such as Ralph Hicken. Sure, their situations are unduly enlarged, impressionistically over-painted, but some point is being made. Character is what matters more than most things, and we delight in discovering people. If they are angry, cruel, vindictive and violent, then we must discover them below all that overlay. That is not what they really are. There is more to them than their angry reaction to life, circumstances, environment and people. Whilst it is true that we meet them as cruel, mean and vicious, it does not mean that is all there is to them.

Finally, I would like to say a little about entertainment. We all like—in fact, all need—entertainment. So let us have it. We do not have to be moralistic about it. Entertainment is

surely sharing life in all its forms but without cynicism, bitterness and cruel egotism. The entertainers who want to give us something are the ones we really enjoy. They are prodigal with their riches. The subservient, the fawners, the ones who want to take us out of true life into unreality do not—in the ultimate—entertain. Entertainment does not have to be didactic, but it does have to be—at least to some degree—interpretative. It has to help us, give us relief from wrong understandings, foolish reactions, bitter negativity. When we can stop being over-serious, over-introspective, overcritical and see that there is much to cheer and encourage us, then we can relax, laugh, and leave morbid guilt and destructive self-criticism. Cynicism can die in the reality of pure fun. Everything can be enjoyed. This is entertainment at its best. And that is why I—and many others—write stories.

True Arcadians are unselfconscious. They are not battling for Arcady. They are realists. The original Arcadians never thought of Arcady as a state or place of innocence and sheer delight. The struggle, today, for an alternate life-style is too often the battle against yet another kind of life-style which—for its part—may never have been understood. A touch of humour might reinterpret our modern Arcady experiments. When utopians giggle, we are on the way to sanity. I say all this, not to apologise for an Australian Arcady, nor to justify my own excursions into one. I am calmly aware that death is part of it all, but then I have a great friendship with death. To be honest, I love the characters I discover when writings They are—as any writer knows—born of all our life experience, and are as real as if they had once existed.

Perhaps they had. Perhaps no reference to them is either deliberate or coincidental. Maybe they forced our hand—our writing hand—and all the more enjoy our writings

because they did. Also it may well be that reality is more understood in ivory castles than in the hard-nosed analysis of modern literary and other go-getters.

## **ENTRANCE INTO ARCADIA**

When the young couple moved into Brown's old place there was a mild stir in the district. Anyone new caused a bit of a stir, but since the husband was an ex-POW and his wife a trained nurse, they thought the couple could prove an acquisition to the district. The farm was situated between the two villages—Wirril Creek and Wirril Rail. Wirril Rail clustered around the railway station and the big timber mill. Wirril Creek was the village on the great north road to Brisbane, known as the Pacific Highway. The older residents related to the Creek and the railworkers and mill hands to the Rail. The question was, 'Where will the new folk relate?'

A clear answer never came. One day the new farmer would be at the Rail, looking for some goods arriving from Sydney, or he would be ordering a bit of flooded gum—architrave and strip timber—for his house; from the mill, of course. His wife seemed to be a good walker. She went to the Creek for mail, and to the Rail for parcels. The locals didn't know whether this neutrality was deliberate, or just happened by nature of the case.

The new people—Denny and Connie Walters—arrived in the middle of the night with Connie's sister and her husband. They had driven up from Sydney in a Land-Rover. That was quite a trip. The Cheshires up the road had the key to the house, and had been in bed for hours when the Walters knocked them up. They were mild people and good neighbours, so there was no problem. Key in hand, the foursome

went back to the house.

This time they drove around the back of the house. Connie had never seen it. Only Denny had seen it, and he had been kidding his wife that it was A broken-down shack. Well, it was a bit primitive after Sydney, but it was a good country house, so Connie was delighted. What impressed her were the Golden Emperor mandarins on the trees. They glowed in the headlights of the Land-Rover. She ran about in sheer delight, looking at the various trees and their fruit,

‘Oh Denny!’ she kept saying. ‘Oh Denny!’ She couldn’t get over the idea that they owned the land, the trees and the fruit.

This was their entrance into Arcadia. That night, in the limited-circle of tight, everything seemed Arcadian. Denny said, ‘This is Arcadia!’

Connie listened to him and smiled. ‘What’s- Arcadia?’ she asked.

Denny grinned mockingly and said, ‘A rustic place. A simple rural setting. A quiet country situation.’

Gordon the brother-in-law seemed a bit sceptical. ‘Nice ivory castle,’ he said, and Denny saw the gleam in his eye. He just grinned.

Everything was different, just so wonderfully different. For example, the fuel stove. Connie couldn’t believe it, although she had lived in the country as a girl. The stove excited her, but she let Denny light it. After a time they had a cup of tea, and they made toast on the hot iron of the stove. The tea was like nectar, and they were all too excited to go to sleep.

Next morning Denny was up early. Because it was winter there was frost on the grass. Denny—who had only seen the place once before—decided to trace the boundary fence. It made him feel good. He could scarcely believe so much property was theirs. He looked at the creeks and the grass.

and the trees. He crossed the railway line through the viaduct, and explored his acres on the other side. There was good grass everywhere, even if it was dry from the winter frosts. Some of the trees were new to him. He guessed he would get to know them.

The Cheshires arrived before breakfast, wanting to help, but mostly interested in their new neighbours. They had brought hot scones and some apricot jam. Denny’s idea of Arcadia was strengthened. They lit the fire and made tea. The Cheshires modestly owned up to having cut the high stack of timber. It had been sawn and split into billets for the fuel stove. Ron Cheshire grinned at Connie as she stacked the firebox full with billets. ‘You won’t take too long to go through that pile,’ he said good-naturedly.

After breakfast they unpacked the trailer with its bed and few bits of furniture. Denny had known there was no built-in furniture. Out of bits of odd timber, Gordon and he made a couple of curtain wardrobes. In the afternoon they travelled to Coolbucca to buy curtain material to hang in the new wardrobes. There was not much money left. Denny and Connie were on a limited budget. In fact, they were just about cleaned out. Denny would have to get some income from writing before he could buy the furniture they needed.

Gordon and his wife Joan left early the next day. Denny and Connie were alone for the first time since their honeymoon. They rigged a study for Denny in the dairy creamhouse. Someone sold them a house-cow, a pretty silver Jersey, and it was due to calve within the week. Others gave them milk and eggs as a welcoming present. The Cheshires made them take vegetables from their garden. ‘Until you get your own going,’ they said.

The weeks sped by. Soil was turned by a neighbour with a horse and single-furrow plough. Denny tried his hand at the

plough and was delighted to know he had not forgotten an old skill. He also harrowed, and used a single-row seeder to plant the peas. Suddenly the cow calved and they had a little heifer calf to look after. Even then they had too much milk, and a neighbour gave them two heifer calves, both of them also pure-bred Jerseys. Now they had begun to farm. Connie refused to learn how to milk, and Denny was happy to exercise yet another old skill.

In between, Denny wrote. He was having a run of popularity with his stories. It was exciting to get the mail and find acceptances, and cheques with them, and often a copy of the journal, paper or magazine in which he had been published. They were both beginning to think this was the idyllic life. They had certainly entered into Arcadia.

One of the calves died of dysentery. Connie wept her heart out. Denny was morose with remorse: somehow he should have prevented that death. The Cheshires were philosophic. 'What's a calf?' they asked, shrugging off the matter. 'Only worth a few bob, anyway.'

Then one morning there were suddenly no billets for the fire. Denny was unbelieving. 'Someone must have been pinching it,' he said.

Connie didn't think so. 'I've used it all, bit by bit,' she said.

Denny was astounded. 'We had enough there to last us for ages,' he reckoned.

He watched Connie at the stove, something he had not done before. 'You'll buckle the thing,' he said. 'You put too much in. You don't need to keep it going all day.'

It was Connie's turn for remorse. 'I can't light it three times a day,' she said. 'In fact I just can't light it. That is why I keep it going all day.'

Denny always lit it in the early morning. After he had cut some wood he suggested they have something cold for lunch, and use the spirit-burner to heat water for lunch and

the tea breaks. He went back to his study, a little disturbed that Connie had not understood about the firewood. Inwardly he giggled at the thought of a huge pile so quickly consumed in the maw of the fuel stove.

At night, they shivered when the cold air came up through the cracks between the floorboards. They put newspapers between the bed-base and the mattress. That helped a little. The frosts were most severe. Even so, they had fun romping about the house, chasing each other, being human. In the days they worked at repairing the old poultry run and its pens. They worked in the vegetable garden, sowing seeds and using the few seedlings neighbours gave to them. Meanwhile they watched the peas germinate and grow into a rich green, contrasting with the red volcanic soil. They were waiting on those peas for some income.

Denny was writing. He was writing about wartime and the time in the prison camp. Numerous incidents easily turned themselves into stories, and the stories-though much more slowly-into cheques. Then one day the terrible thing happened: the stories dried up.

Sitting in the dairy with their new kerosene lamp warming him, he found he had lost the drive to write. Nothing seemed to stimulate him. He had what they used to call accidie: unaccountable torpor and sloth. He knew Connie was pregnant, that they had little money, and that their second calf had died of dysentery. One night they forgot to put the house-cow in the night paddock. When they came out next day it was bogged in the creek, trying to get to the green rushes. Denny had to get Bonny the draught-mare, along with the slide, to drag out the half-frozen cow. Their hearts were in their mouths even when they got the beast on to a hillock in the winter sun. They waited for hours for her to dry out and gain strength. When she could stagger up, she

got the creek in her sights, and made a bee-line for the succulent green rushes.

That night Denny milked the cow and received little milk. He fed it to the calf, along with some calf meal. Accidie was heavily upon him. He remembered that some eminent doctor had said we are personally responsible for accidie. It does not come from outside us. He thought about that as he locked the cow into the night paddock. When he turned to go towards the house he suddenly saw the sunset flame up in the west. He had seen plenty of such beauty in the east, but this seemed very special glory as he watched it. Something akin to sweet pain was welling up within him.

Connie had crept up quietly to him. He suddenly felt her warm hand in his. They both gazed at the sunset, silent in its beauty. Then memory returned, memory about his writing. Connie felt his trouble.

'I've run out of things to write,' he said. 'I've gone dry.'

He thought she would sympathise, would try to help him out of his accidie, but he felt her shaking, and when he looked in the dusk he could see she was laughing. He felt offended: he was young and had great dignity. 'What makes you laugh?' he whispered. 'What's so funny?'

'Oh, Denny,' she said, 'I can't believe you. Run out of ideas and plots! How can you say such a thing?'

He felt the irritation rise. 'You just can't invent things,' he said, 'not, anyway, all the time.'

Her laughter remained. Then she was silent. 'Denny,' she said, 'you have material enough here, at Wirril Creek, to write a hundred stories.'

He needed no more than that. Suddenly his accidie vanished, melting away in an onslaught of creative freedom. They had only lived here for a matter of weeks, not even months, and he had met so many. He began to count them on his fingers. Then he was seeing them in his mind's eye. He saw young Hickey and old Mr. Hicken. There was

Mr. Tracey, although he knew him only little as yet. What about that couple at the Post Office-the Armstrongs-and what about their humour? What about old Aaron with his many children, and then the Thorgoods over at Garland's Point? As he thought, he began to get excited. He wanted to go straight to the dairy and light the Aladdin lamp, get out some fresh typing paper, and put it into his portable typewriter.

He knew he couldn't do that, of course. Connie had cooked the evening meal. He had better eat that first. Afterwards, maybe, she could get out her knitting and come across with him. He'd bring the spare chair and she could sit on that. The age-old yearning to tell stories was upon him. The death of the calves, the chooks that had invaded their garden and eaten the new seedlings, and even the drying up process from writing were all forgotten.

He did wonder for a moment how he could disguise the characters in the stories so that no one could say they lived in Wirril Rail or Wirril Creek or even in Garland's Point, Burtville and Coolbucca. Then he knew that was an absurd idea: as a writer he had a right to use anyone or anything. He felt the materials mounting up in his brain and putting adrenalin into his system.

That made him breathe hard at first, but then it relaxed him. He just wanted to laugh with relief and the great creative urge that was in him.

'You get some good ideas, Connie,' he said, and he felt the laughter rising even higher. 'We'd better eat that nice meal of yours,' he said, 'and then we'll light the Aladdin. You bring your knitting and we'll sit in the dairy.'

She thought, 'I'd rather sit up in bed with a good book, and then drowse off in the light of the lamp, whilst he works out his plots.' However, she said, 'Just as you think, darling,' and there was no irony in her voice.

As they moved towards the house, the last fire of the

sunset behind them, he knew they had made it to Arcadia, and for that he was very, yes, very glad.

## DOLLY

‘What do you reckon’s coming, Dad?’ says Jim Reggin, and Mr. Reggin’s blessed if he knows.

A clinking and a rattling, a sweet music of harness, a nodding of a great draught’s head, and the man walking beside it is also nodding his head. Clink and a rattle and then silence as the two draw up before the cyclone gate.

‘It’s old Hicken, begod,’ says Pat, who is ‘old’ himself if it comes to that.

‘Well, fancy; old Hicken, eh?’ says Jim as though it must be strange if his father sees it that way.

‘Comes to see you once in a blue moon.’ says Pat, who, anyway, never goes to visit Mr. Hicken. ‘Wonder what he’s got?’

Jim thinks that is fairly obvious, but he knows Pat is wondering what might be wrong with the horse.

They see it is a mare, a fine stamp of a beast, fat as butter, bull-necked, high-arched on the rump, and walking with sure tread.

‘Fancy old Hicken with that, eh?’ says Pat as though Mr. Hicken possessing a fine mare passes understanding.

When Mr. Hicken arrives he halts a moment, and all the clink and rattling ceases while he wipes sweat from his forehead and deliberately throws it to the ground.

‘Hot,’ says Mr. Hicken, standing still and gazing about at the heat.

‘Hot, all right,’ says Pat. ‘Hot as we’ve had this summer.’

‘Yes,’ says Mr. Hicken. He peers towards Mr. Reggin. ‘Pat, isn’t it?’

‘And Harry Hicken, eh?’ says Pat. ‘Years since I saw you.’

‘Years,’ agrees NIT Hicken excitedly. ‘Years it is. I was saying to myself this morning, “It’s years since I saw old Pat.” Lord, the times we used to see each other in those days, and now we never have a sight of one another. Yes, it’s a long time, all right.’

‘Nice sort of a mare you’ve got there,’ says Pat.

‘Like it, eh?’

‘Ye-es,’ says Pat conservatively. ‘It’s all right to look at.’

‘Ah,’ says Mr. Hicken. He snuffles through his nose, wipes it with the back of his hands, looks lovingly at the mare, fondles it about the neck.

‘Good old Dolly,’ he says.

He turns to Pat. ‘I’ve worked her,’ he says, as though it is something to have done that. ‘You mightn’t think so, but I’ve worked her.’

‘Work all right, eh?’ shouts Pat.

‘Yes,’ says Mr. Hicken mildly. ‘Works all right. Bit fast. Bit too fast.’

‘No good for you,’ says Pat, still talking loudly. ‘Fast mare no good for you.’ It has suddenly struck Mr. Reggin that perhaps Mr. Hicken wishes to sell his mare.

‘Too fast, all right,’ mumbles Mr. Hicken, but then turns severely to his neighbour. ‘Mind you,’ he maintains, ‘for a man who can work a fast horse there is nothing better. Gets through the work, she does.’ He pauses a moment, looking into the spaces of Wirril Creek, calmly into the valley, contemplatively towards the hill. ‘I says to myself, I says, that if I can find a man who can work her, then I’ve got a buyer.’

‘Ah,’ says Pat, and he gives Jim a wink.

‘And,’ says Mr. Hicken, wagging a finger at Pat Reggin, ‘I hear then that your horse foundered last week and died on you.’

‘Not it,’ says Pat in answer to the first part of the statement.

‘No horse of mine ever foundered. Twisted gut it was. Twisted in the bowel. You can’t do nothing about that.’

‘Twisted, eh?’ says Mr. Hicken, who appears only to have heard the one word.

Pat Reggin seats himself comfortably against the split fence and Jim, who knows the signs, also makes himself comfortable, drawing a paspalum stalk on which to bite, but Mr. Hicken remains standing, holding the winkers, leaning slightly against the mare. He realises, perhaps, that in a lifetime one may only have one animal which dies from a twisted bowel, and he understands that a man would wish to speak about it.

‘Saturday night,’ says Mr. Reggin, ‘I saw that horse as good as you or me. Baldy-that’s her mate, the chestnut-he comes up to the fence on his side, and she comes up on her side, and they sniff each other, and Baldy walks off and never comes near again, for surely to God they both knew there was something wrong. Human it was. Next morning Bidy’s sitting on her haunches like a dog, and sick!-you never seen the like of it. Jim here gives her a dose, but I tell Jim she’s past a drench. And,’ says Pat with lugubrious triumph, ‘she is, too. Vet says it’s no good after they sit up.’

‘No!’ says Mr. Hicken with violent emphasis. Then he shakes his head sadly for poor Bidy sitting up past all hope of drenching.

‘Then next day she dies,’ says Pat sorrowfully. ‘Best worker I ever had, although, mind you, she were a fair bitch to break in. Stubborn.’

‘Hard to break in, eh?’

‘Just when she was needed, too,’ says Pat ruminatively. ‘Threw up her legs, then drew them in. Died of cramps, really.’

‘Terrible,’ says Mr. Hicken, shaking his head and seeing

Biddy die of the cramps.

'The vet says she never had no chance,' says Pat. 'He says you can't do nothing for a twisted gut.'

'Ah, well,' says Mr. Hicken.

He looks directly at Pat. 'I thought,' he says, 'that you would be wanting a mare. I says that to myself as soon as I heard about your mare dying. "Pat'll want a horse," I said; -something that'll work'.

'H'm,' says Pat, only slightly touched by Mr. Hicken's solicitude.

'Mind you,' continues Mr. Hicken, almost tearfully, 'it isn't that I don't want to part with Dolly-I do. She's a bit fast for me. I said, "I'll tell Pat she's fast, and if he doesn't want her, then he needn't take her. If he can't manage her, then that's his business, and he's only got to tell me".' Mr. Hicken's eyes peer into distance, and he mutters away to unseen listeners. 'I'd never expect a man to take a horse he couldn't work,' he explains. 'No, that wouldn't be the thing.' Here he is interrupted by Pat Reggin, with caution in his voice.

'Well, I won't say I don't want a horse, Harry,' he admits.

'No?'

'I do,' says Pat in mild triumph, 'but then it's got to be good, and at a fair price.'

'Well I knowed that,' says Mr. Hicken eagerly. 'I says "Pat don't want a dear horse, and you can't ask a lot for a fast horse." Now if my boy were home, he'd drive Dolly easily, but he isn't, and she's only eating her head off.'

'I'll give her a go,' says Pat, a little grandly.

'Ah,' says Mr. Hicken. He waggles a cautioning finger at Pat. 'Don't tell me I didn't say she was fast.'

'I'll put her in the slide,' says Pat. 'Double harness. You put the winkers on Baldy, Jim.'

Baldy takes the newcomer quite naturally, submits to

harness, and stands quietly. 'Stand there, Dolly,' commands Mr. Hicken. He fusses around her.

'Here, you old tiger, get out of the way,' says Pat.

'She's fast,' says Mr. Hicken.

'She'll stand,' says Jim. 'Let me get at her, Mr. Hicken.'

'Fast, you'd never believe it,' says Mr. Hicken.

'Don't tie her back, Jim,' says Pat. 'Give her a bit of trace, and a long coupling.'

'She's terrible jittery when you go to hook her to the traces,' says Mr. Hicken with a worried expression.

Dolly stands calmly whilst the traces are hooked. This appears to surprise Mr. Hicken no end so that he can only say, 'Goodness gracious me. Well, what do you know about that, eh? She never moved. Well, well.' Then he adds, almost severely, 'But she's fast, though.'

Pat, who is a large man, red of flesh and face, white-haired, and commanding in the grand old manner, and more so perhaps in his farm clothes, stands astride the slide like a warrior going into action-an Irish warrior at that. Jim, as befits the son of a warrior, walks behind.

No procession ever advanced more steadily. Sedately the slide moves forward, Dolly straining at the traces, prancing slightly, but undisturbed.

'Well,' says Mr. Hicken, puzzled and gratified, 'thought she'd be faster.' He keeps up with Jim, his legs wobbling in the effort. 'Mind you,' he gasps to him, 'I had her in single harness.'

'She's going well,' says Jim.

'Well,' agrees Mr. Hicken admiringly.

'Wee-woa,' says Pat. The slide draws to a halt. Dolly, with Baldy, stands quietly.

'Bloody fine mare,' says Pat, forgetting his buyer's manners in his affection for a good mare.

‘Not too bad,’ says Mr. Hicken eagerly. ‘I told myself that you’d like it. “Pat can look after the fast ones,” I said.’

‘She might be fast,’ says Pat doubtfully. ‘I’ll only give her the slide today, and perhaps this afternoon the bull-harrows. She can take the plough tomorrow.’

‘You won’t know till tomorrow, eh?’ says Mr. Hicken with disappointment.

‘I’d like to have her for a week,’ says Pat conditionally.

‘Oh, yes. Oh, yes,’ says Mr. Hicken. He ruminates. ‘A week, eh?’ He looks at his neighbour. ‘Now to tell the truth, Pat, I was thinking about a couple of nice young heifers Jim Andrews has over there. I was thinking if you liked the mare, then I could get them young heifers. If my boy was home, he’d say, “Keep the mare,” but what good is it to me, fast and all that?’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ says Pat. ‘I’ve got a nice line of young Jersey stuff here. Springers too.’

‘Ah,’ says Mr. Hicken, wagging a finger at his neighbour. ‘Jerseys, Pat. Jerseys. It’s the reds I’m after.’

‘Blasted Ayrshires,’ says Mr. Reggin.

Mr. Hicken thinks, too, of the money in his hand, and it is a great enjoyment for him to feel the money, or to stare at a cheque. The rarity of occasions when he is able to fondle money has greatly increased his liking for the experience.

‘Well, if you want to try her for week, Pat,’ he says reluctantly.

‘That mare’s all right,’ says Pat suddenly.

‘You haven’t tried her,’ says Mr. Hicken shrilly. ‘She might jib. She mightn’t work. And,’ he says, in a last desperate attempt to convince, ‘she’s fast.’

‘Fast me ruddy old Aunt Maria,’ says Pat. ‘She’s not fast, Harry. Now what’s she Worth to you?’

‘Fast and all?’ insists Mr. Hicken. ‘I’d have to take something off for that. I could never charge twenty quid for a fast mare.’

‘Nor for a slow one, neither,’ says Pat. ‘I’ll give you fifteen, no more.’

‘Will you now?’ says Mr. Hicken eagerly. ‘Well, I never. I never thought Dolly’d fetch fifteen quid. She’s terrible fast.’

‘Get my cheque-book, Jim,’ says Mr. Reggin. ‘I’ll write a cheque now for Harry.’

Weakened, Mr. Hicken makes a last attempt. ‘Now perhaps you’d better wait a day or two, eh, Pat?’ he suggests.

Mr. Reggin writes out the cheque, crosses it, and hands it to Mr. Hicken. Mr. Hicken is not at all loth to take it, but slight worry shows on his face.

Pat Reggin suddenly roars. ‘Now then, Harry, don’t you tell me she’s fast,’ he says with heartiness. ‘That mare’s allright.’

To prove it he takes the reins, flicks them ever so gently, and ‘ch-cks’ to the pair, so that they move forward, over the grass. Pat turns and shouts that he’ll return the harness in a few days.

‘Ali, yes,’ says Mr. Hicken mildly, but more to himself than Pat, so absorbed he is in his cheque. He gazes absently at it, recollects where he is, stares after the pair, and by this time Dolly has gathered herself into a slight trot. A little, worried, Mr. Hicken gazes at her, clucks, shakes his head, clucks again, appears set on telling Pat about the mare being a bit fast perhaps, but finally shakes his head again and walks down the drive to the cyclone gate, fondling the cheque.

## THE LORD OF THE ART

There is, fortunately, no such thing as an unlikely-looking fisherman. Anyone, praise God, can be a fisherman, be he bank-manager or garbage-collector, and something between these two extremes was Charly Twist, long and strong and red and black; black hair tousled and matted over low forehead and hot red face, gleaming dark eyes and a stubble like a black scrubbing-brush. Below that, the long powerful body and big thick hands that knew how to handle a rod cunningly and catch fish where no one else could catch them.

Not that Mr. Twist fished all the time. Like all honourable men-and this, no doubt, embraces all fishermen-Mr. Twist had his worldly occupation as driver of the cream-lorry; an occupation which, however, merely served to fill in time between fishing and to keep body and soul together, and the combined bodies and souls of Mrs Twist and a large family. There were many twists and turns in that family, all boys and hearty eaters.

Mr. Twist owed his red face in part to his visits to the Coolbucca Royal-a third and habitual part of his life. There he loved to tell his adventures with rod and line, and, since fishing relives in the telling, it was a delightful experience to go into the details of tackle and tussle; warmth flowing from alcohol and reinforced by admiration would make Mr. Twist glory in his high place in the peirage of

fishermen, men of goodwill.

Men of goodwill. Mr. Twist knew no others, for he was a Prince of Fishermen. Men would stand him drinks just to hear his tales, the hopeful among them, like Mr. Tracey, hanging on his words for some hint, some mite of information which would aid them in the hunt for the evasive bass. There was no man from Burtville to Coolbucca, from Samarkand to Peru, who knew so much as the redoubtable Mr.. Twist. Grown men regarded him with something of that youthful admiration they had once reserved for Test cricketers and engine-drivers, and longed to rival him. So do men long for fame, and aspire to be as the ugly Mr. Twist.

Mr. Twist then was a fisherman, and a great fisherman. And he fished alone. Not for him the matey endeavour, but solitude and the individual struggle, the sharp tussle, after which the great man would pick up his prizes and walk home.

It was this walking home which Mr.. Twist loved, although, to be sure, his serenity did not show on his crimson face. It might be early morning when you saw Mr.. Twist or in the late evening, in which case he would be carrying a hurricane lamp, a plump haul in the other hand. And never, never, a small fish.

There were strange features about Mr.. Twist's fishing. For one thing, he had never been known to give one away. Those rich fruits of shallows and sun-speckled pools, those gleaming shapes fit to be eaten by gods, each and every one found its way to the Twist pot or the Twist pan and into the various Twist bellies. And it was impossible to get an invitation to go fishing with him. True, now and again, he would consent to company, but always reluctantly. Never a fish of any consequence would be caught, however. No

perch; often enough not even a nibble. And Mr.. Twist would sit grimly triumphant.

‘Perch is perch,’ he would say. ‘And they know who’s who and what’s what.’ A statement difficult to refute or, indeed, make anything of.

And yet this did nothing to detract from Charly Twist’s reputation. In fact, it added to it; his habit of solitude justified. The lone and successful fisherman. Not for him the habited places, the noisy party, the jokes and the phutting boat on the river, the noise and swirl dear to the heart of the surf fisherman, or the lonely black of the rocks. For Charly the long dark pool, the lush honey-banks, the willows drooping and tempting the wary fish. And he caught them, a fact that fiercely troubled Mr. Tracey.

Mr. Tracey was Charly Twist’s next-door neighbour, an enthusiastic but unsuccessful fisherman. And as Mr. Tracey grew more unsuccessful, and more insanely enthusiastic, the prowess of his neighbour seemed to haunt him. If he sat by a pool Charly Twist seemed to brood over it; he grimaced from a willow, he was scornful and contemptuous, and, as the hours passed with no ripple on the surface, and no timid nudging at the bait, Mr. Tracey imagined he could hear Twist’s hoarse laughter.

Sometimes Mr. Twist taunted. He rose as a huge red-and-black apparition and pointed a thick malignant finger at the incapable Mr. Tracey. He devoured hope with a scoffing display of his own fine catch, and Mr. Tracey trembled with anger, desire and delight.

‘You’ve got to have the knack, Tracey,’ Charly would say as he drove Mr. Tracey home in the cream-lorry after the Friday shopping in at Coolbuca. ‘It’s born in you, or it ain’t, kind of, see?’ Mr. Tracey saw, but the soul of him writhed.

As Mr. Tracey had reason to reflect in after years, Provi

dence is kind, and all is very well with the best of possible worlds, for not even Mr. Tracey dreamed that such good fortune was to play into his hand the night he went fishing in Charly Twist’s pool.

it is a strange thing, no doubt, but a man will consider such and such a pool his own, his very own, as though thus ordained before the beginning of the world, this being given to him by God to be a comfort and solace in the many sad hours which befall all men, a refuge from trial and the stress of trouble.

Mr. Tracey had his pools to be sure, pools which were his by atmosphere alone, and he kept to them, and grew to love them in spite of their small returns, yet after a time he longed after and coveted his neighbours’ pools, neighbour Twist’s into the bargain, and yet, it seems, he was forgiven his transgression of a wise commandment.

Thus, walking in his rubber waders, silently, as was his custom, and softly, out of deference to a very shy family of fish, he came suddenly upon his neighbour. He might have startled Charly Twist, had he not gone so quietly in all his ways.

Charly Twist was not quiet. Mr. Tracey could hear a strange swishing, a long sighing noise, and then a muttered word or two from the truck-driver. Strange, thought Mr. Tracey. Noise where there are perch; and then it seemed to him that the words grew louder, that they contained the venom of scorn, and humiliating scorn at that.

‘Got you, you little beauty!’ said Mr. Twist. ‘Youse the one that got away last time,’ he told something. ‘Well, not this time,’ he shouted triumphantly, and with that a huge fish curved through the air, high above the bank, on to the grass of the couch flat, falling at the feet of the amazed Mr. Tracey.

It was a fish beyond the dimensions of his own brooding dreams, and for a moment he had a wild idea of grabbing it and fleeing, evading Charly Twist and running right into civilisation with it, holding it high and crying, 'I caught it! I caught it?'

But the dream faded, the roseate flame of it died to cold dark ashes, and Mr. Tracey trembled with a strange weakness that comes to longing fishermen when they see a great fish, as it were, in their dreams.

Then another fish. Another. Another. And another. 'Oh, no,' said Mr. Tracey in a terrible voice. 'This is not true.' But it was true, and in the dark belly of the night did Charly Twist mutter and rumble, and from the same dark belly issued these flashing, flapping monsters of fish, making the grass writhe with unbelievable truth.

Unbelievable truth. Untrue truth. Perverted truth. Twisted truth. For the torch flashed, and the light glowed, and there stood Charly Twist, revealed in all his terribleness, all his pitifulness, all his tarnished honour, his discarded claim to be a man amongst men, a Prince of Fishermen.

'A net, by Heavens!' roared Mr. Tracey and his voice was greater than the waterfalls. It thundered above the horrified Mr. Twist. It gouged the splendid reputation out of him, and left him a red-and-black thief, standing in the darkness, a prisoner at the bar of Mr. Tracey's wrath, a wretch under judgement of an inexorable Judge. Yet not only Mr. Tracey the Judge, but all mankind, and especially the terrible fellowship of fishermen.

'Tracey,' said Charly Twist in a queer voice.

'So that's it,' said Mr. Tracey brokenly. He knew it was at these times a man commits murder to hide his shame, yet here was shame in his own voice for having discovered a fellow being at his dastardly act, but-and he noticed it

slight triumph, too. His eyes gleamed, his chest expanded, his blood pounded lightly. One truth was revealed, then, amongst all this calumny. Mr. Tracey was as good as, if not a better fisherman than, Twist.

'I thought it'd happen one day,' said Charly Twist, yet his voice registered neither hatred nor relief. It was just a tone in the night.

'I can't understand it,' muttered Mr. Tracey, bewildered.

'You won't tell,' whispered Charly Twist.

'Tell!' whispered Mr. Tracey back to him.

'I'll give you half,' said Mr. Twist, slight eagerness in his voice, but no hope.

'Never,' said Mr. Tracey firmly. A wild idea struck him. 'You're the one who's spoilt our fishing,' he almost shouted. 'My fishing, too. You with your netting. You've made them shy.'

'It does make them shy,' admitted Mr. Twist reluctantly. He remained penitent, in the dark.

'Then it's the last time you shall net,' said Mr. Tracey triumphantly. 'There's a fifty-pound fine, you know.'

Mr. Twist knew. He had known, year in, year out. It had dwelt in his mind, that knowledge, and in those times when he boasted his prowess at the Royal.

'Tell you what,' he said huskily. 'If I leave the pools alone, will you be quiet about it?'

'Be quiet?' said Mr. Tracey, staring. It had not occurred to him to expose the fellow. He shrank back from unclothing a man in the sight of his fellow creatures. 'Well. . .' he said cunningly.

'That's right,' urged Charly Twist eagerly, wiping his sweating brow.

Hope, now, surged in the breast of Mr. Tracey. These Pools, these quiet pools as they would be, the cream of them not robbed in dastardly manner as hitherto-all his.

'Well.' he repeated in a conditional voice.

'You're a good bloke, Tracey,' said Charly Twist, happily. 'See here, mate. I couldn't wait hours. Not on your life. Fish helps me to keep that there family of mine, see? I net 'em. It's quick, and it's good, cheap food.'

'Good, cheap food?' repeated Mr. Tracey wonderingly, and horrified for Mr. Twist's soul.

'Yes,' said Mr. Twist, 'and what's more, mate, if you shut up I'll never catch a fish again.' He spat fully at the water.

Mr. Tracey pondered. The entire ethical map was there portrayed in his mind. Here was the road of a man's sin, there the path of a man's trial. Here a triumphant fisherman, the like of whom had not been heard before, now likely to be thrust into perpetual scorn, cast into the darkness of contempt. There the path he, Mr. Tracey, would take, one virtually bestrewn with fish, delightful hours, fruitful engagements.

'Very well, Twist,' he said. 'We'll let it rest at that. Although, mind you,' and here he shook a warning finger at the wretch before him, 'never again, see?'

'Never again,' agreed Mr. Twist hoarsely.

'Then take your fish,' said Mr. Tracey magnificently, 'and go.' He felt the power of the moment, the tremendous height on which he stood looking down at the poor wretch. Yet in his heart there was only kindness, pity, sorrow for a legend overthrown, and a faint desire for one or two of the expiring fish.

'You wouldn't like one?' asked Charly Twist.

'I wouldn't like one,' said Mr. Tracey unwaveringly.

So it was Mr. Twist gathered up his last haul, and was swallowed up by the darkness of the night. So it was Mr. Tracey stood and pondered the marvellous ways of man and God, and although his stern code never once altered, or deflected in favour of the fishing outcast, yet did pity flood

him, and then, as he thought upon the new world which now opened before him, delight which came sweeping gloriously over him, a foretaste of sweet dreams, which to the fisherman are perhaps never dreams but only reality lying in the near world of the future.

## THE SWEETNESS OF HONEY

Ned always whistles Friday mornings, more so Fridays than any other morning. Watch him today, pumping water from the well because the tanks are dry. It will be dry, too, on the road today, with the big bus, and the dust will fly up about it, from the Garland's Point stop, through Wirril Creek, and into Coolbucca.

But Ned does not care. He whistles, more for the thought of dust than you might imagine, and all through his slap-up wash he whistles until his ears and nose begin to shine faintly in the early dawn, until the soap dribbles through into his mouth and he must cease whistling, open it and blow, puffing it away, and the wash is finished, and Ned is into his good clothes.

Plum sports coat, blue coat-shirt and grey slacks, and in them, or anything for that matter, Ned is a great fellow.

When he swings his bus into Garland's Point, most of the shopping crowd are waiting.

'Hullo, Ned!' Dan Paynter says. Dan is thinking of big schooners in at Coolbucca. Ned rarely answers them. He is busy enough putting on Mrs. Wright's stroller for the baby.

In at Coolbucca you will see Mrs Wright shopping, and occasionally she will stop to talk with a friend, and after time she will bend, and touch the mite, whilst the other woman will observe, knowingly, 'Ah, it's always a trying day in town for them, dear,' and young Mrs Wright will say

significantly, 'The Clinic, you know. That's why I always come-the Clinic'; and the other one will nod, and say, as knowingly, 'Ah yes, dearie, the Clinic.'

There isn't, however, only Mrs Wright's stroller. There is a honey tin to be filled at Mat's Honey Farm, on the way-, only sixpence a pound, and straight from the comb; Mat, with his white hives standing on the hill for all to see.

Ned ties the tin so that it will not bounce on the way. Then he puts the suitcases-ports they call them, importantly-on top of the roof, well tied and clamped to the slim iron railing about it. There are all sorts of ports, saggy ones and baggy ones, all worn, and none new, but a day would be needed to spend describing them. It was just that you always knew Mrs So-and-So by her port, for after a time they took on some of the character and characteristics of their owners. Ned knew them well enough for the times he had put them up there, and taken them down again, for that matter, and yet he thought little about them.

He doesn't say 'All in' jovially, as you might expect, for there are notes to be made in his book, and petrol to be got from the bowser, the ancient bowser that can trick you. Old Garland serves Ned well enough if he watches him. Old Garland, with his white hair and giggles, seems innocent enough if you were to go by his pink face, but others have been caught, going only three miles on a hypothetical five gallons, and that is why Ned watches old Garland, and why no one talks to old Garland, although they talk enough amongst themselves.

'Cattle is still getting bogged,' one says, and another says, 'Lost our silver Jersey that way this week,' and they really aren't very sad about these matters. They seem to relish the farm gossip, even that which adversity produces. The old women are quiet enough, with their patient looks on their

faces, looks that sit back amongst the old wrinkles, quietly, having been put there with years of resignation and calm acceptance of change and decay, and new life.

But Ned is starting up the engine, and the young ones pile in, hoping all the seats aren't taken, and Ned looks at the seat behind him, but by tacit agreement it is not filled, and that makes Ned glad. He pushes the starter, spurts a goodly cloud of white smoke from the exhaust, huffs it into gear and movement, and everyone is off, into Coolbucca for the day, with the best driver on the road, bar none. Everyone knows Ned's driving, how he clears corners easily, and is never too close to another vehicle, and is never drunk what's more, which is what cannot be said for some drivers.

Ned likes to hear the gears change as he goes up the hill towards Wirril Creek. He likes the bloodwoods beside the road, them with their rearing, their clear trunks, and then the roof, as you might call it, over the road, and cooling it. He never wants to come to the end of this portion of it, you might think, by the quiet look on his face, but he does. Oh yes, even when he stops for a single staring passenger whose baggy port must go with the others, he hurries to settle it into place, jumps to his seat in the trembling bus, and off he goes with a remarkable changing of gears.

Now he slows the bus, enough almost for the engine to die, and the conversation to be heard.

'Butter coupons! We never used them until this year. What with the dry weather, and the cows going off, we just *had* to use them.'

'Well, it's the worst we've seen, any winter or summer, and it's going to get worse, my Bill says.'

Ned doesn't hear this. He is looking at the small shack

beside the road, at the oranges which are shiny-balled lamps on a green tree, the passions which spread and tumble over the old railed fence, and hide their purple knobs. Today he can just catch the smell of the wistaria over the ridiculously small verandah, but he brushes his slight observations aside, and looks for better things, and the conversation, meanwhile, is partly suspended, dying down to a hazy hum, a drowsy almost-nothingness.

Most eyes are fixed, if deliberately casual, upon the small shack cottage, and well they might be, for just when Ned is afeared she might never come, there is a bursting open of that dry brown door, and an emergence of bustling beauty. She is there, richly rosy in the face, a scarlet bandana flaunting on her black hair, and her equally black eyes peering, then gleaming from beneath both. Her lips rival the oranges, her green jumper the leaves of the passion, and her white skirt only outlines her buxom full lines.

She waves a hand to Ned, to let him know she is coming, and then she turns inside for a moment, to kiss Ma, perhaps, and with a skip and a run she is at the gate.

She has a port, but only a small one, just to fit in with that wee cottage. Ned takes it from her, not knowing whether to stare down at it, or up at the beauty, so he does a bit of both.

'Well, Ned,' she says, loud enough for the bus to hear, so that it might not be accounted private conversation. 'How's the old thing running today?'

Ned answers, 'Well enough, Maisie,' and they both make towards the bus, but it is easy to see Ned is fairly agitated.

Nevertheless he has that bag up there in a second, and is back into the bus. 'Whooo-r-r-r!' goes the engine, and it is alive and trembling until the whole bus trembles, quivers, roars louder, and charges along the road with a merry changing of gears and a hubbub of talking, everyone greeting Maisie, and a few of the boys chiacking gently, but

Maisie is bright and impartial to all, with a special smile for Mrs Wright and the baby, and after that she sits back in the seat behind Ned.

Ned is happy now. He cares not for the white whirl of dust, swirling along the side of his old-woman bus, rippling at her skirts. He does not see one bloodwood or one ironbark, or any tree or bush, for that matter. He drives carefully, and he is thinking, but not about ports and the shopping that will be done at Coolbucca. At Wirril Creek he stops automatically and some get out to stretch their legs, whilst the new travellers laze up from the post office where they have been waiting this half-hour.

'Hullo, Ned!' they all cry heartily, and Ned nods to them collectively, takes their bags individually, and enlarges the pile on the top. Children run up, clutching envelopes in their hands.

'Dad says he wants a new spring for the Chev., and to tell the man at the garage it's the same side and wheel as last time, 'cause he knows Dad's car.' This is all in one breath, a monotone, and Ned takes this envelope and that order, all ports and passengers, and he roars the bus into life, waiting only a moment for all to settle, and with a half-look at Maisie has that great vehicle lumbering up the street.

They pass the post office, and it is lazily askew, its notice 'POST OFFICE' awry as the rest of it. A face peers from the window, a face whose eyes, it is alleged, has X-rayed sealed letters these fifteen years, and little it is it does not know, that face, and when Ned passes, and his bus, it is keen and quick enough to see the look that Ned has just flashed at Maisie, and its left eye screws a little so that it is a wink-slow, lazy and askew as the building.

Ned collects a kerosene drum to be filled with linseed oil, and ten sacks to be taken to Anthony and Sons, grocers, of Coolbucca, and he has just about all orders for the trip, so that they are off finally, first on to the bitumen, and then

back on to the dust again.

The clouds roll merrily from the kind old bus. They rush away into the trees at the side of the road, and whiten them, and the bus actually purrs, as though it were really younger than its many years, and quite happy to be taking everyone to Coolbucca for their weekly shopping.

Ned, over the wheel, is king of his kingdom, and surely enough everyone regards him as such. They might have their companionship with High-ups, and a good milk cheque at the end of every month, and even have babies, like Mrs Wright, but here Ned is what you might call the cynosure of all eyes. Even if their regarding of him is casual, it is nonetheless respectful.

'Ned's got her running, now,' they say, or 'Ned handles the old girl well,' and strangely enough it is the young men who always call it the 'old girl,' which is what she really is, of course, an old girl, today with thirty children on her lap, although the notice says distinctly 'LICENSED TO CARRY 24 PASSENGERS.'

There is another notice, too: 'FARE MUST BE PAID ON ALIGHTING. HAVE YOUR MONEY READY.' These two notices confirm, in some way, Ned in his kingdom, but his joy, today, is not because of kingship, or drivership, but because of Maisie who is behind him. He could burst into song, were he not so shy. He remembers in a moment John Charles Thomas, and could, himself, set the whole bus wondering with a rich wild voice singing,

'Rolling free as the breeze,  
What's to stop me and why?  
I can live as I please.  
0-pen Ro-ad. 0-pen Sk-y!'

Sure enough, the road before him is open, the fields too, sweeping, dry and brown, down to Coolbucca itself. The

sky is open, curved above him, light steel for a hot day. Then what is to stop him? How Maisie would like his voice, but because he cannot really sing like John Charles Thomas, and because he cannot sing at all, he grips his wheel, turns the corners swiftly and carefully, revving to complete the swinging curve, and all is well.

That is, until the nonchalant fellow hails him with a lift of an index finger. There is only one word, and that 'nonchalant', to describe this young fellow and his raised finger, and Ned, for all his independence, has to obey a finger lifted, and he pulls the bus to a stop, whilst the young man walks across.

'My car,' he says, 'has broken down. How far is it to the next town?'

'Three to Wirril Creek, back there,' says Ned. 'And ten to Coolbucca ahead.'

'The young man places a pursing finger to his lips. His face suddenly brightens. 'Coolbucca, of course,' he half cries. 'I know a Clyde Reynolds there.'

The bus is silent, hushed. All know Clyde Reynolds, who is a sort of Mayor of Coolbucca Shire.

'Hop in,' says Ned, briefly.

The young man hops in. Ned's plum-coloured sports coat, his blue shirt, his grey slacks pale away in their beauty before the splendid blue of the young man's double-breaster. Ned has never had a cool white collar, and a quiet tie, such as these, nor shoes that seem not to catch the dust, always remaining black and polished, smooth and unworn. Maisie sees all this as the young man seats himself beside her, and Ned almost missed the gear, but not quite. He is a little unpoised, and even grits his teeth slightly, although not enough to be detected.

Ned thinks a lot as the bus shoots along. He thinks of

Coolbucca being ten miles off, and how two can become acquainted in that time, or less. He looks in the mirror above him, and sees Maisie conversing with the young man, although, to be sure, she seemed a bit cold at first. Ned is undecided as to whether or not that was a tactical move on her part. He is fairly depressed as the miles pass, and plunges, literally plunges a foot on to the accelerator, and he does not notice the speed, or the fact that his engine is heating.

'The old water's boiling, Ned,' shouts a knowledgeable youth, from the back.

Ned sees that and stops the bus. He curses a little, which is unusual for Ned. The knowledgeable youth unseals the radiator cap whilst he pours in the water from a square petrol-can. Then they are off again, and Maisie has not looked at him in all that time.

At Coolbucca he pulls up in the main street. He sits in the bus, collecting fares until all are out. His pile of silver dwindles as he is handed pound notes, and finally he is left clutching a handful of these. Behind him is the murmur of the two talking. The young man stands up and says, 'What's the damage, driver?'

Ned says, 'Two shillings the single, three if you're going back this afternoon.'

'I'll pay you two now,' says the young man. He gets out of the bus. 'Damned decent of you,' he says.

Maisie, as usual, goes to pay, and on a perverse impulse Ned almost accepts, but then he waves it aside, and with a smile that is nearly sad, he says, 'Don't be silly, Maisie.'

She gives him a smile which seems to make things fairly worthwhile, and then she is off, down the street, the young man following.

There is all day left to Ned. He may do as he wishes with it when he has collected the orders, told the garage-man

about the spring for the Chev., and the gasket for the head of Johnson's car. There is the produce store, Anthony and Sons, and the sacks. Ned does them all, methodically, not thinking about Maisie much, except once when he sees her in the Red and Green Milk Bar, where the young man is giving her a milk-shake.

Later he sees the young man with Clyde Reynolds. Because Clyde is his cousin he nods, and Clyde nods back

'Hullo, Ned,' he says. The young man stares at Ned, glances enquiringly at Clyde, and the two walk on.

Coolbucca quivers in the heat. The black road fairly dances, and none stays on the sidewalks, not even Mrs Wright and the babe, although, to be sure, it is-clinic time. The young girls are in the milk-bars and cafés, and the young men are in the pubs, and Coolbucca drowns, and will not awake until the afternoon. Ned hunches against a building; drowns until the perspiration begins to bead on his face. Then he stands up and goes into a milk-bar. He sees Maisie, there, with the young man, and he goes out, and although Maisie calls to him he does not hear

Afternoon comes, and all orders are *completed!* He has two bags of chaff for Reg Brown. at Garland's Point, and a bag of bran for the new people up at Allen's old place, and then the ports begin, to find *his* hand, again,, and he pushes their plumpness, one against the other, shoves, squashes and fits them all until they are snug within the rails.- Up with Mrs Wright's stroller-she has the infant in her arms-and all is finished. Nearly all are there. One toot of the horn will disgorge the pub of bus passengers, but one toot, and even a thousand, will not find Maisie.

It is then Ned allows the flood of suppressed thought to burst over him. He is a deep pessimist in a moment. He is for gloom, all at once. The young man who possibly might

have returned to his car will not return, and in not returning will retain Maisie with him. Ned prepares to press the starter, but he does not. He lingers. His fingers toy with the starter, move along to the choke, rub its shiny blackness, move back again, but never push that starter.

Maisie appears before the starter is pressed. She still wears her red bandana, her green sweater with its revealing powers, her white skirt, and the heat of the day has not wilted this bright flower. She is positively brilliant, too blooming, almost, as she swings along to the bus, the young man carrying her small case. They fill up the seat. The bus lurches forward, savagely, you might say, for a vehicle once likened to a kind old lady.

Ned observes no charm in the dry road. He looks to neither side for trees. He draws folds of gloom about him, He tries not to think. Maisie behind him is bright in conversation. Ned thinks a little, knows that in this instance the ten miles will take her from him. He does not want to cover that ten miles quickly, but his own fierceness is doing things to the accelerator.

He almost forgets to stop at Mat's Honey Farm, and he has never yet done that. He finds the seven-pound tin, and waits for Mat to fill it. Mat fills the tin, gazing lovingly at the golden liquid. He wipes off the last few hanging drops with a gnarled finger. This he puts to his mouth, licks first and then sucks.

'Never yet got used to the sweetness of honey,' he says, and Ned, in another way, is like that, but he does not talk. He takes the seven-pound tin and puts it beside the driver's seat. Old Mat stares after the bus, still sucking his finger.

Then Ned sees the car. It is at the side of the road, gleaming,

long lines of black and chromium, a playboy's dream, just as its owner is a flapper's dream. Ned stops the bus. He sits forward, staring, and the young man gets out. He does not pay Ned, but waits for Maisie to get out. She stares back at him, and he smiles invitingly, but Maisie actually tosses her head. There is no getting out for Maisie.

Ned is unbelieving, somewhat, but happy. He forgets his fare and with a surge of sheer joy he belts the accelerator, and the bus jumps and the dust spurts, even up into the astonished young man's face, although that was not deliberate on Ned's part. He shoots the kind old girl along until she is swaying and trundling merrily, and everyone is off to Garland's Point via Wirril Creek.

At Wirril Creek a happy crowd alights. Ted Somerville, who has gin-slings with beer, is singing, as he does droving at night, his Western songs. His voice is rich as he rolls past the post office. A face peers, watching Ned as he hands down ports and a bag of bran. Everyone is chatting happily enough. The older women are weary, but contented. The children are waiting for their parcels, and Ned hands them out, plus one spring for the same side of the Chev., and a gasket for Mr. Johnson. Ned is all the time wondering why Maisie has not asked him to stop at the little cottage. They pass it and Maisie says nothing. Ned can scarcely believe this, but off they go, chaff, passengers and all, to Garland's Point.

Ned says, over his shoulder, 'Someone to see, eh, Maisie?' but she shakes her head.

At Garland's Point he drops the chaff, the remainder of the ports and the passengers, but Maisie stays. Ned cannot believe that. He sits in the driver's seat, staring at the hills, and the cattle grazing in the late afternoon. Then he says, 'I think I'll take the old bus along, then.'

'Mind if I come?' asks Maisie.

Now Ned cannot believe that. He sits still for a moment.

'Where do you want me to drive to?' he asks, and then says cruelly, 'Back to that young man and his car, eh?'

If he expects Maisie to say 'Yes' or even to get wild, he is mistaken. She just tosses her head a little and says, 'Him!' and Ned is glad, but he is still not certain, as he sits there. All Garland's Point has ceased chattering; in fact, there is no one to be seen. There is a faint singing, somewhere, in the distance. Silence, almost, settles down over the old crouched bus. Ned is leaning on the wheel.

'Ned,' says Maisie softly. Her voice is gentle for a flaming flower, well-poised in its green and flannel white. 'Ned,' she says, almost pleadingly, 'what about taking the old bus to Grassy Beach?'

'Grassy Beach?' says Ned. He can see Grassy Beach, and especially in this false pale twilight. It would be quiet, the long shore stretching, then curving to the north, and only a few swallows over its entire length.

'That'd be real nice, Maisie,' he says, and he still cannot believe it. For a moment he remembers the young man, but now he seems small and insignificant. He can almost feel sorry for that young man. 'Yes,' he says as he stirs in the seat, 'that'd be wonderful.'

## MR. HICKEN'S PEARS

Mr. Hicken is a man inclined to talk to himself quite a lot. The Wirril Creek people often saw him talking, either to himself or the flowers in his front garden.

Perhaps he talked to himself because there was little he could see, so that he liked to hear sounds—the sound of his own voice, the singing hum of the bees in the flowers, and the rustle of the pear tree, right up against his own window, its leaves upon the hard glass. And especially in the winter he liked to hear its thousand brown leaves bouncing and scraping across the house paddock.

If there was a thing he loved more than hearing sounds, it was smelling smells. Take the pear tree, for example. Mr. Hicken liked the smell of pears, and the riper the better. Also his plums, peaches and nectarines. In all Wirril Creek there were not peaches, plums and nectarines like Mr. Hicken's.

Often the locals would see him gazing down at this great heap of fallen fruit, shaking his head—sadly or happily they would not know, but shaking his head all the same—and talking, perhaps to the clumped, droning masses of bees taking sweetness from the old man's fruit. The locals hated to see all that fruit going to waste, rotting, as it were, on the ground.

'Mr. Hicken,' they would say, 'you have a lot of fruit there.'

Mr. Hicken would nod, peer towards where the voice was, and say, 'A lot of fruit, all right.'

'Fly, eh?' they would say. 'Fly bad this year?'

'Flies? Yes, they're bad enough,' Mr. Hicken would say. 'Sticky this year.'

'Fruit-fly,' they would explain 'Fly got into the fruit, eh?'

'Go on,' Mr. Hicken would say, slightly interested. Mr. Hicken would never have been able to see even one fly

'Pity,' they would say, 'pity about the fly.'

Mr. Hicken never caught on. He never told them to come in and take what they wished to take. Instead he let the heaped fruit rot, taking his delight in the visiting bees, for he loved their droning sound. Rarely he ate a single peach or nectarine, so that his orchard was a fruit-fly's paradise

The pears, above all, were the envy of all Wirril Creek. Given half a chance, all the Wirril Creek housewives would have been into his orchard quickly as a shot out of a gun. Their sugar-sacks loaded, and out again. There were other pear trees in Wirril Creek, but they suffered badly from the depredations of the flying-foxes. Shrieking and quarrelling all night, those great flapping creatures would ruin the crop before it ripened—that is, excepting Mr. Hicken's fruit.

Why the flying-foxes should not choose to attack the succulent pears of Mr. Hicken had always been a problem unsolved to the folk of Wirril Creek. Pears are pears, wherever they are, and flying-foxes are not given to whims and fancies, especially where pears are large and golden. There was some tale concerning Mr. Hicken, who, in the days before his son Ralph went away to enlist, would stand every night on his back doorstep and swear at the flying animals. Much as this said for Mr. Hicken's ability to swear, the tale is probably overrated.

Some had it that Mr. Hicken would bang a gong, persistently, whilst others had it that he waved a golden lamp. Whatever he did, or did not do, the foxes, as far back as

most could remember, had never landed on the magic pear tree

That Saturday morning, then, when Mr. Hicken stood beneath his pear tree surveying a pile of saffron fruit, tears dropped from his eyes. They may have been tears of joy, for Mr. Hicken seemed to feel things very much.

Whenever he 'felt', moisture would gather in his dim eyes, so that when he shook his head, out of sheer excess of feeling, the tears dropped. Now those tears were falling on the ripened fruit. Mr. Hicken loved those pears.

When he heard the harsh dry scraping of a dray, and the dull thumping of a horse's hooves, he did not look up. He muttered on to his pears. When he was hailed, however, he paused a moment, and ceased from contemplating his fruit.

'Ah there. Mr. Hicken!' said a voice, a bright, cheery kind of voice.

Mr. Hicken peered, but could not see. He shook his head.

'Snapjacks, watermelons peanuts and squash!' said the voice.

Mr. Hicken shook his head in bewilderment. It all meant nothing to him.

'Cheap!' said the voice. 'Cheapest in Wirril Creek.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Hicken. He made his way towards the voice. The word 'cheap' excited him somewhat, for Mr. Hicken had the reputation of being 'close'. He wanted to see what was cheap.

When he got to the dray he saw, dimly, two boys seated just in rear of the horse's rump. One was young Terry Hickey, Dolly Hickey's boy, as he could see, bright-faced, merry, with impudent eyes, and a flat squash in his hands. The other boy, bullet-headed, he did not know. This boy stared at him, for it was the first time in his life he had seen Mr. Hicken and he was intrigued, especially by the manner in

which Mr. Hicken's hair, for all its age, came looping down over his forehead, almost to the long pointed nose beneath the dimmed watery eyes. Nevertheless he nodded and said, "Morning, Mr. Hicken."

Mr. Hicken nodded. He kept staring at the squash. 'I can't grow stuff like that,' he said. 'Can't grow a thing.'

'Watermelons,' said the Hickey boy proudly. 'Can't beat them for size.'

'Can't grow watermelons,' grumbled Mr. Hicken. 'Can't grow anything.'

Dolly Hickey's boy was no fool. Also, he was out for business. 'Grow anything on your place, Mr. Hicken,' he said, waving a hand across two hundred green acres, 'and look at your fruit trees.'

'Fruit grows without water,' said Mr. Hicken irritably. 'Can't grow anything else without water.' He shook his head.

'Cheap they are,' said the small salesman. 'Bob the watermelons. Zack the squash and snapjacks Peanuts bob a pound.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Hicken, 'peanuts.' His eyes, if it was possible, gleamed. Mr. Hicken had always wanted to grow peanuts. That he could not grow them rankled him, some where inside.

'Can't grow 'em,' said Mr. Hicken. 'Never have been able to'

Dolly Hickey's boy had almost forgotten Mr. Hicken. He was gazing wistfully at the tree of golden pears. It was not that he liked China pears himself, not to speak of, anyway. His bright little mind was thinking of all the needful wives of Wirril Creek, they with their preserving pans put away, their sugar unused, their bottles empty; for when peaches and apricots are bottled, what else is there to preserve but the pears that the flying-foxes have eaten?

The Hickey boy could see, as in a dream, his dray filled

with pears, golden pears that heaped up high, that smelled sweetly beneath his nostrils, that tumbled from his dray, so many he had of them. He could even hear his own voice shouting, 'Pears! Good yeller pears! Mr. Hicken's good yeller pears!'

In this dream he could see the good wives of Wirril Creek, flowing from every house and home, they with their baskets and their dishes, all descending on him for his pears. They were thanking him, and he was asking almost any money, and getting it.

Mr. Hicken was feeling. Tears gathered in his eyes, rheumed their way down his face. A red hairy paw wiped them away. 'Peanuts,' he said sadly.

'You c'd grow them,' said the bullet-headed boy.

'And when Ralph comes home he won't stay. That's certain,' said Mr. Hicken.

'Ah, Ralph coming home?' said the Hickey boy, interestedly.

'Coming home, and he won't stay,' said Mr. Hicken. 'Ralph said more'n once that he couldn't farm where there was no water.' He shook his head sadly. 'He won't either,' he said.

'Well, then,' said the Hickey boy, 'you've got to have water.'

The old man shook his head. 'No water,' he mumbled. These youngsters talked a lot; more than in his day. No water, no Ralph. He could see Ralph, home for a day, or a week perhaps, but not after that. No water.

'Coming back from the islands he won't want to stay,' he said. It was just now a man wanted his boy with him. His eyes moistened.

The boy Hickey could see Ralph coming home: tall, thin, misty, a kitbag over his shoulder, a samurai sword at his side, and perhaps, like Sam Loneyan, with a few grass skirts for the girls to giggle over. He could see Ralph looking

about for water and finding none and, disgusted, leaving the old man to mumble to his pears. No, that would be a bad thing. Also the Hickey boy was wanting his dray filled with pears.

Leaning down from his seat, his head cupped in his hands, his brown eyes earnest, the Mickey boy said to Mr. Hicken, 'Just where is the water you have got, Mr. Hicken?'

'Not enough. Not enough,' said Mr. Hicken. 'A spoonful, no more, you might say.'

'Then show it to us,' said the bullet-headed boy, 'and we might be able to do something.'

Mr. Hicken shook his head. Boys, boys, boys. He wanted to get back to his pears. He wanted to grow peanuts. He did not want boys. Nevertheless he took them through the wicket gate, leading them past the rotting fruit, the luscious pears, until they were in his fields of green paspalum. Red cows stared at them, but he led the boys past the stock until they stood on the edge of a ridge, the edge itself cupped somewhat, and gapped in a small cleft, about eight feet high. Through the dip trickled a stream of clear water. It glittered in the new sunlight, gurgling as it was lost between rocks, finally disappearing over the ridge.

'That's all,' said Mr. Hicken. 'That's the lot. Not another creek.' He waved his hand across the green acres. 'Not another creek,' he repeated. 'No rain and it'll all look dry.' He shook his head. 'Not enough for Ralph.' He gazed sadly into distance.

The Hickey boy and his bullet-headed companion exchanged stares. 'Easy,' they said, together.

Mr. Hicken was shaking his head. He wished, now, they would go. He was tired of them.

'You've just got to dam it,' said the Hickey boy. 'Dam it on the edge of the ridge, and you've got all the water you want.'

'Eh?' said Mr. Hicken.

'There.' The boys pointed to the edge of the ridge. 'Dam that and you'll have plenty of water.'

'Well, now,' said Mr. Hicken. His face began to shine. 'Dam it, eh?' Then he shook his head. 'Couldn't dam it.'

'Yes,' said the boys, 'easily.'

'Nothing to dam it with,' said Mr. Hicken. His eyes were beginning to moisten again. Excitement was telling on him.

'There's a ton of rock there,' said the Hickey boy, 'and I've got the dray, see? I can get some stuff in it' see?'

'Do it easily,' said the boy with the bullet-shaped head. He looked serious and confident.

'Well, bless my soul!' said Mr. Hicken.

After that he did not argue. He let them go their way. There was, on his part, much shaking of the head. He was sure Ralph would not stay. The boy had said the place was no good without water, too risky. No, he could not believe all this about the dam.

The boys decided the rocks were not enough so they went away. He heard his front rails clatter to the ground, and the dray scrape away. The boys were away a long time, and when they came back again he had dreamed the dam into, and out of, existence. They had rocks in their dray, which they unloaded. They went away again, the dray wheels scraping against the loose brake-leathers.

They returned with a dray-load of yellow clay, and on the top two shovels sticking up, triumphantly. Mr. Hicken thought they must have been his own shovels.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Hicken, again, when he saw the load they had.

The boys began stacking the rock against the edge of the cleft in the ridge. There was cunning in every stone laid. The small trickle began to swell as it was pressed back in the hollow.

Said Mr. Hicken, for the third time, 'Bless my soul!' This time he said it delightedly.

He sat down on the bank, and took off his boots. He removed his thick black socks, baring his white feet. Then he rolled up his trousers, almost to the knees. His white legs had few hairs on them. Next he ventured into the water.

The water was cool, but soft. It spread, at first, about Mr. Hicken's toes, seemed to gurgle delightedly at making the old man's acquaintance, and bid him venture further.

With a curious feeling at his heart, Mr. Hicken did so. He waded until he was ankle-deep, and all the time his eyes were tearful-with joy this time.

'Believe we will do it, boys,' he said.

The boys nodded, but they were very busy. Time and again they had played at this in the creek and they knew their game well. Mr. Hicken watched, happy and amazed. He even began to pick up rocks, and pass them to the boys. Each rock the boys acknowledged, as though Mr. Hicken's rocks were important above other rocks. This pleased Mr. Hicken, who, after a time, began to direct things, although more or less apologetically.

'Now look, boys, don't you think that rock ought to go there?' he would say, pointing.

'Why, of course, Mr. Hicken.' And the rock would be placed there, all right, although it is doubtful whether or not Mr. Hicken, because of his short-sightedness, saw the winks that were sometimes exchanged.

When the water became knee-deep, Mr. Hicken had to roll his trousers up along his thin thighs. This he did with pleasure. All the time the wall of the dam was heightening, rocks and yellow clay pugged between them. Mr. Hicken could scarcely believe it all.

'Why,' he said after a time, 'the water'll be over our heads when it fills up.'

The boys nodded solemnly. 'You can irrigate, then,' said

the bullet-headed boy, 'like Sam Lonigan does.'

'But that isn't my land, below,' said Mr. Hicken. He was wishing now that it was.

'Irrigate back there,' said the boy with a jerk of his thumb towards the slight slope of the hill. 'Get an engine and a pump and some piping, like Sam Lonigan has.'

Mr. Hicken shook his head, sadly. 'All costs money,' he said. He was a trifle irritated by the constant references to Sam Lonigan.

The Hickey boy said, 'Ralph could buy it all from his deferred pay. That's how Sam Lonigan bought his.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Hicken. He no longer hated Sam Lonigan. Perhaps there was something in it, Ralph and his deferred pay. If he could get the boy to spend it then he might stay.

'Grow anything then, Mr. Hicken,' said Dolly Hickey's boy. 'Squash, watermelons, rockmelons, peanuts.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Hicken, again. His eyes were beginning to moisten. He could see, clearly enough in his mind, the green lines of the peanut plants on the red turned soil; could smell the spray as he had often smelled rain; and he could see the rich crop of melons, pumpkins and the like. Yes, it would be good if Ralph were to spend his deferred pay.

'I'll buy some of your stuff, now,' he said. 'I'll buy a squash and some peanuts. How much did you say they were?'

'Peanuts a bob,' said the Hickey boy. 'Squashes a zack.'

'I'll buy a watermelon, too,' said Mr. Hicken. Mr. Hicken, who rarely ate fruit, loved the soft sweetness of watermelon.

The dam was finished. The gurgling had stopped, swallowed up in the swelling volume of water. It almost terrified Mr. Hicken, so much it was after so little. He shook his head so that his hair looped more than ever, and a few tears dripped to his feet.

'Wonderful,' he said, 'wonderful!'

'Not at all, Mr. Hicken,' said the Hickey boy. 'Only too

pleased to do it for you.'

Mr. Hicken suddenly became aware that the boys had worked for him. They would want money, of course.

They might want a lot of pay. Then there were the vegetables he had promised to buy. A small thrill of terror went through the old man. He looked at the dam, the water of which seemed to increase amazingly in volume before his eyes. He felt uneasy. His eyes, again, began to water.

'Ha,' he said nervously. 'Well, you'll be going, eh?'

The boys stood silent. Mr. Hicken began to feel a sort of terror for the money they might ask. What could he do then, if they asked a high price? He began to wonder whether he should have let them build the dam.

'Mr. Hicken,' said the Hickey boy seriously, 'I was wondering if you'd let us have some pears?'

'Ah,' said Mr. Hicken. He bent forward as though he might not be able to see the boy.

'We built the dam,' said the bullet-headed boy.

'Of course. Of course,' said Mr. Hicken hurriedly.

'Then we thought...' said Dolly Hickey's boy.

'Quite,' said Mr. Hicken. He gazed wistfully at the golden fruit. 'Take what you like,' he said in a voice he did not quite recognise as his own. 'As much as you wish,' he added valiantly.

The boys did not wait to be further urged. They drew their now empty cart under the magic tree and dropped the ripe fruit into it, Terry Hickey sitting up in the loaded branches and throwing the fruit down to the bullet-headed boy. Mr. Hicken scarcely noticed them. He was staring down the paddock at the sheet of water growing before his eyes. He was shaking his head all the time.

When the boys were leaving, their dray filled to capacity as a dream that has come true, golden pears piled high and

tumbling, he saw the melons, the peanuts and the squashes lying beneath the tree.

'You've left the vegetables behind,' he shouted to them.

'We'll be back,' they shouted in reply, 'after we get the next load.'

Mr. Hicken nodded. Perhaps they would give him two squashes, and not even charge him; or, anyway, give him an extra pound of peanuts. Yes, he'd prefer an extra pound of peanuts, although soon he'd be growing his own. He chuckled over that, his head bending lower.

At first he was thinking about the water in the dam, then the irrigation, then Ralph and his coming home, and his deferred pay.

The two boys looked back and saw him staring down at the heaped pears.

'He's talking to himself,' they said. Nevertheless they rather liked the picture of the old man, standing there, his head bent, looking down at the golden fruit. Because they were a good distance away and the wheels scraped on the brake-leathers, they could not hear his chuckle.

## THE SONS OF NIM

Nim Thorgood was a small, brightly black-eyed Norwegian, and it was a pity he ever died. I am of course talking of the Thorgoods who own the timber mill and who had worked it for so many years at Garland's Point.

The Coolbucca people were sure that they hadn't recently received fuel anything like the bloodwood and tallow-wood blocks Nim supplied. Twenty miles he seemed it, charging seven shillings for a piled dray-load. There are many tales told about Nim and his sawn blocks, and how he always demanded cash, and how the then Mayor of Coolbucca, Mr. James Portland, had had a load delivered, and after inspecting the load had pronounced himself satisfied.

'Very good, my man,' he said. 'I shall order more, I think.'

Nim Thorgood, who seemed not to have absorbed this latter information, held out his hand for the cash.

'Ah, yes,' said Mr. Portland. 'Send the bill in. I pay accounts monthly.' He then went on speaking to a councillor, and completely ignored Nim.

Nim began loading the blocks on to his dray. 'No monthly. She ain't monthly,' he was saying to himself. Mr. James Portland looked around and saw with dismay that he was losing his load.

'Hey!' he shouted.

'She ain't monthly,' said Nim. He threw some more blocks on the dray to prove that.

'Now look here,' said Mayor Portland, who had never

been refused a monthly, or even a six-monthly, consideration. 'Look here, old chap!'

'Ain't no monthly,' said Nim. And a few more blocks went on, after which the Mayor parted with seven shillings and a small amount of dignity. Nim always exacted immediate payment.

Nim had started with an axe, a cross-cut saw and a wife, all Norwegian. After a time he bought an engine, and set up a sawbench. The engine, when it came, was drawn from nowhere by three large draughts, and seemed a burden for them. When Nim started it up, everyone voted him either a very brave or foolish man, and the crowd which came to watch regarded the phenomenon from a safe distance, which was considered to be about four hundred yards, and when it began puffing and blowing they retreated even further than that, and when, finally, Nim decided to let off steam, or rather to allow the engine to do so, then every cow in Garland's Point and environs gathered its udder and ran, and worn-out draughts kicked up their heels and went careering across the stumped paddocks.

Nim made history with that engine and his circular saw. He cut more wood than he carted, and many said he would have had that amount again were the engine not so avaricious, but Nim seemed not to mind, and gave himself to sawing more, and carting more, whilst his wife hurriedly gave birth to children, five sons, who in no time appeared to be as tall as their small father.

Sach was the eldest, and then Lash, and when Sach was ready to work he decided that milled timber might be a good thing, and told his father so. Nim, when he had allowed the idea to sink in, became quite excited and rushed off to Sydney to buy a new machine. The great iron-clad puffing-billy drove the new machine, and they had sawn timber for housing.

This enabled Nim to put skillions on the northern, the eastern and the southern sides of the original building he had constructed for his wife and the children, so that there was no longer any overcrowding, even if the house appeared to ramble somewhat. Nim could not help admiring his own handiwork, and would often look up from his sawing and spend a few moments in contemplation. For the most part, however, he continued to saw blockwood, and allow Sach to mill the other timber.

When Lash was able to partner Sach he suggested a machine for dressing the timber, and Nim, again excited, went to Sydney. After that the district was well supplied with slabs, sawn and dressed, and dressed strips to nail over the cracks where the slabs had shrunk.

When Noll came along he proved to be somewhat of a mechanic, so that they were able to fix their own machines and save money on maintenance. The main thing about Noll, however, apart from his work, was his violin. Somehow he had shown an aptitude for this instrument, had been trained in its use, and was capable of producing the most unusual music from its strings. Nim, alone, recognised the Norwegian in the boy, although he said nothing about that.

He allowed Noll to play for the dances at the Garland's Point hall, but mostly Noll played for the family, in the big central room where the meals were cooked, where they ate and lived and entertained.

There Noll would play, and Nim, listening, would be reminded of his own Norway by the sea, and all that it meant, and after Noll had finished his playing Nim would tell the family various old tales, in which they appeared to take only a polite and casual interest.

After Noll there were Lars and Sammy. They were just two more like the others, short spare men, with no backside to

speak of, dropping in a straight line from shoulders to heels, and tapered a little, so that they appeared to be much the same when viewed from front, sides or rear.

The Thorgoods, then, were a united family, with the mill as their central pivot-point, and labour in it their delight. If there was any difference anywhere amongst the boys it existed in Sammy, who was the youngest, and for whom the entire family maintained a special affection. Sammy worked as hard as the other brothers when it came to his time to work, but he was allowed a skillion all on his own, whereas the other brothers were forced to share, and Sammy, in some way, did seem a trifle different, although he was not anxious to emphasise differences, but clung strongly to a sameness.

It was when old Nim died that Sammy showed the difference. He wept where the others were simply solemn, and at the funeral cried incessantly 'Daddy! Daddy!' whereas the boys, and even their mother, seemed more bewildered than sorry, as though they dimly felt that they would miss old Nim and his dray with the careful mixture of bloodwood and tallow-wood blocks. Nim always strongly asserted that tallow-wood and bloodwood were made to burn together.

After Nim died the Second World War broke out, and the boys, having grown sufficiently by that time, were eligible for it, although they did not immediately enlist. It took quite some time for enthusiasm to filter through to Garland's Point, and then another period of time elapsed before that enthusiasm penetrated the roar and whistling of the mill. and it was not until the Lanyon brothers enlisted—three in all—and there was a patriotic meeting called at Coolbucca and two boys from Wirril Creek joined the army that the Thorgoods really knew there was a war on.

At about that time the invasion of Norway was quickly accomplished, much to the indignation of the old Thorgood woman, who immediately insisted that the boys go across to Europe and do something. Nothing loth, Sach enlisted, but he demanded that only Lash might enlist with him, for, apart from Norway, the mill was what counted. Noll, however, overrode Sach and enlisted with him, so that that meant three Thorgoods in the army, and Mrs Thorgood relaxed somewhat, feeling that Norway was in good hands, whilst the mill might easily be run by Lars and Sammy.

After a time Lars became morose, and nothing less than the air-force would please him. Sammy said it was no use one working a mill and that, anyway, he just couldn't manage it, and he revealed to his mother that Norway was what he was worried about, and this pleased the old woman immensely, so that she consented to be left on her own, and with no sons to look after, she took care of the mill. Sach, however, did not allow his mother to remain long alone, for one weekend he brought home a wife, a Sydney girl who was, nevertheless, sensible. She took up the northern skillion.

Lash, home on leave, decided to marry a Garland's Point girl, a sister of Alan Lanyon, who was in his battalion. She took the eastern skillion and kept Mrs Thorgood Senior, and the other Mrs Thorgood, company. Then the boys went overseas, much to the old woman's relief, as she had not ceased thinking about Norway's plight.

Sammy wrote no word home, and it was fully six months before they found out that he was in the merchant navy. This was not, perhaps, considered to be a fighting force, but it was the next thing to it, and Mrs Thorgood was satisfied. She superintended the weekly oiling of machines, remembering the roar and the noise of the mill in its working days, and hoped all her boys would return.

The news filtered through that Noll had been promoted to

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an entertainment group, but it was to be understood that he, Noll, would be in the fighting when it came along, or, as he said, he'd be there when the whips were cracking. Army, air-force and merchant navy; Mrs Thorgood was puzzled about the delayed release of Norway. She thought, perhaps, that insufficient notice had been taken of her boys, and that they had been held back, through jealousy, from launching a quick and effective campaign. She was puzzled when the boys returned from England and the Middle East, but accepted the fact calmly, and even, some time later, the birth of a son to Sach, and a son, also, to Lash.

Then the war came to a conclusion, and after a while the boys returned home; that is, with the exception of Sammy, who had either been killed or was detained in the merchant navy. The welcomehome dance to the Thorgoods was a terrific affair, everyone in the district turning up, especially the girls, who admired Lars in his blue uniform and adored Noll's playing. Some said Noll would be a fool to go back to the mill when he could play like that. 'Divine,' most of the girls called it, and there were not a few who looked knowing, as though they had discovered a genius in Noll, unbeknown to Noll. But since they were unable or reluctant to contact someone great who would recognise Noll, he returned to the mill with the three brothers, and very hard they worked to restore it and the trade they had lost through the war period.

Their mill whistle shrieked in the morning, and in the evening at knock-off time, and everyone set his watch by it. Many were the bullockies who hauled their great logs, and when petrol became more available the log-lorries groaned beneath the beloved tallow-wood of old Nim, and red-andwhite mahogany for the post-war building era. The Thorgood boys delighted in the orders which they were unable to

## The Sons of Nim

fulfil. They employed hands, and began work themselves before the hands, and knocked off after the hands. Sach went to Sydney and bought new and better machines, and timber was trucked to Sydney and all over Australia to build new homes.

Sach built a skillion on to his skillion, and Lash followed suit, and after a time Noll and Lars both decided to marry, so that skillions had to be added to their skillions, and old Nim's house rambled even more; and still Sammy did not return. They had heard from him, but not enough, for Sammy was a close one. Old Mrs Thorgood was of the opinion 'that the sea had got him,' which did not mean he was drowned, but that there was something in his blood that enabled the sea to be his mistress. Sach would not have that, and the other brothers loyally supported him, but the old woman continued her muttering.

After a time Sammy returned. Apprehensive, the brothers expected him to have changed, but he was the same Sammy, only perhaps a trifle more thoughtful. He appeared very much to enjoy the welcomehome, especially the dance part of it, when there was much merriment and kind attention by the Garland's Point girls, who felt Sammy's homecoming to be even more romantic than that of his brothers. Everyone wanted to know what Sammy would do, at which Sammy looked surprised and said he was going back to the mill, of course, although Sach, looking at him, was not too happy about Sammy, and didn't think he would stay long.

Sammy, however, did stay, and if differences existed between him and his brothers, and it seemed a pity Sammy didn't marry and have children running about the various skillions, Sammy nonetheless stuck to his special skillion, the western one, which had been built for him when he returned. Sach, who wished Sammy to be married, gave it

out that a new house would be built for Sammy when he was married, as the skillions were becoming too many. Sach thought, also, that this would be an incentive for the Garland's Point girls, although they needed little incentive in that respect. No, Sammy seemed scarcely to see the Garland's Point girls, although he was pleasant enough, and after a time the matter of marriage was dropped.

Sammy appeared to grow more thoughtful as the days passed, and this disturbed Sach, for he could not contemplate Sammy leaving, or even tolerate that thought. He even urged Sammy to take a trip to Sydney, thinking Sammy might find a wife there. Sammy went to Sydney, just to please Sach, but when he returned it was without a wife.

Then Sammy told the brothers he was going.

'Going?' Sach said. He shook his head in disappointment.

'What you say, Sammy?' said Noll. 'You can't go, Sammy.'

'I want to go,' Sammy said miserably.

'The sea's got him,' his mother said, as though she knew the sea might get all Norwegians, even small black-eyed Norwegians like Sammy.

'It ain't the sea,' said Sammy slowly. The old woman took notice, but continued her muttering.

'I'll build you a new home here,' said Sach. 'Get a wife and settle down. You can't beat a mill.'

'A new home'd be very nice,' said Sammy. 'But I want to go back to the sea.'

'Said it was the sea,' the old woman chuckled scornfully, but the boys were too worried about Sammy to listen to her.

Their efforts to both retain Sammy and find him a wife redoubled. Noll made Sammy accompany him with the orchestra in which he played. The orchestra, so-called, was really a dance-band, and played at most local dances. Sammy went with Noll, and was introduced to quite an

assortment of girls, but none seemed to take his eye. He seemed more interested in Noll's playing of the violin, and indeed while Noll played he would never shift his attention. Noll's playing appeared to fascinate him. It made him even more thoughtful, and next day, after the playing, he would continue to be thoughtful.

One night he told the family he was going the next day. That shocked them.

'Going, Sammy?' Sach said. 'But where?'

'Norway,' said Sammy.

'Norway?' they all said. Old Mrs Thorgood appeared to be very excited. She forgot to speak Australian.

Sammy would not say why he was going to Norway.

'Norway?' the old woman said excitedly. 'What you 8° there for, Sammy?'

'Oh, just go,' said Sammy.

Sach wasn't content with that. 'What for, Sammy?' he asked.

'I'll get married,' Sammy said, and his voice was almost surly.

'Married!' The family was excited, but not happily so.

'Plenty of women here,' Lash said.

'Or in Sydney,' said Sach, looking at his wife.

'Or here,' said Lars, looking at his.

Mrs Thorgood mumbled something which none appeared to hear.

All the brothers sighed. They gave Sammy up. Noll went to get his violin, and when he played it was the curious music of his childhood when old Nim listened and nodded and nodded and listened, and for a time it seemed that old Nim was with them again, nodding and listening. They remembered the solemn tales Nim told, and after a while they thought Sammy must be very different, and probably it

was quite right, his going home to Norway to live.

When Noll finished the playing, Sammy said he thought he would go tomorrow all right, but the brothers wanted him to stay another day at least so that they could fix up a farewell. Sammy agreed, and the brothers fixed the farewell properly. There was a dance at the hall, and the news, flying quickly, brought all the local folk, especially the girls, who thought they'd have a last try. Sach had bought a keg, and to this keg the brothers, Sammy included, went for comfort during the night, having recourse to it many times.

After a time Noll gave it out that he was going to play his violin out of the orchestra, which he did, and the girls all vowed Noll had never played so beautifully, and those who knew shook their heads mysteriously, and said it was a pity Noll didn't do something with that talent. But Noll was trying to do something with it, so sadly, so sweetly, so fiercely he played in a vain endeavour to keep his brother Sammy in the family, and with it. But the sweeter, the sadder, the fiercer the music, the more did Sammy wish to go to Norway.

Noll came down to the keg, and after a time wished to play again, but by this time the dance had finished and all had gone with the exception of the five Thorgood boys, who insisted they would never go home. They sat in the rich darkness, and Noll played and the small men wept together, and in that state Sammy said he'd never leave them if he could help it, and they took this to be a sort of promise, so that they wept again, and Noll insisted on playing more music. But so uninhibited was he with the releasing action of the drink that he played weirdly and beautifully, and made Sammy want to rise on certain wings and flee to Norway without having to work his passage in some bitch of a tramp.

They all went home to their skillions, and Sammy slept on the floor in the living-room. He knew they would use his skillion when he left it, and was rather glad. He worked next

day until three in the afternoon, and then went inside to wash. His brothers, who thought, perhaps, that Sammy's promise of the night before meant something, said nothing, but continued working. Lars, after a time, said he would see Sammy off, and it was generally accepted that Sammy was going, and that was that. They did not regret the dance or the keg.

Sammy said goodbye to them all quietly, and Lars drove him to the station. He watched the dusty road ahead, accelerating in places to make the passage over the corrugations reasonably smooth. 'You like Norway, Sammy?' he asked.

'Oh, fair enough,' said Sammy.

'You'll stay there?' asked Lars.

'M'm,' said Sammy doubtfully.

'Girl, eh?' said Lars.

'Lovely,' said Sammy suddenly. 'Saw her in Oslo.' His words seemed to pour out as he described her. 'I'll find her.' he said enthusiastically.

'Engaged?' said Lars.

Sammy chuckled. 'Cut it out, Lars,' he said.

They had reached the station. The train wasn't immediately due. Sammy bought his ticket, a single to Sydney. 'I'll get a ship in Sydney. Work my way.'

'But this girl,' said Lars. 'What's her name?'

'Don't know,' said Sammy. 'She was in Oslo. I'll find her again.'

'But she might be married,' said Lars. 'You never know.'

'She ain't married,' said Sammy confidently. 'I'll find her somehow.'

Lars shook his head doubtfully, and said 'Fancy that.' He was still mumbling about it when the Sydney express came churning in. He helped Sammy to a window-seat, and

Sammy leaned out, talking until the train went.

As the train gathered up its loins, its clinking, clanking loins, Lars shouted, 'Well, come back,' thinking that Sammy never would.

Sammy, leaning out further, shouted, 'I might,' but Lars did not appear to have heard, for he was standing, shaking his head, and looking down at the platform. Sammy, in the train, felt suddenly released from the strange family which was his, and Noll's accursed violin, and so free did he feel that he thought he might come back. He turned to Lars to say so a second time, but Lars was lost to him, and the shout that came back to Lars was muffled in sound and the black smoke that rushed away from the engine, so Sammy just waved and waved until Lars and the station were well out of sight .

## THE WOBLER

Mr. Tracey was tensed with excitement, an unusual state of emotion in him, but today, or rather this evening, he was going fishing. In his hand a split-cane rod, on his shoulder a haversack hung, and in his heart immense delight.

Never had the gum forest seemed so cool to him. Because it was just before dusk, he could see the trunks of the trees, could hear the rustle of the bush creatures as they fled before his approach, and could catch the mellow gold of the last slanting rays of the sun. Although all this was noticed only half-consciously, Mr. Tracey knew it added to his deep contentment, an anticipatory contentment, to be sure, but one which filled his soul with tranquillity.

Then he came to the pool. This was like an adventure in itself, the parting of the undergrowth, the sigh of the deep brown water, the softness of it, and silent, more silent than the bush with a promise in its very quietude. It brought excitement, too, a quick uneasy delight that made Mr. Tracey's hands tremble and fumble as they unslung the haversack and clicked the reel so that the line would run smoothly.

In the tin, the coveted frogs. Frogs, Mr. Tracey had found, were not easily obtained. He had spent two valuable hours peering under overhanging ferns and moss growth in the small creek on his farm. He had sought a frog as a prospector seeks precious metal, and few he had discovered, two to be exact; but two, thought Mr. Tracey, would assuredly obtain for him that large perch.

Perch! His mouth watered, his heart beat more quickly. Never, even in those dim years of the past, years never to be

forgotten when he had played and fought in a war, had he had more pleasurable excitement.

Two hooks, old Bob had told him, one large, and the other smaller. Whip them into the frog. And silently, oh so silently, Mr. Tracey, for your perch linger in the depths of this shallow pool. A terrible affair, thought Mr. Tracey, digging hooks into a struggling frog that stared up at him with large wondering eyes. A little man he was, the frog. Ah, yes, but the perch, the perch! Mr. Tracey smothered his feelings and hooked the struggling frog. It quivered, hung limp. Mr. Tracey felt the excitement tell on him, but he stood and whipped his line across the water where it looped high for a moment before it hit the surface with a musical plop, after which it sank.

'Keep it coming. Keep it coming,' old Bob had told him, so Mr. Tracey kept it coming.

But in vain, it seemed, for golden pre-dusk gave way to purple dusk, and Mr. Tracey tugged and encouraged his line, yet never a bite. He watched, peered at the white underbelly of the frog, but no fish rose to that succulent bait, not even to stare haughtily, or amusedly, or with contempt; certainly not to nibble. Perch evaded Mr. Tracey and all his frog.

He felt the warm night creep round him, and then, as he was about to curse reasonably at his failure to have had a bite whilst the dusk lasted, he wondered if he were alive and in this world, or indeed in another world where a figure stood silently surveying the pool in which Mr. Tracey fished.

'Never get anything that way,' said the man softly, but firmly, wagging a huge unnatural head. When the figure came closer Mr. Tracey was relieved to see it was a man and not a midsummer concoction of his mind. In fact it was a burly fleshy sort of individual, far from classic, and never to be confused with a celestial.

'Not a hope on God's earth,' the man said to him.

Mr. Tracey reeled in his line. He lifted the limp frog from the water and held it up for the man's inspection. Now, as the man looked at the frog he was able to look at the man. He was a hairy-faced fellow with an upright shock of hair, and Mr. Tracey rightly assessed him as a red-stubbed, redhaired descendant of another country's bog-trotters. Yet, he reflected, bog-trotters knew a thing or two, especially when it came to the pursuits of poaching and fishing.

'Some,' the man said in an indifferent voice, 'do get 'em that way, I'll admit. But they're lucky.'

'Oh,' said Mr. Tracey.

'Yes,' the man admitted generously. 'I've heard of it, though I can't say I've seen it done, meself, and never have I caught one that way.' He paused for a moment, gazed silently at the water, and added, 'I have heard of perch bein't caught with worms, too, and the like, but there again I've never seen it.'

He surveyed Mr. Tracey solemnly, and said in a deep voice, 'Wobblers.'

Mr. Tracey was startled.

The word was unintelligible to him, but he realised it meant something to this fellow. 'Oh,' he said uneasily.

'Wobblers,' repeated the man, and he stood staring at the water, as though water and he understood wobblers.

'You can't get them without,' he said. 'Although I will admit I have heard of it.'

Mr. Tracey shook his head in admiration. He felt small now, infinitely small beside this giant of a fellow, this fisherman who gabbled about wobblers.

'What is a wobbler?' he asked.

The man said nothing. He continued staring into the water.

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After a time he sighed, a pitying sort of sigh, more pity for himself than the ignorant fellow beside him. An enduring sigh, too, for it was evident he had much to suffer.

‘A wobbler,’ he explained gently, ‘is for wobbling.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Tracey.

‘And when it wobbles the fish go for it, naturally,’ said the man.

‘Ah,’ said Mr. Tracey, relieved.

‘And perch love wobblers,’ said the man delightedly. ‘What’s more,’ he added, ‘I’d never be without one.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’ said Mr. Tracey hopefully. Nevertheless, he was cautious in hope.

‘So I always carries one,’ the man told him, and he fiddled in his pocket. ‘Matter of fact,’ he confided, ‘it’s me last one till I get a nothery.’

Mr. Tracey trembled. He tried to peer at the small gadget, but was unable to see it.

‘Come behind the trees,’ the fisherman told him; ‘we’ve made enough noise already.’

Rod and all, Mr. Tracey followed.

‘This here,’ said the man hoarsely, striking a match and showing Mr. Tracey a piece of carved wood, ‘is the wobbler.’

He waited a moment until this important piece of information was received. Mr. Tracey nodded, stared eagerly.

‘How does it wobble?’ asked the fisherman. ‘I don’t know. But it does. It’s made that way. Wait till we chuck it in—on the end of your line.’

He chuckled. ‘Now give us that frog you murdered. Take him off, and those hooks. Now put this wobbler on; that’s right. Now rub some blood and guts on him from the frog—not that it’s always necessary, but it helps. Now there behind the wobbler’s tail as you might call it is the little hooks that’re going to get Mister Blooming-Hungry-Perch.’ He chuckled again.

Mr. Tracey was entranced. He viewed this wooden sem-

## The Wobbler

blance of a frog, eyes painted white, with the ecstasy of a native viewing his tribal totem, his life-giving, life-preserving god. Yet, too, did doubt war with faith.

‘I could show you how it’s done,’ the man said, ‘but bein’ a fisherman I knows as how you’d like to try it first. So just whip her in.’

Mr. Tracey loved the man. He whipped her in.

He saw the blob of wood hit the water and transform itself into a live frog. He saw, as he tugged gently, that the frog shot forward as though propelled by swimming legs, paused, and again shot forward. He saw, too, did Mr. Tracey, that the water clove behind the frog, spreading outwards, and then a great fear and a terrible joy came into his being, played havoc with his heart, whipped up the tempo of his blood and made his brain sing with excitement, for—by the Lord Living Harry!—a fish had snapped, and then with a cry away went his line.

The fisherman watched and applauded every move. ‘Good on you!’ he said warmly, and tried hard to rein in his speech, but it was difficult. ‘Good on you, old fellow,’ he said a second time. ‘Just like a Trojan. Show him who’s boss. Play him. Now bring him in.’

Mr. Tracey scarcely heard the words. He saw the fish, a silver streak along the surface of the dark water, felt it tug, sensed the very life of it struggling with him, calling out his humanity, his divinity, testing it, yet at the same time teasing the inner being of the farmer on the bank. But Mr. Tracey won. He saw it come towards him with the inevitability of night covering day, surely as darkness explodes into brilliant light, as now, within the soul of Mr. Tracey, a light flashed.

‘Up the bank! Up the bank!’ the stranger warned unnecessarily. Mr. Tracey was taking no risks. He was down beside that fish, hugging, almost weeping tears over it, talking

as a child would in delighted prattle.

Nor did the stranger laugh. 'Done like a Trojan,' he said, and then as Mr. Tracey, inarticulate, did not respond, kept repeating the phrase more to himself than the other fisherman, as though there were, indeed, two of himself, one which had to be convinced by the repetition of the observation.

'I got it,' said Mr. Tracey joyfully. 'I got it!'

'You got it all right,' said the man. 'You got it with the wobbler.'

'That's right,' said Mr. Tracey. 'With the wobbler.' He stared, almost uncomprehendingly, at the fisherman.

Reality began to assert itself.

'Where,' he asked in a strange voice, 'did you come from?'

'Heaven,' said the man. 'Where do you think?'

Mr. Tracey did not know what to think, and the first part of the man's answer he did not think too preposterous.

'As a matter of fact,' the man said, 'I came here because they told me you was fishing.'

'Did they?' said Mr. Tracey. 'And what did you come all this way for, may I ask?'

'As a matter of fact,' the man said again, 'I'm a foxcatcher.'

'A fox-catcher?' said the bewildered Mr. Tracey. He was still grasping his squirming fish.

'I catch foxes,' the man said, 'with me hounds. Every fowl-owner likes to see me, see, because I cleans the district out of foxes.'

'Excellent,' said Mr. Tracey. 'Then I must show you just where the foxes are on my farm.'

'Good,' the man agreed. 'Many there are who can't show me just where they are, but the dogs know. Oh yes, the

hounds find 'em. But, of course, as you know, I don't do it for love.'

'No,' said Mr. Tracey, staring at the stranger. 'Of course not. It is, hah, for the skins, eh?'

'There ain't no skins when those hounds finish with a fox,' said the fox-catcher juicily. 'No, mister, I does it for chooks, and the better the chooks the more the foxes.'

'I hear,' he went on, 'as how you have the very best chooks in the district, and that's why I went to the trouble of walking all this distance. Not, mind you, that I didn't think about the fishing—I did.'

'Then you shall share this fish with me, and any others we catch,' insisted Mr. Tracey.

The stranger regarded him silently, and Mr. Tracey became extremely uncomfortable. What possessed the fellow, anyway?

'Mister,' said the fox-catcher, 'I'll catch your foxes for you, I will.'

'And I'll give you some of the finest fowls you've seen in many a day!' cried Mr. Tracey, his heart filled with joy, his whole being flooded with that delight that visits men but seldom. 'You have done me a great service,' he said soberly.

'As to your chooks,' said the man, 'you can keep 'em. I have now, right here, changed my mind. No,' he cried, as Mr. Tracey began protesting, 'I mean it. I'll get y' foxes, but I won't charge. And for why? Because you and me's fishing pals. D'you know what that means?'

Mr. Tracey regarded him steadily. 'I think I do,' he said quietly.

'Yes,' said the fox-catcher. 'If there were more fishin' there'd be less wars and strife. Two men fishin' get more fun and that than two men doin' anything else. And so, mister, I'll not bother you for them chooks since you offered me

some of that perch.'

'Then we'll get a few more, eh?' said Mr. Tracey eagerly.

'They'll keep,' said the fox-catcher. 'This feller's big enough for a feed for us both, and the others'll be there when we want 'em, next time. He'll make a great supper, and sweet as you like.'

The thought was extremely pleasing to Mr. Tracey, and he said, 'We'll go right now. We can fry this fellow in batter and then crack a bottle to celebrate.'

'Right down my alley!' cried the fisherman, and the silence fell, for Mr. Tracey was extracting the wobbler's hooks from the fish's mouth. He separated the wobbler from the line and in sorrowful silence passed it across to the fox-catcher.

'Yours,' he said in a strained voice.

The silence fell again whilst the fox-catcher regarded the miraculous piece of wood. Then, unbelievable but true, the harsh hoarse voice of the fisherman. 'Keep it, mate. I'll get another.'

'No,' said Mr. Tracey, feeling pitifully grave. 'It's your last.'

'There are other wobblers in the world,' said the stranger philosophically, 'and if anyone can get 'em, then I can. But,' he concluded triumphantly, 'there ain't another fish like that, and there's never been another night like this, if you come to look at it, so what are we waiting for?'

And Mr. Tracey, as he held his fish up and regarded it, felt his entire being reflooded with joy and echoed the foxcatcher's question, after which he followed his new boon companion through the trees.

Deep down in his heart Mr. Tracey was making a brave decision. He would give his new friend a batch of hens even if he refused them. Mr. Tracey never liked to have an uneven

arrangement, and certainly not when it came to the matter of fishing—especially fishing with a magic wobbler.

For his part, the stranger was scarcely thinking about chooks. He could get chooks any time. It was Mr. Tracey who mainly held his thoughts, but there were moments when his mind wandered towards the chooks. So much so that he would give a small sigh.

## TALLYHO THE RED FOX

The arm of coincidence, so often generous in actions for both writer and storyteller, was this morning doing a trifle of stretching for Mr. Hicken, although that gentleman was quite unaware of anything other than that the morning was very fine. Mr. Hicken, as he opened the gate of his fowlyard, was suddenly aware that the morning was very dismal indeed, and that the sun, if it insisted on shining, was brazen and unsympathetic.

For there, in and near the tall paspalum of his fowl-and-duckyard, lay the white feathers of Mr. Hicken's fowls, and the plumage of Mr. Hicken's ducks. Mr. Hicken, who was usually fairly slow of reflex, became suddenly galvanised into alarmed sorrow. This increased as his gaze travelled and he beheld the gory corpses of ducks and fowls.

'Foxes!' said Mr. Hicken.

Mr. Hicken, trembling with terror, stooped and felt the nearest bird. It was warm. 'Dead, too,' thought Mr. Hicken. His hairy fingers twitched about the limp bird. Heart beating, he bypassed a favourite Rhode Island Red, a heavy Orpington and a skinny Leghorn with legs stiffening towards heaven. He parted a clump of giant paspalum. It was then his agony was greatest, and a groan parted his lips.

'She ain't there!' said Mr. Hicken, and the truth was that she wasn't, neither Emma, his favourite duck, nor her twenty-five eggs, due any day to be hatched into the sweetest

ducklings Mr. Hicken and Emma had ever hatched. Mr. Hicken, small tears in his eyes, stared with deadened sorrow at the empty nest and slowly but purposefully raised his head, his eyes and then, higher, a fist towards heaven, whilst he muttered that vengeance would be his lot, see if it wouldn't.

Another thought struck him, slowly, and he pondered it a moment, after which he searched about in the grass for a weapon. A half paling came to his searching fingers, and this he grasped, firmly, the light of battle gleaming in dimmed eyes. The warm fowl had made him believe that fox might still be within close radius.

He closed the fowlyard gate behind him, and then almost died of pure shock as he spied the fox, which, aflood with the brazen sun, was staring at him from a nearby bunch of bracken. It might not have seen him, so absent was its look, so preternaturally solemn its gaze.

'God bless us!' said Mr. Hicken.

The fox started a little at that, turned and ran a few yards. It then sat again and fixed another look upon the farmer. This sort of thing angered the owner of Emma, so that he swung his paling, whooped, and ran for the animal, which even then did not seem scared, apparently having some knowledge of Mr. Hicken's age, weakness, and inability to run as fast as a fox. Nor was there a hound to soothe on to this infamous beast, let alone a gun to shoot it. Mr. Hicken almost burst with indignation over the whole matter. Long after the fox had gone did he talk to himself, in slow rumbles not customary to him, for he was, normally, a mild man.

He was still talking to himself, and deciding to have a yarn with old Adam Tracey, when the long arm of coincidence elongated slightly, hovered about the Hicken establishment

and came to rest on Mr. Hicken, who, drooped over his front gate, was waiting for someone to share his indignation and fury. The arm resting was the fellow who now approached Mr. Hicken.

By no stretch of the imagination could he be thought to resemble a fox, although, to be sure, his hair was reddish, ginger-red, harsh on his face and arms, and sprouting wildly over his head. However, it was not at the fellow Mr. Hicken stared, but at the weird contraption which, horse-drawn, followed the stranger. It may have been an ordinary cart or dray, but the sounds it emitted were even more weird than its appearance, and as it came closer Mr. Hicken could see that the sounds came from a bag-covered contraption. It barely smothered a strange and mournful wailing, an entire bedlam of sound which had a strongly depressing effect upon the already depressed Mr. Hicken.

The fellow, when he drew abreast of Mr. Hicken, betrayed a fine pride in his cart of wails. He even paused a moment or two to allow the wailing to have its full effect upon the watcher, and then heartily he said, 'G'day.'

Mr. Hicken, who had a story to tell, said, more eagerly than upon other occasions, 'Ha!'

'Nice day, eh?' said the man.

'No,' said Mr. Hicken deliberately. 'Not very nice at all.'

Far from depressing the stranger, this seemed to make his expression even brighter. 'Oh!' he said.

'I've lost fowls today,' said Mr. Hicken bluntly. 'And,' he added, 'ducks.'

'Chooks,' said the man rapidly. 'Chooks, hey?' He approached Mr. Hicken, his red beard bristling, his blue eyes fairly flaming. 'You've lost chooks, mister!' He flicked a finger, raised his right hand in the air, and brought it down with alarming emphasis. 'Do you know?' he said, peering into Mr. Hicken's slightly excited face. 'I'm going to tell you how you lost them chooks.' He nodded, shook his head with

violent emphasis, and said, almost hoarse in his whispering, 'Foxes.' He said no more, but drew back, as though, having uttered that one wild word, no more needed to be said.

'Yes,' said Mr. Hicken, awestruck, and in similar tone. He did, however, recover quickly, not wishing to be done out of his unusual tale.

'Ten hens,' he said, and as this appeared to astonish the man only slightly, he added, without blushing, 'fifteen perhaps, with what they took away.' The man nodded, as though it was understandable altogether. 'And...' announced Mr. Hicken, no longer leaning upon the gate, but drawing himself to his full height and intaking his breath, preparing for the big announcement. . .

' . . . duck and setting. Ducks and eggs,' supplied the man calmly.

'Yes,' said Mr. Hicken, deflated, and suddenly helpless.

'Thought so,' said the redheaded man.

He then disregarded Mr. Hicken's floundering, and, at the same moment, whistled. This was the sign for coincidence to depart hurriedly (albeit in contentment) and for noise to rush in, weirdly, as the baying of hounds over the dark Styx. cries of the damned to be loosed, the mystery only being made clear when the red man uncovered the contraption in the cart to display a pack of foxhounds, baying and yelping, crying through the wire-netting behind which they were enclosed.

'Goodness gracious,' said Mr. Hicken. The sight startled him, rheuming his eyes slightly. 'If only,' he said to the stranger, 'you had had them here this morning.'

'It *is* this morning,' the stranger informed him.

'Early,' said Mr. Hicken in explanation.

'Still get your foxes,' said the owner of the hounds.

'Not now,' said Mr. Hicken sadly, from his accumulated

bush-lore.

'Tallyho the red fox!' said the red man, suddenly grinning about some joke he knew. 'Tallyho the rascal and we'll get him.'

The words enchanted Mr. Hicken. 'Well, well,' he said interestedly.

'Course we'll get him,' said the man. 'You watch.'

He took one foxhound from the mass of tan and black drooping ears, and dropped him to the ground. The dog drew his body level with the earth, commencing from the moist tip of a nose until the tail only, at its tip, was above ground-level. Then he let out a wail and a squeak and a howl and a mournful note of joy, after which he stared at his master, awaiting orders. His master, pleased with this sort of exhibition, withheld that word to go.

'I'll let 'em all go?' he said to Mr. Hicken.

'Oh, yes,' said Mr. Hicken eagerly.

As he fiddled with the cage-door the dogs set up a howling. However, when he opened it they did not attempt to emerge.

Then, with one mighty whoop, the red man ejected them. 'Tallyho the red rascal!' he shouted at them, and a light came into their eyes and they escaped through the opening, dropping to the ground, their bodies following black noses which traced absurd patterns upon the ground. They were visibly excited, yelping, turning and twisting.

So, too, was Mr. Hicken excited. He clasped and unclasped his hands, made nervous movements and wished the hounds would find the trail.

'Don't you worry, boss,' the redheaded man said. 'They'll get him.'

'See that there bunch of trees near your creek?' he told Mr. Hicken. 'They'll find him there.'

'It isn't my creek,' said Mr. Hicken.

'That doesn't matter,' said the man with slight disgust. 'They'll get him.'

Then, surely, they were running towards the creek and the clump of trees, weaving throughout the grass, never looking up, but howling and bursting into impatient noises until the leader let out a yell and fairly flew at the trees. Mr. Hicken clasped his hands and thought of the fat fox, belly filled with Emma and her offspring. That fox wouldn't be able to run much. He saw the hounds tumble down the creek bank and become lost amongst the trees.

'Rushes there, eh?' said the man. 'I'll bet there is.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Hicken tensely.

'Thought so,' said the man triumphantly. 'Then he's there. Tallyho the red rascal, they'll get him.'

And so they might have. There was a shrill yelping, an excited high-pitched call and the next moment a blown bundle tossed itself through the air, bursting on the sight of the two men, becoming lost in the tall seeded grass. As it went it bounced and turned and twisted, leapt across ridges and flattened along undulations. It was lost and found, seen, lost and discovered, all in breathless moments.

On the hillside they played, the hounds and the fox, and the fox, cunning to the end, raced north, and then south, and, finally doubling on his own tracks, was lost again in the grove of trees. When Mr. Hicken, trembling with fright and nearly dying from disappointment, thought the game lost, the fox came running, this time towards the very fowlyard it had last night raided, but close behind, their throats wide and baying, their triumphant music to stir the blood of the old man, came the hounds.

The red man was stirred, too. 'They'll get him,' he muttered, and then, when the hounds might have missed their quarry, he rose to the tips of his toes and shouted loudly and long, 'Tallyho the red rascal ! ' Mr. Hicken thumped his thighs in incredible delight, shouted unintelligible words and

whooped and screamed hoarsely until the fox itself was caught, captured and tossed into the air; and all the time the red man was laughing and shouting his war-cry.

‘But of course, mister,’ said the man, ‘there is the matter of payment, hey?’ He thrust his red bristles at the mild Mr. Hicken.

‘Payment,’ said Mr. Hicken. His sorrow returned. He hated that word, or any like it. Payment, money, bills, they were all the shadows in Mr. Hicken’s life.

‘A few juicy ducks, or a pair of hens, eh, what about that?’ cried the man.

Mr. Hicken relaxed slightly. ‘That’s a lot,’ he said, and not without cunning, ‘for giving your dogs a feed of fox. I’ll give you a hen.’

‘Two hens and a duck,’ shouted the hound-owner.

‘Two hens and a duck,’ agreed Mr. Hicken, with reluctance. Following Mr. Hicken to the fowlyard, the stranger proceeded to eye the poultry. His knowledge of poultry was unimpeachable. None of your three-year-old loafers of laying fowls, no scaly legs for him, or even your second-year hens. He wanted pullets, just on the lay, and he selected two of the plumpest. The duck he chose caused a wringing of the heart to Mr. Hicken. The dead birds, also, the redheaded man took, with assumed reluctance, telling Mr. Hicken that he’d clean up that mess for him.

In rear of the dog cage was a smaller, bag-covered cage, and, the bags removed, a fine collection of birds was revealed, red and white and black and spangled varieties of fowls, none of them at all to be sneered at, and ducks also, and one goose, which had seemingly lost its honk. Into this cage were popped the two pullets and the duck.

‘Now,’ said the red man, licking his lips and looking about triumphantly, as though to give Mr. Hicken something

for his money—or rather, his poultry. ‘Now, he said, ‘tallyho for the next red rascal!’

## THE FOOTBALL MATCH

Once in the country you are liable to pass anything with the possible exception of Devonshire teas: hot scones and cream, and honey and jam. Not as delectable perhaps, but to me quite as irresistible, is a country football match, and more especially an informal one. You are likely to come across one of this sort anywhere, usually on a piece of pasture that has been grazed upon during the week, and consequently is dotted with cow-pats which make the play slightly more swervacious.

The particular match which halted me was on such a piece of ground, and its popularity was in strong evidence by the numbers of cars, trucks, utilities, sulkies and single horses which were parked or tethered and tied to some spotted gums. From this mass of vehicles and stock emerged to greet me an old man with a leathery face and hands, grimness shown upon his features and a tract in his hand. 'This,' he told me as he thrust the paper towards me, 'is the day that the Lord hath made.' He seemed to bear no malice towards the ungodly footballers who were tearing up and down the spotted turf.

The game in progress was apparently second or thirdgrade, and not at all strong meat. The crowd on the sidelines seemed to be deriving a great deal of entertainment from it, but I gathered the sporting *magnum opus* was yet to be played. However, there was a bald-headed man who kept running up and down the sidelines saying, 'It's a good game!' And, rubbing his hands, repeating, 'Oh, it's a good

game.'

I could see after a time that the match was more for the spectators than the actual players. Each moment was savoured by the former, friends were recognised with guarded but pleased explanations. 'Hullo, Bill.' 'G'day there, Fred.' 'Well, if it isn't Harold. How are you, Harold?' Bill, Fred and Harold in good health. Strangely enough, also, no talk of pigs or cows or crops, not even furtively.

The children showed little interest in game or adults, being busy at a stall where they could buy icecream and softdrinks, provided they firstly handed over their coin to a dark-featured and suspicious man who perpetually held out his hand.

More dark-featured were the black folk who had come probably from some reserve. They showed a great interest in the game, and were voluble in their comments, which had a strong 'blue' bias, and the small children, clad in outsized and outlandish garments, cheered with grown-up intention

But the match had finished and they were impatient for the new to begin. This was not to be without ceremony, for the delayed commencement of the main match was intentional. It was a time of savouring, when the players champed and pranced as war-horses do before the fray. They assembled into mock scrums, broke and reassembled, as though this was a necessary rite and the match-to-come, without the ceremony, would certainly be lost.

After a time I was convinced that the blues were the home side, and as in this grade the reds were superior in weight I had a natural sympathy for the blues which was to get altogether out of control as the match proceeded, and become as definite a bias as that of the dark people. Added to a natural sympathy for the small fellow was a slight annoyance with the reds for their too apparent *savoir-faire*. It

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was almost indecently that they carried on their own prancings.

They had, too, a mascot, a miniature of a fellow who must have led them on to the field, as though, by contrast, you could see what mighty fellows they were. The red team lumbered nonchalantly after him. The referee, neatly tricked out in white, waited courteously at the centre-line. He talked to them quietly as a senior prefect to juniors. The coin was tossed, won by the reds, the captain meditating over wind, sun's rays and the slope of the field, finally deciding to run down to the east.

A lone old cocky-farmer made it his business to stand beside me while the game was in play, and each time I was caught up in general excitement and moved down the sideline, he followed me. Backwards and forwards we swayed with every exciting pitch and toss of the match, and rarely we exchanged words. Once, however, he said quite gloomily, 'No lime in the soil.'

The old bald-headed man who had thought the previous match a good one was not saying so this time. He kept clasping his hands together and rubbing them anxiously. It was sheer sorrow, almost, which peered from his eyes. He was taking it very much to heart. 'His boy Bruce's playing,' the cocky confided.

And, as though that were the signal for shouting to begin, a shrill feminine voice shrieked, 'Brucy. Brewcey. Bru-cee!' and there, tearing up the field, his short legs working like the arms of an outdated locomotive, was Bruce, with only a sturdy full-back in his path. Silence settled over the field, a deep sorrowful hush which broke and burst into a cascade of 'Ahs' as the full-back narrowly missed Brucee.

Only for a moment, however, and the most excited cry of all mankind welled into a roar. Such a cry did Horatius hear. 'Brucee!' was taken up by a hundred voices, and groans and anguished cries came from the red supporters as

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Bruce swept over the line, swerved towards the goal-posts and there mid-between, but a trifle to the rear, placed his ball.

Men whose faces were seamed with heavy farm-work, women who had long ago become accustomed to the joys and sorrows of life, now gave way to uninhibited delight

They told Bruce he was pretty good, and that was the stuff to give 'em.

The old farmer at my side did seem slightly elevated from his former gloom, but he was cautious and maintained doggedly that there was no lime in the soil, which so annoyed me that I asked him what he meant.

'Look,' he said, pointing to the blues. 'All little fellows. No lime in the soil, that's why. To build the big fellows you have to have that lime. Now that there referee was reared on this soil when there *was* lime in it. He was one of the old blues.'

The try was converted, which again caused a terrific outbreak of savage joy among the blue supporters. The red players exchanged significant glances.

The old fellow informed me that the blues had never yet won a match, lime deficiency presumably being the cause. The reds, who also knew about the blues never having won a match, were determined to cut short this rot. But that they **were** unable to do. Try as they might they could not persuade the blues that they, the reds, were terrible fellows and to be feared, whereas they, the blues, would soon be enveloped in defeat and disgrace. Until half-time the blues prevented the reds from scoring, and the reds refused to allow the blues a repetition of their former triumph.

Half-time and the spectators went into action on the sidelines. They replayed the first half for the players and thereby imparted much valuable information. There was quite a

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manoeuvring to get alongside the great, to hail a player known, and bottles of cordial were distributed, and oranges; until I felt quite out of things and would not have knocked back the opportunity of claiming remote relationship even with a red. Cordial, orange, and advised, the teams trooped again to the field, this time for pure business.

The reds conveyed the impression of this pure business as they ran on to the field, and there was determination in every large chin, firmly set. The blues seemed to think it was a matter for joking, as though they didn't care anyway, but they did. They attacked the reds in a positive fury, as ants will attack lumbering beetles. Not so lumbering, however, was the clean-limbed winger who retrieved the ball from the ruck and flew down the field with it. The furious blues pursued him and the watching, waiting full-back crouched to receive and tackle, but the winger swerved, threw out his hand, swerved again, reached the line and tapped the ball behind it.

The red supporters were taken almost completely by surprise. Then they burst into a roar against which the insults of the embittered black children were as faint cries in a great storm. Reds and supporters straightened themselves with relief, as though, after all, they had just commenced playing. Advice was shouted to the players who were watching the ball soar over the goal. Another roar and the game was away.

The field developed into a battleground in which each red was marked intently and intentionally by a corresponding blue, so that should a red receive a ball he was promptly tackled and dumped. The ref became quite excited and shouted incessantly, 'Back, blues. Play the ball, reds,' in a sort of chant. Then he watched the blues to see they kept their five yards distance, which they were most careful to

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do, knowing their ref, but the reds were not as observant, and were frequently penalised, much to their disgust.

Then, in the midst of this fury and hurly-burly, a collarbone was broken. It belonged to a red, and being a gentleman he did not even writhe. He lay like a silent fox, and waited for examination. He was carried in careful manner from the field. The old man, being either short-sighted or colour-blind, said excitedly, 'What did I tell you? No lime in the soil. Bone broken. What did I tell you?'

'A red,' I shouted, and he seemed surprised.

'Serve him right,' he said. 'He had plenty of lime.'

The blues held the reds right up until the last ten minutes of the game. Then they appeared to tire. Bruce's father almost twisted his hands off in his anxiety. Towards the last few minutes of the game he was tearing at his wrists. 'What do you know? What do you know?' he kept asking spectators. The old fellow beside me had lapsed into a coma I could see the reds would sweep over at any moment, and

knowing the game was almost ended I asked him had he any lime interests.

That appeared to rouse some indignation, as though I had believed his utterances to be purely propaganda 'No sir,' he said forcefully and with dignity. 'I own this field, see and it hadn't no lime in it, either. One day you won't be able to rear man or beast upon it.' He stared resentfully at his fellow spectators. 'Brains, brains,' he muttered. 'They ain't got any.'

'But you don't lime, either,' I said, with one eye to the blues.

'No,' he admitted sadly, 'but you need money.'

Then the reds scored. They had been wrestling heavily near the blue line and suddenly had gone over. The white referee, reared on good lime soil, gave the verdict. Red supporters nearly screamed themselves hoarse, but I preferred to believe the blues had had the moral victory, lime deficiency

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even excluded, and that was all that mattered. I cheered the blues.

‘Once,’ said the old man, as though in a dream, ‘it was all lime. Good soft grass. Fat red cows. Plenty of milk. That was when we had our own butter and cheese factory. All finished now. No lime, of course.’

I felt really sorry for the old fellow, him with his memories. As though through his eyes I could see these brown fields as they had been, knee-deep in rich green grasses, the fatbellied stock on it, and the farmers and the farm children sturdy and strong like the reds, but then I was not at all sure I was sorry for the tough little blues and the tough turf.

‘Look,’ said the old fellow beside me suddenly. ‘George has the ball.’

Not Bruce this time, but George. ‘Jorje!’ shrieked an excited female, but the rest were too breathless to commit their hopes to utterance.

‘Oh, Jawge!’ the female shrieked again, almost weeping.

And George was away, too, out of the pack, past the few backs who had been taken by surprise; past, even, the superb full-back who waited with steady confidence, missing his opponent only by a hair’s breadth. No, George was away to a goal that would have brought the score to equal had it been converted, but no, the ref had blown his whistle immediately following the try, and the blues were cheated of their equalling points.

Plead as they might, the reds were not permitted to allow their opponents a sporting chance, which shows what lime will do to a referee, and the old fellow beside me had forgotten all about that stuff, and with the rest of the crowd was swept up into the crying that billowed and flowed and fell and rose until black children and white, and reds and blues, and wrists and tracts and lime and no lime were caught up

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into such a fellowship of feeling that has made me vow permanently that wherever there is tough dry turf and small tough players I shall pay my entrance fee without quibble and be prepared to put up with come-what-may.

## PRIVATE AMNIG, V.C.

Aaron, a man of many years, is also a man of many children, and that is why, perhaps, he drowns this summer morning, nodding over his emery wheel in the small backyard of the siding cottage.

Any moment now Aaron may wake slowly to life, either to answer a yell to open the gate or to make certain that, if a train approaches, the side gate is closed. Afterwards he will subside again, muttering to himself and drowsing as before.

If Aaron is a little tired, then it is not to be wondered at, for a man who has reared eighteen children is apt to be weary and not expected to be agile, and generally Aaron is unable to snatch a great deal of sleep during the day, because of the children who tumble about the cottage and the small backyard. This morning, however, it seems the heat has sent all Wirril into a gentle torpor, a warm lazy daze which stills the hand of Aaron and commits him to restfulness over his bench of mechanical appliances.

Come evening and the cool creeping down from the foothills, and Aaron will be awake, his emery wheel spitting a splurge of bright sparks; and Aaron will bend over it like a bow, sharpening this tool or that, making a nicety of a blunted chisel or chipped plane blade.

What Aaron thinks from time to time is difficult to say, for Aaron, at any time, seems a little dazed. How easy, then, to put it to the account of his many children, but such a jibe is cheap and too facile. Aaron, in his own way, is proud of his tribe, and will not countenance joking in the matter. Only once has he been known to ask for assistance,

and that was in the matter of his income-tax returns, when he was reassured by Mr. Armstrong, the local postmaster, that he owed the Government nothing.

'In fact,' Mr. Armstrong told him, 'I'm sure the Government must owe you something.'

Aaron's gnarled hand, on this warm morning, droops over the still wheel. His eyes are half closed, his lips parted as he breathes heavily and slowly.

He does not hear the same Mr. Armstrong as he walks tappingly down the road, neatly happy and trim from his post office store.

'Mr. Amnig! Mr. Amnig!' calls Armstrong, his voice high with excitement. 'Mr. Amnig!' The excitement mounts to a point of falsetto.

Aaron wakes into life, brushing his thick hand across his lined face. He stares somewhat stupidly at the wheel before him, seeing it in some queer mysterious way as a symbol, a habit man has when he awakes, and then more consciously he hears the postmaster's voice.

'One minute. One minute,' he grumbles. 'I'll open 'em for you.'

'Not the gates. Not the gates,' says Armstrong with all excitement. 'It isn't the gates today, Mr. Amnig.'

'It isn't the gates today.' That phrase runs over and over in Aaron's mind. Another symbol perhaps. 'It isn't the gates today.' Well, then, what is it if it isn't the gates?

'It's a telegram,' says Armstrong, and his clean slim fingers have it held at both sides, stretched out, the news written plainly for the eyes of the world to read.

Aaron stares down at the telegram a trifle suspiciously perhaps, but mainly wonderingly.

Armstrong stares down at it, too. His eyelids quiver somewhat, his blue eyes clear and keen, whilst his lips keep

moving as though they would voice a great piece of news.

‘He’s got the V.C.’

‘Eh?’ says Aaron. He peers up at Armstrong, puzzled. He feels he might be asleep himself, and this postmaster a partly unwelcome figure in his dream. There is something too energetic about the dapper and tensed form of the messenger.

‘The V.C.?’

‘Yes, the V.C. Harold’s got it for bravery.’

‘Ali,’ says Aaron slowly. This he can understand, although what Harold has ever wanted with bravery he does not quite know.

‘The V.C. That’s the Victoria Cross, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly is,’ says the postmaster. ‘The finest decoration a man can have.’ Armstrong himself takes a pace down the road, some sort of an imaginary Victoria Cross swinging from his white silk shirt.

‘The best a man can have,’ he says.

Aaron says nothing. He stands in the sun, pondering the slip of paper, the words of the postmaster, and the son who has won this award. It all seems so much of a jumble to him, that he would prefer to be sleeping, or at least drowsing again in the sanctuary of his workshop.

‘Missus’ll be pleased to hear it, I’m sure,’ he says.

‘Of course she will,’ says Armstrong. He sweeps energetically around on one heel, his arms swinging towards the low blue hills. ‘We will all be proud to hear it, Mr Amnig.’ He says earnestly, ‘I’m proud to have known Harold.’

Aaron wants Armstrong to take himself away. After that he will tell Harold’s mother and that will be that. Mr Armstrong, however, does not wish to go. He savours the vastness of his news and would advise Aaron concerning his new-found fame.

‘To be the father of a V.C.!’ He is still thinking in

exclamations.

‘H’m,’ says Aaron again after a time. He moves from one foot to another. Apparently mild, Aaron is inwardly a man with strong feelings, but the gift of expressing them has been denied him. He says then, plainly, ‘Well, I’ll tell the missus.’

He has committed himself to going to the house, and moves towards it. The postmaster stares after him, and Aaron, shuffling, holds the piece of limp paper. At the house, however, a faint surge of excitement goes through him, and this irritates him. His voice shrills a trifle as he calls impatiently, ‘Mum! Mum! Where are you?’

Mrs Aaron, when she appears, is certainly not prepared for such news. She has been dozing on the sun-swept verandah, facing the railway, and perspiration beads her flushed face. She blinks at Aaron and then says, ‘Well, what is it now?’

‘Here.’ He hands her the paper.

She stares at it and then hands it back to him. ‘What does it all mean?’ she asks.

Aaron takes the telegram from her, peers at it, turns it over and says finally, ‘Young Harold’s gone and got a Victoria Cross.’

‘Well now,’ says Mrs Aaron. She cannot, for a moment, believe that, but after a second’s thought she realises she knew it all the time.

‘If ever anyone was going to get the Victoria Cross it was our Harold,’ she says triumphantly.

‘Don’t take no notice of that Armstrong feller,’ Aaron warns her. ‘He’s still standing up there on the road.’

‘They’ll make him a corporal now,’ says Mrs Aaron happily.

Aaron shakes his head. ‘I don’t think they’ll do that-not now that the war’s over.’

‘Then,’ demands Mrs Aaron with triumph, ‘how can he get the Victoria Cross if the war’s over?’

'I don't know about that,' says Aaron. He pauses a moment. 'I don't care, either.' He turns and stumps up the yard towards his emery wheel and bench, and the coolness of the workshop. Armstrong, watching him, walks away with a certain degree of disappointment registering on his face.

While Aaron sleeps, the news whirls about the Wirril district. Party lines are ever aids to gossip, and it is flung far and wide about Harold Amnig and his V.C.

'Which one was that?' is the usual comment. 'I never could tell who was who in that batch.'

'Harold,' says another. 'You know, the white-faced one with the dark hair and skinny legs.'

'All seemed the same to me.'

But after a time Harold is pin-pointed, and there are confessions, a spate of them, all along the party lines.

'I always picked him out of the bunch. Seemed the only one with much go in him. What can you expect when there are so many?'

These tales are but partly true. Harold, of all the boys, might have seemed the quietest; and yet he was normal enough, foxing with the boys, rabbiting and playing cricket on the railway line between the coming of the trains. But such simple living only takes on symbolism when fame comes. Harold had been, before the war, an ordinary youth; then, when war came, had sprouted into premature manhood, gone away to a call-up, come home on a few leaves and finally gone north.

Andy, the eldest, had got himself made a prisoner in Malaya, which, to Mr. and Mrs Aaron's way of thinking— had they expressed themselves—was of little use. Ron and Gerald, the two younger than Andy, had seen action in the Middle East and then New Guinea. The remainder of the

Amnig family were still at Wirril Creek, sprinkled about the district as helps on farms, or actually at the siding cottage, filling the bedrooms and spilling on to the verandahs.

A great flourish of trumpets is abroad in Wirril Creek and Rail, and throughout the entire Coolbucca Shire. War may have ended, but Wirril Creek has sprung into fame, since it has now been proved that from the local pastures and the low cool hills may come as good as any in the world. There is plenty of talking about welcoming Harold home, and then it is no longer 'Harold,' but 'Private Amnig, V.C.'; which, it is understood, is the correct manner of addressing yourhero.

Even to Aaron, Harold is called 'Private Amnig, V.C.', and it only leaves the old man bewildered and angry. His anger subsides, however, as he forgets the whole foolish affair. And then Harold himself comes home, not by train, as so many anticipate—they with their brass band ready—but by truck, dropped quietly in the centre of Wirril Creek and not recognised by anyone, since soldiers in green are not uncommon. The rector's wife is the first to learn the news on her monthly visit.

Says Mrs Aaron: 'Harold's home. Isn't that good news? And not a bit different.'

'Ah,' says the good wife of the rector.

'You'd think it would change them, wouldn't you?' says Mrs Aaron. 'But not my Harold.'

She might have gone on saying 'Not my Andy, not my Gerry, not my Ron,' for they had all come back to the siding cottage in apparent ignorance of rehabilitation problems.

The 'Welcome Home', then, is complete, and the arrangements that have been made are many and exacting, all

leading towards the one point and the same day. There have been public meetings, these resulting in committees and subcommittees, so that sports have been arranged, a kind of a gymkhana, food has been obtained, advertisements have appeared, as though word of mouth would not suffice in Wirril, and the Coolbucca *Guardian* has printed reams about 'Our local boy, Private Amnig, V.C.'

As a result of these meetings, committees and subcommittees, a public holiday, in the Shire of Coolbucca, has been proclaimed. The local member has been asked to be the main speaker, and the rector has offered to preside. The matter of subscription has been attended to, and in no tardy manner.

No, all things taken into consideration, Private Amnig, V C., is listed for a fair sort of celebration.

When the day dawns, it is Aaron who must be constantly opening the gate for the cars that insist on crossing. There are buses, too, great lumbering vehicles laden with cheering children, young men and young women, and old Diggers who are ruminating their years of sentiment and memories, chewing the cud of old and half-forgotten days. With them are their wives, the Red Cross helpers and, of course, members of the committees and sub-committees. It is to them Aaron opens the gates, as though it might be any ordinary day, and indeed the business of gate-opening and gate-shutting concluded, he retires to his den of a workshop to seek peace.

Wirril Creek, then, is a festive scene. There are stalls of drinks and stalls of food. There are races and games, chacking and fun-making, both on the sports ground and across the river, where the young couples wander in scrub or lie on the sloping banks. It is a great day for the Wirril Creekers.

Before dark, as dusk hazes the blue hills, Aaron bestirs himself. He leave his workshop—regretfully, perhaps—and

makes his way to the house. He scrubs his face and hands vigorously, puts on a clean shirt and a tie with it. He brushes his greying hair, puts on his coat and hat and waits for Mrs Aaron. She emerges, fully and properly dressed for the occasion, since there shall be no 'letting down' of her Harold.

Aaron's pace towards the Memorial Hall is stiff and awkward. He is reminded of the many times he has gone towards the small church for this or that christening. Now it is another, a more fearful sort of christening; a baptism, you might say, into the life of a hero.

The three soldier-brothers act as a sort of bodyguard and guard-of-honour to their brother. Andy is there, having returned from Malaya and prison. At his homecoming, the trumpets blew moderately. At the homecoming of Ron and Gerald, both survivors of the Borneo show, the trumpets scarcely tooted. Harold, the hero, tensed and white as ever beneath his hat, braves the crowds but wishes his hat might hide him. Then they enter the hall.

There is great merriment in the hall, that happy restlessness that crowns a festive day. There has been discovered this day a great hoard of goodwill, and that hoard has been exploited and distributed in no mean manner. Now, as Harold enters the hall, the young folk realise he has changed little, and their former awe changes to a sudden inrushing affection, so much so that they shout noisily, 'Ah there Harold,' or 'Good old Harold,' and try to catch his eyes, to have a salute answered personally, so great in the human heart is an aching for fame.

Harold, sweating in his uniform, still wonders about the whole affair, and distinctly dislikes it.

The band breaks appropriately into 'Here the Conquering Hero Comes', for about the fiftieth time this day. There is a clashing of cymbals, a rolling and a rattling of the drums large and small, and a concerted blare of brass for the great deed the young man has done.

Then the rector speaks. He waves the noise down to a small sighing shirring sea. He brushes the sea away with one sweep of his hand. He holds the people, saying to them that they think this and they think that, or more correctly reported by the *Coolbucca Guardian*, 'We think this . . . ' 'And I am sure we think that . . . ' and it seems he has hit the nail upon the head, often, for there is a cheer and cry to every statement; the rector is obviously pleased, and in a few moments hands over to the local member.

He, fine fellow, is ready with words and phrases. He rises, from behind the chairman's table, lifting his hands from the black velvet cloth and rubbing them together. He speaks of 'Our Hero' with a look towards Harold, and of 'Our Unsung Heroes', with a look towards where heaven is at this meridian, and he subdues the jubilant crowd with a mention of the unknown heroes. He is a man to sway the people, this one, and Aaron is seen to nod, from the midst of his puzzlement. The rest Aaron cannot understand—the fuss, the band, the crowd and the festivity.

The local member promises the people he will not stand there to say many words, and having thus set them at ease proceeds at great length. He feels, he says, that it devolves upon him to voice the thoughts of the people of his constituency, the people that have here gathered, and so he turns, accompanied by acclamation, to Private Harold Amnig, V.C., and says that he speaks on behalf, not only of the people of Wirril Creek and the entire Coolbucca Shire, but for the people of the State, nay, the Commonwealth, and (here dropping his voice), the Empire, and the Allied Nations themselves.

It is to be thought, then, by the manner in which this statement is carried with acclamation, that the Allied Nations themselves are applauding, so deafening is the handclapping, and it is certain the nations of the world might little better them, and yet this is not the end of it all. A

presentation is to be made, and soberly, quietly, bearing in mind the task which is his, the local member steps forward.

'Private Amnig, V.C.' His voice is deep, solemn. 'On behalf of the people of Wirril Creek, Coolbucca Shire, I hereby present you with this token of their gratitude and esteem.'

He hands an envelope to the boy.

Harold Amnig takes the envelope, bows, and stands in silent anguish.

Aaron, seated in the audience, in the front row, stares up at his son. He shares a little of that agony his boy is experiencing, but deeper, even more than that, he has a private agony. He sees this presentation as a vast conspiracy to take his son from him. Because he is no fool, but only the father of eighteen children, he knows they have branded this boy a hero, and he has never wanted him to be just a hero. He cannot say anything, however, nor think much more than now he thinks. He watches his son twisting the envelope then opening it, and finally staring, amazed and a trifle fearfully, at the opened cheque.

The local member stands, raises a hand and says, 'The people of this district have made this gesture, raising the amount of five hundred pounds'—he must mouth this terrific sum, and all watching him savour the fame of it—'as a token, if insufficient, of their gratitude for what one soldier has done.'

Cheering and applause. Only the Amnig boys, looking at each other, mouth a voiceless whistle. Harold shakes his head a trifle, but Aaron feels a pricking anger, a sensation new to him and uncontrollable, making him helpless.

He knows in a dismayed moment that wherever his son walks he will be known and remembered not as a man, but as a hero, as the winner of five hundred pounds. He wishes

to stand up and stamp from the hall, but does not, because of his white-faced son up there and Mrs Aaron beside him. Instead he sits there, waiting for his son to speak, and Harold, when he does speak, talks in a low tone, little of which can be heard except the words 'I'm glad to be home,' at which Mrs Aaron happily nods.

It seems, then, that the show is finished, every ounce having been squeezed from the day. There has been no spectacular response from the award winner, no exciting telling of the tale, the manner in which he attacked the machinegun, or even his thoughts. It seems difficult, indeed, for some to visualise Harold ever having pulled anything off, but it is true, of course.

As they sit there, wondering what is the next step before they sing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' and the National Anthem, the rector rises, and taking advantage of both silence and the warmly-developed social spirit says:

'I am sure we cannot let this day pass without some tribute to the parents of our hero. They are with us tonight, and we all know them: Mrs Amnig, who has cared all these years for her boys, and he who must feel the proudest man in Wirril Creek tonight, Mr. Aaron Amnig, father of the V.C. winner.'

There is a burst of applause, and Aaron rises, half angrily.

If he has never said anything in his life publicly then he will say it now, and be damned to the parson and be damned to everyone.

'And,' continues the rector, 'whenever we think of Harold Amnig, V.C., we shall think of the man who is his father.'

Struck, Aaron sinks to his seat, his whole action melted in the last amazing statement. He feels his wife take his hand,

but this only numbly. He stares up at the face of his hero son and sees suddenly that the boy is not at all changed and that, for all his bravery, he is not alone. His gaze shifts to his other sons; Andy, who had been a prisoner, and the two boys who fought longer, even, than their V.C. brother. In a queer way it commences to filter through him, as a thought, that they have not been separated from him. He thinks, even, in a wild rush of hope, that they may live with him, and even work with him: Andy, Ron, Gerry and perhaps Harold, for all his five hundred pounds.

He forgets the five hundred pounds then, and sits back, a trifle stiffly, while the tears prick his eyes.

Back of the hall someone shouts, jovially perhaps, but with feeling: 'What about three cheers for Aaron?' And then the people of Wirril, who have said for many years, jokingly, that Aaron himself has deserved the V.C., stand and let ring three hearty cheers, while Aaron sits tight in his seat amazed, bewildered, but just beginning to be happy.

## THE FISH REDEEMING

Mr. Rankin esteemed esteem. Success he did not so much care for, since some fair measure of esteem had come his way. Settled in Wirril Creek as schoolmaster with a comfortable and tidy home, a comfortable and tidy wife, there was little more he asked of life. Except, perhaps, continued tidiness.

Mr. Rankin was noted for tidiness. He could not abide disorder in the classroom, and Mrs Rankin's life was given to keeping the home neat and clean. Not that she rebelled in any manner against her husband's standards, for she had come to regard them as an integral part of God's universe, with Percy Rankin, as it were, the servant of tidiness.

Perhaps Percy Rankin over-estimated the esteem given him. Even Mr. Peebles, local-politics man, thought his friend over-fussy. Not one small blackberry clump could Mr. Rankin see but he must have it out, speaking sententiously about the 'influence of untidiness upon the young lives of our children.' Out would come the accursed weed, of course; but the farmers, the timber-workers and the teamsters thought the schoolteacher a 'proper old woman.'

Which, of course, he was. When the first Rankin baby arrived, it was commonly said that Rankin had had it. He certainly fussed enough over it, knew how to fold a nappy, what was the right temperature for the milk, what was wind and what was not—and the rest—and perhaps it was over the matter of the baby that his esteem began its decline.

Yet Rankin, in his own way, was a good fellow. It was

simply perhaps that he was a schoolteacher in every corpuscle, every vein, artery and organ. He fussed, he nagged, he irritated, he foisted himself upon people's minds by his persistence, and no one cared to talk him down, had anyone **been** able. So that in his own way he had earned himself that regard of the people which he so highly prized.

And such an esteem can build a man's ego, can assure him that he has the most of life tied up in a small parcel, a nuggety swag on the end of a stick, carried about, never to be relinquished, the envy of many, and the very justification of existence.

And so it might have gone on for ever, had it not been for fishing.

It was strange that Mr. Rankin should have been attracted by fishing. Most men find in fishing a great relaxation of mind. It gives them time to think. It is, in a way, a medicine, purifying the spirit whilst it also stimulates or heals. None of that Mr. Rankin desired, so sufficient he was in himself, so rarely was he visited by subjective speculations. Yet the same teasing bait that has lured on many a man had also for Mr. Rankin a fearful fascination.

One afternoon Mr. Rankin, after tidying up the school and marking a trifle of homework, had stepped from the ochrous department building, and, about to put a long lean leg over his pushbike, noticed a boy padding along in the thick red dust of the highway. The boy should long ago have been home, but, his head forward, his feet scuffing the warm stuff of the road, he was trudging merrily.

'I say, young Terry,' Mr. Rankin called in his after-school voice, 'you are a bit late, aren't you?'

'Perch,' said Terry Hickey in a proud voice. He held up, for the schoolteacher's inspection, a fine specimen of a fish.

'You didn't catch that?' said Mr. Rankin, amazed.

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'Now didn't I just,' said Terry, his eyes glowing. 'And with a worm, what's more.'

'With a worm,' breathed Mr. Rankin.

'You can get 'em,' said Terry, the light still in his eyes, 'if you try.' He seemed then to have forgotten Mr. Rankin, as he remembered again his tussle on the bank of the brown pool. And in the same moment, a shaft of light had penetrated to the murky depths of the Rankin soul.

'I can't believe it, Terry,' he said, shaking his head.

'Oh, well,' said Terry, and he plodded on his way, making even larger puffs of the scuffed dust.

And that had begun in Mr. Rankin a spurt of desire which was fated to become a fierce passion.

So fierce was the passion that it led him to extremes of extravagance. Normally a person who totted-up his petty expenses, and made much of income, capital expenditure and the like—as though he relished sums out of school as well as in—he changed suddenly to making purchases of a reckless nature. For example, he bought long, shining, black waders, these presumably for fishing, and a gleaming creation of a rod such as a fishing man dreams of, believing it to be his final reward in heaven. Other equipment, too: nylon lines, hooks of every shape and dimension, cunningly turned, and floats, and a creel which could never be even one-quarter filled, and a reel with every gadget upon it, and a thousand other things designed to entice and ensnare the agreeable fish.

Perhaps it was her husband's purchases which began the questioning of her Percy within Mrs Rankin's heart. Hitherto she had been blinded by his magnificence, his omnipotence, as it were, his ability to accomplish what he set out to do, his rare passion for tidiness, his fierce eye upon the wayward napkin, or the dead flowers in some half-forgotten

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vase; for Mrs Rankin had ever been her husband's best pupil. Now she noticed that his clear-headed outlook on buying had become somewhat fuzzy. She almost gasped as one fishing thing after another came into the house. And what she noticed, more than anything, was that never a fish did her hubby catch.

Percy Rankin thought that a strange phenomenon also. Having picked up a little here and a little there of the art of fishing, he had set out with great hopes of filling his creel on his first attempt. As the locals could have told him, none could have accomplished that, so few being the fish in the creek, but Mr. Rankin never asked anything of the locals. He instructed them always, and would have been surprised if they had pointed out his lack of knowledge in the art of fishing.

Yet the terrible truth was that the fish mocked him and all his grand equipment. Doubtless they had many a finny quiver, many a watery chuckle as they peered upwards at the lank creature on the bank. Fussy little minnows tickled his line, nibbling at the bait, and very fine bait it was too, long juicy worms from the tidy Rankin gardens. Mr. Rankin, when he saw his float bob, and the water shiver, would quiver with excitement and hastily try to jag a fish, but not even a minnow lost his self-respect over the elongated schoolteacher.

And so Mr. Rankin, though undefeated, was powerfully disappointed. The blame lay with the fish, not with him. He read more advertisements and played into the hands of the vendors, for the fever was still upon him. But Mrs Rankin could barely conceal her amazement. She found, too, to her positive delight, that she could leave nappies lying about without her husband noticing. In her newlyreleased condition, she was apt to go to the extreme of contempt for her man. He had never caught a fish; he was a fusspot. She left flowers in vases until they withered, and often neglected to

dust out a room, always with a half-guilty, half-triumphant feeling.

The rot spread in Mr. Rankin. At school he would be caught by periods of abstraction. In the midst of long-division he would forget the task in hand. The children were amazed, but, like Mrs Rankin, delighted. Feet of clay in the shining splendour of their tin god. A certain amount of silent chacking. Untidiness, and, what is more, scarcely noticed. A falling-off in intensity of teaching.

Terry Hickey, cunning child, knew the weakness of his teacher, and he would forge the most incredible accounts of fishing. Perch of unbelievable size. How they had flown to the line of his father. How Lash Thorgood had brought in a beauty of six pounds up at Brown's Wash.

'Brown's Wash, did you say, Terry?' Mr. Rankin would ask eagerly.

'That's right, sir,' Terry would say, and Mr. Rankin's heart would leap sickeningly with amazement and jealousy—and hope.

'And the bait?' Mr. Rankin would ask breathlessly; 'the bait, Terry?'

'Worm,' Terry would say, and slyly, 'big fat juicy worm.'

And that afternoon Mr. Rankin would be on his hands and knees after a big fat juicy worm. Gone now the order of the week, homework on such and such nights, letters to the Department on Friday nights, and even the Progress Association missed their esteemed treasurer and his phobia of blackberry patches.

Another sort of fisherman altogether was Mr. Tracey. He had that quiet, confident approach appreciated by all decent fish. They recognised his merits and respected him for what he was, and every tussle was a clean issue in which the best won, usually Mr. Tracey. He had long ago given up that

feverish approach to the sport which marks out the greedy amateur. So that he was able to appreciate the beauty of the night as he kept his long silent vigil, and his thoughts were peaceful enough, his silence ruminative.

When, then, he heard a crashing along the banks of his favourite pools, and a heavy breathing, and even muttered cursings—and saw a fearful stab of light—he felt quite stirred to anger. He blessed himself for having already caught five fine fish, and was about to rise and go when he too, was caught in the glare of light. He could not go.

The light wavered and eclipsed. There was a moment's silence. When Mr. Tracey could peer through the murky gloom he espied a strange creature, tall, gloomily dark garbed in outlandish rig and carrying, of all things, a huge creel. He shook his head in unbelief. Then the light stabbed again.

'Tracey,' said the voice. It was weary, despairing, disgruntled.

'Huh,' said Mr. Tracey without favour.

The light moved from him and explored the bank eagerly. Then the light came to rest upon five fish. There it stayed, and at the other end of it was a long-drawn-out 'Oh!' Finally the light dropped.

Then Mr. Rankin said in a strange voice, 'Did you catch **those**, Tracey?'

It was obvious to them both, but more easily believed by the catcher. Mr. Tracey barely nodded.

In the darkness Mr. Rankin must have been talking to himself. Suddenly he burst out 'Aren't they beauties!'

Mr. Tracey felt his anger evaporate. Of course they were beauties, and he loved occasional praise. 'Not bad at all,' he said modestly.

Mr. Rankin was breathing heavily. Little did the fishing farmer know that the schoolteacher was close to being a little mad, upon the verge of seizing the fish and fleeing.

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Then Mr. Rankin must have won his first bout, even in the midst of his desperation, for he said: 'I say, you wouldn't mind giving me one, would you?' It was a question, not a statement.

'Not at all,' said Mr. Tracey. He could not use the five fish in any case. 'In fact,' he said generously, 'you can have four if you like. I only need one.'

'Only need one,' repeated Mr. Rankin with some bitterness. Then he came to himself. 'I'll buy them of course,' he said, and before Mr. Tracey could protest he said rapidly, 'You see, I need a few badly.'

Mr. Tracey shook his head, bewildered. 'Well, put them in your basket,' he said finally.

'No,' said Mr. Rankin triumphantly, 'I'll put hooks in 'em, as though I'd caught them.' He seemed now to be speaking to himself. He took hooks from a compartment of his marvellous basket, and began hooking the mouths of the fish. He tied short pieces of nylon to the hooks. He slipped the lines about his fingers and stood. 'Now I'll get off home with these,' he said in an exultant voice. He stood a moment, his eyes gleaming in the light of his searchlight. 'I'll show her I can catch something,' he said triumphantly, and for that moment believed indeed that he had caught the fish.

'Oh,' said Mr. Tracey curiously.

'Never can catch a fish,' said Mr. Rankin, reverting to sorrow, 'try as I may, Tracey. And the little woman thinks I'm a fool.' As the full truth dawned on him, he repeated his words. 'Yes, a fool,' he said incredulously. He shook his head, and then came closer to the farmer. 'I say, Tracey,' he said, 'you won't let on, will you?'

'Eh, er, hah, that is to say, no,' said Mr. Tracey. He was astounded.

'Well, thanks,' said Mr. Rankin, but he had forgotten Mr. Tracey. He had given away to tremendous temptation, reclaiming his esteem, at whatever price. Only he and Tracey

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knew he had sold his soul. 'I'd better be getting along,' he muttered.

Mr. Tracey watched him pick up his creel and the light. His eyes gleamed when he saw the fine rod, and he said, wistfully, 'Haven't you ever caught a fish with that?'

'Never a one,' said Mr. Rankin. He paused a moment, sadly. Then he felt the weight of the fish in his grasp. 'But this makes up for it,' he said heartily. He began to crash through the bush.

Then it came to Mr. Tracey in a flash that what was being done here was irremediable. Rankin was doing something he might later regret.

'Just one moment, Rankin,' he said.

The schoolmaster paused. He knew the tone within the voice. It was one he had used himself, many a time. It was accusation, reproach.

Yet Mr. Tracey was not reproachful. 'How is it,' he asked, 'that you never catch any?' He laughed with a faint trace of scorn. 'How is it?' he said, echoing himself. 'When you come crashing through like a rhinoceros, scaring the fish.' He snorted. 'And I bet you use worms for bait, hey?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Rankin. The fire had gone from him. The fish hung limp in his grasp. His old failure flowed back upon him. 'Worms,' he agreed.

Mr. Tracey shook his head, pityingly. He liked this feeling of pitying Rankin, but there was more to it than that, great precepts at stake; anyway, precepts of the fisherman's world.

'Just you put all that stuff down,' he said, and as Mr. Rankin obeyed meekly he felt the contempt in Mr. Tracey's voice.

'With that great glaring light,' said Mr. Tracey, 'and all that noise and the like.' He peered at the schoolteacher.

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'You don't even show respect for your fish,' he cried. 'How can you expect to catch them, hey?' He added heavily, 'And with a worm!'

Ten minutes later the two men rose carefully. Without the aid of a light they crept through the tall gums along the bank. Their going was very soft. Finally they came to a long pool covered with dark eeriness.

'Here,' whispered Mr. Tracey.

They sat behind a thick-boled gum, and Mr. Tracey showed his friend how a frog is hooked. Mr. Rankin watched carefully. He had only a faint hope that he might redeem himself. He no longer cared for that sort of esteem he had known, for its old power had died. But he longed passionately to catch a fish, not simply that he might take it home to his wife and confound her. Not even that he might regain his old poise and become again the steady schoolteacher. Something even deeper than that was involved, but it was not very clear to him, as he squatted and stared at his line being hooked with a new and fearful bait.

'Now throw it,' urged Mr. Tracey, and Mr. Rankin threw it, so that at first it curved into the air, and was faintly seen against that light above the pool. Then it hit the water with a faint 'Polop!' and sank.

Moments of waiting. Moments that drew out, extended to their own limits, after which time ceased to be, the world frozen in that strange light and the water unmoving.

The two men sat there, each with his own thoughts, Mr. Tracey trying not to feel proud, an evangelist of fishing, and yet, as he saw the line sink, so certain of what his craft must yield; and Mr. Rankin, humbled now, with his almost accomplished crime for ever behind him and negated, watching the line moving in the water. His pulses were beginning to throb, heavily, and his heart, too, had begun

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hammering.

But if the fish heard, they would know it for a drumming of respect to them, and a noise of excitement to the schoolmaster, who, having forgotten all, was staring at the line with final certainty in his mind that this time the bait would be taken, and the line fly until it had reached its immediate limit, whilst behind the reel would be the madly excited fisherman, who, however, would not be so excited that he could not fight, nor foolish enough to lose the first fruits of his vindication.

**MR.  
HICKEN'S  
LETTER**

Mr. Hicken, as everyone knows, is a tall, tired man. He seems to carry about with him a perpetual weariness. Mind you, we are not saying this is genuine, any more than we are insisting that it is genuine. You just never know with Mr. Hicken. Come to think of it, you never quite know anyone, really. We all have our camouflage and defence techniques, and use them from time to time.

This day Mr. Hicken seemed more weary than ever. Not a lot had happened lately in his life, but then there had been much thinking and it may well have been that which tired the old chap. Take, for example, that incident with young Hickey and the pears. It had resulted in a degree of bewilderment to the old farmer, but on the whole had proved greatly satisfactory. We mean that small dam that the two boys had created. That was a kind of hope for Mr. Hicken that he could persuade Ralph to stay and farm the land at Wirril Creek. Most of all, Mr. Hicken wanted to grow peanuts, for the times were concentrating fairly much upon peanuts. Some called them ground-nuts, but Mr. Hicken liked the old name—peanuts. He could visualise the rich green foliage of them against his red volcanic soil, his rich basaltic earth.

You would think then that Mr. Hicken's mind and inner eye would have been upon Ralph or the peanuts. Curiously it wasn't. Curiously it was, today, upon his legs. Just as we sometimes get strange views of ourselves, so this day the lanky farmer was having an unusual view of himself. He

was saying to himself, 'My! My! How long my legs are.' He had a bit of a smile playing around his lips for the very length of his legs.

At one stage of his rumination he thought, 'My! My legs must have grown. Overnight, I would say. Quite long they are. Too long, I think.' Then he added whimsically, 'Perhaps the longest legs in the world!'

To tell the truth, Mr. Hicken wouldn't have seen all that many legs, and certainly not in his own country let alone the whole world, for his world was fairly circumscribed. He had not been further south than Newcastle, or further north than Tweed Heads. Travel made him nervous, and the energy required of him in meeting people drew severely upon his nervous reserves.

This, then, was the state in which Mr. Armstrong, the local postmaster, found his old client Mr. Hicken. Mr. Hicken did not see him coming on the postal cycle, that machine all tricked out in brilliant paint—post office red, you might say. He did not see the postman's bag, or notice the clips about the ankles and trousers of the public servant. Mr. Hicken was still surveying himself, likening himself—in a rare touch of humour—to a Daddy Long Legs spider. He chuckled faintly at his own thought.

Then he saw Mr. Armstrong. Now it may have been the sun playing tricks, or it may have been Mr. Hicken was still entrapped in legs, or it may have been a momentary aberration of sight and thought, but suddenly Mr. Armstrong seemed to have a monstrous face, and a swollen head, and his cycle clasped between his legs seemed like some creature out of a phantasy. Mr. Hicken had the delicious dread which always visited him in his private phantasies, and since this phantasy was very public, he chose to enjoy it in his own terrified sort of manner.

'Upon my soul!' he cried. He backed away from the distorted vision before him. 'Upon my soul!' he said a second

time

‘Mr. Hicken!’ shouted the postmaster. He knew about the old farmer, and his day-dreaming. ‘I have a letter for you.’

Mr. Hicken heard that. Dread again seized him. ‘A letter!’ he shouted back, as though both of them could not hear at the normal decibel level.

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Armstrong, ‘a letter for you. A registered letter.’

The old fellow should have understood the letter would have to be special. Everyone had to go to the post office to get the letters. Wirril Creek didn’t have any mail delivery. Strictly speaking, the postmaster did not even have to deliver registered letters, but kindness and curiosity both impelled him to bring this special epistle to Mr. Hicken.

Mr. Hicken had a third visitation of the same dread. His mind swiftly flew back to the time when his first wife had been in Coolbucca Hospital, and the kindly surgeon had written him a letter telling him that Mrs Hicken was ill with ‘terminal carcinoma.’ His reason probably was to extract a few more visits by the reluctant husband. It had had that effect, but from that time onwards the farmer had associated registered letters with tragedy, with death and the like.

‘Registered,’ he said gloomily, and his face showed his sudden sorrow. He could see Mr. Armstrong clearly now, and that man’s face showed nothing but delight. He wondered about that.

Mr. Armstrong nodded. ‘It’s from Ralph, you know.’

‘Ralph!’ shouted Mr. Hicken. His senile appearance suddenly changed. He was standing upright. Tall he was, and erect, a fine figure of a man. He no longer drooped, no longer seemed tired, and the sudden return of vigour astonished the postmaster.

‘From overseas,’ he said. ‘Has a foreign stamp on it.’

Oh, Mr. Hicken was a happy man. It would be wrong to say he danced, but he suddenly became very Dickensian as

he wove his way past the rail fence, opening the gate with sudden dexterity and almost snatching the letter from the public servant’s proffered hand. ‘Ralph, eh?’ the old man was saying, and he kept looking down at the letter.

Mr. Armstrong waited quietly. He had not brought the letter for nothing. News for the local district was his responsibility. He knew for the most part what would be in any given letter. He could tell by appearance, address, feel, and weight. In this letter a cheque, in that an invoice or a bill. In another a newsy communication. Oh, it was his life and he was an expert. However, the envelope of this registered letter had been quite thick, and no amount of feeling would yield the secret of its contents. He sighed happily as he waited.

What he had forgotten was that Mr. Hicken used reading glasses. Always those glasses remained in the kitchen, in the third drawer, on a pad of red velvet. Mr. Hicken invariably forgot to take them with him, even when he was shopping and others had to act as his reading eyes. Mr. Armstrong would dearly have loved to be the reading eyes at this moment, but Mr. Hicken was having none of that. He simply stood, meditating over the letter, and then, after a small sigh, turned and made his way towards the house.

Only once did he pause. He stopped and turned to watch Mr. Armstrong remount his cycle, and with an urge and a shove send it on its way to the post office. Mr. Hicken gave a kind of grunt and went again towards the house.

Mr. Hicken didn’t open the letter immediately. It wasn’t even that he wished to taste the anticipation of its contents. It was that the dread had returned, the dread he usually had with any new event. Mr. Hicken was by nature and habituation a pessimist, but what saved him from being wholly negative were his journeys into phantasy. When things

## The Days & Dreams of Arcady

seemed threatening he would dream them into some glorious surprise. He could extract joy from the worst of natural and circumstantial disasters. One flick of his imagination and he had a new situation. He could turn sorrow to surprise and grief to glory. Not of course that he *believed* in any of it. He did not, but it was his method of making his way in life.

He found the spectacles, he slit open the envelope with the potato knife, and he began to read the contents. Contrary to most people's ideas about him, Mr. Hicken was an avid reader. He especially liked fiction, and the worlds into which it introduced him. His fiction characters would often come to play with him, and he gave them the best of his phantasies for their environments and habitats. We say this only to convince our readers that Mr. Hicken was no fool when it came to reading a letter, especially a letter from his soldier son, Ralph.

'Dad (Ralph had written),

'At last I am coming home. It has been a long time. I waited on after many of the fellows were repatriated. It has been quite a time here. One part of me wanted to come home to see you. The other wanted to stay on. Things have been happening to me.

'I can't tell you what it meant to go into prisoner of war camps and see the men all skin and bones, huge hollows for eyes, and the tragedy of the deaths of their many mates. It would be hard for you to understand, so I will not write much about it, but try to describe it when I get home.

'Now I am looking forward to the time when I'll get to meet you. With Mum gone, it won't be the same, but still it will be home. I don't know what I'll be doing in the future, but I've got a few ideas in my mind. Anyway, we will chat them over. This letter will get to you long before I do. There will be time in Sydney being demobbed, and I guess you won't be making it down to Sydney, so I'll see you in the old home town, Wirril Creek.

'Give my love to all the folk there. I won't mention any by name because others will complain that I have forgotten them. So love to all, and of course, Dad, especially to you.

RALPH.

## Mr Hicken's Letter.

Mr. Hicken read and re-read the letter. Sometimes there would be tears in his eyes. At other times he would sit bolt upright and say, 'Well, how wonderful! How wonderful!' Then doubt would grip him, the old dread would threaten to return and he could only overcome it by looking at the letter again, or by standing up and pacing the floor.

'Of course he will come,' he would say, and after a few of these self-reassurances, Mr. Hicken got himself outside to run up and down the pasture in the night paddock, and to do a little jump, skip and a hop, so that had anyone seen him they would surely have thought he was at once most wonderfully youthful and most incredibly senile.

It did not take long for the district to know that Ralph Hicken was coming back. Ralph had a wonderful history. He had gone to the Middle East with the 6th Division A.I.F. and had returned in the 9th Division. This division had been first in New Guinea and then later 'in the Islands', any one of the hundreds of islands where they hunted the Japanese troops. After the bomb on Hiroshima the capitulation by the Japanese armed forces had begun, and Ralph had been sent to Borneo. It was there he had shared in the rehabilitation of the ex-prisoners of war. He had elected to stay in the army longer than most, so that by this time all the joy and fuss of returning soldiers, sailors and airmen had died down. In fact it had died out.

It had not died out in Wirril Creek. They were proud of their servicemen and had resolved to do them good when they returned. There would be an event with the Returned **Servicemen's** Club. The demobbed men would have to run the gauntlet of 'as Welcome Home', with banners outside the local hall, and much fuss inside. Because of the lateness in time, Ralph was the last serviceman to be demobbed. They thought that made it an even more significant event. So

great plans were afoot for Ralph's welcome home.

Mr. Hicken had found their plan quite devastating. They sent the Committee up to him to talk the matter over. Of course, the postmaster was one of the leaders of the Committee. That did not at all appeal to Mr. Hicken. He must have decided to obfuscate the matter by suddenly becoming helpless and unable to understand. He trembled and became agitated, clucked with his tongue, drew in his breath, shook his head and looked generally confused. They repeated their offer to him, but he kept shaking his head.

Finally Mr. Armstrong said with some severity, 'But Mr. Hicken, the Committee wants to send you to Sydney to meet Ralph. They want to pay your fares. Think what that would mean to Ralph.'

Mr. Hicken almost moaned. 'I don't think that would be good at all,' he groaned. 'I might get lost, I might miss Ralph, and then what would happen?'

Immediately they understood his dilemma. 'Oh,' Mr. Armstrong said, relieved. 'We never thought of you going on your own.' He laughed, as though that idea had never entered their heads. 'Oh,' he repeated, 'one of us would be going with you.' Since that seemed to cause even more dismay to the farmer, he added quickly 'I would go, or Adam Tracey here, or one other of us.'

Mr. Hicken refused the offer. He had never dreamed of going to Sydney. Why should he do that? What would Ralph think? He told them these things in his confused way, and they sighed and left it at that. They talked it out in front of him and finally decided to leave the matter to Ralph. He would work it out, anyway. Besides—come to think of it now—he might like to slip home and give his dear

Dad something of a surprise. Yes, that would just about be it: Ralph would surely like to surprise his father.

They nodded on that, shook Mr. Hicken's hand, and retreated from the farm and its small bosom of a dam.

Mr. Hicken for his part seemed mightily relieved, and expressed this relief with a bit of a snigger, which was not characteristic of him, but which seemed to give him no end of satisfaction. In fact, he went on sniggering for quite a while. You may think this quite strange, even if not in character with the old man, but the fact is that Mr. Hicken had his own way of maintaining honour and dignity. Given in that we would not use similar tactics, we must grant it to him that his methods were most effective.

Moreover, Mr. Hicken could use the privacy of his farm to indulge in quite undignified actions, like rushing up and down the night paddock on his long legs, kicking them up—one at a time—very much like a poddy calf. Ah, yes! Mr. Hicken was living in delighted anticipation of Ralph's return.

He was also having visitations of the old dread

**NEED  
A  
WIFE**

Bertie Curtis was very thoughtful following the visit of the dairy inspector. In his own quiet way he had secretly dreaded the coming of the official, and because he habitually prayed to God about the most intimate details of his day's work, he had often prayed about the inspector, petitioning God to give him at least some warning about that man's coming.

Take the bails, for example; Bertie had promised himself that, being warned by God regarding the inspector's visit, he would immediately haul down, bag by bag, the ton of pollard and linseed meal stacked in the fourth bail. Then he would remove the feed-drums from the third bail, and the surplus of feed-sacks he was reserving for the wheat season when bags were at a premium. It would take some doing, but Bertie had promised himself he would manage it, even if it meant later re-stacking the feed in its rightful bail, the drums and feed-sacks in theirs.

But the inspector had come, with no warning except that his small roadster had pulled up outside, and he had uncurled himself from the driving seat, unfolded himself from behind the wheel. True, he had waited a moment to stretch, to reach his lank form towards the sky, after which he had advanced purposefully towards the Curtis house. Bertie, being a bachelor, had his house no tidier than the bails. To tell the truth, Bertie had feed stacked in the house too, his father's old room taking most of it, with the daily ration for the pigs in the storeroom, as well the pigs knew.

So it was Mr. Kissop found Bertie, petrified almost,

amongst his feed.

'Ah there, Mr. Curtis,' he said heartily, knowing for sure that he had the law on his side, and undoubtedly, on the other side, a law-breaker. 'Nice day, isn't it?'

'Lovely,' Bertie told him earnestly. If Bertie had been able to roll his eyes, they would have rolled with apprehension.

Ted Kissop rubbed his hands together. Long, capable hands they were, the hallmark of character, as Bertie acutely observed. 'Just thought we'd pop down and look things over,' said Mr. Kissop, using a rather jovial royal plural.

'Ha,' said Bertie, trying to enter into the inspector's delight. 'Yes, of course, hai'

'H'm,' said Mr. Kissop absently. He loved the trips around to the farms. He had a great respect for cow-cookies and their acumen, though rather less for their cleanliness. But what pleased him most was the sheer delight of travelling at the Government's expense, along endless stretches of road, turning into nooks and crannies of farm life, and being at no disadvantage, either.

'Things are a bit anyhow,' said Bertie slowly. Then, with a rush, 'What with the rain you know, and one thing and another.'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr. Kissop kindly, as though this were the first time he had heard such a thing, and because of that it contained something interesting. 'Certainly has been wet Mr. Curtis.'

'Besides,' Bertie told him eagerly, 'I've just had twins.'

Mr. Kissop seemed to see nothing surprising in this, but he was delighted. 'Different sexes, Mr. Curtis?'

'Two heifers,' said Bertie proudly.

'Fine,' said Mr. Kissop. 'I can't remember many cases of the same sex. You're a lucky man.'

Bertie stared at the ground. Then he said, without much

enthusiasm, 'Well, I suppose you'll be wanting to see the bails and dairy.'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr. Kissop, as though that suggestion was a surprising one.

'If you'd like a cup of tea. . . ' suggested Bertie.

'A cup of tea,' repeated the inspector, and Bertie's hopes rose a trifle. He regretted, mildly, and for the first time, that he was a teetotaller. Probably Mr. Kissop, being a jovial man, was not.

Ted Kissop's eyebrows shot upwards as he entered the kitchen. There were fifteen cats inhabiting the chairs, the table and various half-empty sacks of feed. Bertie, noting the surprise, hastened to explain.

'I keep that feed for the fowls,' he said proudly. 'That bag there's for the black chooks, and that over there for the Rhode Islands, and the other for the Leghorns. Keep a check on what they eat, and so I know my profits.'

'Ah,' said the inspector doubtfully. 'A man with a system, eh, Mr. Curtis?'

'In here,' said Bertie, taking him into the storeroom, 'are the bags for the pigs. They have a bag each.'

'But you don't feed them in here!' said Mr. Kissop, shocked.

'Oh, no,' said Bertie; 'not on your life. But they try to get in, the little coots. I've caught 'em more than once at the wrong bags.'

Mr. Kissop allowed his gaze to fall lightly upon the fowls, of varied colours, pecking their way along the hallway. Bertie sighted them also, and divining that this was no place for fowls—or not today, anyway—rushed at them, spreading his arms. 'Sh-hoo!' he said, his voice cracking as he endeavoured, vainly, to register indignation.

It was at this point Mr. Kissop declined tea. No, he was firm about it. There were other farms to be seen, as Bertie well knew. Bertie later considered that it was at this point

he had lost any advantage he might have had over the tall inspector.

Mr. Kissop shook his head slowly when he surveyed the feed in the fourth bail. He pointed that out to Bertie, who quickly countered the suggestion with his fifteen cats 'and some to come'. Mr. Kissop nodded doubtfully, and proceeded to the third bail, where he peered into feed-drums. He shook his head even more doubtfully. At the second bail he almost wept. There was a litter of machine parts, tools, grease and oil. 'I see,' he observed sadly, 'that you use only one bail, Mr. Curtis.'

'Only one,' said Bertie, brightening. 'They know just when they've got to come in, Inspector, and come in they do. Saves a lot of time.' Bertie shook his head and said, 'I don't know why some go to all the trouble of bailing them up in different bails.'

Mr. Kissop continued to look sad. 'No, I suppose you don't, Mr. Curtis,' was all he said.

It was true that the yards were spotlessly clean, cobbled and without manure. Bertie's large vegetable garden received its portion daily, and so Mr. Kissop was able to breathe freely on that score. But the dairy itself cancelled those few good marks. It was littered, too, with harness and pieces of metal scrap, worn-out horseshoes, rusty cans and—the gods forgive Mr. Curtis—drums of sour skim! Mr. Kissop had ceased shaking his head. He was numbed, it seemed, and now expected anything.

'Those pigs you have, Mr. Curtis,' he said suddenly, 'where are they?'

'Oh, way out there,' said Bertie, pointing towards the furthest reaches of his farm.

'Ah,' said Mr. Kissop. He seemed to breathe more freely.

Then it was he said the amazing words, the sentence which, then and when he had departed, burned and continued to burn deeply into the mind of the bachelor

dairyman.

‘What you need, Mr. Curtis,’ he had said, ‘is to get yourself a wife.’

Bertie had looked at him in amazement. He had not thought to protest, to question indignantly, to do other than look horrified. ‘A wife’d fix everything for you,’ the inspector had added knowingly.

Only one comfort remained to him, and it was that the inspector had let him off with a warning.

‘You’d better start cleaning things up, Mr. Curtis,’ he had said. Then his gaze had dropped to the ground as he sighted something familiar.

‘The pigs aren’t always out there, are they?’ he asked.

Bertie, because he was too stunned for words, too dumbfounded, and because, anyway, the evidence was against him, could only shake his head in miserable acquiescence.

The truth was that Mr. Curtis was afraid. He had thought about Ted Kissop’s suggestion, and there was no way of getting around it. More, he found the thought of marriage was not at all repugnant. He could not even hate the thought of a woman in his house. It actually appealed to him.

Yet, also, he was alarmed for his freedom, the carelessness of doing just as he liked, when he liked. To come in when he wished and make a cup of tea, to forget a meal now and then, to jump into the truck and go down to the sales, and when the sales were finished to stay seated upon the rails and discuss cows, crops and the infamy of the Governments. So Bertie shook his head, and tried to think badly of Mr. Kissop, who had thrown a bomb of confusion into his life.

Much in this frame of mind Mr. Curtis wandered towards

the southern boundary of his farm. The impulse was unconscious, but it was undoubtedly a longing for company. There, where his property converged upon the road and railway-line, was the Amnig house tucked into that last small triangle, and fenced around with palings. Aaron Amniga his wife and eighteen children lived in that house, and many were the times Bertie had shaken his head in wonderment. Now his slow progression towards that mass of humanity must have been brought on by a loneliness hitherto unnoticed by him, but lately so callously revealed by the inspector.

Aaron’s forge was burning, for a thin wisp of blue smoke ascended into the early evening. From the kitchen chimney spiralled a thicker plume of smoke. The Amnig meal—no mean affair—was in course of preparation. Mr. Curtis shook his head sadly. He longed for the warmth of a fireside. For himself, he was heartily weary of sausages, boiled, fried or poached eggs, and even more tired of the preparation it entailed, the cleaning up so often required.

Perhaps because the evening had a slight chill to it already, the Amnig children were not to be seen; that was, apart from Dora. She sat, her well-shaped legs dangling over the palings fronting the railway-lines. When she saw Bertie Curtis she waved carelessly.

‘If you’re looking for your red bull, Bertie,’ she said, ‘he’s over in them turpentines.’

‘Ah,’ said Bertie, ‘in the turpentines, is he?’ He felt strangely uncomfortable in the presence of Dora and for the first time he noticed her eyes were brown; large too, and that they gleamed as they observed him. Her cheeks were red, perhaps from the cold, but her nose was unblemished firm and smooth, and slightly upturned, so that it might have been called pert. Mr. Curtis found himself screwing

about to catch a glimpse of that little beauty. Within, he was vaguely alarmed.

But Miss Amnig saw nothing wrong in her neighbour Bertie.

‘What do you sit here for?’ Bertie asked suddenly.

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Miss Amnig, and her nose, if possible, tilted higher. It was no concern of Bertie’s if she wished to watch the fettlers on their way home. She loved the prattling rattle of their trikes, and the rhythmic rise and fall of the handles, and even more the carelessness of the men as they passed. A wave or a nod, and sometimes a bold stare, something she was always able to match.

Then, last week, Harry Crowther had promised her a pair of pigeons, a pigeon pair.

‘I’m getting a pair of pigeons,’ she said suddenly.

‘Pigeons,’ said Bertie. For some unknown reason his heart contracted. He hated and loved the sensation. It was new. His farm and all its importance suddenly shrank also, dwindled to nothingness beside the richness of the girl on the fence. He noticed, with downcast eyes, that she was wellformed, matured, capable, and certainly a good worker.

‘Fantails,’ said Miss Amnig, and her eyes became dreamy. It was not that she liked fantails a great deal, nor that she was madly in love with Harry Crowther—not yet, anyway—but she knew the sight of two white fantails would tear at her defences, and before she knew what was happening Harry would be taking her to dances and things.

Bertie desired to ask where the pigeons were coming from, but at that moment the trikes came into view, and Miss Amnig became demure, her eyes gently upon the machines as they neared, her chin cupped into her hands.

They were come, they were gone, and in that time much had happened. The men had shouted ‘Hi there, Dora. Ho there, Bertie!’ and had whizzed past. One young fellow had shouted, ‘Half your luck, Bertie!’ and there had been a roar

from the others.

When they had gone, Dora’s cheeks were aflame. ‘Well, of all their hide!’ she said. She stared at Bertie, and as she stared the crimson mounted. ‘They reckoned you were doing a line with me,’ she said indignantly.

Bertie nodded. The experience had pleased him. ‘Wait till I get that Harry Crowther,’ she said, her capable jaws clenching.

‘Harry was giving you the pigeons, eh?’ asked Bertie.

Dora seemed unable to speak. Then she said, ‘That’s what he thinks.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Bertie.

Suddenly Dora said, ‘It’s getting late now, Bertie. You’ll be going back for your tea, eh, now that you’ve found the bull?’

‘Now I’ve found the bull,’ said Bertie, and his voice sounded sad.

‘Well, I reckon,’ said Miss Amnig confidentially, ‘that you ought to stay for tea. One more won’t make much difference.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ said Bertie, scarcely realising what he was saying.

But throughout the meal Mr. Curtis said very little. He seemed to be pondering something, and all who knew Bertie knew also that he was a man with one thought at a time. A fact which had not gone unnoticed by Mr. Kissop, who for all his busyness and desire for cleanliness, was no man’s fool.

Next morning, Dora sat on the fence as was her custom, and the following evening also, but it was not to wave to Harry Crowther. She gave him a cold stare, much to that young man’s amusement.

‘I’d hate to be hitched to that dame,’ he told his fellow

fettlers when they were well out of hearing range. One had to shout to be heard above the noise of the trikes.

'Got some go in her all right,' someone agreed.

'Like 'em with go in 'em,' said another.

'I'm young yet,' said Harry Crowther.

And Mr. Curtis had not cared to search out his bull, although each evening it gathered the heifers into the turpentine clumps. No, Dora had seen Bertie pile his utility with empty feed sacks and sail away merrily towards Coolbucca. It had not pleased her much. It was as though she had met Bertie for the first time, and in some way she wished to get her own back for the embarrassment to which he had subjected her before the fettlers. Of course it was all his fault. Bertie Curtis, indeed! She often stared across to his farm, wondering about the house and how he lived, and whatever that man did on his own.

Sunday morning it was when Bertie came, ostensibly looking for his bull. It was a bright Bertie this morning, and a calm one.

'Hi there, Dora,' he said.

Dora glanced around to see whether or not she was noticed by any of the family. She was, but she dropped from the fence and advanced on Mr. Curtis. 'Now look here, Bertie Curtis,' she said.

'Thought you might like to have a look at my place,' he told her. 'Never been there, have you?'

'Well, what do you know about that?' she demanded.

Bertie grinned. 'I've got something to show you,' he said. 'It won't take you a minute.'

Dora stared at Bertie as though this were a new Bertie she was seeing. But it was the same old Bertie, a trifle less shy, a trifle cleaner in his clothes, but as stolid and determined as ever. 'Don't suppose it can hurt,' she said airily. 'And you can't eat me,' she added haughtily.

'I've cleaned the dairy up something wonderful,' Bertie

told her as they tramped across the pasture. 'Ted Kissop was out the other day and he went me hot.'

Proudly he showed her the bails. True, the feed was still there, but with fifteen cats there was still a counter to any objection by the inspector. It was the third and also the second bails which were pleasing. Spotless they were, but Dora saw in them only three clean bails, and the shining chromium of new milking-machines. 'They'll cut down the work, Bertie,' she said.

Bertie's face fell. 'Don't you think it's clean?' he asked.

'Oh yes,' she said uncaringly. There was faint dismay in her neighbour's face. 'Got a nice place here,' she said with slight envy.

'Like it, eh?' said Bertie, and he began rubbing his hands.

When they passed the house, Miss Amnig put her upturned nose into the hallway. Then she trod the two steps, stood in the hall and peered into the kitchen. When she stepped back, her eyes were filled with horror. She stood on the top step, her arms akimbo and indignation personified.

'Don't you tell me, Bertie Curtis,' she said, 'that you live h all that mess!'

'Mess!' said Bertie, equally indignant.

'I've a good mind. . .' said Miss Amnig. With that, she began shooing the fowls from the hallway, after which she advanced on the kitchen, followed by a dismayed Bertie.

'Go on,' she told him, 'get that stuff into the barn.'

'Now don't you go getting those bags mixed up,' said Bertie, alarmed. 'I won't know what returns I'm getting from the chooks.'

'Chooks!' said Miss Amnig in disgust. 'Chooks. I like that!'

A quarter of an hour later the profits of the pigs were also mixed and the cats had fled to the barn. Bertie was lighting

a match, igniting ancient history in the form of years-old newspapers. He should have been furious, but as the flames leapt from the paper, so did an intense delight Rourish within, and along with it a fear also, fear of liberty curtailed, if not wholly abolished.

Finally, when the house was swept and garnished, and the seven devils of loneliness, the cats and the fowls cleaned from it, Dora stood on the back steps and brushed her hands. She glared warningly at Bertie.

'Don't you ever let me catch you with the place like that again,' she said.

Bertie was looking at her and thinking. With her, Ted Kissop would never catch him on the hop. Better a smart woman than many indolent prayers to the Almighty.

'I was going to show you the orchard,' he said mildly.

'Ah, yes,' said Dora with faint enthusiasm.

Before they even reached the orchard Dora became aware of the birds fluttering and cooing above the enormous apple tree which centred the orchard. Coming closer they could see them more clearly. White pigeons, and every one of them fantails. Dora stared at them in amazement.

'White fantails!' she said. She looked at them with unfeigned delight, her small nose upturned in pleasure. Her look of motherly indignation had departed. She was the Amnig girl again. 'Gee, they're lovely, Bertie,' she said.

'And Harry Crowther won't be able to buy none, either,' said Bertie triumphantly. 'I bought the lot. Every white fantail in Coolbucca I got.'

'Bertiel' said Dora in amazement. Then the colour began to seep upwards from the neckline of her dress.

'Bertie Curtis!' she said the second time.

But Bertie said nothing. Then Dora caught sight of the pigeon-cote. 'Where did you get that?' she asked.

'Made it,' said Bertie, pleased at the question.

'You did?' she said unbelievably. A light was dawning in

her eyes.

Bertie nodded. Dora shook her head wonderingly. 'I reckon that's real good,' she said admiringly.

Then she stiffened. 'They'll dirty all the apples when they come on,' she said with slight indignation. 'You can't leave that there.'

'That's right,' agreed Bertie, bewildered. 'You're right, Dora. Where'll we put it?'

Dora scarcely seemed to notice the change from the personal singular to the very personal plural.

'We'd better put it right over in the corner there, farthest from the house, Bert,' she said.

'So we better,' said Bert admiringly, already taking it for granted.

## MR. TRACEY RELAXES

Mr. Tracey believes he hears a singing, a high dreamy note of music, a gentle song, but he is not sure, for there is a scraping of wheels as a dray draws near, and he peers, does Mr. Tracey, over his steel-rimmed spectacles, his eyebrows necessarily raising, and his astonishment showing mildly on his placid features.

We are coming, Mr. Tracey.  
We are coming with our vegies.  
Oh, buy some, Mr. Tracey,  
If you will

To be sure, it is young Terry, and he is seated high amongst pumpkin and squash, snap-jacks and turnips, sweet corn and a bulging sack of peas. Mr. Tracey finds it is necessary, still, to peer over his spectacles, but he is sure, now, of what he sees.

‘Bless me,’ he says. ‘If it isn’t young Hickey.’

‘That’s right now, Mr. Tracey,’ says Terry Hickey, brightly, approvingly, as though he was sure Mr. Tracey wouldn’t fail to recognise him.

‘M’m,’ says Mr. Tracey, gently.

‘We’ve got punkin, skwarsh, yellow pops, sweet corn, turnips and peas,’ says Terry Hickey.

‘Plenty of them,’ says his friend, who is a small bulletheaded boy.

‘M’m,’ says Mr. Tracey, again. He peers at the pumpkins first, turns one over, taps it, frowns sternly, and says, looking

up at Terry, but from beneath his glasses now: ‘That isn’t a very good pumpkin, young Terry. It isn’t ripe.’ There is a certain amount of triumph contained in this last uttered statement. He repeats firmly, ‘It isn’t ripe.’

‘Nuh,’ says Terry casually, ‘some of them aren’t. Not for keeping you know. Got to eat ‘em now.’

‘Ah, yes,’ murmurs Mr. Tracey. He continues to explore. His hand caresses a turnip, his eyes also, but the turnips are all right, plump and white, and for that reason Mr. Tracey seems even sterner. With triumph, however, he notices a faulty cob of sweet corn.

‘Cut-worms been at this!’ he says. He holds the cob aloft, firmly grasped in his hand. ‘Can’t sell that, you know,’ he says.

‘No, Mr. Tracey,’ says Terry patiently. ‘You can’t. Not after the cut-worms have been at it.’

‘Unless,’ says Mr. Tracey brightly, ‘you sell it cheap.’

‘Of course,’ says Terry Hickey, who knows a thing or two.

‘Cheaply, hah, cheaply,’ says Mr. Tracey, feeling much better. His mild but careful eye scrutinises the remaining produce. He snorts softly because all are unblemished, and when he is beginning to give up, in a sort of disgusted despair, he sees the pea-sack, chock-a-block, the peas filling out every corner of the hessian, and spilling prodigally on to the floor of the cart.

The spilt peas seem excellent enough, but Mr. Tracey, who also knows a thing or two, plunges his hand into the sack’s green belly, and withdraws a handful of peas, and proceeds to examine them.

He gives a cry, the nearest, you might say, that Mr. Tracey could come to a whoop. ‘See,’ he says, drawing himself up so that he might shoulder, almost, against Terry. ‘See,’ he Points out. ‘Brown, wet. Peas no good like that.’

Terry nods. ‘Have to be eaten straight away, eh, Mr.

Tracey?’ he says, and Mr. Tracey does not seem to hear him, so concerned he is with the sweated peas.

‘Mind you,’ he says to Terry after a while, looking down at the peas in a sort of judicial manner, but resolved, nevertheless, to be as fair as possible, having regard to all circumstances of the case, ‘I think they would be all right if you cooked them immediately.’

‘Cooked them immediately,’ repeats Terry absently. Reins in hand, he is staring at Mr. Tracey’s cauliflowers, as once he stared at Mr. Hicken’s good yellow pears. Mr. Tracey’s cauliflowers are, you might say, sort of show pieces.

It is not, mind you, that Mr. Tracey never sells his cauliflowers; he does, but not to the Wirril Creek residents. He has larger irons in the fire than tinpot shows like Terry’s Saturday-morning run. He sends to the city markets, always has, always will, if he has any thought to the matter. That is why Terry gazes wistfully at the green banners of the caulies.

‘Now my peas, Terry,’ says Mr. Tracey, ‘they *are* peas.’ He coughs, and adds apologetically, ‘Or were, I should say.’

‘My word, they were peas,’ says Terry enthusiastically. ‘Now Mr. Tracey, if you still had the peas you *would* sell to me, wouldn’t you, now? I’d give you a good price, too.’

Mr. Tracey becomes suspicious. He darts a look at Terry, but Terry has not changed much, so that he darts a look to the left, which is up the road, and a look to the right, which is down the road, and then he darts looks all about him, for he fears conspiracy is afoot, and about to tread upon his heels. He looks over his glasses, severely. ‘Terry,’ he says in a firm voice. ‘I’ve told you before, and I tell you again, that I will not sell to you. I can’t imagine myself selling vegetables to a mere boy—not my vegetables.’

Terry shakes his head sadly. ‘No, not your vegetables, Mr. Tracey,’ he says slowly. ‘I could never expect you to sell to me.’ Steeped in sorrow and humility, he places himself well

down the ladder in the scale of vegetable vendors, and with such self-deprecation that Mr. Tracey eyes him sideways, a trifle suspiciously.

‘H’m,’ he says, coughing. ‘Well, I’m glad you see it that way, Terry.’

Terry, staring ahead, nods. He sees it that way, all right.

‘Mind you, Terry,’ says Mr. Tracey magnanimously, and in a spirit of explanation, ‘when I say I grow vegetables, I mean I grow vegetables. That is to say I know what I am going to plant, what I am going to get, and where—when I harvest those vegetables—I shall send them. I can’t afford to be— hah—er, tinpotting about, you might say, selling a bushel of peas here, and a lettuce there, and say a cauliflower, well, here.’ He waves an arm about to indicate the general direction in which he is unable to do this or that sort of thing.

‘M’m,’ says Terry, monosyllabic and gloomy.

He knows, does Terry, that it is not only what Mr. Tracey’s vegetables look like—for they are fine vegetables to be seen—but it is what Mr. Tracey’s vegetables actually are. Mr. Tracey knows how to grow things, so careful is he with his humus, so persistent with his compost heaps, so very, very exact with his mixture of farmyard manure.

It has been said of Mr. Tracey that he keeps fowls only for the express purpose of collecting their droppings, but this is scarcely to be credited, as Mr. Tracey is known to ‘do a good thing out of the sale of eggs, and the idea of Mr. Tracey, waiting, as it were, near a perch, or within his fowlyard, for the birds to enlarge his manure pile, and therefore the quality of his vegetables, is an image farfetched.

Nevertheless it is certain that Mr. Tracey manures his gardens well, and that no lettuce leaves his vegetable patch but that it is large, crisp, succulent and sweet. Lettuces for

kings are what Mr. Tracey grows, and the same may be said of all his vegetables. Onions firm, well-rounded, rich in flavour. Cabbages hearted so that a finger will not sink in them, but which, when cooked, are as white as snow, and as melting. Cauliflowers! Ah yes, the cauliflowers—but they call for an essay on their own.

From where he is, seated high up in the dray, Terry sees the white hearts of Mr. Tracey's cauliflowers, the creamy tumbling white hearts, with rills and waves and ripples of richness.

Terry Hickey shakes his head and thinks that it is a great pity Mr. Tracey is firm in his marketing principles, and that it is a greater pity he will not assist Terry along the road-to prosperity. Terry can see it, all right, the people thronging him for the vegetables which they know come from Mr. Tracey's garden, but that cannot be, and as for him thinking it might be, well, he can hear the folk of Wirril Creek talking about Mr. Tracey and his vegetables.

'Him sell vegetables? Not him! Not old Mr. Tracey. Oh, no, not that chap.'

Or, 'Well, he is a strange old boy. Never goes anywhere. Never sees anyone. All he does is grow vegetables.'

'Mind you, he does grow good vegetables.'

'Oh yes, he grows good vegetables all right.'

Mr. Tracey, of course, grows good vegetables, but he never goes anywhere, or perhaps, more correctly, does not often go anywhere. There was the time, of course, when he did go into Coolbucca, and came home singing. That was about two years ago. Then he was a merry fellow, but it seems he has been more than repentant for that one brilliant lapse, and that he has given himself up, even more, to the growing of vegetables. Nevertheless his lapse has not been forgotten, and his determination to withdraw into his own shell has heightened contrasts and accentuated the memories of his merriness.

They say that Mr. Tracey buttonholed the Mayor of Coolbucca, Clyde Reynolds, and said to him, 'I say, old fellow, what did you do in the war?' And Mr. Clyde Reynolds, at a loss to know which war he referred to, being too young for the First World War, and too busy to be at the Second, had shaken his head, saying he had done nothing if it came to that.

'Thought not! Thought not!' Mr. Tracey had said delightedly. He had wagged a finger in-the air, directed it eventually at Mr. Clyde Reynolds, and had gone with a half-hop, and a half-skip, down the Coolbucca main street, and he had sung, happily, songs which showed he had been acquainted with the First World War, of such fine old vintage they were, and as he had ridden home in the bus, right back -to Wirril Creek, he had continued singing merrily to himself. He had patted Ned, the bus-driver, on the back, and said that he, Ned, was a fine fellow, and how well he drove, which he oughter've, of course, seeing what a fine lot of young fellows and young women he had on board, and—hah—if he were young, as—hah—he had once been, if there had been such a batch of—hah—young girls as there was this day, then he would have—hah. . . Whatever he would have was left to the imagination of all, for by this time Mr. Tracey had disembarked and floundered to the road, his right hand grasping an untapped bottle, and his left waving benevolently at the young people who had so stirred his memory

Everyone cheered at this warming sight of Mr. Tracey, and Mr. Tracey had raised his hand again, placed the other, bottle and all, about his waist front, and bowed, saying all the time, 'Quite so. Quite so.' After which he had retired to his vegetable farm, dancing and jigging up the clear red road to his place, singing.

Now, however, if medals were to be handed out for two Years of exemplary conduct, then the first would have to be

hung upon the chest of Mr. Tracey. For Terry Hickey, however, the remembered occasion brings a thoughtfulness to his eyes, and a certain amount of distant hope to his breast.

‘Mr. Tracey,’ he says suddenly. ‘What did you do before you grew vegetables?’

Mr. Tracey starts at the question, draws himself up, and takes a deep breath. He eyes the youngster shrewdly, but gives an answer, nevertheless.

‘Well,’ he says modestly, ‘I didn’t always, hah, grow vegetables.’

Terry stares ahead. ‘Of course not, Mr. Tracey,’ he says as though anyone would know that—anyone.

‘H’m,’ says Mr. Tracey. He nods. ‘Quite so. Quite so,’ he agrees. ‘I—er—hah!’ Here he ceases speaking and fixes his eye, this time suspiciously, upon Terry. ‘I—er—hah, wonder why you ask me that, young Terry?’ he says.

‘Well, I wasn’t really interested,’ says Terry, ‘not really. What I wondered about was whether you had ever been to war.’

‘Been to war?’ echoes Mr. Tracey. He stares highly at Terry Hickey.

‘Yes, been to war,’ says Terry’s friend, surprisingly articulate. Hitherto he has crouched quietly amongst the vegetables, content to be as silent and harmless as they, but a spring has been touched, and Terry’s friend may not remain inarticulate. He rambles on.

‘I know a cove,’ he says, ‘that was in New Guinea. Got shot, he did, in both legs and both arms. Went to get a Jap, he did, and he got shot. None of the others got shot, though.’

Having imparted this information he stares at Mr. Tracey, and as Mr. Tracey is about to speak he suddenly continues. ‘He didn’t get shot in no bones, he didn’t. Got shot through

the flesh. Didn’t get no bones broke, he didn’t, so he could hold his legs and run. He got that Jap, though.’

Again the small fellow ceases, draws in his breath, and huddles to a vegetable. Mr. Tracey looks a trifle surprised, watches the small fellow for fear he may erupt again, looks over his glasses in the process and commences.

‘Pooh,’ he says. ‘You boys don’t know what you are talking about.’

He looks impressively at the uninformed youths.

‘No one does,’ he says airily, waving a hand in the air, ‘No one.’ He bows apologetically.

‘Unless, of course,’ he says, ‘it is someone who has been to the war.’

He nods and nods to show the truth of this statement cannot be denied.

‘Mind you,’ he cautions them, ‘no one who has been to the war would talk about it, not unless they could not—hah — refrain from talking.’

He gazes absently at Terry, whose blue eyes are clear and without guile, making Mr. Tracey feel that this boy, if any, is entitled to know a bit about what happened, even before he was born.

‘Now in this war,’ he says, ‘no doubt the men found things bad, hard. No doubt these little Japs were a tough bunch of nuts to crack. Not easy, you might say.’

Terry nods his head, the little fellow shivers acknowledgement, and Mr. Tracey expands his chest and continues.

‘Neither were the Huns,’ he announces surprisingly; surprisingly because he has never visualised himself holding out on matters of war to two youngsters, or, for that matter, anyone, but the ice has been broken and his reserve of many years has gone to the winds, and all the surround of thoughtfulness and mental secrecy has been dispersed, and he plunges headlong into narrative and experience so that he forgets, for the moment, that he is talking to two boys, or

that he is talking at all, for that matter.

It is rather as though he is communing with himself, or even acting as a sort of commentator upon those strange years, now long past but to his present mind near, so clear and factual they are in detail.

‘Talk about being shot through the legs,’ he says. ‘I remember a fellow who was shot through both legs, and got his bones broke—broken, too. There was no running away for him, of course. We had to go out and get him, pick him up from no man’s land, with the shells about us, and some machine-gun fire too.’

The vegetable boy awakens and says, ‘Geel’ which is accompanied by a long whistle of intaken breath, and Mr. Tracey looks at him, nods, gulps a little and hurries on.

‘Machine-gun fire,’ he explains. ‘And none of us got hit. Got him in, too. Fine fellow. No complaints.’

Terry shakes his head as though he cannot believe it. ‘Bet you got the Em Em for that,’ he says.

‘M.M.?’ says Mr. Tracey. ‘Oh no, you don’t get the M.M. for that,’ he explains. ‘Oh no, not that.’ He laughs deprecatingly. ‘Those things came down in the ration truck,’ he says, and laughs. ‘Hal Hal In the ration truck.’

He sees the boys exchanging looks, and becomes serious.

‘I did see fellows get decorations, mind you,’ he says. ‘And they did deserve them, let me tell you.’

They let Mr. Tracey tell them. They listen with real interest to all he has to say, and they nod, say a word here, and reckon, with intaking of breath, that it must have been terrific, and Mr. Tracey, speaking at a rapid rate, nods and agrees, agrees and nods, and tells them, warningly, that it is not all they think it might be, but a man remembers all the best things, by Jove, and it wasn’t—er—hah—a bad experience, but there you are. Yes, certainly, Terry, he has been to the war.

At the end of this Terry nods, as though he was quite convinced, all the time, that Mr. Tracey must have been to the war, and the small vegetable boy comes to life and says, over and over again, ‘Gee, mister,’ in so awed a voice, and with so much genuine admiration, that Mr. Tracey feels the trappings of his age fall from him, his grey hair is brown and crisped, his face is young and firm again, and he might easily march, as once he marched, to some of the fine old tunes.

He thinks, too, how bright he used to be in those days, and casts a sort of frown at himself for the old hermit he is now becoming, and how he is, altogether too much, living in himself. He looks about for some means of remedying these states of error, but can see none.

Terry, of course, being a wise young man, rouses himself, smiles cheerfully upon Mr. Tracey, and says he must be going if he wishes to get his vegetables sold, but he will be back again, Mr. Tracey can be sure of that. He waves goodbye to Mr. Tracey and all his cauliflowers, urges the old mare into a semblance of life, so that the dray scrapes and whistles along the red road.

Mr. Tracey watches them depart with some little dismay in his breast. He feels he must do something, that life now is altogether unsuitably geared to his present high momentum.

‘Er—hah—Terry,’ he calls loudly. ‘Stop that cart, boy! Er—hah—would you like some of my caulies to sell?’

Terry, for all his cunning, cannot contain his smiling, and Mr. Tracey sees that this Terry has somehow brought him to a state of selling his caulies, and he might very well be angered, but he is not. He shakes a finger at the young rascal, laughs, and says, without peering over his spectacles, ‘I believe you started me off talking like that, young Terry, so that you would get my caulies, eh? No, don’t deny it! Isn’t it so?’

Terry thinks it is best to be straightforward about it all, so that he tells Mr. Tracey he did want Mr. Tracey's cauliflowers, because if he had Mr. Tracey's caulies, or any of his vegetables, for that matter, then his sales would increase, and he would be able to compete with Joe O'Malley, who did the Thursday run, and in any case Joe O'Malley's vegetables were pretty poor, and if Mr. Tracey thought his, Terry's, were poor, then he ought to see Joe O'Malley's.

'Quite so. Quite so,' says Mr. Tracey, and he is warmed to think his vegetables have such high repute, and he remembers his initial objection to selling vegetables to the Wirril Creek folk was because of their laughter at his pioneer vegetable-producing project, immediately following World War One. Very sensitive he had been then. However, a new generation was growing, and it was to be doubted whether they should be penalised. If, then, they really think his vegetables are so good. . .

Aloud he says, 'Well, you haven't caught me, young Terry, because I'm going to let you have what you want, now, or at any time for that matter, providing of course you can give me a fair thing.'

Terry is the young businessman, a little eager perhaps, but saying that he can give Mr. Tracey just over the market price, which is good, really, seeing as how Mr. Tracey will not have to pay agent's fees, freight, or even worry about bagging and boxing. Mr. Tracey nods at all this, and smiles and says it is a great thing, and how many caulies will Terry want, and if he wants some *good* pumpkins, pumpkins that will keep, then he has some good hard Queensland Blues if he would like them.

Terry says he would like them, and he takes as many caulies as he can manage to heap into the dray, so that the small vegetable boy has to climb out of the vegetables, and

sit up on the front seat with Terry, and the two make off down the road with the green plumes of cauliflower leaves swaying and nodding behind them, and Mr. Tracey, looking down at his coins and nodding, and looking up at the boys and nodding, seems alert and satisfied, whilst Terry, triumphant amidst his spoils, thinks it is a very fine thing, which might never happen again, but anyway once is better than not at all, and a jolly sight better, indeed.

## RALPH HICKEN COMES HOME

Mr. Hicken had his-worries. As was mentioned previously, he kept getting his attacks of the dreads. For a man of Mr. Hicken's habitual pessimism this was not a difficult thing to do. Nothing ever seemed to promise much to the nervous farmer. Doubtless he had seen bad seasons. Cows had been known to get bogged in the Wirril Creek criks during the frost-bitten winters, and calves had been known to get scours in the pleasant summers. An occasional pig had got lost in the great mountain behind his pastoral property, and seasons had been when his fruit was so badly blown with the fruit-fly that it was virtually inedible. So much for the things which fed Mr. Hicken, but to see him as a wholly negative man would be to miss the subtle humour which fed the person of the nervous farmer. He had his humour all right, but then he was able to disguise himself by his outward gloom, and his perpetual shaking of the head.

Today he was going on with a fair bit of head-shaking. He kept looking down at the pleasant paspalum, at his thick stems of new maize, and at the beginnings of a crop of cattle pumpkins. Secretly he was pleased with the crop, but to show this would be to let down the stoic Hicken nature. For others to see him satisfied and even proud would be to invite some form of disaster. Mr. Hicken firmly believed that the powers of fate watched human beings quite closely. They disapproved of human pride that invites the judgement of

the powers that be. Not that Mr. Hicken had ever seen the word *hubris*. For all his wide reading he had never come across it, but the idea was there in his mind.

This morning then, Mr. Hicken was surveying the acres which were his, seeking to view them loftily and without giddy conceit. It was just that the pain of presenting them to Ralph—his son returning from the wars—was upon him. Would Ralph see this modest property as promising something for his future, or would it also seem cramped, cabined in, confined, and generally speaking all too little for his ambitions? Mr. Hicken allowed himself the luxury of one rheumy tear trickling down his reddened face, his North Coast sunburned skin, his tough and leathery countenance. One rheumy tear made its way down to his chin, paused, hung, and then dropped.

'He'll never stay,' said Mr. Hicken in genuine despair. 'Not even with the maize as green as this, and the young sorghum coming on with good promise.' When he looked at the red and white Ayrshires with their noble frames, their reasonably filled out frames, and their promising udders, he was not encouraged enough to think that Ralph would be held by them. Why, the boy might remember back to the days when he milked so many of them by hand, and had had to feed the calves, dig out the ensilage, and skim the cream, all before breakfast and prior to making his way to the school at the Creek.

Mr. Hicken sighed, and another tear made its way, unwonted, down his creased and leathery cheeks. It was then Mr. Hicken heard the singing of the young fellow, Hickey. He knew it was Hickey. He always had to be on guard against the clever youngster. It was Hickey in his dray with the loose and scraping brake. As Hickey came close, he changed from singing to whistling, and that did nothing to allay Mr. Hicken's suspicions of him.

'Great day, Mr. Hicken,' said young Hickey. 'How are

things today?’

Mr. Hicken judged that it would be best to be gloomy. That would help to get rid of the young pest. Not that he actually disliked Dolly Hickey’s boy. In fact, he even had a warm spot for him, but today he was interfering with the bit of thinking the farmer had to complete before Ralph returned.

‘Things not too good at all,’ he said. ‘If we don’t get some rain there could be a bushfire.’

Terry Hickey grinned to himself. He was not sure what Mr. Hicken could see from his eyes that were half-hidden under those bushy eyebrows. He nodded in agreement. ‘Could get fires this year,’ he said, as though he had been thinking about that subject a fair bit.

For once the old farmer came to the point. He asked, a trifle irritably, ‘What do you want this time? What could I do for you?’

‘Ah!’ said the boy thoughtfully. ‘What could you do?’ He grinned. ‘Nothing, Mr. Hicken. I was just wondering whether you wanted any help to get to the Rail.’

‘To the Rail?’ asked Mr. Hicken querulously. ‘Why the Rail?’

‘For Ralph’s homecoming, of course,’ the lad said cheerily. ‘You know he will be here this afternoon, don’t you?’

Mr. Hicken received a sudden shock. ‘Ralph coming today?’ he said, with a question in his voice. ‘Whoever told you that?’

‘They said you did,’ said Terry, for once quite surprised

‘Mr. Armstrong said you said he was coming this week, leaving Sydney yesterday.’

Mr. Hicken kept his eyes concealed under his large eyebrows. He did this by not looking up. He felt a slight but fierce joy in his inner being. He was quite jealous for meeting his boy first and meeting him apart from the Wirril Creek and Rail communities. ‘That could be,’ he said

cautiously. ‘Ha, yes, that could well be.’

Ralph had said nothing about arriving today. Had he been travelling by train, and not stopping along the way to see his friends, then doubtless he would have said he would be arriving this very day, but Ralph had not said that, and all the farmer’s money was on the bet that Ralph would *not* arrive this very day.

‘So what will be happening, young Hickey?’ he asked in a neutral voice. It would not do to betray his triumph, for young Hickey was most astute.

Dolly’s boy Terry was astute enough to suspect something, so he became quite casual. ‘Oh, the usual, you know,’ he said. ‘They’ll all be at the station waiting. They’ll have the banners out. The Committee will be there. But this time there’s something special.’ His voice was no longer casual and so Mr. Hicken became alert.

‘Something special,’ he said. ‘And what would that be?’

Terry dropped back to being casual. ‘Oh, just the band,’ he said, ‘you know, the Coolbucca Band.’

Mr. Hicken was astonished. ‘The Coolbucca Band!’ he gasped. ‘Why ever the Coolbucca Band?’

‘Ralph’s special,’ said young Terry. ‘Real special, in fact. The CoMr.nittee reckoned they ought to turn it *on* for Ralph because he’s that special.’

Even young Hickey could not know the moment of ambivalence for the old farmer. One part of him thrilled with pride: they thought his boy special enough to import the famous Coolbucca Band. The other part was protesting. How dare they take over his boy like this, and without reference to him? How could they dare possess his very own son, and he, Hicken, having all these qualms about whether he would stay or not? The conflict drew a deep sigh out of the old man.

‘I wish they had told me,’ he said. Then he came to a decision. ‘You, Terry Hickey,’ he said, ‘I thank you for coming

to tell me, and offering me the transport of your cart, but I am not going to the station. I'm staying right here.' Mr. Hicken turned away from the boy and looked into the distance, so that his eyes were on the centre of the great mountain Pirrawarrini. He rejected the presence of the young invader, and he wholly refused the welcoming actions of the Wirril Community Committee.

Young Terry looked a bit wistfully at the old man. He had a deep affection for 'the old chap'—as he often called him. He tugged the reins, turned the dray around, and made for the farm gate. Once on the road, he turned to look at the old farmer, shook his head a trifle sadly, and urged his mare forward.

Already Mr. Hicken had forgotten the incident. His brain now was on the matter of food, of preparing a meal for his boy, of seeing his room was tidy and ready for him, of scheming up ideas that would make Ralph want to stay. The matter was, of course, an obsession. Sighing, he went back to the house, made himself a cup of tea, and sat on the verandah that fronted the road. After a little rumination his tired eyes closed, his weary mind relaxed, and his aging body drifted into sleep.

When he awoke, he heard the faint sounds of music. Gradually the meaning and import of that music came to him. It was the Coolbucca Band, playing, no doubt, at the Rail. The Hicken property was close to the Walters' property, which was itself one step closer to the Rail. The sound of music had drifted up the hill to him, and, on the whole, Mr. Hicken was pleased. Secretly—that is, unadmitted to himself—he was delighted that the Committee had thought fit to welcome his boy home right royally. His objections were two: one, that they had not consulted him, and two, that they were virtually taking over his son. Mr. Hicken

thought that quite unfair. He wanted—so to speak—to have first bite at the cherry, to get Ralph inside and all that.

It was at that point that Mr. Hicken was surprised. A vehicle was standing outside the house, over near the grove of fruit trees. He stared at it. Where had it come from? He knew it was not a local vehicle. Few looked as prosperous as this one. Moreover, it was an army vehicle. The farmer knew that. Doubtless it was a disposals vehicle, fresh from the army, but its condition was so good that it could not have been bought too cheaply.

Mr. Hicken was uneasy. The vehicle stood there as though it belonged to the place, as though it had proprietary rights on Hicken soil, or, rather, Hicken pasture. Mr. Hicken stared. There was a man standing under the pear trees, looking up at the fruit. Not that the fruit was ripe; not that the man could eat it as yet, but he was looking at it. Mr. Hicken had to peer to get any idea of who it might be. He saw then that it was a man in army greens. That was all he could see

He stood up. He coughed and hurrumphed, and snorted. He made warning noises in his throat. His hand went up, beckoning, and then warning off the fellow who had presumed to invade his property. The man turned and stared, and then with a loud whoop came rushing towards the house.

Mr. Hicken stiffened and cursed mildly for his shortsightedness. He wished to know who this fellow was who seemed to know him, and was about to confront him. Then his knees almost gave way. His breath came in short gasps. His pulses raced, and he began to tremble all over. So weak he was that he could scarcely remain standing.

He heard the voice, 'Dad! Dad, you old beggar!' and there he was, his son, his Ralph, his only kith and kin, proudly done out in army greens and rushing up to the verandah.

Mr. Hicken made a deliberate move towards the steps, but

before he could take more than two strides, his son was on him. He was holding the old man in a steel-like embrace, and hugging the very breath out of him. Mr. Hicken felt his lungs bursting with pride and dammed up air, and incredible joy.

'Ralph!' he was saying, time and again. 'Ralph, my boy! Ralph!'

Ralph, for his part, was no less excited or joyous. 'Great to see you, Dad. Really great, it is. How are you? Come on, how are you really?'

The old man knew he could never answer all that. He just stood there, and the tears were coming unbidden. He brushed them away, and they kept coming, and here was Ralph patting him solicitously on the back, and then putting his arm around him, and doing all the things he had never done, and which were, anyway, quite un-Australian.

He stood there looking at Ralph, and Ralph also was looking at him. There was a silence between them, and Suddenly they both smiled and grinned and laughed, and shook their heads as though that were all pre-planned, and just what a father and a son ought to do. Ralph led his father back to his chair, drew up one for himself, and sat in front of the old man, looking into his eyes, and shaking his head as though it were all a dream, but good anyway, even if only a dream.

'It's great, Dad,' he said. 'How many times I have dreamed of this!' He left the idea up in the air. Mr. Hicken did not know what to say. When he spoke, he asked Ralph, almost inconsequentially, if he'd like a cup of tea. Ralph said he would, but he would get it. He knew where the tea things were, and he'd light the spirit-stove, and Dad had better sit down, as he looked a bit exhausted at the moment.

The break in time was good for them both. By the time water, tea, sugar and milk had been brought together in a delicious brew, they were quite ready for each other in a less

breathless encounter.

'Great tea,' Ralph said with enthusiasm. 'Often dreamed about this, I have.'

His father said, 'Why were you over near the pear trees?'

Ralph said, 'I came to the verandah and you were asleep. You looked so tired.'

Mr. Hicken nodded. 'Now that is true,' he said. 'I was tired.' He was going to make something of that, and then felt a bit ashamed. No, the lad would have to come to it himself, and not out of evoked pity. Mr. Hicken stared at him pleasantly. 'You should've woken me up,' he said. 'It was a wonder I didn't hear the truck.' He looked keenly at Ralph. 'Where did the truck come from?' he asked.

Ralph smiled, not without pride. 'It's mine, Dad,' he said. 'Got it cheap in Sydney. They're selling them off like flies. Really cheap, it was.'

Mr. Hicken was back in bewilderment. He was trying to understand what it all meant. Why would Ralph want a truck? Ralph for his part sensed his father's uneasiness. 'It's going to be good,' he said. 'It's going to give us a bit of transport.'

He grinned at his father with affection. 'Do you good to be driven around a bit,' he said. 'We could have some good times together.'

Mr. Hicken wanted to cry. He just plain wanted to weep. He wanted the dammed up fountains in him to open and pour out their torrents. Fear, apprehension, sorrow, loneliness and longing for affection had all combined to tie him up tightly. He had never dared express these, and even now he didn't dare, but a tear or two escaped, and he felt himself coming into some marvellous sense of release and relief that he had not known in years. He sat there, glowing, sipping his tea, and trying not to let Ralph know too much of it. He thought he must be in a dream, but since the dream was

good, then it was all right with him.

They both sat, savouring the good moments. As they sat, the music drifted up to them. Ralph sat upright. ‘“Colonel Bogey”!’ he said, astonished.

‘“Colonel Bogey”!’ echoed Mr. Hicken. He was puzzled. ‘What, er, where?’ he asked.

‘They’re playing the tune “Colonel Bogey”,’ Ralph said. He looked around as though expecting to see a wireless or a phonograph.

Mr. Hicken was still slightly bewildered; then it all dawned on him. He gave a youthful chuckle. ‘The Coolbucca Band,’ he gasped triumphantly.

Ralph looked puzzled. ‘The Coolbucca Band?’ he echoed.

His father nodded. ‘Down at the Rail,’ he said. ‘They’re playing down at the Rail.’

Ralph was still puzzled. ‘The band from Coolbucca are here at Wirril Rail,’ he said, ‘and they are playing there?’ He shook his head. ‘Why?’ he asked.

Mr. Hicken was suddenly proud, and in an inordinate way. ‘For you,’ he said, ‘they are playing for you. They are expecting you on the afternoon express.’

The whole matter suddenly became clear to Ralph. ‘You mean they are going to welcome me home.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr. Hicken. ‘At least that is what they think they are going to do.’ He chuckled, and without malice. ‘They wanted me to come down and be there when the train came in.’ A trace of malice crept into his voice. ‘I wouldn’t go,’ said the old farmer. I told them I wouldn’t go.’

Ralph stared at him. ‘Why not?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘Because,’ said Mr. Hicken triumphantly, ‘I knew you weren’t coming by that express. I knew that if you were then you would have told me.’ He looked at his son. ‘There!’ he

said with sudden finality.

A grin broke out on Ralph’s face. ‘You old coot!’ <sup>11</sup> cried. ‘Trust you to know. I had it all planned out as a surprise, and you sensed.’ He was delighted about that, shaking his head. Then a thought struck him. He looked down at his watch. ‘Does the train come at its old time?’ Mr. Hicken nodded. ‘Then it’s just about due,’ Ralph said.

Mr. Hicken didn’t really care whether it was due or not

All he cared about was that Ralph was home, and that he had a truck, and that he looked young and strong and capable, dressed as he was in army greens.

‘We’d better go,’ said Ralph. ‘We’d better get there as quick as we can.’

Mr. Hicken was bewildered. He stared at Ralph. ‘{iet where?’ he asked.

‘To the Rail,’ said Ralph, ‘before the train comes.’ He looked at his father. ‘Can’t let them down,’ he said. ‘It’s good of them to have the band out and to welcome me.’

Mr. Hicken’s feelings were mixed, but before he could think, the sound of the approaching train came to his ears. It was the double-engined express puffing up the incline and swerving around the bend before Wirril Rail.

‘Quick!’ shouted Ralph. ‘Into the truck, Dad.’

Mr. Hicken could not forbear feeling proud at the pace in which he followed his boy to the vehicle. Ralph had opened the low door for him, and he sat on the left side of his son. He noticed the seat was quite comfortable. He drew himself up with new-found pride. Ralph in a flash had the engine started, was into gear, and they bumped towards the farm gate. Mr. Hicken was about to dismount to open the gate, but his son gestured him back into the vehicle. In a trice he had opened the gate, driven the vehicle through, hopped out and closed the gate, and was stirring up the white gravel of the Pacific Highway as they raced towards the Rail.

The express was sliding towards the station, applying its

brakes and stopping, all before they turned in to the road leading to the station. Ralph seemed quite excited, and his father caught some of that emotion. He peered right and left, wondering what was happening.

Something was happening, and nothing was happening. At the station they were all there—Railites and Creekites— looking to see from which carriage Ralph would alight. Their banners were all held high, and there was bunting also. Some of the children held balloons, but most sturdy and proud of all was the Coolbucca Band.

They had gladly come all the way for the event. A few of the members had been at high school with Ralph. Others just knew of him. The feeling of patriotism was high, and of course today was a sort of festival, and festivals were all too rare in that rural community. Anything for a celebration! So the band vied with the hissing, puffing engines. The engines were letting out their compressed steam, and so were the bandsmen. They had played for entertainment before. Until this time they had been merely showing their prowess, but now they were honouring a great son of their nation.

Or at least they thought they were. Everyone was peering, looking, staring, scrutinising and expecting. No one alighted: not one! No one stepped forth with army greens and colour patch and blaze of the 9th Division Infantry. Not one! What is more the train was getting impatient, or—to speak more properly—the guard, the engine driver and the firemen. They appreciated the festive blaze of colour and the martial music, and the gaping crowds—a sight unusual on that North Coast line, and so far away from Sydney—but the train was already half an hour late—as usual! So they must be away!

The train gathered up its black loins, its puffing persistence of asthmatic breathing, and pulled away from the station. The guard waved his green flag in solemn acknowledgement of the occasion, and the regret of a foiled

welcome, but then there was nothing he could do. I he driver was looking most important, for driving two engines is an important event. The firemen were putting the coal into the great fireboxes, and they had little time for festivals. The train had to be on time!

Mr. Armstrong was devastated. the Committee was filled with a sense of tragedy. The members had calculated quite cunningly that this must be the train on which Ralph would arrive. Their best intelligence experts had thus informed them. And now they had made this most terrible mistake. To think of the organisation which they had used to bring Rail and Creek together, members of families, indeed the whole community with banners and bunting, *plus* the Coolbucca Band—and all for nothing! I heir sorrow and despah knew no end.

That is until the army disposals Land-Rover hove into sight. Ah, what a sight! Whilst the two-engined expless pounded its way on to Burtville so many miles away, the Land-Rover hurtled itself towards the station A young man

in army greens jumped out of the truck, and onto the station. Close behind him, long-legged, red-faced, puffing and proud came the redoubtable Hicken Senior.

It was Terry Hickey who spotted them first, and he alerted the limp and sorrowful group. ‘That’s Ralph Hicken!’ he shouted, ‘and that’s old Mr. Hicken!’

Mrs Hickey shushed him for saying ‘old Mr. Hicken’, *but* it was in fact true. Anyway, no one cared for politeness at that moment. The cry was taken up, ‘Ralph Hicken! Ralph Hicken’s come!’ Mr. Armstrong suddenly became a human being again. He resumed his inbuilt dignity in a trice. The other members of the Committee drew themselves up to their accustomed height, whilst the major-domo of the Coolbucca Band lifted his baton, and the members of the

band looked at him, as though fully expecting rare magic to issue from that weapon.

Which it did! There was a crash of cymbals, a rush of air into the wind instruments, and a thrumming beat into the drums. Away they went with 'Colonel Bogey' again. Not that that piece was altogether appropriate, but it was very stirring, and something had to come—in a flash, so to speak.

Now the children began to wag and wave their little flags. The banners were held aloft. The balloons bobbed up and down madly. Small children began to cry, but all parted to allow the progress of the Hickens both senior and junior until they reached the dignified podium and the solemn Committee. As they did, the cheering broke out, and the band swung into 'Here the Conquering Hero Comes', which was very appropriate.

When the silence was achieved, the postmaster of Wirril Creek, as the senior member of the Committee of Welcome, assumed his most impressive Committee voice, and spoke in solemn and appreciative speech. He lauded the last-to-come home hero, spoke of his decorations, and his fine service achievements, and to Ralph Hicken's surprise was exactly right in what he reported.

While this was proceeding, the old farmer—father of the hero—stood close by his son, his chest continually tightening with each plaudit of praise, each element of the fine chronicle of his son. He stood to attention as though he, too, were part of it all, which of course would be fairly true, he being the father of the hero.

The crowd on the station had come to silence. Only the voice of Mr. Armstrong was heard. Even small children drowned their own voices in appropriate silence. The echo of the badly-placed public address system could be heard in the mill and beyond. In fact the voice echoed around the small valley in which the Rail was located. It was all very impressive.

Ralph, for his part, had a volatile sense of humour. His face grew somewhat red as he tried to suppress it in light of this fantastic pomp and ceremony. He was inwardly hysterical, but the audience put it all down to the sun, and the excitement which makes so many become crimsonfaced. Ralph, in fact, was superb. He almost achieved the appearance of one who was solemn. Even so, his inward mirth was like a time-bomb ticking over. Any moment it could explode.

But then it did not explode. Mr. Armstrong's remarks were finished. An envelope containing a gift of money was presented to Ralph. He managed a bit of a stuttering speech—caused mainly by suppressing his inner mirth. Father Hicken beside him had no sense of mirth, but only one of greatest awe. He could not comprehend why such fame should come to him when he was only Ralph's father, but in a way which he had not known previously he was immensely proud and greatly grateful.

Oh, it was all so fine! Everyone thought so, even down to young Hickey and up to the wonderfully dignified postmaster. No one had told the Coolbucca bandmaster what to do. He had a choice in his own mind. For him it was either 'God Save the King' or 'The Hallelujah Chorus'. He had never ventured the latter on such occasions, but now, in a highly inspired burst of fervour, he indicated by the secret ways bandmasters have that this was his intention, and the instruments all broke out at once in the famous Handel masterpiece.

Hilarious joy mounted in the bosom of Ralph Hicken. He just wanted to give vent to great laughter, cascades of it in fact, but the solemn face of his male parent forbade this. He assumed great sobriety, all the while enjoying his own inner laughter. Mr. Hicken's gravity was a salute to his famous son, and an agreement with the solemn, yes, pompous,

Committee.

It was a wonder then—the Railites and the Creekites, all one in their unusual unity, coming as they were to tell the world that their small grove was not just nothing, but in fact really *something!* Ralph was in great wonderment as he surveyed this unusual scene and event. The earth around him seemed veritably to shake with the thunder of the band's concerted effort. Its music reverberated around the hills, telling out its great message and testifying to the immense dignity of man, and the superb rightness and appropriateness of this remarkable—if somewhat ruggedrural community.

## **BULL AND BULLOCK**

The bush paddock originally belonged to Tom Winters in the days when he had been a successful bullocky, that is to say, as bullockies are counted successful. Tom, however, like his bullocks, had grown old. It is well known that individual bullocks are never replaced within a team, for the team in its entirety grows old, and it is time, then, for the bullocky himself to consider retiring from the game.

When Tom had finished with yoking, his paddock, hitherto eaten to within an inch of the ground, began to flourish as a typical bush paddock. Bullocks withdrawn, the dung-fostered clumps and old tussocky grass flourished with abandon. Ferns and blady grass grew coarsely, the suckers made their appearance, unchecked. Finally Pat Reggin purchased it, but the banks were the real sellers, for old Tom had only nominally possessed it.

As bush paddocks go, it was not a bad one. Suckers, blady grass and bracken given in, it was a warm paddock in winter for the dries, and the tall growth protected the green stuff from the frosts. Stock even fattened upon it, and Pat Reggin, when he bought it, was pleased to graze his dry cows in it. Occasionally, too, he was able to pick a line of poorer stock which he would fatten and sell. He kept only his own for breeding, but the dealing turned him in a penny or two.

Tom Winters, who lived next to the bush paddock, still retained a connection of sorts with it, in the form of the old bullock. This bullock had been the leader of his team, and in

a way symbolised the past which had been Tom Winters' and his team's. He was Tom's pride, certainly, the old fellow with his quiet ways; a present evidence of the grand times before tractors, bulldozers and timber lorries, for the old bullock had a serenity sometimes lacking in these more hurried days. All his ways were pondered and determined.

Getting into the dry paddock, for example. There was never any hurry in doing that, but he always got there. Doubtless he believed himself within his own right, for he had grazed there since time immemorial. It seemed, both to himself and Tom, that there never had been a time when he had not wandered there, so that possibly it was not a moral argument, but merely an accepted fact, that he was lord of the paddock. This amount of free grazing was looked upon tolerantly enough by Pat Reggin, who in his own way had a great admiration for the bullock and his master. He never chased the beast from the paddock.

The bullock made his entrance through a particular spot in the fence. Here, where the wires were slack, he would waggle through his huge head, and that through, the remainder of his bulk managed somehow to work through the now-tautened wires. After this he would amble towards the cows, male intent in his stride certainly, but so subtly concealed that the cows never suspected. With a gentle light in his reddish-brown eyes he would gaze, casually, towards them, carelessly making his approach, so that, before they realised fully, he was with them.

It was a habit with the old fellow to select a partner for the day, a full-bodied cow, or slim heifer, and it was rarely more than a yard or so from him. Because of his age and experience, the old bullock probably knew quite an amount, but there was one matter still left unsolved, and because of it, standing beside the selected dam for the day, he would

stare ahead with mild puzzlement in his eyes, mingled with a faint determination in which there was no loss of self-respect. But, puzzlement or not, the old bullock enjoyed his daily vigilance and would not be separated from his mate.

What the cows thought is problematical. Probably they were politely surprised, for they certainly had great respect for his bulk and shape, and no bull in all his male entirety could have surpassed him in shapely buttocks, full and hanging dewlap, sleek glossiness of hide, bulk and straightness of back, so that—perhaps as much for his beauty as for his quiet gentlemanliness—the cows welcomed and accepted him.

He differed greatly from the young bull. The young bull belonged to Jim Andrews and, like Jim Andrews, although perhaps in different ways, was impulsive. His whole inclination was to attack the bush paddock at any section of the fence, force his way through, by belly-twisting, and body-sidling, or to belly-roll on the ground, or jump the fence, so that he might be immediately with the cows. Once through he would run, tail flicking, belly swaying, and himself roaring, towards the dams, and had it not been for the old bullock he would doubtless have realised most of his intentions.

The old bullock strongly deprecated any rush or hurry of any sort. He had not been used to it in hauling days, and conservatively, objected to it now. The old bullock, ponderous in all his ways, and determined, insisted that the young bull should not impetuously rush any cow, or, for that matter, have to do at all with her.

On his first visit the young Ayrshire bull had been bellicose. He had growled and roared, torn earth in hoovesful and tossed it into the air. He had shaken his horns wickedly

at the old bullock, but these actions the old bullock had disregarded. When the young bull had ventured even closer, and attempted to come between him and the dam selected for the day, he had shaken his old and mighty head, with some grandeur of action—powerfully, too—and that had been enough for the younger beast. He had accepted the situation, which was to become more or less permanent. From then on, he would, each day, follow the old bullock, much as a disciple accompanies his master, and although there may have been rebellious inclinations and barely submerged desires, the young bull maintained a continuous respect. Doubtless he was puzzled at times, especially on the count of the old bullock's ineffectiveness, but he seemed not to question it.

Also, the two animals adhered strictly to a timetable. It was agreed, apparently, that the young bull retire from the paddock about sundown, after which the bullock would remain until dusk was falling before returning through the slackened wires to Tom Winters' house paddock. In the morning, after sun-up, the old bullock would make his way into the bush paddock, choose his day companion, and wait for the young bull, who presently would come roaring at the bush paddock fence, conquer it, and come racing towards the old chap and the herd of cows. What the young bull did in the night was probably never revealed to the bullock, more out of consideration for his feelings than the inability of the younger animal to boast, for the bull—whose inclinations were stopped by no fence—upset many a gestation table in the district and caused surprise to breeders of Jersey cattle at time of their stock calving.

Pat Reggin, who knew the possessiveness of the old bullock, and the defeat in the bush paddock of the younger animal, saw to it that his cows at mating time had the advantage of his own bull, after which he would return them to the bush paddock, thereby creating illusion in the mind of

the old fellow, and bolstering him with unjustifiable pride.

Dogs often visited the bush paddock, and they were, of course, of various kinds. Those who were hunters only by nature entirely disregarded the bull and bullock. They had no part in the paddock but to hunt, and so they would sniff around clumps of blady grass, or poke their heads into hollow logs, and even occasionally startle a rabbit, after which they would tear, ears back, legs extended, and themselves shrieking, so that the rabbit was urged on, and rarely caught. The same dogs would mercilessly hunt down a fox near the creek and then, possibly, be beaten by him on contact. The cows, bull and bullock knew naturally that there was no danger in these hunters.

But cattle-dogs, the dogs with the bush tainting their blood, came only for sport. They had a desire to chase, and even kill, and their entrance to the paddock, often stealthily made, was with intent. They made no immediate rush at the cows, or even the calves. It was apparently understood that the bosses had to be challenged, and so they would approach, shoulders hunched, ears back, and moving slowly on crouching legs. They would no more dream of neglecting this procedure than refusing a fillet steak.

The bull and bullock never neglected the challenges. The young bull at their approach would arch his powerful neck, tense his heavy shoulders, and breathe strongly from his distended nostrils. He would paw at the earth, and bring his small tail flicking along the back. Then he would charge the animals. Often a dog would retreat before this maddened rush, and relinquish the fight immediately, but another might stand aside, and dart in on the bull. Then the bull would twist and turn, and cavort and bellow, and try to horn the opponent. Usually, if the bull felt that way about it, the dogs were content enough to leave him to the field,

and they gave the impression as they trotted off that a bit of fun was not worth all that intensity of feeling.

Should they persist, then the old bullock had his say. He had a habit of bearing straight down upon the challenging animal, his nostrils snuffling and the substance of them gleaming in the sunlight. His form, lumbering, also had surprising agility. The brown of the eyes would change to pure red, and the heavy white horns would waggle wickedly. His head he would sway from side to side, first at this dog, and then at that, and the sight would be enough to awe the animals into a hurried retreat, leaving the larger beasts in triumphant possession of their domain.

Outside the paddock it was a different matter. Should the bull and bullock—as occasionally they did—decide to take a holiday from the bush paddock, then they would go north along the white gravel road, or south along the same road, and, either north or south, they would meet a dog: Jim Andrews' to the north and Pat Reggin's to the south. These dogs instinctively knew the bullock and bull to be out of bounds, since they themselves had an intimate knowledge of the point to which they could chase the intruding animals, and yet not be without their rights. The bull and bullock had the same knowledge, so that invariably their wandering impulses were checked, and they returned to the paddock.

Strangely enough it was the young bull who was chased, the dog at his heels snapping and barking. The old bullock, had he chosen, might have escaped to north or south, as he desired, but he always followed the dog which followed the bull and, at the fence of the bush paddock, managed to enter that asylum without the dog's even snapping at him. There, too, the chase ended. Reluctantly and with wistfulness, the dog would cease his barking, rest for a moment, panting beside the fence, and trot back to Jim Andrews' or Pat Reggin's—wherever he belonged—and the bull and bullock would go back to their old game with a cow specially chosen.

But the old bullock arrived one morning to find the paddock emptied of its cows and heifers. Not even a vealer remained. Disconsolate, the old fellow wandered about in the rough bracken, the tussock and the fallen timber. He climbed to the ridge and peered about, his head swaying slowly, but not in the valleys nor on the valley sides could he see the stock. Anyway, he knew they had gone. There was nothing for him to do but graze, and this he did only half-heartedly.

Then the young bull arrived. He was, as usual, impetuous. He made his way through the fence, and came hurrying across the curve of the valley, just below the ridge head down and grumbling, as though in a way he was thinking, and actually discussing some problem with himself. There was scarcely muted anger, too, in his eyes, and his belly swayed with his urgency of perambulation. His small eyes were searching for the cows and the old bullock. The old bullock he saw on the ridge, and raced, protesting to himself, towards him. When he arrived, he regarded the old fellow with somewhat of surprise, as though the bullock denuded of his cows was now being sighted for the first time.

The old fellow, shorn of his usual company, certainly appeared lonely and ineffective; divested of his authority and sovereignty. He was not even gently quiet and puzzled. He was bewildered.

The two grazed uncomfortably that morning. They sensed the change in the paddock. In a way its old personality had fallen from it. The young bull was inclined impatiently to retire from the paddock; but habit held him, and he grazed along with the old fellow. However, the absence of the cows made the paddock different. Even the dogs, hunting for rabbits, were changed.

One of the dogs was Pat Reggin's large black dog, and some said there was a bit of the dingo in him. He rarely entered the paddock during the day, although often at night he would chase the cows and vealers. Today he missed the cows, and saw the bull and bullock. He approached the two warily, and the bull, who was now ready for any suggestion of fight, seemed scarcely to wait for the challenge. He rushed straight at the black dog. The dog crouched, his forepaws before him, and the bull, back arched, and all muscles tensed, bore down on him. The dog barked and whisked aside only just in time. He snapped, and that set the young Ayrshire dancing, forelegs down, splayed slightly, neck bunched, the small tail flicking angrily.

The old bullock was watching the battle, his head lowered heavily towards the grass, his red eyes solemn. Occasionally he shook his head, and sent mucus flying in golden streamers; but he made no attempt to attack the snapping furious animal, or to assist the young bull. The bull was well able to look after itself. Every twist and turn barely missed the dog, who had lost himself, almost, in savagery. The dog knew this occasion was different from others, and would not desist.

The old bullock knew the difference of the occasion. He might almost have gone to sleep, standing there, watching. Usually by now he would have charged the intruder and routed him, but today he had hesitated, and now he no longer wished to fight. Also, he was slightly afraid of the savage black fury.

Finally the bull drove off the black dog, but the dog would not outrightly admit defeat. It backed to the fence, and stood barking. Then it retired through the fence, and lay down on the roadside, still watching the two animals, its red jaws grinning, and the dingo curve of its teeth apparent.

After a time it chose to disregard both animals, and trotted down the road, apparently pleased with itself.

The young bull watched the departing dog, and the bullock, standing silent and motionless—as when the fight had been in progress—watched the young bull. The bull turned, stared at the old fellow, and tossed his horns with emphasis, an action he would not have dared do in other days. But then today was not another day.

The bullock made his way down from the ridge. He went towards the night paddock belonging to Tom Winters. But this time the young bull did not follow. He hesitated only a moment before turning towards his own paddock, and he went off, hurrying, not roaring this time, but certainly confident enough, until he reached his side fence of the bush paddock; and disappeared.

## **RALPH HICKEN'S REVELATION**

Ralph stood in the early dawn. He stood on the back verandah of their old pioneer home, and stared towards ancient Pirrawarrini. That old giant of a mountain loomed largely through the grey of the morning, the faint ochrous colour that would give way to the brighter moment when the light would suddenly fill the poised air, and the magpies would cry chortling, and—he could swear—the full-throated utterance of Andrews' bull would trumpet through from the foothills of Pirrawarrini.

It was a strange feeling—being back at home. Stranger than most men and women would believe. It was an important strangeness, a significant alienation, something he could grasp at. It was different from the gentle sweetness he had felt at the 'Welcome Home' yesterday. That was Australian and 'North Coast' right down to its bones and its ragged trimmings. They were a sentimental people, his nation and his race. They came from a history of ancient invasions when they had been Celts and Picts and Scots, and then Angles and Saxons, with infusions of the Vikings, the warlike Danes, and the Romans. The flooding by the French, the strange landings of Spanish, and the many tribes which had grown up from these had all given birth and colour to sentimentality. Then they had become Empire builders and all the time they had filled their history with battles and wars, savage irruptions and strong conquerings.

The last they had done had been this warring across the entire world in two major conflicts. The first had ceased

temporarily in 1918, and then 21 years later it had begun afresh, drawing in other powers both hostile and allied, and suddenly it, too, had ceased, and the world was beginning to breathe new and strange airs of liberty.

Looking towards the slumbering mountain, Ralph Hicken felt the mystery of everything—life, war, returning home, new days, and the enigma of man—biting at his mind. It was not that the war had made him come alive, that he had begun thinking when the world was falling apart. There was much more to him than that. He had always thought. Strangely enough he had caught it from his father, the man who forever seemed old in life. He had married later in life than most, and as far back as Ralph could remember had lived in a world of his own rumination.

He nodded towards the mountain, some ancient spirit of worship gripping him. That was it: his old Dad had always seemed to battle with the constant confrontation of life which was about him. He felt everything deeply and seemed helpless to cope with it all. Yet the strange thing was that his father always seemed to emerge unscathed, unscarred. The memory of his mother's death flashed in on him, and he remembered the incredible tenderness and acceptance his father had had.

The magpies stood out on the old tallow-woods and gave their morning prophecies. Sometimes they were strident, awkward and harsh, as though they did not care. They would have their say. This morning they warbled. They were sweet: they, too, were welcoming home. At least that is how the young soldier heard them. Their warblings and chortlings were liquid joy. He could see their open beaks thrusting up, as though by some intense straining they could achieve a rich musical victory.

Then Andrews' bull roared. It was a strong fellow, but a bit careless. It was the cry of the conqueror who sends out a reminder to his rivals that they had better give up trying. In

Wirril Creek there was only one king, and he was it. There was a desultory answer, here and there, but in fact more replies of bullocks than of bulls, and this morning investiture being completed—something like the changing of the guard—the countryside stilled into temporary silence.

He could not stem the coming of his thoughts. Nor did he wish to do so. Memories were flooding him without effort. They came out of the past and flowed into him, and over him. Some of them were plain and bland, but some of them were bitter and astringent, and he shuddered slightly like a man who eats his first olive, or mistakes dry ice for the cold moist thing. The strongest memories should have come to him, immediately, from the recent conflict, the years in Europe, North Africa and the Islands, especially those last years in the Pacific. They stayed where they were bidden, and the old memories came.

They were a strange mixture, a recalling of similar early dawns, when he herded the cows to the bails from the night paddocks, when he went off on fruitless errands trying to discover newly-born calves in the high harsh kangaroo grass and the tufted paspalum, when he drove rogue heifers and bullocks from the main road through the open rails, back into the paddock behind the railway line. They were ordinary memories but rich to him, as they came, and he smiled, and a faint laugh came to him also.

Soon his father would emerge sleepily on the front verandah, bringing the bucket of hot water from the stove, and they would start to wash the udders of the waiting bailed cows. He knew the old man was wondering painfully whether he, Ralph, would stay on the farm, or go off somewhere on his own venture. He smiled again at that thought. It was something he could not reveal to his father: his father must not yet know his pattern of thought on this matter.

Staring into the now glowing dawn was something he relished richly. How many times he had dreamed of these moments, at times when his own mates were noisily talking of wine, women and song, and doing their tough Aussie boasting and exaggerating as they always did, with only a modicum of truth in their claims. Few of them were as tough as they made out, and he noticed that most of the boasters were not the men who made it best in battle: just some of them did.

This morning he loved the thin stretches of white mist that lay in the strata about the foothills. Probably it had something to do with the cold night and the warming morning. He did not greatly care to know. He loved the flaked whiteness of it, the layers of thin smoke-like mists. He also loved the crisp air that was reaching him, with a faint odour of breakfast fire-smoke. It was all like nectar to him, feeding his hungry and active mind. He knew that in a way he was curious, different, not the normal Wirril Creek person, yet, even as he thought about it, a wry grin came to his face. Who—for goodness' sake—was such a person? The grey and grizzled farmers had always been there as a background to his life; the plump and strong wives who toiled from daylight to dark without modern amenities, the scraggy kids with whom he had gone to school, trudging the couple of miles from farm to Wirril Creek—all of these crowded in on his mind. Some seemed like types, but then, when you got to know them, they were not typical. They were just themselves, each having his or her characteristics, each a bit idiomatic. He had to grin when he remembered the differences.

Yet there had always been a gap. They were away from him. He liked them, they liked him, but he fancied they

thought him different, and—for that matter—he was. It was hard to say why the gap was there and what it was made of. He did not know. He just knew that thought patterns were different. They always talked about things that didn't greatly interest him. Perhaps their ideas and interests were right, and good ones. Perhaps, if he had not gone to the war, he would gradually have come to be like them, and have the same mind and approach to life; he just didn't know. He knew he had always been thoughtful.

He grinned, shrugged his shoulders and remembered that that was the way his father had always been. His grin widened a little when he thought that that was how he might finish up—just like his old Dad. The grin was wry, turning to a frown. He didn't want to be just like his Dad. He wanted to accomplish things. His father always seemed to see himself as the victim—or product—of circumstances and the like. Ralph didn't follow that. When some good idea was in his mind, then other ideas crowded in with it. He knew he had always wanted to accomplish plenty, but not just for fame's sake or for boosting his own ego. There had to be more to life than just being a successful person. His grin returned. He thought to himself, 'What a load of rubbish I think, really!'

Looking across the rails, he could see the cattle bunched up in the corner of the night paddock. He had better anticipate his Dad and bring them in to the bails. He was about to walk across the near paddock to cross the creek and the rails when something held him. He just stood and looked at what was so dear to him. He knew himself to be a practical man, but somehow he could never get on with the practice of life without first understanding what it was all about; what, anyway, it was all about for him and his Dad, and the people in Wirril Creek, and then in the wider world. That

was what the war had done for him. It hadn't turned him into a thinker, for he had always been that, but it had given him materials for thought, and he knew his mind was crammed with his war-years, experiences, ideas and conclusions which might not otherwise have come to him in many years.

It was then that the whole thing flashed in on him. He saw at once—as though in a brilliant light which instead of blinding him gave him unusual perception—the meaning and pattern of his war years and the world about him. If he had thought about it—edging towards some conclusion or solution—it would have seemed most strange to him. It had to come, unbidden, springing up from somewhere within. That he, at this moment, standing looking towards an old North Coast mountain, should have some kind of understanding that great thinkers strain to achieve, was of course ludicrous. Yet he knew in that sudden moment some kind of explanation of his world, some kind of rationale of everything.

What came to him first was the pretended toughness of humanity. The things they admired most they feared most: toughness, hardness, ruthless pursuit of goals, treading over one another to achieve those ends. Bigness was what many saw as greatness. He thought of the great leaders—Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. These men showed a massive front to the world. They were not only protectors of their tribes and nations, but they gave greatness to them. Hitler and Mussolini had been of the same ilk, if become a little mad. The same went—in men's minds—for naval ships, bombers and fighters, ground armaments and weaponry. They were all big, threatening. Yes, 'massive' was the word. They stood for some kind of invincibility. Instinctively he looked towards Pirrawarrini, but that massivity was different. It was not cruel, ruthless, gaining some ends of its own. It was

quiet, calm, almost slumbering, but Ralph knew it to be strong and fruitful without being tough.

As he saw the human worship of so-called greatness, he also saw what was true greatness. Anyway, to him it was true greatness. It was his father, pondering, puzzling and working. It was his mother who had worked hard and provided comfort and warmth for them. It was the Armstrongs, impossibly pompous but not tough; not underneath, anyway. It was the unbelievably patriotic Coolbucca Band and their fervent home-welcoming. It was young Hickey and his Mum, Dolly. It was old Tracey and his stiff private being. It was these men with their dairies, their cream, calves, cows and milk. It was the men on Pirrawarrini with their bananagrowing, and others producing carrots and peas and the like. It was the Saturday sport and the Sunday worship, the Monday to Friday working, living, selling and buying, loving, marrying, having children and dying. It was the local politics and the suspicions of State and Federal politics, the conservatism that kept riotous ideas in check. Sure, it had faults—over-conservatism, neglect of the wider world, little of do-gooding, a certain inbred way of thinking—but then it was simple and even naive. It was not, however, foolish or unthinking.

It all seemed over in the minute he had thought it. In a way it was like a vision: he had seen the mass of humanity in its foolishness, evil and suffering. There were hideous flashes of war, of bursting mortars, shattering shells, of breaking bombs, of mangled and tattered flesh, of seeping blood and strange groaning, crying out to whatever help might be in the hidden realms and powers: there was the cursing and hatred, bitterness and bafflement. With it, there was tenderness too, weeping emotional tenderness that cried out for some great pity, some change in the ways of men and nations. Then there was silence, the silence in his own mind like the nameless quiet after a thumping barrage.

He felt strangely at peace as he moved towards the cows in the night paddock. The dawn was breaking strongly now, and a touch of heat was in the air. He knew his thoughts had seemed jumbled, but for him their message was clear: simplicity and love were what mattered, and not massivity, toughness and ruthlessness. They were the pitiable things, and they had become the cruel and useless things.

He began to talk to the cows as though he remembered their names. He used the old ridiculous cry, 'Hoop there! Hoop there, won't you? Hoop! Hoop! Hoop!' Whether they remembered that cry, or whether old Mr. Hicken had somehow kept their memories fresh or not, they responded, and began wending their way to the opened slip-rails, and through the underground cutting of the North Coast railway line. As usual, some of them mooched, and others hurried, nodding their heads up and down as though working hard in some bullock team. Others looked around for a following calf, but all moved towards the bails, the promise of lucerne chaff and ease to their milk-filled udders.

It was then he saw his Dad standing against the sky, looking down at him. His eye caught sight of a small dam, a catchment of water he had not seen before. He remembered the conversation with his Dad the night before, the talk about 'the little dam'. So this was it! It gave him delight. Also he heard the huge black cockatoos as they screeched overhead, and the competition of the great currawongs who had suddenly become vocal. The whole thing sounded like some pre-arranged orchestra. The magpies had finished with their own songs, but the kookaburras sensed their right time and they gave vent to their mirthful cacophany.

Ralph felt they authenticated his bit of philosophy, come through to him via his homemade ways of thinking. He wondered whether his Dad usually thought in similar ways; he imagined not!

The cows kept moving towards the dairy-bails. This time

—and it was not usual—they had formed a triangle, the leading cow far ahead of the others, and then they—the other cows—following it in triangle formation. They were plodding as though that was what had been planned for them even before creation. It was a strange thought, and Ralph pondered it thoughtfully as he moved towards the bails, the milking, and his Dad.

## **GRANDMA SELLS PERSIMMONS**

Grandma sells persimmons. Anyone in Wirril knows Grandma. She is a legend, she and her persimmon trees, with their dozen varieties of gold fruit. She sits all day on the front verandah, which looks out on to the busy Pacific Highway, waiting for the buyers to come. Her hands are folded on her lap, for she has long ago given up the silly idea of sewing. 'Nothing in it,' she says.

There is nothing in anything it seems, other than selling persimmons. She calmly takes the money when they give it to her, nods, nods all the time until they are out of the gate. into their car or utility. She watches them drive away, listens to them change gears as they pull up the gradual slope of the hill, and knows that in the spot where the tallow-wood grows beside the road they will pause, almost as though they were about to turn around, come back to buy more persimmons. Here they change gears, and Grandma nods to herself, opens her hands and looks down at the threepences and other silver coins nestling there.

Usually she is paid in threepences, as though people think that if they rid themselves of a few spare threepences they are not spending anything, really. Grandma then closes her hands and waits for more buyers to come.

All sorts come. There are those, very keen, but just a little sly, a trifle slick. They come from the city, and they think Grandma will sell them persimmons almost for nothing, like

the cream they want to buy from her, and butter if she has it. When they find they may only buy persimmons they decide they shall go back to the city and say, 'Persimmons? Persimmons? Why, I know a place along the Coast road where you can get them for nothing. Next to nothing, anyway.'

They say, earnestly, 'You know, these country people don't know what they are giving away. Sixpence a dozen the old girl asks, and down here you pay one and sixpence a dozen. Look at that now! Penny ha'penny down here, ha'penny up there.' They are very pleased about that.

Grandma sits on the front verandah, and looks at the yellow persimmons and then down at her hand with a few threepences in it. She has sold a dozen to the last car. Clever man that, by his own reckoning. Clever all right. He thought he was getting away cheaply. You could see it in his face, looking at the persimmons, calculating how much there was in just one tree, the tree from which he had picked his golden beauties. A man could make a bit, just out of that one tree. Grandma had sat on the verandah and watched. Finally he had only taken a dozen. Pity, he had thought, driving away. All that money going nowhere. Two threepences in Grandma's hand.

'If I had to box 'em,' she thinks, 'buy the boxes, pack 'em, then hammer the lids down. Then get Jerry to take them in the service-car to the station. What would the boxes cost? What would nails cost, and Jerry taking them to the station?—that is, if Jerry remembered to call and take them.'

Grandma looks down at the threepences and thinks about agent's fees; or agent's bills, for Perce Anderson got a bill back for his peas.

There are others who buy Grandma's persimmons. Some of

them stop in rather nice cars, polished cars. No scratches on the paint, no mud on the mudguards. Polished-looking men and women, but only polish Grandma is inclined to think. They want persimmons.

'Good gracious,' says the man as he comes through the gate. 'We are in luck—that's if they'll sell. Persimmons! Haven't seen them for years. Didn't think you could get them.'

The polished man, who has his wife with him, says, 'I say, are your persimmons for sale?'

'They're for sale,' says Grandma, looking straight at him.

'Then I'd like a dozen,' says the man. He looks at his wife. 'Perhaps we could even make it two dozen, eh?' He feels he is being benevolent towards both his wife and Grandma.

'Sixpence a dozen,' says Grandma.

'Ah,' says the man. He looks about for the fellow who is going to pick them for him, but there isn't any fellow. He looks a bit uncertain, but Grandma seems not to care whether he takes them or not so that eventually he walks over to the tree, a little self-consciously, and begins to pick persimmons, mainly from the lower branches. All the best fruit has been picked lower down, as he is not the first polished person to have stopped at Grandma's, and, polish and all, he looks for the best, sees them higher up, begins to reach them, cannot, grasps a branch and hauls himself high.

Tie comes out of the vest, clothes a bit awry, but he forgets that in the fascinating search for the best. Nothing stops him; he is out, determinedly, for the best. The woman gives a smile to Grandma, and a queer look to her husband, whom she seems to see in a somewhat different light. He looks flushed about the face and wears a triumphant expression.

Sometimes the polished people have little polish. They are ever so polite to Grandma. They don't mind getting up the

## The Days & Dreams of Arcady

tree. They speak in polite distant voices, husband to his wife, wife to her husband, as though they really don't know each other, haven't known each other for a long time. Might be the first time they have met.

'Oh I say, dear, do you really think we need a dozen? You know, we won't be into Sydney before Monday, and that is a long time to keep them.'

'I don't know, dear,' says her man as he climbs the tree, 'that you can't keep the ones that aren't too ripe some considerable time perhaps.'

'I'd be careful, dear,' says his woman, watching him climb, 'that you don't get your trousers caught in some of those branches.'

'I am, dear,' he says. meaning 'careful', and not sounding too intimate.

'I have some hard ones, dear,' he tells her.

'Let me see them,' she says, and her man dutifully shows them. She looks at them with a stare as hard as the unripe fruit.

'Oh, dear, they will never ripen. You can't pick fruit like hat, dear.'

Well, he can but he won't. 'Can't put them back on the tree, dear,' he says. Grandma is watching them from the verandah, so he can't drop them.

He gazes a trifle sadly at the three he has picked, and finally throws them to his woman. After that he picks the yellowest, the most golden you might say, those with a touch of red on the curved tips. Then he gets quite enthusiastic, for although he has picked a dozen he sees a couple of beauties, further up, and he may not resist them. He throws them down.

'That's over the dozen, dear,' she says.

Oh, they'll make it two dozen. They make it three. One and sixpence in Grandma's hand. No boxes, no nailing down the lids, no depending on Jerry to pick up the blessed

## Grandma Sells Persimmons

cases. Anyway, how would Grandma pick them? Perhaps Grandpa might pick them.

Not Grandpa. He sits inside, for he likes a fire, even if autumn is yet young. He'll have nothing to do with persimmons. He curses those trees at night, when the flyingfoxes swoop down from beneath the mountain, and commence their bickering and squabbling, keeping it up all night.

'Hullo, lidy,' says the man who is out to do business. He might be a barrowman (on a holiday, of course). He has green corduroy trousers, his sleeves are rolled up and he wears bright tan shoes. 'I see you have persimmons there, lidy,' he says.

'Sixpence a dozen,' says Grandma.

'Sixpence a dozen, now!' cries the barrowman his eyes lighting up. But natural cunning makes him conceal his surprise.

'Tell you what, lidy,' he says. 'I'll take twenty doze straight and give you fourpence a dozen'

'Sixpence a dozen,' intones Grandma.

'But, lidy,' he says, 'I'm giving you an offer for twenty dozen. No risk on your part. The risk is mine. What might happen, eh? I might lose half of them through being over ripe. Anything might happen. I take the risk. Now come on, lidy, I'll give you fourpence a dozen.'

Grandma doesn't care if the whole lot goes bad on him. She don't care if he never makes a bean out of them. She doesn't even bother saying, 'Sixpence a dozen,' but just opens her hand, and the barrowman sees the silver threepences and sixpences in it, and he nods, gives a bit of a grin, forgets all he might lose, becomes hearty again.

'I'll take 'em,' he shouts. 'I'll take 'em if I lose the lot. Sixpence a dozen.'

He takes them. Bert, his cobber, stands beneath the tree

and catches all the barrowman throws to him. He puts them in a sugar-sack, two sugar-sacks, three sugar-sacks.

'How many's that, Bert?' he asks, and Bert says it must just be about enough, and they give Grandma a look to see if she's been counting, and she is staring at them, so they think she must have been counting and they say, loudly, that they reckon it is enough, near enough, as though they might be leaving a few of their own, and the barrowman wipes his hands, finds money in a trouser pocket, and gives it to Grandma, a new ten-shilling note. Twenty sixpences, forty threepences. Grandma looks down at it, wonders a little, would rather forty small coins.

The barrowman goes off through the gate saying he'll take the risk, lidy, dashed if he won't.

Grandma crushes the note in her hand. It has sharp little corners where it is folded, sharp like the man who gave it to her. Grandma smiles grimly. Never an end in the world to the people who think you are a fool.

A utility truck creeps down from the north. It groans on the hills, creaks when it nears Grandma's, squeaks a little, staggers along carrying a burden of children and campinggear. It sags past the persimmon orchard and hesitates. It groans and stops. Children Ring up a canvas tarpaulin, peer out. They see the persimmons.

'Look, Dad, persimmons!'

Dad crawls out from behind the steering wheel.

'I know,' he says, a trifle irritated. That's why he stopped, he tells them. He'll see if they are for sale.

He feels in his pockets before he goes through the gate, as though he has made a fool of himself before, buying things and then not having the money; as though, too, he has often dreamt he has.

Grandma nods to him. She likes this sort of a sale. 'Six-

pence a dozen,' she says as he raises his hat. The man nods, looks grateful, likes Grandma's voice, wanders a little, not knowing where to commence, what tree to choose. Finally he remembers and calls to the children, and they come tumbling across to him, through the fence, and up into the trees. He is bolstered up now by a handful of children, made a man by fatherhood.

'Now, don't break the limbs,' he warns. He shouts an order to this one or that, and stands a trine importantly, with his legs apart; but after a time he becomes a little anxious, for the family has deployed in different directions. Only Dick is up the tree above.

'Come down, Dick,' he says quietly. He raises his voice to the others. 'Come on, Rob, Betty, Allan. That's enough. We don't want to take the whole orchard.'

'Neither you do,' says Grandma, a trifle grimly. 'You couldn't afford it.'

Six dozen makes six sixpences. Five sixpences and a fumble for the other.

'Let the children have that dozen,' says Grandma. 'The ripe ones.'

Well, they have them, anyway, their noses pushed into squashed fruit, golden fruit, broken fruit with juice orangered, oozing. Some of them have found the date-plum persimmons, as dark as dates, and as sweet.

The man is going out the gate when he sees some yellow flowers. 'Calendulas,' he says in surprise, turning to Grandma.

'Marigolds,' says Grandma, nodding.

'English marigolds,' the man says. 'I'd like some seedlings if you have any to sell.' He fidgets hurriedly in his pocket.

'Take what you want,' says Grandma. 'There's plenty of them under the old plants.'

'For my heart,' says the man. 'The old ticker plays up a

bit. Make a soup out of them, you know, and you can't beat it. Try to get the seedlings in town, can't get them.'

He stoops down and scoops a handful of them from the soft wet soil. Grandma will not take a penny. She nods seriously when he repeats gratefully that they are for his heart.

She watches the utility stagger down the road, hears it lurch and groan, sees it sway, and finally disappear over the hill. She smiles then. Grandpa will snort when he hears that one—marigolds for the heart!

There is one more visitor for Grandma, one more at least. Another of those polished cars. The man who gets out of it is upright, overpolished. His wife is a stuck-up piece of goods if ever there was one, thinks Grandma, and although she is rarely moved by impulse, she thinks now that she would like to show these two a thing or two.

They come through the gate as though they don't want to, really, and wouldn't, actually, only that they want persimmons. The woman looks haughtily at Grandma and says, without a look at her husband, 'How much are your persimmons?'

Grandma thinks she won't sell them at all, but then she thinks she will.

'Shilling a dozen,' she says for the first time in her life of selling persimmons.

'A shilling seems a lot,' sniffs the woman.

Grandma opens her hand, closes it. Ten shillings in that hand, two-shilling pieces, shillings, sixpences, threepences.

'We'll have a dozen, George,' the woman says to her husband. She pays the shilling into Grandma's hand. The shilling is highly scented, like the woman.

She then waits to have the persimmons picked. She even gives a glance along the verandah to see where the man is

who will pick them. Grandma's hand closes over the shilling firmly.

'Pick them yourself,' she says. 'Everyone does.'

'I beg your pardon?' says the woman.

'They all pick them,' says Grandma firmly. She holds the shilling tightly. 'Don't expect me to,' she says, even more firmly.

George picks them, but George does not want to. George takes the fruit from the lower branches. He will not be urged up trees. He hands each to his wife. Eleven persimmons. He holds one in his hand, stares at it, puzzled.

'What,' he says to Grandma, holding up the persimmon, 'is this?'

It is a persimmon with some dark muddy stain on it.

'Flying-foxes,' says Grandma. She nods. 'Vomit.' The man stares at her. 'They all vomit,' says Grandma

Click, they are gone, the gate shut, the polished car rolled away and dusk is rolling in. Grandma will soon go inside.

First she commences to count the coins. Threepences are herded in fours and sixpences in twos. Silver sheep. Heaps of threepences. There is a delight in fathoming the number of shillings in that handful of small coins. Down the road the clip-clop of a horse.

The horse is cantering now, pushing aside the silverpurple, the mist that lowers about the orchard, fumes gently along the rows of trees. Well, no one on horseback ever buys persimmons.

The horse is at the gate. It stops. The little half-caste boy from the blacks' camp. Bad lot those blacks, Grandma thinks.

A wistful small face above the shaggy old bay. Looming large in the evening that bony bay. Two props for its front legs and the boy perched just behind the props, his large

wistful eyes looking at the golden persimmons through the gloom. He does not see Grandma on the verandah.

‘Want some persimmons?’ shouts Grandma. She really thinks you have to shout at dusk in order to be heard.

The half-caste boy looks mildly scared. He is about to urge on his swaying horse, then thinks differently.

‘Good evening,’ he says to Grandma in an ultra-polite voice.

‘Good evening, yourself,’ she says.

The small fellow upon the horse makes a serious face. He speaks in a quaint manner, known as old-fashioned. ‘I would like some persimmons,’ he says, ‘but I haven’t the money.’

She knows he isn’t trying to get a few for nothing. He is in earnest, the little fellow. Besides, he has interrupted her counting. Grandpa is inside beside the fire ready to snort. Plenty to tell Grandpa. Marigolds for the heart!

‘Go on,’ she says abruptly. ‘Take some. Take as many as you like.’

‘Thank you,’ the small fellow says, with an upward lilt in his voice. ‘That’s good of you.’

‘Fuh!’ she snorts, and gets down to counting her threepences, lining them up again in fours, piling them high. She takes no notice of him when he finishes picking his golden fill, his hoard that tumbles about him in pockets and shirt front, which slumps him a bit as he climbs on to the bay horse. Then he goes off in the gloom, and she wonders absently, as she gathers up the last of the coins, how the bay mare is able to carry such a load.

## A MATTER OF ASPARAGUS

The afternoon of Ralph Hicken’s return to the bosom and farm of his father, an interesting thing happened. Mr. Hicken Senior was greatly worried about what he could do for the evening meal, known in the district as ‘Tea’. Following the memorable welcome home to the last of Wirril’s servicemen, the invitations to the evening meal were many, but Mr. Hicken stood steadfastly against them. He wanted Ralph to himself, and he also wished to find out what were Ralph’s plans for the future. He was always moved to agitation when he thought about Ralph and the future. So Ralph and he politely refused every invitation. Everyone understood.

When, however, they arrived home, it was to find the front verandah stacked with all kinds of gifts. Mr. Hicken had a poultry run, and some fine birds in it. Yet here were eggs in a large Egg Board box. Here were vegetables of all kinds, laid out in a pattern of floral design—the carrots and parsnips still had their tops. Fresh creamy caulies were in their surround of green plumes. Cabbages were large, firm and fine. Also there was fruit. It was the time of soft fruits — plums, nectarines and peaches. Some fruity hands of sugar bananas were on display.

Inside, on the kitchen table, was a side of bacon, a flich of ham, and—of all things—a few fine fillets of perch. In addition to these *naturallines*, there were also some tinned

foods such as fish, ham, and the like. A basket of bread, butter, bottled fruit and jams was in the centre of the table. There were no notes with the food. Doubtless the kind Wirril folk were showing their appreciation in other ways than importing the Coolbucca Band and giving an official 'Welcome Home!'

Mr. Hicken was characteristically bewildered. Ralph was delighted. The question of the evening meal was settled. In any case it was time for the milking and separating the cream. Ralph took one of the horses and went out for the cows. His father hardly dared enjoy the luxury of the moment for fear it was soon to give way to his boy's rejection of farming as his future way of life. He was caught between a new delight and his own incipient and ancient dreads. This inner conflict only increased his bewilderment.

Ralph enjoyed the afternoon, even though the milking was late. He chatted with his Dad as they extracted the rich creamy milk. Ralph grinned to himself, and his father picked up the private humour.

'What is it, Ralph?' he asked.

Ralph smiled towards his father and said, 'Nothing really I thought you would have milking machines by now.'

Mr. Hicken shook his head. 'Machines don't do the job properly,' he said. 'Anyone will tell you it dries the cows off quicker.'

'Could be,' said Ralph, 'but those who begin to use them never go back to hand-milking.'

Now his parent was plunged into gloom. Just another reason for Ralph to leave. He pumped away at the udder, and noticed his hands were trembling.

That night he said to Ralph, 'Did you notice the little dam?'

'Little dam?' Ralph was surprised.

'Young Hickey helped me make it,' said Mr. Hicken. 'He was really after my pears, but he made the little dam. Somehow it keeps the water.'

Ralph said, 'I'll look at it first thing tomorrow.' His face became thoughtful. 'Nothing can happen here without water.'

Mr. Hicken's saddest and deepest premonitions were being fulfilled. Even so, he made a brave stab at the problem. 'We've got a good creek there, Ralph.'

'A good creek,' Ralph agreed, 'but we need to hold its water.'

'There's the spring on the other side of the railway line,' his father reminded him.

'Good spring,' Ralph agreed, 'but we need more water.'

It was only the next morning, the day of Ralph's revelation, that he—Ralph—saw that water, that water of the little dam.

Mr. Hicken was an early riser. He had had to be to get the cream in time for the Burtville factory lorry. The first light of dawn was coming through the tall tallow-woods. Black cockatoos were at things early, delighting in their own raucous screeching. There were currawongs vying with them. A cacophany of emulation came from down near the flooded gums. It was the kookaburras. Ralph was coming up from the creek.

'Fine little dam, there, Dad,' he said.

Mr. Hicken's heart sang. He threw caution to the winds. 'You like it, eh?' he said eagerly. Ralph made a note that his Dad must be ageless. Beyond the tottering appearance the old boy was as vital as ever. Every so often it showed through.

Ralph nodded. 'It's good,' he said, 'but it's got to be better. We need to build a big dam. Also we need a large pump and some irrigation.'

Mr. Hicken's joy evaporated. He dropped his gaze, and hid behind his bushy eyebrows. Also he took a clean bucket and began on Blackie, their one Friesian. She gave a lot of milk.

Ralph chatted with the driver of the Burtville lorry. He was new to Ralph, but he knew all about the returned man. They talked about four-wheel drive vehicles. After a time he drove off. Father and son went up to the house. Ralph started to get some bacon and eggs together. Mr. Hicken Senior remained blanketed in gloom. He fancied he had better speak to Ralph outright about the farm, but one part of him was afraid.

It was mid-morning when the American arrived. Ralph had driven off in his vehicle, going up to see some of the folk at the Creek, and to get the mail. An hour or so after his departure the American appeared. The dogs ushered him to the house. They knew he was a foreigner, but they had nothing against him.

Mr. Hicken was seated in his old rocker, on the verandah. He was rocking away with some inner apprehension, some habitual fear, and had not noticed the first barking of the dogs. Suddenly he saw the stranger. He could tell by the face and the dress that this was not a Wirril man. He decided he would not do any talking. He tried to get back to his private reverie, but that was not to be.

The American had a booming voice. Mr. Hicken disliked booming voices, seeing his own was tremulous. The American was confident and that did not endear him to the farmer.

Mr. Hicken seemed to pass his own life not being confident. The man of the U.S. of A. was calling him 'friend' and Mr. Hicken had never been called that. He tried his tactics of retreat. He looked bewildered, uncomprehending.

The friendly foreigner was undeterred. He had a heart that embraced the world. He knew Australians were far behind citizens of North America in most if not all things, but his geniality swept them to his own heart, nevertheless. He was like a missionary who loved the natives, even though they had yet much to learn. So the happy foreigner made his way up to the steps, on to the verandah, hand stretched out and face glowing.

'Ramon B. Huggenbruegger,' he said warmly. 'Huggenbruegger of Splatts Cans and Conserves.'

Mr. Hicken did not collapse. At first he trembled, but he knew that if he hung on until Ralph appeared, then all would be well. All he said was, 'Cans and Conserves!' His voice was mild.

Mr. Huggenbruegger thought he looked like a real nice person. He said, 'That's it—Cans and Conserves. That's us.'

The dogs were barking again, this time with furiously wagging tails. The army disposals truck was wagging its way up from the front gate. It pulled up near the house. Ralph had some mail, and a few things in a sack. When he saw Ramon B. H., he paused and then grinned. 'Hi!' he said.

Mr. Huggenbruegger was delighted. 'No one here says "hi",' he said, 'so "hi!" yourself.' He shook hands. In a confidential voice he said, 'Ramon B. Huggenbruegger, Splatts Cans and Conserves.'

'Really?' asked Ralph. 'And what brings you into these parts? Just travelling through?'

'Nope,' said the American. 'I aim to stay here, and spend

some time. Even live here. Might even make it my home.' Ralph was curious. He seemed not to notice his father's increased agitation. He decided to give hospitality. Mr. Huggenbruegger had found a chair for himself and was filling it generously. Ralph said, 'Can I get you some coffee, or maybe tea?'

'Coffee!' agreed the man from North America. 'You mean real coffee?'

Ralph didn't comment on that. His father never drank coffee, but Ralph knew how to make it. He gave tea to his father, coffee to the American, and poured himself a glass of milk.

'Now,' he said to the visitor, 'what would make you want to settle in these parts?' Before giving the stranger an Opportunity to answer, he said, 'This is poorer country than the river flats around Burtville and Coolbucca. I would imagine you would want that kind of land. Expensive of course, but. . . ' He made a gesture towards the American, much as to say 'All Americans are cashed up.'

Mr. Ramon B. H. was enjoying his coffee. Even more he was enjoying the conversation. 'Good rich river flats, no doubt,' he shouted, 'but not the land that I want. Pay the world for that stuff, you do. Even more in the States.' He paused and thought warmly about the States. Recovering, he continued. 'To tell the truth, son,' he said, 'this is the kind of country we like in Splatts Cans and Conserves. And why? Because it is canning country.' He paused and looked rather majestically at both the father and the son. 'Yes,' he said solemnly and impressively, 'it's good canning country.'

After that Mr. Hicken withdrew, deeply into his own mind, his personal contemplation of his yearnings and his fears. He let the other two men continue their animated conversation. He knew it was so much ideas and theory What he

heard had no link whatsoever with the life, farming and produce which he knew at Wirril. The foreigner man must be mad, and just a compulsive talker. Mr. Hicken had never heard the phrase 'compulsive talker' but the idea was there in his mind.

Ralph, to the contrary, was fascinated. A vital and intelligent person, he had been somewhat a sport in the flow of Wirril types. He had never ceased to confuse his father: so much so that in later years out of filial concern he had just accommodated to the older man, having both tenderness and pity for him, because he knew him to be a person of depth and character. He watched his father privatise himself, and then talked sensibly to the visitor from the U.S.A.

What surprised him largely was the mention of asparagus. So far as he knew, no one in the Wirril area had ever grown this vegetable. He doubted whether Australians ate much of it. He and his mates had opened tins of it during action, but they had always joked about it. 'La-de-dah vegetable,' they had called it. Even so, they had eaten it, and—what is more—relished it.

'Asparagus needs cold country, doesn't it?' Ralph asked.

The American said, 'Not necessarily. I've cased this country. I like the soil. It's basaltic. You have water here if you look for it. You can grow asparagus all right. Also you grow peas and carrots well. That's asparagus country.' He looked towards the foothills of Pirrawarrini. 'You got land in the foothills?'

Ralph nodded. 'A little,' he said, 'but we could get more. Land's cheap here.'

'I know,' said the American, his eyes brightening. 'Farmers could do well for Splatts here, and do well from 'em, too.' He stared at Ralph. 'Would you give it a go, eh?'

Ralph glanced towards his father. The old man was

asleep, his tea cold and only half drunk. 'Let's have a little walk,' he said.

Ralph took his visitor towards the creek, to the small flats where the land was good. They had earnest conversation. Mr. Hicken awoke to see them shaking hands, near the sliprails. He noticed that the American had a Land-Rover that looked like Ralph's vehicle. Ralph, he thought with a sinking feeling, was most animated. Unbidden, the old and odd rheumy tear made its trickling way down the Hicken cheek. He knew it had been too much to hope for. The fates had not planned this for him.

Ralph was rapturous, if also quite cautious. 'Dad,' he said, 'that American firm Splatts is coming to this district. They are going to build a huge factory. They want the farmers to grow asparagus. Acres and acres of it. Also they want our peas and carrots. Acres of them. Dad, we've got to do it. We need all our land and more.'

Mr. Hicken could not comprehend. One part of his brain grasped the fact that Ralph and he were going to be together. Ralph wanted to farm! He trembled inwardly at the thought.

That, however, was not all of it. From that point onwards everything was foreign to the old farmer. All the land was to be for vegetables. What was all this about *asparagus?* Acres of asparagus! Mr. Hicken's mind faltered at the thought. Carrots and peas he could understand, and maybe potatoes and beans if they wanted them, but *acres and acres of them!* His mind reeled. Suddenly he stood, straightened his shoulders and pointed to Ralph.

'Do you mean,' he said, in an amazed shout, 'that there will be *no cows and no milking?*'

Ralph looked calm and mild. 'We'd have to work that one out, Dad. Maybe we've milked long enough, night and

day all these years. Maybe when we get our tractors and machinery, and plant our land, and even buy more land and plant it too, we could be rich enough to do without poddies, pigs and cream.'

Mr. Hicken saw the sight of a dream in his son's eyes. However, everything was going too fast for him. He began to tremble.

Ralph said nothing, looking into the distance, staring towards the foothills of Pirrawarrini and the land they could clear of the scrub, land that was good for asparagus.

He was also thinking of the little dam his Dad had had made. To be correct, a little dam that Terry Hickey had constructed. It was just like a small bosom of water, but it had promise. They could capture their perpetually flowing creek. Maybe a bore of sweet water over at the spring, and then—who knows?—there could be good water at the foot of the mountain.

He rose from his chair, went over near his Dad and stood by him. 'Crikey, Dad!' he said, 'we could do it, you and I. We could do it together! I'll bet anything we can and we will!'

Mr. Hicken also rose. He was bewildered beyond measure. He scarcely knew what his son was talking about, but he knew the last bit that *they would do it together!* His heart rose. He felt his slow pulses starting to throb. His old heart was racing a bit, but not too much. His dreads had dissipated in the last few sentences his son had uttered. It all meant that he and Ralph together would do whatever was required.

The single tear that trickled was not of sorrow but of joy. Inside his heart, fountains were rising. Indeed they were bursting from him. Golden cascades of joy were making their way down his revived spirit. All the pointlessness of everything had dissipated, and in its place most powerful purposefulness .

He and Ralph were not sentimental types. The mutual hug they had had on Ralph's return would last them for many years. They were not demonstrative men, as they just stood there, but Ralph did have one hand on his father's shoulder. He was quite moved by what lay ahead.

As for old Mr. Hicken, he stood there, the single tear poised on his chin, but inside were the golden cascades pouring and leaping down, and it seemed they might never stop.

**JIMMY  
CONWAY  
WORE  
BOOTS**

Burtville was very busy, and Saturday morning in Burtville is usually busy enough without Jimmy Conway having gone and died.

'Jimmy Conway?' 'Jimmy Conway dead?' 'Old Jimmy Conway, eh?' Yes, Jimmy Conway dead, and most people had thought Jimmy Conway would live for ever, as though that were an attribute of his, amongst other qualities. Others might die, in the natural course of events, but not Jimmy Conway.

The military band, then, or rather the brass band—will they be out? Assuredly there must be a brass band for Jimmy. The cortege then; the cars, the utilities, the councillors' cars and the businessmen's cars, they will all be there, of course. Such a hurrying, such a busyness around the small country town of Burtville, and even a stirring within its self-styled suburbs.

Jimmy Conway dead. I can remember Jimmy Conway, although, indeed, it seems to be a long way back in the misty beginning of things, the first memory a child has, yet one which is distinct as few memories are distinct. Jimmy Conway striding down past my father's house, and men nodding to him, and someone saying, 'Ah there, Jimmy. How's things?' and Jimmy, with a bored smile on his black face,

answering, 'Hullo yourself'; for Jimmy was at ease with white men, as well as with his own. No one seemed to consider Jimmy a black man, and although the Burtville people have ever been wary of the blacks, they never showed any suspicious awareness of Jimmy.

There are other memories of Jimmy, or rather, of people talking about Jimmy. Some reckoned in that First World War that the climate in England and France would kill Jimmy, and others reckoned when he got malaria in the Middle East that that would finish him, but neither England nor malaria seemed to make much difference to him. He came home occasionally on leave, attended the dances and functions arranged for servicemen, and even, on one leave, was married in the Anglican Church.

When the great news came through, about Jimmy's getting a medal, there was quite an amount of talk. The Sydney papers made a great fuss, and the Burtville *Courier* had three long columns which contained Jimmy's life story (which everyone knew) and Jimmy's various actions in which he had fought, and, of course, *the* action, and finally the remarks made by the Sydney newspapers, some by the London press, and, in thick type, those made by the English major-general who seemed to consider Jimmy's action so outstanding.

Months later Jimmy came home, and I can well remember the band playing at the station, and the festooning and the bunting in the street, and the holiday that was declared for the Burtville children, and then Jimmy himself, happy, and not in the least embarrassed, but smiling, and actually wearing his medal which the King was supposed to have given him by his own hand.

Jimmy seemed no different upon that occasion, and the fact of his sameness seemed to surprise and relieve everybody.

'This small token of our affection and esteem...' the Mayor had said, giving him a handsome gold pocket-watch, which appeared to surprise Jimmy no end. This was the signal to cheer, and for the band to strike up, and for the real festivities to begin. Most people like a reason for festivities, and although Jimmy was not forgotten, you might say the evening belonged to everyone.

Jimmy went back to the Reserve, and to his wife, and was not forgotten, but everybody was pleased he had conceived no high ideas about his station in life, now that he had a medal. That medal, incidentally, was a Distinguished Conduct Medal, narrowly missing (so the *Courier* reported) being the Victoria Cross in this particular action. Jimmy might never have won an award, the way he went back to his old work of fencing and ploughing, picking beans and peas, and planting onions for those who cared to employ him. For the most part he found plenty of that employment because he was a hard worker.

Farmers still speak about Jimmy's capacity for hard work, and his skill, particularly in fencing. In this, Jimmy Conway was taken with the idea that each post must be rigidly at the perpendicular, that it must be rammed hard, stamped so that, if needs be, it would endure until the Last Trump. His lines of fencing were undeviating, and he, scorning staples, demanded always that he should bore for wires, whether plain or barbs.

The other Burtville blacks were more indolent, too easygoing for Jimmy's standards, and if they worked with him they were urged on, and if Jimmy worked by himself he stuck to uncompromising standards of toil. He was not a fast worker, but over two or three days could complete more chains of fencing, or pick more bushels of peas than a white

man. What he did earn he never squandered, and for the cheap drink sold by the whites to the Reserve blacks he had only scorn. Tobacco, if that be accounted a sin, was his only transgression.

His family was a large one, sixteen children living, and one who had died at birth. The boys were keen footballers and cricketers, and one year achieved a certain fame by having eight of the family included in the Burtville firstgrade League team. The team was referred to, jokingly, as 'Jimmy Conway's team,' but for all that they did particularly well.

When, then, the news came through that Saturday morning about his death, it surprised everyone. He had not even been taken to hospital, dying as he did in the night, without warning. Immediately folk began to discuss Jimmy, his past, his family, his straightforwardness, his honesty, and quite a deal they found to his credit. Farmers, on the spot, invented apocryphal accounts of his work, but in truth some vowed the fences erected by Jimmy thirty years before were as good as the day he had finished them, excepting, of course, a few white-anted posts. Others remembered, with slight exaggerations, the number of bushels Jimmy had picked in a week during the pea season—a colossal number, although not a deliberate exaggeration—and altogether most were sad Jimmy had passed away.

The Burtville *Courier*, which was published on Saturdays, was not behind in the matter of Jimmy's death. It surprised most by announcing on the front page that Mr. Jimmy Conway had passed away the previous Thursday evening. Jimmy's death-notice occupied the columns usually given to the important European news, and the leader, written in the English of a past decade, spoke warmly and sincerely of the

Burtville warrior. Folk then remembered there had been a wailing and crying from the direction of the Reserve, but they had not taken much notice of it at the time.

Vic Allsop, who for forty years had been Burtville's coroner, its sole grave-digger and cemetery attendant, was able to discuss details with most. He informed them that Jimmy was to have a 'whacking big funeral,' that he was to be buried in the Anglican section, and that the brass band from Coolbucca would surely be there. It relieved all to know the band would be there, for they had not forgotten Jimmy's medal.

I doubt whether Jimmy had gathered much of a fortune in his time. He had too many demanding children to be able to accumulate much, and the children, when he grew too old for work, themselves worked only spasmodically, and brought in very few shillings. Like Jimmy, they were upright and honest, but his propensity for work they had not inherited. It appeared, then, that the funeral would be paid for by the Burtville citizens.

Whether or not that fact was known, and whether or not it inspired a sense of possession of Jimmy's body would be difficult to say, but it is a fact that most people were surprised when Jimmy's family turned up, seventeen in all, in a red truck, and took their place at the head of the funeral—that is, immediately behind the hearse. It was agreed, of course, that this must be so, but there were murmurings from some.

The cortege is worth recording. Probably never in Burtville's history, nor in history anywhere, has such a conglomeration of vehicles been seen. Athol Parsons the Mayor, his well-dressed wife and two daughters followed—in their sleek

post-war car—the red truck. The Reverend Clive Edwards, officiating minister, was not altogether sure where he should be, but he followed the Mayor, in somewhat a bewildered manner, and from then on it was an alternation of trucks and cars, a mingling and a commingling, a rattling and a wheezing, a roaring, grating and reverberation of utility trucks, timber lorries, carriers, cars, semi-cars and even, in the rear, Andy Johnson the blacksmith in his dray, and Jack Whalen following with spring-cart.

Jack Whalen was muttering to himself about Jimmy Conway, 'A white man if ever there was one,' which was intended to be a great compliment to Jimmy Conway. It took an hour or two for these vehicles to prepare, to come into line, to be drawn from side streets, the main street, to emerge from narrow lanes, or be driven from garages, but assemble they did, and snort and puff and rumble, and tremble into a slowly moving line, and Burtville, seemingly *en masse*, moved forth to pay homage to a dark man they both respected and loved.

The red truck was steeped in sorrow. Sorrow rode with Billy Conway at the wheel, sat heavily upon the shoulders of his brother Larry, and more quietly, although not cheerfully, upon the widow Mary Conway, who had, during the First World War, married Jimmy at the Anglican Church. Billy, because he was the eldest, wore his father's medal. There had been some talk about the Mayor pinning it to Jimmy's breast, but the impracticability of the suggestion had placed it at a discount. The medal rode to the funeral, and away from it.

The band, as they solemnly played and purposefully and slowly marched, might have drowned the sorrows and the wailing of the dark folk, but no gathering of bands upon the earth could have stemmed or overwhelmed that sorrow that

wailed and rose, and fell, and rose again, flowed over the cortege and made the rural people forget it was just Jimmy who had died, and they began to believe he was a yet greater man than they had esteemed him to be, so that they became quite solemn, just a trifle uneasy, as though now they were strangers at this death festival, and the folk in the red truck the real mourners.

The long cortege came to the cemetery, trembled, shuddered reverberatingly as does a goods train in all its sections, but stopped.

Four men dressed in the almost forgotten khaki garb of that First World War carried the draped coffin to the grave.

The service was at the graveside, a murmuring by the rector which few heard, an uneasy rising and falling of prayers, versicles and responses, and words about Jimmy Conway which perhaps the listening Conways may have heard.

They themselves seemed a trifle bewildered, and the rest shuffled, looked up at the pure green of Vic Allsop's tenyear-old poplars, until finally they heard the minister intone the dust-to-dust and ashes-to-ashes part, the cue, seemingly, for the blacks to commence a wailing and a weeping, and for Billy to cry—old as he was—'Daddy! Daddy!' and all the Conways forgot the white folk, and cried 'Daddy! Daddy!' until it seemed there had never been such a wave of sorrow or endearment upon God's earth.

Some of the children threw themselves at the grave, and others rushed about, Larry with frenzied hands grabbing at the dirt and flinging it into the air. The dead had been covered, the 'Last Post' played, a pleading wail of the 'Reveille' in some endeavour to wake the sleeping Jimmy, and the band had broken into soft music. Emotions were

tempered again, softened, until sorrow was, perhaps, only a small stream and one running quietly.

The Conway family tumbled back into the red truck. Engines broke the silence, cars moved out, not caring about formation, and people began speaking freely, surprised a little at the tone of their own voices. Some even arrived at the eternal topics of cows, crops and the possibility of rain.

I have forgotten very few of the details of that day, but what I remember most was Billy Conway turning suddenly to Larry and saying, 'Eh, Larry, what did you do with Dad's boots?'

Larry seemed prepared for that question and looked defiant. 'You've got boots,' he told Billy, 'I haven't. I'm keeping them.'

'Oh no, you're not,' Billy said. 'They won't fit you.'

They got into the truck then, and they were arguing loudly about boots.

Then the subject switched to shirts, and in this argument some of the brothers joined, and for the row that arose it may have been shoes and shirts, and boots and trousers, for, as the red truck drew away, there was a hullabaloo of voices, of noise, and of laughter, and finally, as the truck was almost lost in the distance, the shrill shrieking of laughter, and then the concerted singing of a song, an old one resurrected from Jimmy's past, for few these days seem to remember it. They shrieked it happily and confidently as they went towards Burtville, and the burden of it was, 'What's the matter with Father, *He's* all right.'

## CONCERNING GRASS

The two men, the tall one and the shorter, thin one, rode their horses up to Denny's front gate. It was dark, and Denny was almost asleep, but not quite. He heard their horses' hooves on the gravel, even through the heavy rain, and he lay still a moment, hoping they would pass.

'Hoi there. Anyone home?' came the shout.

'Anyone in?' said a lesser voice.

Denny did not curse. He just got up, struggled into a pair of trousers, and slipped a shirt over his shoulders. He lit the lamp and went to the door. Pushing it open a little he peered towards the gate, but could see nothing because of the rain.

'Hullo there,' he said.

'Wet weather, eh?' shouted the louder voice.

Denny knew that, knew too that he would have to go to the gate. He put boots on, and an oilskin. He protected the lamp in the half-open fold of his coat.

The man with the loud voice was large on his horse, although his horse, restless and shifting in the lamplight, was large enough. The thin man, somewhat shorter by looks, was on a small bright-eyed mare. Both loomed towards him as the lamp swayed and changed focus of light. The rain shot towards Denny in silver slivers.

He peered up at them. The tall man leaned down over his horse. 'Sorry to get y'out,' he said.

'That's all right,' said Denny.

'Want a paddock,' shouted the man, as though Denny might not hear him.

'A paddock,' said Denny, thoughtfully. He had been asked for paddocks.

'Thought you might have grass to give away,' said the big man eagerly.

'It's good grass,' the other man observed.

Denny agreed with that. 'I was keeping it for my stock,' he said.

The big man looked disappointed. It was then Denny heard the mob on the road, a dog yelping way back behind them, and all the time the milling on the gravel road, the low mooing and the confused movement.

'Got a mob out there, eh?' he said.

'She's some mob, too,' said the big man. 'Had to get them away from the river. The flood's terrible.'

'It's real bad in there,' Denny said.

'I would have lost the lot,' the big man said. The other man beside him nodded; almost sleepily, Denny thought.

'I've got a small mob myself,' he said to Denny.

'Three of us,' shouted the big man. 'We're all in the same boat.' The word 'boat' registered, associated itself with water and flood. 'We need boats now,' he said heartily.

Denny nodded. 'I was going to get stock,' he said slowly. 'Wanted to pick up a few head and use it for myself. They're all asking for it.'

'Only empty paddock along the road,' said the big man, shaking his head.

Denny stood in the rain for the moment, considering. The cattle were edging nearer to them, and the smaller man shouted to his dog.

Denny looked up at them. 'There's just the two of you, eh?' he asked.

The smaller man said, 'Three of us. Another chap's back there. He's having a bit of difficulty with his mob. I was helping him, before.'

The big man chuckled, and then roared at Denny. 'House

cows, they are. Every bloody one of them, house cows. He nearly has to pat 'em all. "Get up, Juanita," he says to one of them. "Get up, Nora, I tell you, get along there." ' He chuckled again. 'Everyone of them house cows,' he said.

The rain battered harder upon the trio. The cattle moved, shifting restlessly upon the road.

'You can have the paddock,' Denny said, 'but you'll have to put your mobs in together. There aren't any dividing fences.'

'Both of us?' said the big man, eagerly. 'Thanks a lot, mate.'

'The three of you,' said Denny, and the smaller man nodded. Denny could see now that he was harder in the face than the taller man, but seemingly quieter. He turned his mare, and threw an arm into the air.

'I'll tell Bill,' he shouted as he went off.

'Bill'll be glad,' said the tall man. 'Him with his house cows'

He looked down at Denny. 'You're doing us a good turn,' he said. 'Might have lost every head. Tried to keep them on those flats, but what can you do? The others had more sense and got theirs off before. We waited, and now you can't get a paddock.' He corrected himself. 'Leastways we're lucky now,' he said.

'There's good grass there,' said Denny. 'It hasn't been touched in months, and with all the rain.'

The big man nodded, and leaned down, towards Denny. 'I'll give you a good thing for it,' he said.

Denny shook his head, negatively, slowly. 'Share it with the other two, that's all,' he said. 'One and six will do me.'

'I'll give you two bob,' said the big man.

'Only one and six,' said Denny, almost lazily.

'Of course,' said the big man, 'I'd wait until they got another paddock.'

'Three of you, or none,' Denny said.

The big man looked a trifle gloomy. Then he nodded, slapped his horse's neck, and shouted, for he heard the others coming. 'One and six to the lot of us then, and all in together.' He was very hearty.

The man with the herd of house cows was short on his small stocky horse. He had no stock whip in his hand, but a few twigs of wattle. He sat forward on his horse, and looked down eagerly at Denny. He was red in the face, and fat too, with a slouched hat placed squarely on his hair. The rest of his face was fat, humping up, almost into folds, as he sat.

'Glad! Lord, I was glad when they told me. Grass! You just can't get it, and the stock pinched and miserable.'

'They'll fatten on that,' Denny said, 'if they'll fatten anywhere.'

'Thank the Lord,' breathed the short fat man. 'That's the end of our troubles.'

'Well, come on,' said the big man. 'We'll put 'em in.'

'Say you put yours in first,' the fat man said to him, as though he were at a picnic. 'Then Harry can put his in, and I'll put mine in last.'

'Least yours will stand in the rain,' yelled the big man. He plunged his horse upwards in the light of the lamp. Then he cracked his whip, rather magnificently, and went towards his stock. Harry nodded, wheeled his horse and went after the big man. As he raced away he whistled his dog. The short fat man sat up straight, looked at Denny, and said, 'I'd better help them, perhaps.'

He went off jogging, and Denny could see his hand bouncing up and down, and all the time clutching the twigs of wattle.

Denny waited until the cattle came along the road. Then he fastened the gate behind him, and walked along the fence to the paddock rails. He slipped them, and pointed, his hand black against the lamp. 'Straight in with the lot,' he yelled, to be heard above the mob.

The big man nodded, pinched in his lips, and cracked his whip. It made a great to-do in the night, and then the mob shot forwards, their front legs outwards, planted against the mud as though they were being driven, unwilling, from behind. Their long upturned horns flashed whitely in the light, their eyes glared, and they snuffled the slime from their gleaming nostrils. He had a confused picture of baldy-faced steers with hair curling about the horns.

'Hoop there!' yelled the big man. 'In there, you beggars.'

Harry edged the leaders towards the rails. They went through, suddenly, and the mob surged forwards, milled as it overflowed about the opening, and then was into the paddock, a rumble of hooves, a protest of bellows and lowing.

'Fifty head there,' shouted the big man. 'Fat they were, before the flood.'

They had seemed pinched up, cold and tired, to Denny. He watched them tucking into the grass.

'Now yours, Harry,' said the big man. He was still staring towards his stock.

Harry and the big man turned back on to the road, and cantered away. When they came back they were droving steers, black steers which might have been nuggety and heavy on good grass, with no cold rain. Now they were miserable, in-drawn and humped. Harry cracked his whip, moving amongst them, touching one here and there with the butt of his whip. 'Come along, come along,' he kept saying.

The big man cracked his whip, time and time again, but for all that the small stock took their time. Harry stood at the rails, counting them. When he finished he began coughing, steadily, as though he were used to coughing, and not at all worried about it.

'You go inside,' Denny said. 'I'll help the other chap with his.'

'Bill?' said Harry, cheerfully enough. 'No, I'll help Bill. His stuff will come when he calls them.' He grinned, and

cocked a suggesting finger towards the big man. 'Horace here gets real wild about Bill and his cows, but Bill's in love with his stock, and Horace can't see that.' He coughed and said, 'Not that Horace isn't, either, but in a different way.'

When they brought Bill's stock along it was at a slow pace. Denny waved the lamp, lazily, up and down, backwards and forwards, and all the time the rain beat down, prinking the long sheeted water on the road. The warm glow in the centre of the lamp reproduced in the small drops on Denny's fingers.

The cows were Jerseys, silver, some of them, and the rest dark, almost black. They seemed a trifle bewildered, but for all that they plodded steadily forwards, their heads nodding up and down, the frost white of the rain fringing their soaking dewlaps. Eyes, large and soft, were turned towards Denny. He stopped waving the lamp, and they went past him, into the paddock.

In the rear was Bill, beating a recalcitrant beast with wattle twigs.

'You old nuisance,' he kept saying, affectionately. 'Dash you, you old nuisance.'

Then they were all there, in the paddock. The big man sat on his horse, his arms folded, staring down at Bill. Bill counted and then nodded. 'Forty-four,' he said, 'of the best.'

The big man snorted. 'They'll be dead in the morning,' he said, 'if my stock gets near them.'

Bill seemed not to have heard him. 'They'll last anything out,' he said, 'now that they've got that grass.'

'You know,' he said to Denny, 'it's surprising what Jerseys'll go through. Some people won't have that, but I know it.' He seemed settled now, ready and eager to talk all night.

The night had nearly gone, because the light of Denny's lamp seemed almost ineffective. There was a luminous glow

around the whole skyline, as though the rain in itself contained light, and was spreading it outwards. It was a faint sheen, white, almost to silver.

'It's nearly dawn,' said the big man.

'We've had that stock going all night,' said Harry.

'Mine since four yesterday,' said the big man. 'I'm further back than the rest.'

'You should see it,' Harry said to Denny. 'People pulling their trucks through the mud with other trucks, and mud everywhere, and dead cows, and stock. There isn't a bite for any beast.'

The big man shivered at the thought of it. 'Gaw'struth, it's terrible. I lost ten head before I got out. Saw my baldy bull go down the river, and not a thing I could do.'

'That's jolly rotten luck,' Bill said. 'It hurts to see that.'

The big man nodded.

'Hungry!' Harry said, commencing to be talkative. 'There wasn't a thing to eat, so Bill and me thought we'd have a chook. "What's a chook, here and there?" I said to Bill, "when everyone's not worrying about their birds, but only about stock." Bill thought we shouldn't, but I thought we should.'

'I was only thinking about my own fowls,' said Bill, 'but they went into the river, all except the rooster, that is. He stood on the bank, with the water swirling near his toes, looking at the hens and wondering what it was all about. He couldn't make it out at all.'

'But we're safe now,' the big man said happily. He sighed and stared across the paddock. The stock was knee high in grass, which by daylight was green to be seen. It must have appeared something of a dream to them, Denny thought.

'You'll find the creek, all right,' he told them. 'Just down the hill there, and no boggy spots.'

The three men nodded. Light came greyly over the paddocks, and the four men could see stock grazing. Although

the rain was beating heavily the stock held against it.

'Well, there's no point staying longer,' the big man said. He stared at Harry. 'Coming, mate?' he asked.

Harry said he wasn't. Bill was looking at the cow which had lain down in the grass. 'Old Jenny, eh?' he said, half to himself, as though he had thought this might happen, all the time. 'So she's calving, eh?'

The big man didn't even look interested. He nodded to Denny before he brought his horse past the rails. 'I'll fix up later with a cheque, Mister, Mister. . . '

'Walters,' said Denny.

'Walters. Good. Well, I'll fix you up during the week. One and six we said, eh?'

He waited until Denny nodded, and then he went off, flourishing his whip as though it still counted. He sped up the road, and the horse spurted water sideways.

'He'd have given two bob last night, or four bob, for that matter,' said Harry, 'and now he's got his horse galloping.'

'I'll take a look at that cow,' Bill said. 'She came in difficult last time.' He went across to the cow, and it stared up at him as it writhed and strained.

Denny and Harry looked at Bill helping the cow, and they nodded, each understanding.

'Do that big bloke good to rear Jerseys, especially from poddies,' said Harry.

They watched the light strengthen and lengthen, and Harry said suddenly, 'I was telling you about the chooks we killed. Hell, we were hungry! We caught two of them in the corn, or Bill did really, and we had to wade to them waist-high. He was pretty quick catching them, considering his build. They flapped and squawked, but we pretty soon plucked them. We only had salt, so we had to boil them, and they didn't smell the best; but no chook smells much when it's plucked and lying there stone-cold naked. They didn't smell so bad when we had them boiling, and our tongues

were nearly hanging out, for what with keeping an eye on stock, and pulling them out of water, we were pretty famished. All the time they were cooking, Bill kept on saying, "Do you think we ought to have done it?" but by the time they were cooked he thought so.'

Harry grinned. 'When we went to eat them they were stinking. Couldn't touch a mouthful of them. They'd been eating the green grubs in the corn, and stank when you put your nose near them.'

He shook his head, a trifle ruefully. 'I wanted to eat that chook, too. I kept remembering Mersing in Malaya during the show there, and the chooks we had got from a boong's place, seven hens and one rooster. We ate them on Christmas Day, with white sheets for tablecloths. Tokyo warned us they were going to bomb us out that day, but they didn't. We had seven hens and a rooster between six. They were good.'

He began coughing. Denny listened to him, somewhat anxiously. 'You'd better come inside with me,' he said 'You can get warm, and dry those clothes.'

'I'll give Bill a hand,' Harry said. 'That cow's going to have difficulty.'

Denny looked at Bill, and then at Harry, now shivering. 'Bill'll be all right,' he said. 'He knows cows.'

'Oh yes, he knows cows all right,' said Harry.

'Come on then,' Denny said. Nevertheless, before they went to the house they both watched Bill, kneeling there, beside his cow. He was talking to it, as it stared up at him with half-wild eyes, and all the time his hands were pressed against its heaving sides, and at last he bent down, saying some words, and he began to take hold of the partly-born calf, pulling it gently, and all the time crooning his words, whilst his eyes were soft as those of a mother itself, or a calf for that matter.

**MR.  
PEEBLES  
OF  
HOREB**

Mr. Peebles was continually grateful to the makers of duplicating machinery. It was not exactly that he admired the actual machine, or that he was entranced by the mechanics of it. What pleased him was the rapid and efficient manner in which it turned out leaflets, and Mr. Peebles wanted leaflets to be turned out, in large numbers, to carry his thoughts like winged messages into every home in Wirril Creek. Deftly then, he ran the roller down a sheet, lifted, inspected it, and placed it with another ninety-nine.

Years ago, he remembered, they had to be written by hand, painfully and slowly; and then, when the glory of the typewriter burst upon him, typed in single or with carbons. But even that work had been tedious. In addition, of course, there was the Coolbucca *Guardian*, of which he was the Wirril Creek correspondent. In the columns generously provided by a copy-hungry editor, he had been able to make small incidents appear of great importance, and to add dignity and significance to the doings of friends and neighbours.

But however valuable the *Guardian* may have been as a medium of spreading good ideas, Mr. Peebles depended even more upon the personal touch of his duplicated messages.

Mr. Peebles, finishing the hundredth copy, paused a while to think on what he had written. He had called a public meeting

True, he had been given no authority, but what of that? Whence comes authority of that sort, anyway? Mr. Peebles scratched his chin with an inky finger and pondered abstract byways of philosophy and civics. . .

But he had warned his friends and neighbours and he knew they would be there. The people of Wirril Creek enjoyed Mr. Peebles' public meetings. Mr. Armstrong, the dapper postmaster, would be secretary and Mr. Peebles himself would be chairman. But, Mr. Peebles now sadly reflected, they were little closer to their original objective.

That objective was worthy. It had come to Mr. Peebles as in a vision. One evening, as autumn had fallen softly about Wirril Creek, merging its blue smoke of a short twilight along the valleys and the hills, he had chanced to look towards the Memorial Hall, clear against the skyline because it was on the rise of the hill, and trees about it had been cleared away. Mr. Peebles, who, because of his afternoon reading suffered about this time from a mild amblyopia which somewhat obscured his normal sight this evening saw a hall about which were soft-foliaged oaks, poplars shiver-ing from ecstasy, as Mr. Peebles knew to be the custom of poplars, and, besides the oaks and poplars, a fence. No fence in fact existing about the hall, Mr. Peebles was forced to admit a vision.

Beautifully the hall fence swept about the building, a tall curving affair where the gates were, and although it was lower as it tapered away from them, it still maintained dignity of form, adding to the hall an almost preternatural beauty. It struck Mr. Peebles forcefully that the hall had never been done justice, and that that sort of a fence was wanting. Only for a moment did his misty sight allow him the transitory glimpse of the wonderful—after which he blinked, and the fence vanished, leaving only the dull sight Of an unfenced public hall. Gone for ever, thought Mr. Peebles.

For ever? No! A firm conviction entered the heart of the evangelistic Mr. Peebles that here was a vision which should be given the substance of reality. Mr. Peebles, in a way, was a prophet, tall and spare of frame, with something of the same visionary stuff in his spirit as animated prophets of old. A white spirit was Mr. Peebles, burning amid the rural sloth of Wirril Creek.

He set himself at the typewriter and wrote an article for the *Guardian* in which he pointed out that a fence of some sort was wanting at the Wirril Creek public hall. His article, too, was not without some results.

Mr. Brinall, the local storekeeper, told Mr. Peebles that he knew Pat Reggin had split rails and mortised posts which he could not use on account of labour and which were lying there for any white-ants who cared, unless Mr. Peebles hopped in and got them. This only drew a snort from Mr. Peebles, who, far from wishing to hop in, made his opinions of split fences fairly well known.

No, the freelance writer stuck grimly to his original vision, and would not budge a trifle, for opposition only implanted it more firmly in his mind. Further to his article he had called a First Public Meeting, at which he had propounded his ideas. The folk of Wirril Creek, being fairly polite on the whole, had not actually laughed at his idea, but without that sort of laughter they managed to convey to Mr. Peebles their absolute incredulity. Mr. Prinall clung stoutly to split rails and mortised posts, particularly those of Pat Reggin, but Mr. Peebles opposed any such deal in local fences.

Then the Second Public Meeting had been held, and a Third, until the idea of the fence began to filter into the minds of the people. They listened to Mr. Peebles' plan, heard about his oaks and poplars, and the fence, which smacked to them of the impossible. They did exactly nothing, and all the organiser's leaflets seemed a waste of effort

until someone suggested a subscription list.

In Wirril Creek a subscription list is an insidious thing. No one can place his name without a fair contribution, and the custom is to glance over the list and remark that So-and-so was pretty tight when you come to think of it. And in the long run just about everyone contributes. From a meagre fiver the total ran to seventy pounds, each mite and otherwise being faithfully recorded by the local correspondent in the *Guardian* to the shame and glory of the givers, it being in itself an impetus to charity. As Mr. Peebles himself commented on the final total—'No mean effort.'

The money being in hand, Mr. Peebles believed it remained only for him to call a meeting, place his original scheme, and have it accepted. That meeting he had called, but the local people were strongly against his project. The sum of seventy pounds they regarded with some awe, and the responsibility toward3 its right spending they shouldered with severity of judgement. What more, they asked, would you want than a nice netted fence, strong netting with hardwood rails and post's? What was wrong with good northern timber? Outside of fences Mr. Peebles could see nothing wrong with northern hardwood. Pruned box trees he thought excellent for city and suburbs, but not, not Wirril Creek. Against this lack of vision, the iron soul, the flaming spirit, the prophet substance of Mr. Peebles violently revolted. In disgust he closed the meeting, tempted almost to abandon the project, but the vision, and seventy pounds, would not let him rest. The duplicator then rolled again into action, and leaflets piled up for distribution by Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Peebles welcomed the visit to Mr. Armstrong as a sort of mental pick-me-up. Mr. Armstrong measuring sugar to the

grain in his post office store, neat and dapper as his crisp brown-paper bags, was prepared to receive the local prophet.

‘Good morning, Harold,’ Mr. Peebles said.

‘Good morning, Arthur.’

Mr. Peebles flourished a bunch of leaflets.

‘Exactly,’ said Mr. Armstrong. He tilted the sugarmeasure slightly, so that the grains moved slowly towards their destination. ‘We’ll get these out, Arthur, but. . .’ He paused, dug the shovel into the bag and eased it a fraction of an ounce. Mr. Peebles waited patiently.

‘. . . I think, Arthur,’ he said, ‘we should give them an idea of just what your gates and fence would look like.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr. Peebles slowly.

It was a grand Public Meeting. On the night appointed there was no lack of attendance. Whereas, normally, a meeting scheduled to commence at eight invariably commenced at eight-thirty, there was, this time, no lack of early arrivals. There was a sense of big things in the air. What made all curious was the fact that Mr. Peebles had been missing these last few days. That he had gone to Sydney all knew. The matter of seventy pounds had also cropped up, but there was a general disappointment disguised as relief when it was announced that that seventy pounds was in the care of the Hall Committee and not to be accounted for by the *Guardian* writer.

The fence experts were there in force. Mr. Brinall refused to move from his original rail-and-post idea, and Mr. Percival, a mild man at home and a strong-minded man abroad, was all against Mr. Peebles’ idea.

The meeting awaited, with some tenseness, the arrival of Mr. Peebles, he being the chief figure in this fence drama, and when he appeared many an eyebrow was lifted at

the spirit of confidence with which he entered the hall. There was a sigh, a slight murmur, and the meeting was about to open. Mr. Peebles, from his position on the stage, viewed with enormous delight the crowd which had assembled. A prophet without a crowd is always at a disadvantage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said, taking note of the rustle of bodies and the creaking of seats, deeming it to be music in itself, ‘ladies and gentlemen, we are here tonight to discuss the matter of a fence and gates for this Hall.’

‘Get on with it, Arthur,’ said Mr. Percival from the rear of the hall. ‘Get yourself elected chairman.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr. Peebles, in no manner perturbed by the laugh raised. ‘Yes, there is the matter of a chairman. Now if anyone would care to. . .’

‘I nominate Mr. Peebles as chairman and Mr. Armstrong as secretary,’ said Mr. Brinall.

The election completed, with scarcely concealed pleasure Mr. Peebles arose to declare the meeting open. Mr. Armstrong having read the minutes, the meeting began in earnest. However, Mr. Peebles had some warning to give.

‘I warn you, ladies and gentleman,’ he said, ‘that this meeting will be drawn out, prolonged and generally unsatisfactory unless we stick to the matter in point—that is, the gates and fence for the hall.’ He paused a moment, and added dryly, ‘We are not here concerned with the pros and cons of certain forms of government, farming, and marketing of primary products. I shall call any member to order who proposes to indulge in personal comments or private grievances.’

‘In other words,’ said Mr. Brian Hickey, who was well acquainted with local customs, ‘you don’t want no arguments.’

‘The meeting, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Mr. Peebles

with gravity, 'is open for discussion.'

Silence fell, not the gentle drifting sort of silence such as had fallen that autumn evening, but the silence that is often before a storm. The crowd tensed in its chairs, waited ominously for the first person to speak so that it might break in torrents of comment and submerge ideas and plans in floods of scorn, disapprobation and laughter. For this reason each was loath to be the first.

Mr. Percival arose. 'Mr. Chairman,' he said, and the audience relaxed like a sea against an unresisting shore, 'I am here tonight to say that I don't want to start no fights but I reckon that whatever sort of fence goes up we don't want no convent walls.'

It was a pity Mr. Percival started upon that foot, but the meeting had to go on, and so Mr. Peebles answered with gravity. 'No, of course not, Mr. Percival,' thereby greatly astonishing that gentleman so that he subsided in his seat. Mr. Peebles then said that they had heard the speaker's remarks and was there any further discussion?

There was discussion, naturally, but the flow of it Mr. Peebles firmly and patiently steered into correct channels. He cut away the verbiage of extraneous matter, snipped the shoots of personal venom, cleared the trailing and obscuring creepers of personal reminiscence, and insisted only that his fence and gates be discussed. Finally, with some disappointment, the audience sensed it was being robbed of its usual verbal fight.

And that did not please Mr. Percival. He arose and said 'Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I propose that we have what sort of fence we like. I propose that we have a cyclone fence and gates.'

'I second that,' said Mr. Hickey, whose ideas about fences were not fancy.

Mr. Brinall, who resembled a bulldog in many ways, opposed such a high-falutin' scheme. He wanted to know what

was wrong with a post-and-rail fence.

Mr. Peebles reminded him there was a motion on the books, but begged to be allowed to show the audience something which might guide them in their choice of a fence.

With that, Mr. Armstrong left the stage, and proceeded down the central aisle towards what was, on famous threemonthly occasions, a projector-room.

Much as a rabbit disappears, so did Mr. Armstrong become hidden in the room, the lights failed and the hall was in darkness. Surprise was spent in gasps until a light flashed upon a screen which Mr. Peebles succeeded in unrolling. Mr. Peebles faced the audience with a billiard cue in his hand, and this added height to his tall form.

As Moses must have called forth water with his rod, Mr. Peebles conjured a picture with a stumping of his cue. Mr. Armstrong flashed on the first picture, which was Mr. Brinall's post-and-rail fence, and very rural it appeared. It was greeted with little enthusiasm. Even Mr. Brinall was silent about it.

Mr. Peebles explained in sepulchral voice that he had gone to some trouble to have these depictions executed. He thumped again, and with all joy cried, 'Next slide, please,' and in a mingling of colours the old was withdrawn and the new appeared, this time presumably the sawn-hardwood fence with netting, but Mr. Armstrong had to retrieve it and reverse it until it showed correctly.

Mr. Peebles did not comment upon this picture, and forth came convent walls, serenely peaceful, and enough to shame the soul of Mr. Percival had he not been a man toughened by lifelong struggling with his wife.

'These, as you see, are convent walls,' said Mr. Peebles, and offered no further comment. He stumped, this time majestically, and into view slid the scene which no audience

could have resisted. It was the local hall, the very hall in which they sat, but now it was a Hall. The brush-boxes, pruned, which had appeared in other depictions were shamed by the oaks and poplars that almost moved, shivering their soft green over the spellbound audience. Perhaps it was that richer green of the lawns which showed them up as being soft, and the green on those lawns never belonged to the North Coast, but to the artist only, but they helped. More, however, than lawns, were the gates and fence themselves.

Mr. Peebles drank in the glory of the scene, for it was his vision revived or realised, a fence that swept about the Hall, assisting it to draw up the robes of its dignity and ponder with solemnity and sedateness the matter of life and the world. From its frontal facade it stared calmly, even contemplatively, from the surround of its fences, down at the audience now seated within itself.

‘Well, well, well!’ said Mr. Percival absently, and aloud.

Mr. Peebles, on hearing that comment, cried ‘Lights’ and the light shone, and there was Mr. Peebles standing triumphant, the resemblance to Moses vastly increased, the light brilliant upon him, the eyes of the audience slightly dazed, and there might have been something of Elijah on Carmel, as well as Moses upon Horeb.

Any who felt inclined to oppose the new motion gave way to popular feeling. Mr. Percival graciously withdrew his motion, and proposed the new. He did, however, ask about costs of such a project, but on these points Mr. Peebles reassured him. Unanimous then was the verdict, and all that remained were the matters of tenders and committees and sub-committees, all so remote from the glory of the vision.

It was when this business concluded, the audience dispersing in a creaking and clapping of seats, that Mr. Peebles

began to wonder. It came to him that the struggle was ended. True, he would write in the *Guardian* of this triumph, but henceforth no more meetings, except business ones, no more leaflets, no doubts, no verbal or stand-up fights, no comments throughout the district, no gossiping discussion with every meeting of two or three people. No more of that.

And Mr. Peebles was ever so slightly sad, as perhaps is the prophet when he has scourged the sin from his people, and they sin no more.

## TERRY HICKEY'S DREAM

This great dream came to young Terence Hickey, not in the middle of the night or even the early morning, but in the blaze of the noonday sun. 'Rumbustious' is not a word you apply to the sun, even at midday and in its greatest blaze, but somehow the word seems to fit the sun as Terry saw it.

He had been pondering the matter of Ralph Hicken's return to the bosom of the Wirril district, and being a boy of good memory for detail it came to him that Harry Hicken, the delightful but bewildered old farmer, had suffered greatly from the thought that Ralph, his one and only son, might, on return, stay only for a short time in the family home, and then depart for wider—and perhaps greener—fields.

Terence Hickey, as the name suggests, had much of the Irish in him. This was the gentle Irish, and with it some of the sentimental, to say nothing of the inherited gift of cunning. It was not that Terry worshipped Ralph, but his ideas of that person were high ones. However, it was the soft spot for old Mr. Hicken that generated his dream.

The dream went something like this: Mr. Hicken will never survive a separation from his son Ralph. Moreover, his farm will have no point if the boy is not there to handle, manage, control and even extend it. Thus Mr. Hicken will waste away, and perhaps even die, going to join Mrs Hicken, wherever that may be. Terry was rather vague on the afterlife and the after-places. In fact he was very much a person of the Here and the Now, even if he knew little of the Why.

What he desired was to do something which would hold Ralph to the farm and the district. True, his plan was a small one, a micro-plan you might call it. It was on thiswise that he thought: 'I have my aviaries of birds. I know of no animals or other creatures which hold and grip human beings like birds. Take, for example, my Special Yellow Crested Cockatoo. He with his raised crest (like raised eyebrows) is continually showing surprise when people meet him. Sometimes he speaks to them from his repertoire; other times he just acts for them. He does acts, and he does acting. He mimicks. That is, he is himself but puts on shows to impress others. He produces unusual sounds. He makes human beings go off into gales of laughter, especially because he—the Yellow-Crest—reminds them of some human being or other. He says, "Howareyou?" all in one word.

'Then there is my special Galah, "Charlie". He does crazy things like turning upside down, hanging from the perch with one claw, and shrieking to be looked at. He gets into funny positions and people laugh heartily at him.

'But then, there also are the beautiful finches. Look at the different kinds that exist, and the colours of them. Look at the way they whistle and flash through the aviary, especially as they nest in the dried ti-tree. These little birds are hard to resist.

'Last of all—but best of all—are the budgerigars. These birds will get anyone in. At first they don't try to do this, but then, after a time, they arouse great interest. Especially when there are fifty to a hundred in one cage, and they all talk, laugh, whistle and screech at the one time. It is like a tribe of people who are happy in themselves. Budgies can get anyone in.'

Terence not only had a dream: he had a plan. He took a small cage—made in fact from a tea-chest—and he caught

two of his most charming budgies from the great crowd he possessed. When it is said 'most charming', that description fitted about every blessed bird in the big aviary. One was totally yellow—you might say 'golden'—and the other was an aqua-blue. He put two small receptacles in the bottom of the cage, one for water and one for seed. He carried a modest supply of seed in a jam jar that possessed a lid.

Normally Terry took with him a bullet-headed boy, who, although he was not of great intelligence, was a good companion, and great 'backer-up'. He always seconded everything Terry said, if not in actual word then in gestures and motions, so that what Terry said always seemed so authentic. In this case he was absent. Terry sensed that the task ahead needed sensitivity, discernment, and quiet persistence, and his bullet-headed friend was nothing if not insensitive.

Most people could recognise the approach of the Hickey dray. It had one loose brake, which scraped on the iron wheel. So it did this day as it passed through the opened sliprails of the Hicken farm, and made its scraping and unoled way towards the Hicken house. Silence bathed that old home, as it drowsed in the mid-afternoon sun. Even the dogs dozed, each with one eye opened, and that eye recognised the Hickey boy and saw no cause for alarm.

Terry shouted, 'Anybody home?' and a voice from inside said, 'Of course. What do you want?'

Young Hickey said, 'It's Terry Hickey. I want to see Ralph.'

Ralph came on to the verandah. He grinned at young Hickey. 'You've grown a bit,' he said. 'I remember you when you were a little tacker. Now, what can I do for you?'

Terry realised Ralph had been so long away that he had got out of Wirril Creek manners. No one asked you directly what you wanted. It was a matter of parley. You talked

about other things than the main one. Gradually you came to the point. Otherwise there was no game in it, no entertainment.

'I don't really want anything,' said Dolly Hickey's son. 'I just wanted to say "Hullo!"' He grinned. 'Hullo!' he said.

'Hullo yourself,' said Ralph. 'Good of you to come.'

'It's nothing,' said the Hickey boy modestly. Then he looked a little shy.

'I brought you a couple of birds,' he said.

Ralph looked surprised and a little puzzled. 'Well now,' he said, 'some birds, eh?' He came down the steps. He looked into the dray. Then he looked into the cage. He was pleasantly surprised by what he saw. In fact he looked quite fascinated.

Terry Hickey looked at him with a bland expression on his face. He knew that the budgies did their own clever work of attraction. He was not out to promote them.

Ralph began to smile, then to grin. Finally he laughed. 'Clever little beggars,' he said, 'very clever.'

Terry remained silent. He knew there *was* a trifle more promotion needed, but his trust was in the little feathered creatures.

After a time Ralph looked up at Terry, seated on the dray. 'What made you bring these to me?' he asked.

Terry shrugged his shoulders slightly. 'Thought you might like 'em,' he said. 'Kind of thought they might be a good thing to have after all your experiences.'

Ralph Hicken caught the gist of Terry's thought. He was surprised and gratified. 'You mean these might take my mind off things?'

'Sort of,' said Terry.

Ralph nodded absently. 'Reckon I can handle all that stuff,' he said, 'but I certainly appreciate your gesture.'

They both stood watching the little birds, drawn together by their original and happy antics. They heard a shuffling

sound and looked towards the verandah. Mr. Hicken, snuffling and snorting, was emerging from his afternoon drowse and the living room. He was peering towards Ralph, Terry and the dray. His voice sounded like a grumble.

‘And who can that be?’ he asked.

Ralph said, ‘It’s young Terry Hickey, Dolly’s boy.’

Mr. Hicken was startled. ‘Young Hickey?’ he asked. ‘Now what would young Hickey be doing here?’ He made one of his rare attempts at humour. ‘Building dams, eh?’ and he laughed at his own heavy humour.

Terry shouted. ‘Great to see you, Mr. Hicken. Great to see Ralph, too. Good he’s home.’ He paused, and then said loudly, ‘Hope he stays home and looks after the farm.’

Mr. Hicken heard only half the statement, and was startled. ‘Look after the farm?’ he asked. ‘Who will look after the farm?’

‘Ralph here,’ Terry said boldly. ‘I guess he’ll stay and help you.’ He had his own shot at humour. ‘He’ll be able to make you a big dam.’

Ralph said nothing. His father had slowly made his way down the steps and was peering at Terry. Then his gaze fell on the home-made cage. ‘What’s there?’ he asked. Then he saw for himself. ‘Bless my soul!’ he cried. ‘And what do you call *them*?’

‘Budgerigars,’ said Ralph.

‘Budgies,’ said Terry. ‘They’re great little parrots.’

Strange to say, Mr. Hicken had not seen one budgerigar in his life. He peered with a certain interest. Then he said it again. ‘Bless my soul!’ He looked at his son. ‘They are tiny parrots,’ he said. ‘Maybe they are parakeets.’ Mr. Hicken had seen plenty of grass parakeets. He had also seen lorikeets, white cockatoos, galahs and black cockatoos. He had not seen budgies. ‘Nice little beggars,’ he said, with unexpected appreciation.

Terry’s heart warmed to the old man. ‘Brought them for

Ralph,’ he said. ‘They will look nice around the house.’ He sought to be helpful. ‘Maybe you could keep them on the verandah.’

‘Ah!’ said Mr. Hicken. ‘On the verandah.’ He seemed pleased.

Ralph suddenly saw that his father would have an interest in the pets. ‘I’ll make a bigger cage for them,’ he said, and Terry’s heart began to feel warmer.

‘Budgies breed in cages like that one,’ he said. ‘They have lots of babies. Sometimes eight, or even ten. I had one and it laid sixteen eggs. Thirteen hatched and twelve lived.’

The statistics were a bit overwhelming for the old man. He passed a hand over his forehead. ‘Guess Ralph will look after them,’ he said. He was wondering why young Hickey had brought them for Ralph. Perhaps he had a plan to keep Ralph interested in the place. Then the thought struck him like a hammer blow. He hid his delight and joy, but Hickey sensed it. Mr. Hicken was astonished to see a good reproduction of an Irish wink. He marvelled that young Hickey should be in the conspiracy to keep Ralph on the farm. He did not wink back, but Terry saw a flash of satisfaction flare for a flicker of a second, before it was covered.

Ralph was not deceived by the joined conspiracy of the young boy and the old man. In fact it rather delighted him. He decided not only to play along with them, but also to have some fun at their expense.

‘Now young Hickey,’ he said, ‘if I bred some of these, would there be a good sale for them?’

Terry looked bland. ‘There are some who breed them in Coolbucca and Burtville,’ he said, ‘and Lenny Jones out at Garland’s Point is breeding just violets, and if you got some of his, you could ask your own price.’

‘Great!’ said Ralph. ‘I reckon I might take them on.’

Mr. Hicken and Master Hickey were both delighted. ‘I’d help you, Ralph,’ Terry said.

‘That’s right,’ said Mr. Hicken. ‘Terry would help you. No doubt about that.’ The old farmer looked earnestly, first at Terry and then at Ralph.

Suddenly Ralph liked the whole situation. He had a certain pride in his old man, his fearful father and yet redoubtable Dad. He admired the persistence of the old fellow. As for young Hickey, Ralph thought he was ‘twenty-four carat’ and ‘a great little feller’. In fact Ralph was tasting something of what it was to meet humans and know them. His mind slipped away to the problems—the human problems—that had confronted him in those desert years, and jungle years, and years of death and pain, of good mateship, and sudden shocks and surprisings.

So he said, ‘Young Terry, I accept your wonderful gift, but I have a problem.’

‘You have a problem,’ echoed Terry. He glanced conspiratorially at Mr. Hicken Senior. Mr. Hicken was unused to returning conspiratorial looks. Instead, disappointment invaded him. Sorrow began to overtake him. The negative ‘but’ of his son’s speech deeply troubled him. He had to stare stonily at Terry, and the effort cost him his habitual rheumy tear. The trickle began.

Hastily Ralph said, ‘My trouble is that things are hard to buy in these days. One part of me could never keep these budgies in a small cage like this. Another part of me wants to see them in a good aviary, but where would I get aviary netting these days? It would be as scarce as hen’s teeth.’

‘Brian Hickey!’ exploded Terry. When Ralph looked puzzled, he said, ‘Brian Hickey has a roll. I know he has a roll. I saw the roll.’

Ralph grinned. Mr. Hicken smiled faintly. Both knew that Brian Hickey was Terry’s father, and that the Hickey children had the strange habit of calling their Dad ‘Brian’ and

and their Mum ‘Dolly’.

‘So your Dad has some of this aviary wire, eh?’ said Ralph. ‘And what about timber? Where would I get that?’

Terry looked surprised, even disgusted. ‘At the mill,’ he said pityingly. ‘They have all you need.’ Of course, the mill.

Ralph pointed to the pear tree, close enough to the house to be seen from the verandah. ‘There!’ he said dramatically. ‘That’s where we would put it.’

‘Put what?’ asked Mr. Hicken, for whom events were moving too quickly to understand them.

‘The aviary of course,’ said Terry Hickey, acting as though aviaries were built every day, and the selection of their site was a very little thing. His mind was working furiously. He was thinking Dad would be glad to sell that rare roll of aviary bird-netting.

‘Get in, son,’ said Ralph suddenly. He pointed to the LandRover. That thought pleased young Hickey no end. Whilst Ralph went into the house to get the keys of the vehicle, he climbed down from the dray, picked up the cage made from a tea-chest, and carried it across to the verandah. He put the cage on the old cedar table where all Harry Hicken’s rubbish found a resting place. By the time Ralph had the key, and Terry was settling himself in the LandRover, Mr. Hicken was peering into the small cage, staring at the budgie of warm yellow and the other of beautiful blue.

As they drove towards the slip-rails, Terry and Ralph looked back, and they could see the old man with his head against the bird-wire, still peering. When they had replaced the slip-rails, Ralph said, ‘All this’ll do the old man good.’

Terry felt a thin line of faint fear: maybe Ralph was doing this only for old Mr. Hicken, and not for himself. Maybe far from keeping Ralph at the Creek it might give him a bit of an excuse to go! The thought sickened the young boy, and

he sat staring ahead, not enjoying this unaccustomed ride in a Land-Rover.

Today was one of those unusual days when Brian Hickey was home. Mostly he roved up and down the Coast, from Sydney to Tweed Heads, buying up second-hand materials, attending farm sales and auctions, buying into the army disposals, collecting old machinery, and carefully discovering priceless antiques as though they were junk. Today, marvellously, he was home.

Terry took Ralph to the long slab-built shed which had once been a dairy bails, a cream-house, a makeshift barn, and a temporary house. Its length was quite surprising for a farm building in Wirril, but what it contained was the real surprise. It would take a fat catalogue to chronicle the shape, size, nature, history and ways of all the materials. There was the vast junk of old plows, harrows, cultivators, seeders, and mowers of every kind. There were the tables of second-hand tools, nuts, bolts, bits and pieces. There were old meat-safes, ancient ice-boxes and chests; there were stacks of second-hand galvanised iron, flat and corrugated. Along racks lay timbers—softwood and hardwood—dressed and undressed. Ralph's quick eye spotted silky-oak, Baltic pine, flooded gum and cedar. He saw old tables, chests of drawers, wardrobes, bed-frames made of iron, of brass, and of timber. He could see no bird-wire.

Brian Hickey was an expansive man, a man whom time had developed into an assured man. There was little of life, of the world, and of human nature that Mr. Hickey did not know, or thought he did not know. For a man who had travelled much of the world as a sailor, all of the North Coast as a buyer and salesman, and little of his own farm as a husband and father, he was doing pretty well. His wide face was florid, his tattooed arms strongly muscled, his belly

held by a harness belt a testimony to the fattening power of malted hops, and his clear blue eyes a witness to the power of man's personality; with all this in his favour and power he boomed a greeting to young Hicken.

'Great to see you, Ralph!' he cried. 'Sorry to miss you at the Rail. I was out at the Flats. They had a good auction at the Brannigans' farm.'

The two men shook hands heartily. Ralph liked Brian Hickey, but hoped Terry would not develop like his Dad. Terence had always planned he wouldn't. Now he was planning the way for Ralph to get his aviary wire at a reasonable price. He knew his Dad had more than an eye for a bargain. It was the very essence of life for Brian Hickey to turn junk into good money.

So they talked about many things—the war, butter coupons, coupons for meat, and coupons for clothing. They talked about the hard lot of dairymen and the good lot of retailers in the cities. They had things to say about the Creek, the Rail, Coolbucca, Burtville and Garland's Point, and all inhabitants therein. They had nothing to say about Ralph's purpose in coming to the Hickey second-hand junk market.

Finally Brian Hickey said, 'And now, young Ralph, is there anything I can do for you?'

Ralph wasn't bargaining for a bargain. Long ago he wanted to ask Hickey if he had bird-wire, how much of it and what would be the cost, but that would have been a mild insult to buying-selling protocol, and both men knew it. The soldier said, 'I want to build an aviary. I need a bit of bird-wire.'

The response of Brian Hickey was reflexive. He would have to say that bird-wire was hard to come by. In fact you just couldn't get it. Go into any hardware shop and ask for it and they would smile at you, and have pity in that smile. They would understand a soldier coming back from the war thinking he could get just about anything he wanted, simply

for the asking, and, of course, the paying.

Rarely Brian Hickey fought his hard-nosed responses. They were his form of protection against losing in life. In his early days he had lost so much with his Irish innocence, and his Irish trust and goodwill, that it was to take him a lifetime to catch up his loss. Even so, something gentle was in the soul of this big man. He said with a warm grin, 'I have one roll of that netting. You won't buy it anywhere. I'll let you have it.'

'Let you have it' was understood by young Terry and older Ralph to mean, 'At a certain price.' In fact this was not what Brian meant at all. He clambered up over some furniture, hauled himself up onto the beams of the slab hut, ferreted, caused dust to be disturbed, pulled and tugged, and down came a fat and undisturbed roll of aviary netting.

Terry looked at it with no little awe and envy. His Dad would never let him have it. He could see the possibility of a long large aviary with such a treasure of bird-wire, but his father gave him nothing. Whatever Terry's heart desired in all that world of junk he would have to work for. Terry would have nothing to make up for as the years went by. His Dad taught him how to live both by the labour of his hands and the astuteness of his mind. Now, however, Terry was about to see a miracle, and one he would not quickly forget.

Ralph asked, 'How much, Brian?'

Brian said simply, 'Grab it, mate. It's yours. It's a gift.'

Ralph replied, 'I don't get you. A gift? I want to buy it.'

'I know,' Brian said, 'but I'm giving it to you.'

What made Terry marvel was that he didn't sound strained. *He was actually making a gift of a roll of bird-wire to Ralph Hicken!* Terry looked unbelievably at his Dad, and then had to cope with his own emotions when he saw his Dad really meant it. A whole new Hickey world opened up to him, an unusual and even beautiful Brian Hickey world. He turned away to hide the pricking behind his eyes and the

tears that threatened to gather.

Ralph was looking puzzled, and Brian was explaining.

'Now look here, mate,' he was saying. 'You go off to that war. You go through all that, and you come back, and people are on your hammer, trying to make something out of you, the moment you get out of the army.' He coughed a trifle. 'I don't want to make meself out as a great fellow . . . ' At this point he paused and looked at Terry, whose jaw was hanging somewhat. Terry was trying to absorb it all, but was unable to master such a feat.

'Now young Terry,' he said severely, 'you just have to stop trying to make a buck or two on every occasion. Sometimes you have to think of others.'

Terry turned away to hide his amazement. Then his eyes went upwards.

Undeterred, Brian proceeded. 'So the wire's yours, young Ralph, and anything else you need. Say like some hinges, a bolt for the aviary door, and of course you'll need a good bit of timber with all that wire.'

Ralph found it difficult to cope with the sudden generosity, but he was grateful. He and Brian and young Terry went into conference about the size of the aviary, the timber needed, some nails and fittings for fear Harry Hicken's workshop was bare, and would yield none of these things.

'What's more,' said Brian as part of this incredible dream, 'I'll stick it on the lorry and have it up to your farm in no time.'

He didn't wait for thanks. He was a busy man as he wanted them to know, and as they knew and were not greatly disturbed to know. They watched him lumber off to some other part of the junk shop, and then looked at each other.

Amazement was still in Ralph's eyes. He hadn't been looking for a bargain, and his conscience was clear, but it was the unusual gesture of Brian Hickey which had greatly

moved him. Terry for his part was glowing with joy. In fact his joy was an awed and reverent joy. A great miracle had taken place, and Terry had been too hard-nosed to believe in miracles. Now his conclusions about his Dad, about life, and about the supernatural were undergoing a change.

Ralph suddenly said, 'I'll need a lot of birds. Of course I'll need a lot of birds. I'll need plenty of budgies, some finches, and maybe some others.' He wasn't quite sure as to what others.

Terry's trained and conditioned mind immediately thought of the birds he had to sell, and how Ralph would be glad to pay 'the right price' for them. He glowed. Then the thought and memory of the recent generosity of his father came flooding in. In his eyes was a mixture of delight and regret. Of course he would have to give the birds to Ralph.

Ralph picked up Terry's thought. He gave a roar of laughter. 'Oh no, Terry,' he protested. 'I want to buy them.' He grinned. 'It'd never be my aviary of birds, would it, eh?' He grinned even more widely. 'My Dad would never understand, would he? He'd need to know the aviary, and breeding all those birds, would help to keep me in Wirril Creek, eh?' He went into peals of laughter, so much so that tears came into his eyes. He kept shaking his head.

Terry's eyes widened. Suddenly he realised that Ralph Hicken had played him along all the time. He lifted his two arms to lash at Ralph in embarrassment, but Ralph caught his hands and held them.

'Look here, young Terry,' he said. 'You're going to help me build this aviary, and I'm going to buy birds from you, and through you, and the old man is just going to love looking out at them, and watching them, and thinking all the time that that was how he and Terry Hickey kept me on the farm.'

They both walked to the Land-Rover. Ralph got in and turned the ignition key. Terry Hickey settled himself comfortably, and the Land-Rover moved off, towards the Hicken farm.

The two of them were thinking as they drove along. Both could see the aviary finished, and the birds in it, flying around in the unusual expanse of a new freedom. They could hear the colony of budgies chattering, whistling and chortling their heads off, whilst the finches fluttered, flew, whistled and called in excited and happy tones. They could both see old Mr. Hicken peering towards the aviary, and because he wanted to see it more closely and observe each little character of the differing birds he would have to leave his rocker on the verandah, descend the steps and make his way towards the aviary.

When the two thought about that—and they did, simultaneously—then smiles came on their faces, and for this and other obvious reasons they were both contented, happy, and serene.

## FLIGHT OF SWANS

Mr. Whelan is most particular this morning about his ablutions, more so than on many occasions. After a wash and a hard rub-down with the rough towel he dresses partly, discovers his shiny suit which has long been hidden and pressed beneath the mattress, and puts it on. Then he surveys himself in the mirror, keenly, and for an old man is quite satisfied, sure that the Jim Whelan who stares back at him is fit to meet the best.

And the best he may meet before the day is ended. He searches for the leaflet which was slipped beneath his front door, and scans the items which, anyway, he knows by heart. The first is 'VJ events', and he has an especial snort for *that*, since he has heard that VJs are only tuppennyha'penny craft, and not at all to be compared with the past—that is, his, Jim Whelan's past.

But there it is, advertised and claiming authenticity—MONSTER REGATTA AND CARNIVAL—the suggestion of gaiety, the insistence of enjoyment, colour, noise, excitement and entertainment. Already his blood begins to warm, his cheeks to flush a trifle, but there is no time to waste, so that he makes the tea and boils an egg, and leaves a slice of bread to toast itself on the black hob of the stove.

Barely has he eaten the egg, munched the toast and wiped the excess butter from his lips when he hears the bus racing down the road, winding and soaring around the bend, blurring in its exhaust-pipe and tooting its horn as it reaches each farmhouse and, finally, as it reaches Jim's place, there is a

specially long toot, or so it appears to Jim, who hurries from the house down to the gate.

And there is the bus, terrifyingly so, since Jim rarely emerges from his seclusion. If he is fresh-faced, so are fifty other children, farmers and timber-men. The young ones gaze a trifle awfully at him because they have already woven a legend about him. A few of the adults nod, then avert their heads slightly and continue talking about the weather, the crops, the last dance at the Hall, and the new people in Jim Brown's old place. Only the very old ones seem prepared to talk to Jim, but Ned, who is impartial in all his judgements, friendly to all, and the driver of the bus, has a warm 'Hullo there, Jim' for Mr. Whelan, as though he is proud to welcome, of all people he has ever welcomed into his bus, this one Mr. Whelan. This cheers Jim a trifle, whisks away his self-consciousness, places him upon a seat while the bus sings and changes its gears, sings again, and is away to the Monster Regatta and Carnival.

Colour! There never was the like of it. Flags flying, banners waving, sails adorned with remarkable devices, and then the ceaselessly-mingling brightness of the women, be-frocked, or in shorts, and some, even, in bathing-costume. The steady volume of noise quiets Jim's nervousness as the bus draws to a standstill. He pays his two shillings and is swallowed by noise, crowd and colour. A man at a chocolate-wheel shouts at him 'Sixpence for a pound,' but Jim reckons that can wait until later, good as it sounds.

The crowd throngs about him, swallows up his old habit of keeping to himself, yet, in a manner, binds him even closer to his loneliness. For a fleeting moment he wishes he had not come.

Then he stands at the old broken wharf and stares out on to the blue water. He thinks, then, that there is nothing so

soothing, anywhere, as blue water, water which ripples softly in the sun, which beckons merrily with white gleams of sheer delight, and which is altogether independent of the flow of humanity.

About a half-mile across is the bar of golden sand, a long smooth wall enclosing the stretch along which the regatta is to be run. A buoy or two moves idly and a speedboat shatters the silence of the water, roaring and tearing through white foam, assuring everyone that there has never been other than sheer enjoyment in this world.

The VJs swing into line, twist and turn about the buoys to show their flimsy prettiness to the watching crowd. A voice booms from the amplifiers giving them their handicaps and their places. 'Eastern Butterfly, you have fifty-five seconds, you have fifty seconds. Forty-five. Forty.' The voice drones, almost drugging the old man as he watches. He remembers the eighteen-footers that floated along here, great white beauties, indifferent to the excited crowds which had so eagerly followed their progress. Now, only these flimsies. He is slightly sorrowful.

'Hullo, Jim! Fancy seeing you here, eh?' It is burly George Harrap, and Jim is damned if he has seen George for nearly twenty years, although it took him only a second to recognise him.

'Well, George,' he says, no signs of astonishment, no flurry, calm as a man with a pipe in his mouth. 'Fancy you here, George. Never expected you.' Unconsciously he is playing host to George, as though, perhaps, he has arranged the very day, and was wondering whether or not George would accept his invitation.

George says very little. He was, for a moment, going to explain to Jim his prosperity, the change from the old days of bullocking, but looking at Jim he is a trifle wistful, and

the magic of the past claims him, and the present, prosperity and all, is not a patch upon it.

After a time he says, 'Remember that wharf, Jim?' much as one might remember Canterbury Cathedral before the bombings.

Jim nods his head. 'Remember it, George?' he says genially. 'There was timber there in those days.'

'Timber,' says a voice and they turn to see Charlie Hodges. 'I pulled tallow-wood that was thirteen-six around the girth.'

'So you did, Charlie,' says George in warm confirmation. 'We all did.' He points to the still water on which are skimming the VJs, like so many butterflies. 'That there water was heavy with timber.'

'The mill was there,' says George, pointing to a high hillock of couch-grass.

'Sawdust under there,' says Charlie. 'I bet if you kicked that it'd be sawdust.'

'The stuff used to leave that there wharf,' says Jim, happily, but, albeit, solemnly. 'Corn and pigs and the timber.'

George, for all his property, suddenly discovers a truth. 'With all their fancy wages and prices today, Jim,' he says, 'I wouldn't mind having the money we got for sticks in them days.'

'If you could buy what it bought then,' says Charlie.

They agree, solemnly. The crowd, the self-important crowd which hurries and scurries everywhere and nowhere with intent, is now of no importance. Jim's shyness and separateness are gone. He stands on the condemned wharf like a benevolent valuer, appraising the present in the light of the past, with little credit to the present.

'The timber that went into the mill,' he says. 'You don't get it today.'

'No heart then,' says Charlie Hodges.

'No thirteen-foot-six tallow-woods,' says George.

Jim chuckles, condescendingly perhaps, but then he has a position to maintain, that status of the old days when Jim was pre-eminent.

'Remember the time,' he says, 'when the bullocks near went to that damned sandbank?'

George remembers. 'Laugh, Jim? Lord, I've often laughed over that.' He turns to Charlie. 'Jim brought them bullocks down and was going to drop the logs in the water. What happens? When the water takes the weight off them logs, away go the bullocks as though they must get to that sandbank or die.'

'But I called them back,' reminded Jim.

'So you did,' chuckles George in agreement.

They are silent, remembering the wharf as it had been, the produce heaped upon these now rotting timbers.

'Friendship in them days,' says George. 'It was different.'

'Do you reckon, now?' says Jim eagerly. It is a thought he has been fostering these many years.

'Ah, yes,' says Charlie sadly. 'They aren't as friendly now as they used to be.' He looks sorrowfully toward the crowd. 'People is more selfish now,' he concludes.

Jim wonders. It seems to him, for all the changes and chances of life, that these people are as happy, perhaps, as when he was young. If there are no slim white birds of eighteen-footers and only these small craft, then the race is enjoyed as much as the races he had once watched. Children, hanging from the old girders, are shrill with excitement. Older folk behind them are gripping their hands as the craft turn the eastern buoy and come swiftly into the straight for the home run. Jim thinks that if his eyes were better he would make out, even, the men in the small craft, but they are only spots to him. In any case, he would not know them.

But when the names are called they are names he knows mostly. He is glad of that, as though the past has not altogether been broken with, for all he says and Charlie and George say.

Charlie's wife comes to claim him. She is sweet to Jim, and remembers him with trifling enthusiasm, but is intent upon dragging her husband off. George very lamely tells Jim about his success in life, but Jim does not seem to hear. He has little to tell George about success, which is probably why he does not comment.

He steers clear of the publican's booth, still refuses to be tempted by 'a pound for sixpence.' He has a cup of tea and a few sandwiches, a mere relic of what he would have been able to purchase for a shilling years ago. In fact, he remembers, lunches were free in those days, and a great deal of laughter and fun went on with jokes at the expense of those who were pouring tea; a heavy, hearty sort of humour that spared nor hurt none. Jim, as he bites his dainty sandwiches, feels it is a great pity the old days ever passed.

But the sculls reverse his opinion. His innate honesty convicts him. He is forced to admit they had never seen sculls like these. The craft themselves are light as a feather, but cunningly fashioned. Their pointed prows cleave the water, skim over it, glide at the slightest insistence of the sculler and finally draw up in line for the announcement of the handicap.

And what a race it is! Jim, who can barely see the sculls at the eastern end of the stretch, does, nevertheless, not miss the start. He disapproves of a course in the deep water, applauds the positions near the sandbank and senses a tightening excitement as the sculls shoot away. Backwards and forwards go the rowers, their bodies rhythmic in movement, the water lying smoothly beneath the moving craft. This is the time when the crowd leaves its pastimes, throwing at the wicket, ice-creams and refreshments. People tumble and tip

from the cars and buses and come running forward, the excitement growing as the spectators are unable to refrain from screaming. Jim finds himself almost shouting as once he would always shout. The foremost sculler is pulling in long, easy movements, his follower in shorter, stronger urges, and when they draw near and pass the wharf there is little distance between.

Dizzy with excitement and almost crazed with shouting, the children are in danger of falling into the water. One spectator, unable to contain himself, follows an urge and dives into the water, his body cleaving towards the fleeing sculls. Then a shout goes up as the man who has pulled easily passes the buoy and flags.

And now the day is nearly finished. The wood-chop, with choppers every bit as good as in his own day, have a strange fascination for Jim. He would like, even, to chop, but has to admit his age. Charlie and George seek him out again and get to talking about chops in the past. Jim listens to them with tolerance and mild enthusiasm. Gradually it has been dawning on him that with so much to remember he needs no pity, nor has he any real loneliness. He thinks that when he returns in the bus he will be able to retain much of his old confidence.

Then the announcer almost stuns him with surprise. 'Now, folks,' he says, and his voice is a trifle tired. 'Now, folks, we have many of the old-timers here today who remember Garland's Point as it was in the good old days. Now, there's Jim Whelan over there. I suppose Jim knows more about this place than anyone, including his two old friends standing there with him, George Harrap and Charlie Hodges. They tell me Mr. Whelan sank a lot of money into this place, but then the new bank they put at the mouth of the river finished all that.'

'So it did. So it did,' agrees Jim, half-aloud, remembering now all his dreams for the place. He had planned a hotel on the hill behind the wharf, and rows of houses where now only a few of the fishermen's homes stand. He had seen then, as in a dream, the produce of the North Coast come pouring through his streets, passing the pubs, wagons loaded, trucks packed, all going to the mill and the wharf. The wharf, too, had grown, stretched down the river so that the hungry maws of the waiting craft might be fed before they glided away.

And, as Jim stands and remembers, the announcer's voice passes on to another subject, the words mumbling wearily. To the east, where the scullers were, rises a cloud of swans, black and white or silver almost where they shadow in the sun. Their rising waves are almost pulsations.

'Swans,' says George suddenly, wistfully almost, thinking perhaps of the city, which, for all its facade, might now seem only the hollow fulfilment of a promise. George stares at the swans.

'Well, I'll be going, Jim,' he says after a silence. 'See you next year, eh?' This with a trifle more of enthusiasm. 'I suppose they'll hold these things yearly like we used to, hey?' It is his last attempt at heartiness.

Charlie sees his wife approaching. 'You're a lucky dog, Jim,' says Charlie with a burst of honesty. 'I'd like to be in these parts still.' He shakes hands with Jim and follows after George.

Jim is not sad at their going. He watches them absently, Charlie with his fussy wife and George, alone, making towards his car. It is a nice car, smooth, well-polished, large, but it is remote from Jim as though it does not exist—not, anyway, in his world of thought. Charlie's car is not quite as big, but it is shiny also. He watches the two cars

## The Days & Dreams of Arcady

drive along the patch of sand and couch which had once been the main street of his famous town.

Then Ned toots the horn of the bus and the stragglers come from everywhere, tired but happy, converging on Ned, dreading his departure without them. Jim walks too, not quickly but confidently, detached from the strong emotions of youth and yet uncritical. Before he reaches the bus he turns to take a last look at the blue water which now has speedboats upon it, roaring and revving, twisting and cavorting in sheer pleasure. There are VJs sailing to the sandbank with girls on them laughing and happy, and on the old wharf the children still play where the great logs once were. The people are weary, but, for all that, contented.

Jim, when he does climb into the bus, retains his selfconfidence. He senses a respect, and even admiration, from his fellow passengers. The man who built a town. He bursts out: 'Take her away, Ned. What are we waiting for?'

This, of course, is no question, but Ned, nothing loath, revs the engine, makes a slight sound of gears and is away with them into the hills, the engine singing and roaring as they round the bends.