

About This Book...

The title is derived from the subjects of the book-stories about boys, girls and adults. How do freedom-loving children grow to be thoughtful adults? What is the true meaning of freedom in this world? Can such a theme be highly entertaining, and not dull and moralistic?

The writer-Geoffrey Bingham-has been writing and publishing stories for the last fifty years or more, and they have been widely accepted. He has published five collections of short stories: *To Command the Cats*, *The Translation of Mr Piffy*, *At the End of His Tether*, *The Days and Dreams of Arcady*, and *The Raymond Connection*. This sixth volume contains a hitherto unpublished forty-three-year-old document written as he was returning from Singapore to Sydney, after release from a Japanese POW Camp.

The stories cover a wide range-war, prison camp, peace, life in country and city-but are all concerned with people. Re. viewers generally remark that his characterization of people and other creatures is superb, and that he discovers unusual depths of richness in human beings. His stories often have wry or ironic humour, but no cynicism. Perhaps more than most Australian spinners of yarns, he has something positive to say to the human race, and this without losing his ability to entertain.

PRO HART has always been pleased to do paintings for the covers of Geoffrey Bingham's books-both fiction and non-fiction-of which there are over 100. The cover painting depicts the story 'The Girl in a Cossie', originally published in the *Women's Weekly*. Hart catches the idiom of the writer, but long ago he had developed his own understanding of his fellow Australians, his humour being no less whimsical than that of Bingham. The two have much in common, and their coming together again makes this a desirable volume to possess.

New Creation Publications Inc.

The Boy, The Girl, And The Man



Geoffrey Bingham

*The Boy,
The Girl,
And The Man*

Geoffrey Bingham

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Cover layout by Glenys Murdoch

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*Dedicated to
our fascinating grandchildren,
who keep us remembering
how young people think, live,
and see life.*

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NOTE

None of the stories in this volume
is intended to refer to any person or character,
however much you may think they do.

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FOREWORD

Foreword

ONE or the proof-readers who had read the whole manuscript said, 'Why, this book is about freedom!' She asked me whether I would use the word 'freedom' in the title. Curious as to what she had seen, I went over the stories, reading them again. Usually I write stories off the cuff, and at any point in time. I rarely try to place one in a journal or magazine, and so one or two of these stories have been written many years ago, some a few years ago, and others quite recently. They all lie unattended until enough accumulate to make a full volume. How would the yarns, then—written over a number of years—have a common theme? Probably because freedom is a prominent idea in our thinking.

Ideas regarding freedom are many, and the introduction to a volume of short stories is scarcely the place to discuss the matter or metaphysics of freedom. Short stories are for entertainment, but then not for mere entertainment. True entertainment takes a genuine look at life, not as escapist fiction—the stuff of idle dreams—but as looking at reality in its most stimulating and enriching forms. The short story is as much an art as any other. Whilst the writer is not a preacher or a moralist, he is a

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communicator, and what he communicates must matter some, if not much. A thoughtful volume of short stories can be a useful social document. Henry Lawson's stories and poems were nothing if not that.

There can be no doubt that for the most part Australian short stories have been occupied with the idea of human freedom. This Bicentennial Year tells us that our beginnings were in years of bondage, especially on the East Coast of our land—that part established by convicts, their bosses, and free settlers. South Australia—by contrast—is proud that her history was free from convicts. Even so, this State has been called 'the house of dissent', because much of her land was settled by dissentients. Methodists chafed under the social opprobrium of 'chapel' as against 'church', and Baptists and others as being classed 'nonconformists'. Lutherans were of two orders, but both were glad to be free to start a new society in a southern land. There were churches simply called 'Christian' because they resented the tyranny of denominationalism-

Most of us envisage freedom as liberation from domination, the opportunity to live life without authoritarian intervention. How free we can be without some agreed form of order is a moot question, but certainly the Australian spirit resents restrictions, including the constriction of the human spirit. But is this resentment simply part of the Australian mind, or is it universal? It seems universally to be part of human thinking, i.e. that we are born to be free. Whether in fact this freedom is ever attained in full is questionable, but we certainly have moments of freedom, and they can be exquisite.

The first of the stories—'Don't Fence Me In'—deals with the mind of a boy who meets his first restriction in

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life: a fence. Another obstacle to pure freedom is parental insistence on obedience in 'The Woman and the Wild Apple'. Freedom from natural fear is sketched in 'No Fear for Jeremy', but in 'The Girl in a Cossie' a young boy has fear of water which has to be neutralized. 'The Boy and the Golden Gelding' presents one of these delicious moments of freedom, when a boy rides untrammelled—as in a dream. 'The Power and the Glory'—which was written in 1946—spins the old theme of a mother who holds the family in bondage by her last will and testament 'The Magnificent Male' has nothing to do with sex, but simply with the liberation of a godlike captive bird. 'The Sound' is a yarn about a near-deaf old man who recovers his hearing and a world once lost to him. 'Singapore to Sydney' was written in 1945 when prisoners of war were returning from Changi to Sydney, and this previously unpublished document describes the incredible sense of freedom the men felt on release. 'The Man in the War Wards' is a series of stories describing a soldier's wounding, captivity, and release. 'How Come You Kept Corrie?' tells of a pert Corella parrot which changed character from the wildness of freedom, to serenity and affection through the pleasures of captivity.

It is certain, then, that the stories are concerned with the matter of the freedom of spirit which is natural to man and other creatures. Even so, there is no moralism in these accounts since they are meant primarily to entertain—to bring pleasure. When we write yarns we join, and so help, to perpetuate the ancient order of storytellers. When we read, or listen to yarns, we join the equally ancient order of those who delight in the history, mystery, and endless antics of the human race.

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'The Girl in a Cossie' was published by the *Women's Weekly*, and 'The Power and the Glory' by the *Bulletin*. The remaining stories have hitherto been unpublished.

GEOFFREY BINGHAM

'Don't Fence Me In'

HE TRIED to remember the first time he had felt the danger. It was so far away in time and memory that recall was beyond his power. For the moment he remained baffled. Then he remembered the fence. He was surprised that it came into his view. He had never recalled the fence.

There it was—the fence. It was a rail-fence. Its rails were wooden, probably cut from old gums. The rails were wedged in their posts, tight in the mortised cavities. The fence was old because by now the timbers were grey to black, and some of them—on the weather side—were rough with lichen. It was strange that after all these years he should see that old fence again.

When he looked closer he saw there were single strands of wire running below the bottom rail and between the second and top rails. He felt a slight quiver of rage at the sight of the fencing wire. Why, he did not know. Then he remembered. His mind took him back to the first time he had been confronted by that fence. 'Confronted' is a strange word to use for a fence. A fence just stands there—being a fence! It has no personal being. It is just a fence.

In this memory-recall the fence did have a personality. It was strong and tall to the tiny child who had crawled up to it. It frowned on him when he came near. It was stolid and forbidding. He remembered now that he had wanted to go beyond that particular fence. It was his first, and he sensed a strong conflict building up within him. He was indignant. What was a fence when he was who he was— at least more than a fence?

Beyond the fence lay everything. Beyond this first fence' lay much, and beyond the much the everything—of that he was sure. So he put out his hand to the fence. It was hard and dry. It was harsh to his baby hand. It was harsher to his will. It stood locked into itself, a barrier to what was beyond.

At first he pushed at the post nearest to him, but it was unresponsive. Then he slid his hand between the bottom wire and the ground. The wire stayed strong and invulnerable. He rose a little, and put his head between the wire and the first rail. It pressed against his head, allowing him to go no further.

That was when the rage first visited him. In his child-heart a wave of indignation grew. Nothing ought ever to stop him doing anything he wished, as in reflexive anger he pushed his head between the wire and the rail. There was the sense of pain and anger which compelled him to press and press and press!

Suddenly his head had passed between the wire and the rail, but both held him in a vice. His shoulders were larger than his head, and they could not free themselves. His rage grew and he pressed as he swayed; swayed as he pressed. Suddenly the fence gave up the struggle. Not only were his head and shoulders free, but his whole body. He

had crawled through.

He crowed with delight. His baby eyes shone. He had accomplished something! He knew now what it was that brought joy—insistence upon personal freedom. He crawled around ecstatically. It was not that he was unable to walk, but crawling delighted him. Sometimes he would move crab-like, going to this side and then to that. Sometimes he would move rapidly without any particular reason. Now his legs tailed about him as he rushed this way and that

He knew there was a different world outside this fence. Not far away was a road. Not that he knew what was a road. He could hear the intermittent sounds of roaring as vehicles rushed by. The drivers were intent on the white gravel road in front of them, and they sought to hold their rushing cars so that they would not skid.

This little boy—himself—was delighted with the free world. Nothing held him. He disliked being held. His father often held him, and he endured it, but did not like it. His mother, who was quieter than his father, also often held him, and he was patient with her. However, he longed to evade them both and go on his explorations.

Today he was away from them, and in his own new world. They had a different world—the other side of that stolid fence. Some instinct kept him from going too close to the white road. Also he disliked roaring noises. He liked the small sounds, like breezes over grass, or the curious utterances of the hens back in the poultry run. He also liked the plaintive cries of little 'Tich', the soft brownish-grey Jersey calf which loved to suck his fingers and slobber over his face. Then there were the puppy cries of the Kelpie pup 'Remus'. He liked the little tail-wagging pup.

Small as he was, he had fed Remus broken eggs from the Egg Board crate. He had broken the eggs himself, with a blue-metal stone. Sometimes they just seemed to break between his small, strong, crushing fingers. He would watch the yellow of the yolk and the jelly of the egg-white ooze through his hands.

He did all things without reference to any other but himself. He had his own world within himself. From the beginning it had been so.

He wondered how a small child could be so independent, so sure of itself. He felt a heart-sickening admiration of its steely self-will. He asked himself, 'Could that really have been me?' He was uncertain, but the fear kept nagging at him.

After a time the little boy tired of his new, entertaining, and wide world. He crawled back towards the fence. It had no eyes for him. It stood there, stolid, staring ahead. He smiled at it, thinking to win its acceptance. It neither smiled nor frowned in return. It just did not acknowledge him.

His hand went out to the steel wire. The wire was firm, but dead. So were the hardwood rails. The whole fence was impassive. He felt contempt for it, and pressed his head at the bottom wire, then between it. Now he was no novice. He knew how to twist a bit, struggle slightly, turn and coil his body. In no time he was through, running towards the house, his father and mother. They would both be there, and, with them, the food. He liked the food.

'That surely was me,' he thought to himself. 'I cannot believe a little child could have such great anger at restriction, or such great delight in defeating restriction.' He knew how the lines had been set in him that

day. Always he had been angry at fences. Not only fences, but anything the fence symbolized. He would be locked into nothing, and be shut out of nothing. He must go where he would go. This always had to be.

Once in the house, with Remus sniffing and snuffling at the door, he felt secure. He liked the smells of the food, and the fun of his father, and the hot, sweet biscuits of his mother. He lay back in bed listening to the serial story his father made for him—night after night—out of his head. The thought of the fence died with his sleep, and was nothing to him when he awoke the next morning. There were other things, now, to do, and he went to do them.

'However did it figure so much to me—that fence?' he thought, strangely troubled that the memory of it should visit him. 'How,' he thought, 'could a baby have such anger?' He began to remember something. It was about his ability to open the lock of any door, and to penetrate any window. Not that that made him a burglar or a robber. It was not to get in that he taught himself this. It was mainly to get out that he had learned it. When he thought about it the second time he realized that he would not be balked, either going out or getting in. He also remembered a song his father often sang, 'Don't Fence Me In.' He wondered whether his father wanted to break through fences, but he could not decide about that

From Singapore To Sydney

PHEW! Where can a man start on all that myriad of impressions? The thought confounds one, and yet there is material to fill books. I think impressions rushed in on us in those days, and after a somewhat placid life intermixed with cruelties of the little yellow enemy, and the usual honour tales, we were rushed into a world of unimaginable beauty. I think it was the arrival of the Gurkhas at our prison camp that made us realize we were free men, although of course we had been well supplied with news from our hidden camp wireless set

Release!

It rushed at us, that new world. Little brown men with Sten guns and a hatred of the Japs, eager as they were to incite this enemy into a false move. We could hear the stutter of those deadly little guns. They smiled at us and said that soon the last shadows of Nippon would have fled from over our lives. Yes, we were free! After the Gurkhas came the Fannies with their mobile canteens,

and we were suddenly in the world of women. We had, all of us, felt the incompleteness of man without his counterpart, and here they were to usher us into this new world. It was new because all our values had been fulfilled over the years when we thought, thought a lot. It is foolish to think that we came home sorrowful and silent men. It was an experience, and many of us are the better for it. Some, of course, lie on many hills, and we still seem to hear the 'Last Post' floating from amid the green trees, and the urgent 'Reveille' that calls them to life immortal. We who are left and are free have happiness before the eyes, but our hands still grasp theirs in memory.

Yes, we were free. We began to eat good food. The old eternal round of rice meals was replaced by foods we had dreamed of in rash, wild moments. Here they were before us. We were dazed, could hardly believe the miracle of bread and butter. Chocolates and Virginian cigarettes—they were beyond conception! Yet, this was not to be long. Truly the shadows of our small oppressors had lifted from us, and the dread of the coming invasion and what it might mean for us; death was so close to us in those days.

Embarkation

When the ser-major said to me, 'You are going home tomorrow,' there was an air of unreality. Dreams of those terrible years were to come suddenly true. I think our minds were beyond comprehension of those events. The senses had been rushed at by superlatives. We were confused with the terrible beauty of the whole affair. To hear a woman's voice really hurt One chap, after listening to

the first woman speaking to him after three and a half years, said to me, 'Come away; that's like honey. It's sweet; too much isn't good for you.'

We were going home, then, to a world where this was the so-called commonplace. In some ways are our values refined, our appreciations sensitized. We are new men in many ways, and yet no thanks to the enemy. It was the integrity of strong men that was unimpaired, but strengthened by the harsh years of testing. But free! Free to go from it all! Free to enter into a new world which had been a dream world. I think it had all the unreality of a dream about it; I think dreams seemed more substantial to us than the reality. Yes, we were free, and trucks were taking us towards Singapore.

For many nights, weeks of nights, we had been waiting sleeplessly for the consummation of the promise. Some of the humorists sang, 'Lord Louis regrets he is unable to land today.' Others sighed, 'Languid Louis, oh lazy Louis, when will you come?' He came all right, and shook us with his big hand, gave us that warm smile of his, and then introduced us to 'the wife'. I was in bed at the time, and Lady Louis smiled sweetly when I told her I came from Sydney. 'Where all the pretty girls are,' she said. That sent a pang through me.

This was all finished. Singapore town greeted us with Indians clad in jungle green. There were little Gurkhas telling the Nips to work hard and do the things we had done over the past years. One Jap warrant officer toiled at loading earth on to a lorry. The Chinese and natives stood about, jeering. A Jap working party trudged by, heads bent, and hopeless looks on their faces. The vendors were there, too. They shrieked their old wares at us. We had no

money. We wanted nothing. The Red Cross had seen to that. Still they persisted with their long-hoarded black market gains. Old watches we had sold in the hard times, now reappeared and were ours for a packet of Virginian cigarettes!

The truck rushed past them down the wharf, and there were sweetly smiling nurses with hot tea and biscuits, cigarettes and nice words. Then we were on board ship, *the Oranje* standing in white splendour at the wharf. We stared at her from amid the wreck of dockage, so lately bombed by the Super Forts. The cries of Singapore were in our ears, but they were fading away, fading away, and our ears were hearing the soft murmurs of the new life that came in upon us like terribly sweet music.

The *Oranje* presented the direct antithesis to our former camp and life. There there had been darkness and filth; here there was light and cleanliness. We stared amazed and bewildered like yokels. One chap muttered to the nurse, 'Why, that's a calendar, isn't it? I haven't seen one in years!' She laughed and said, 'How sweet,' That's what we were thinking about her.

Then we went to our wards which were white and pure. We stared at white-sheeted beds, we goggled at silver taps and convenient cupboards.

Then we left Singapore.

'Goodbye Singapore!'

We pulled out from the wharf. Our hearts literally thrilled. The crowd waved to us. 'You can keep Singapore,' we said, and yet in our hearts there were faint

regrets, old memories that suddenly came crowding in upon us, old memories returning from pre-Nip days. And then, too, were the memories of the huddled Singapore beneath the devastation of the cruel little bombers; streets lined with dead, contorted into a hideous effigy of the glory of war. We remembered those days and were silent until we remembered we were going home. Then we waved frantically to those who were staying behind; those who would follow us. Singapore hooted its sirens, and the grim grey ships in the harbour nodded quietly as we moved out on to the ocean.

Shipmates

One thing we may never forget was the sterling work of the sisters and nurses. They toiled for our well-being, and we blundered about in a maze of friendliness and treatment we still could not quite absorb. I suppose we had become very analytical in those years, certainly introspective, and we were apt to squeeze the full content of joy from any experience. What experiences were these then, and we could absorb in full content, We were dazzled with the luxury of life.

We wanted to see Darwin. We had almost become accustomed to the wonder of poultry and eggs, fruit and icecream, and goodnight smiles from the nurses. We had become almost blasé about it, and yet it was only a thin veneer covering the tremendous joy beneath. Through it all we were hungry for Australia. We had dreamed about that country on many nights. Soon we were to pull into

Darwin. The skipper told us we would be clothed there. We thought nothing more would happen.

'Hullo, Darwin;

'Hullo you,' said Darwin as we pulled through the boom. Great Catelinas tore over the water to impress us with their heavy beauty. They screamed in delight over the ship. Long white streamers floated in the air and were silver strips in the sun. When they reached us they were long unrolled strips of toilet paper! How we laughed. Then Darwin's Navy came out to meet us. Small vessels chattered up to us. Larger vessels hooted a heavy welcome. A torpedo boat roared about us. And suddenly everybody sang! They waved and screamed and laughed, and all the time we shivered through and through in every nerve. We crowded to the sides, men in blue shorts and white shirts, some with only one leg, some without an arm, and others still thin from privation. 'Oh, hullo Aussie,' we cried. 'Hullo Darwin and all this glorious world which is ours.' We were at Aussie at last!

The fleet ushered us in. The air sirens screamed joyously from the shore. The hills about were lined with waving soldiers and soldier women. The wharf was brown with crowding figures, and there on the wharf was a great sign, 'WELCOME HOME!'

It was that which broke us. We suddenly became alive. We shouted and screamed and nearly wept. When we were exhausted and close to the wharf the band was playing. Ye gods! what was that song? 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Thousands of voices sang to us, and we listened, silent. The folk song of the most wonderful people in the world. We shivered in ecstasy. We felt a lump in our throats. Oh yes, that is true. We had a right to be sentimental after four and a half years. We had a right to gaze proudly upon these sturdy fellow countrymen of ours. We had a right to thrill to the core, and we shouted in return, 'Thanks Darwin, and hullo Aussies.'

They swarmed the ship, of course. Even the vigilant provost could not restrain them. They clambered up the rigging, men and women. Others took shots from the wharf. Suddenly there was a girl behind me and a man with a camera. He said, 'Put your arm around her.'

I did; I needed no second bidding. 'This is the first girl I have had my arm around for years, four and a half years,' I said.

'Jot that down,' he said to his steno—an AWA girl with smiles.

'I can believe it,' said the lass I was clasping. 'Ah, that's better,' she said. The old technique had not been killed.

The men on the decks were showering Nipponese paper currency to the eager souvenir hunters on the jetty. Someone threw Nip cigarettes to them. They smoked them and looked slightly dazed. Then we were allowed to go ashore. We were allowed to put our feet on firm Aussie soil! Yes, you know how many years ago it was we did that. We used to count it in days.

We were placed in trucks and cars and taken to Mindel Park. Amplifiers welcomed us with music. Prettily dressed girls came out and smiled at us, and we were no longer bashful. You simply can't be like that with an Australian lass. She has the unconscious poise of perfect freedom.

We let them lead us to groaning tables where home cooking yelled at us to be tested—scones and buns and sausage rolls that had only appeared in dreams hitherto. The girls talked and told us all we wanted to know. Yes, there were still some unmarried. No, there weren't many Yanks now. Yes, Sydney still had its bridge. (The Japanese had told us they had shelled the middle pylon away!)

Then we drank soft drinks, and ate fruit such as is not in any other country. We could eat nothing more. We sat and talked, and all the while the music played and the sea below the golden sands looked cool and inviting. Darwin surrounded us, trying to make us happy, but they could not do what they had already done. They had a dance waiting for us that night, a dance and a picture show and a concert, and anything else we wanted. Alas! We had to leave at five thirty.

We hung over that rail until Darwin faded from sight] The girls at the wharf wept when we came in; they laughed and smiled when we went. Do you realize what all that meant to us? Can you really comprehend what that welcome said to us? We had thought at times in those years that we had been forgotten, and now Darwin said reproachfully, and yet understandingly, 'We are Australia, and we have not forgotten you.' 'Gosh, we'll never forget that welcome,' said hundreds. 'They turned it on properly,' said others. 'We never dreamed it would be like that,' said another. Darwin had said, 'We are the front door to Australia. Enter in, veterans of a terrible war. We have not forgotten you.' The paper they sent aboard said, 'Men of the *Oranje*, we salute you.' That is why we will always love Darwin and the valiant garrison that guards her dry sands and beautiful shores.

The Catelinas saw us on our way. We steered slowly through Australian waters, reluctant to leave such a wonderful place, regretful and wistful about that lost dance. Then we remembered there was Brisbane and Sydney, and the folk we were urgently waiting to see, and we said, 'All this, and heaven too?'

Queensland Coming

When we turned the Cape we saw the gently rolling hills of the east coast. To us it meant Australian shore. I think it was then we first realized the vastness of our land, and knew why Australian people were so large, and why they so much loved their own. We applied our new tests of values and found the old homeland A1. We watched the soft shores roll away into the distance and then we knew it could not be long.

The Sound

THE OLD man was getting cunning. Not that they knew. Only he knew. It was not that he believed he was partly deaf, but he knew they thought it. So he used every device at hand. He unconsciously lip-read what they said. He looked at their expressions. He knew what they were about, and they wondered how he knew.

The woman, his wife, was very perceptive. 'He's just about deaf,' she said, but she, too, was puzzled. He would suddenly catch something she was saying, and he would let her know, by a chuckle or a look, and at those times his humour was enormous. She liked that, but felt uneasy. Sometimes she would talk to the children about him. 'He's getting deaf,' she would say, but then she was never too sure he didn't hear some things. She was careful, not exposing herself all the time. She was a trifle afraid of his fine irony, especially when he took on his aloof look. She didn't much like that special gaze of his.

Sometimes he seemed to hear nothing at all, but then again she couldn't be sure. Those were the times when he was absent in his looks. He had always been a bit of a dreamer, and had high respect for his own dreams. For

the most part they had come true. You might say that when he dreamed he reckoned it was a sort of guidance from Heaven, and he felt put on to see it came to fulfilment. So he would labour, working his dreams into reality, 'making them part of life.

For that she admired him, but sometimes he seemed to go at it with too much intensity, and the zeal worried her. Then again, at other times he was quite comical about the matter, letting his laughter go floating around the house, as though he found the very ideas of his dreams quite uproarious. It was a bit confusing to her, but she tried to read the signs, to see the difference between absent-mindedness and the fact that often he was not hearing.

She was surprised when he agreed to having his ears tested. He grinned at her. 'Nothing wrong with my hearing, but you think there is, so we shall see.'

It wasn't all that easy to have his hearing tested. They had to go to the Department of Veteran Affairs, but protocol demanded that first they go through their local G.P. That medical man gave a snort and a laugh.

'You!' he said. 'You! Deaf?. I wouldn't think so.' He and the old chap often used to have conversations, and very intelligent and intelligible they were, too. He peered down the ears, whispered, raising his voice in tone and volume. At the end of the test he said, 'You could have a bit of deafness there, but who would have thought it?' He looked at his old friend. 'You must be clever if you are deaf,' he said. 'You must have learned to lip-read.'

His patient protested. 'Don't even know what lip-reading is,' he said. 'Only really deaf people need that.'

They were able to get an interview at the Veterans' Hospital, but that appointment was months off. Looking

back they chuckled about the interview. It took months to eventuate, and then it was in and out of the clinic in less than five minutes. The examining doctor had a clinic all of his own, and in a posh part of the city, too. All the medical and surgical specialists had their quarters there, and the rents must have been high, for they charged exalted fees. That didn't really concern them, but it probably concerned the Veterans' Affairs Department a bit. Even so, they seemed fairly used to that sort of thing.

The old man was not sure when it was he first suspected that he might have been a bit deaf. He generally missed the main points of humour, especially on TV, although when everyone laughed he didn't look blank, because he knew that would prove he was deaf. He just felt blank inside. He didn't mind the others laughing, but he would have liked to have laughed—heartily. Humour was something he was reluctant to miss.

He said to himself, gently, 'Maybe I am a bit deaf. Or maybe it is just that I am a deep thinker and don't pay enough attention to what they are saying.' He thought a bit about the lip-reading and caught himself doing some of it. 'Never mind,' he consoled himself, 'age creeps up on us all. I've had a pretty good go up until now.'

That was true enough. He had had a pretty rich life, and not just in one country. He was a man who thought a lot about the world, about people, and about their actions and antics. He was never flippant about life and humanity, but then he wasn't weighed down by it, either. He believed every person in the world was responsible for his—or her—own decisions.

Occasionally he became wistful. That was when the family all gathered and the chatter was going on as though the children, their spouses, and then their own children all had things of immense importance to share with each other. He would only grasp smatterings and smidgens of the lot, and perhaps that was all he needed, but he also liked the tidbits. Even so, he took it calmly enough, and was clever enough to conceal his failing hearing, but he found himself hoping the Veterans' Affairs Department would get moving on the matter.

When the day came for him to go to the clinic he set out with zest, driving himself and taking no one with him. For a long time he sat reading old numbers of *Time*, the *Bulletin*, and the women's papers which he never otherwise read.

He must have dozed off, for a clinical-looking young lady was talking into his ear. 'Doctor is waiting for you,' she shouted. Her shouting made him feel irritable. Anyone would think he was deaf. He had felt so good, snatching that quiet snooze.

The doctor chatted with him, doing a bit of role-playing. The old man grinned inside himself. He fell into the role prepared for him, but he thought, 'Fancy passing another human being by, when there is so much to talk about' He knew it was the cost of time which influenced the other man to be detached and polite. He also became detached and polite.

The doctor passed him on to an attractive young woman who took herself and her vocation quite seriously. He let her place earphones over his ears, as though he had never worn such before. He kept grinning inside himself, but looked most serious when she kept looking at him. He

had to click a switch when she touched a key, sending a sound to him. He wasn't too sure what he had missed as she fiddled with her keys.

At the desk she spoke briefly to him. 'You will be informed by the department,' she said. 'They will let you know by mail. They will give you the result of the test.'

He listened to the car radio as he drove towards the hills where he lived, his eyrie above the city. He could hear everything distinctly. Then he began to dream, and although his driving was reasonable enough, he didn't hear the radio.

His wife might have expected him to return with a listening aid in his ear. He just grinned from one ear to the other. 'Perfect hearing!' he lied cheerfully. 'Never examined anyone with better hearing!'

She was surprised. They had been married forty years, and he could still catch her, pull her leg, so innocently he could speak.

Then she caught the twinkle in his eye and her worry subsided. 'What's happening?' she asked.

'Time will tell,' he said, knowing this would irritate her. Of course, what he was saying was true enough.

So they waited for the result. It took its time in coming. It said that he had a certain deafness but would need to have another hearing test at the Hearing and Acoustic Centre. They would doubtless hear, one day, from that very Centre. Someone would communicate.

He went back to his vegetable garden, and to the bush, and his bit of walking and exercise, and scarcely realized how quiet the world had grown about him. The birds he kept in his aviaries seemed alive enough, but something about them was different. He felt vaguely puzzled. He also

wondered why it was that the noisy screaming of the grandchildren had lessened. Perhaps they were growing up and maturing. This pleased him no end.

The letter arrived, telling him when he was to go to the Centre. He marked that on his Scanner. His wife had to remind him on the day, although it had been at the back of his mind. He felt a trifle strange as he drove down the hill, towards the city. He found the clinic, then the waiting room, and before he realized it he was drowsing dreamily, floating between the world of reality and the hazy world of dreaming. His life was so busy that when he stopped at times like this and relaxed, sleep came so easily to him.

They had a different machine for testing his hearing. The professional-looking man who tested him was warm and human enough. 'You certainly need some help with that hearing,' he said. 'It isn't serious, but for your kind of work you need just that bit of help.'

He sighed gently. He knew that when they asked questions at his lectures he didn't always hear them distinctly. Only last week he had mistaken a question. Also, on the phone, he couldn't catch names as easily as he used to do.

He nodded. 'I think an aid could be a help,' he said quietly.

'Comes to most of us,' said the clinic man. 'Aids can make all the difference.' He smiled. 'You are in for a bit of a shock,' he added, 'and also a bit of a treat.'

Shock? Treat? The words puzzled him. He was thinking about them as the man plugged his ears, taking a cast of, and from, them.

At the desk they told him to come back in a fortnight. In the two weeks he seemed to hear less and less. Perhaps it was his imagination. In any case he was not troubled,

but he noticed that if anyone turned away from him and talked, then their conversation seemed most indistinct

The family joked about the matter. 'It has taken a year,' they said. 'You never know, it might take another year before you get the device.'

The professional-looking man at the Centre helped him to use the hearing aids, showing him where the batteries were fitted, and how to turn the device on and off, and how to increase or lower the volume. He went through it all in a bit of a dream until the man began to talk!

It wasn't that he was shouting, but his voice was so clear, the conversation so distinct He remembered that that was how he once used to hear people. A small tremor of excitement moved somewhere within him. Then it grew. He felt himself brightening. This, then, was 'the shock' and 'the treat'. He had a sense of delight

So did his wife when he reached his home in the hills. She looked at the device, and watched him fit it 'Marvellous!' she said, with some excitement He didn't know why she was so delighted.

Then he did know. Suddenly he knew very well. Her voice sounded so clear. He grinned. 'Don't shout so much,' he said. 'You used to have a quiet, gentle voice.'

'Now you know why I had to shout,' she said. She laughed. 'You were pretty deaf, eh? Go on, admit it'

He admitted it calmly. He nodded. He took a ten-dollar note from his pocket It was fresh from the teller at the bank, and it crackled crisply. He hadn't heard a banknote crackle crisply in years. He felt the trickle of delight begin to form itself into a creek, and then a small river.

They both went outside. Suddenly he heard the cries of his own parrots. The Rosellas seemed to have arranged a concert of piping calls, high and beautiful. He loved the sound of them. Then the Twenty-Eights began calling. He had read about the call, but he had never heard it. All the time they must have been calling! He was amazed. The Cockatiels had arranged another concert in their large aviary. The aged dog Mufti suddenly had a young and vigorous bark. He chomped up and down, energetically. Bill, the Long-billed Corella, made his harsh call and the Princess male parrot cried high over his sleek and beautiful mate.

He heard his fellow workers beginning their afternoon tea, and he joined them, although it was his day off from business. He heard the shirring of the water spray as it played on the lawn, and in the staff-room the metallic clink of spoons, the musical rattle of cups. It sounded like a bevy of bell-birds.

In that moment he knew the pleasure of sound—crisp, defined sound. It was like returning out of a quiet world into the life he had once known. He wondered how one sense of a person could mean so much.

He sat and listened to the conversation. How musical human voices could be, and how caressing. How stimulating words could prove to be when they were uttered—and heard—at the right intonation! He marvelled at the beauty of it all: the background of bird songs, a dog barking and a harsh Corella crying, and the foreground of human beings letting life flow through their voices, making delicate but strong communication.

He felt very close to tears, and since they were tears of joy he did not greatly mind. He saw his future stretching

out, filled with small sounds, strong noises, rich songs, and rolling and enveloping laughter.

He looked at his wife, remembering how her voice had once been, and now, how unchanged it was. He knew that by a slight fiddling of a finger on the volume control he could return to his quiet and restrained world, but he didn't think, now, that he wanted to do that.

As he sat listening and listening, he knew that he never wanted to return to that world.

The Power And The Glory

NOBODY CARED or had reason to suspect that Mrs Harry Wragge was other than a genial soul. To suggest to any Burtville citizen that Mrs Harry was of a possessive disposition would have brought a disbelieving smile. 'Not Mrs Wragge. Not old Harry's wife.' Old Harry had gone to his last long rest, curiously enough without much reluctance, as though it might be his first, too; and Mrs Wragge womanfully continued on, probably with the sole purpose of mothering and protecting her brood.

Young Harry, for example: how on earth would young Harry get on without Mumsey? Possibly not at all. Even Effie, his wife, had to admit that Mumsey was a great help, most times to Harry. And Harry, of course, did not deny the fact, but was patently eager to agree that Mumsey was a wonderful woman.

The strange thing about Mrs Wragge and her family was that they, each of them, had a different form of address for their mother. With young Harry—now, incidentally, in his forties—it was 'Mumsey'. With Carl, not long married, it was 'Mother'. And She, his wife, encouraged this form of address as polite and flattering to

no small extent. With Jimmy, struggling out on his farm, it was 'Ma', and with Jean at home, and now not struggling at all, it was just 'Mum'. Ma, Mum, Mother and Mumsey—she loved them all, the expressions of love and adoration and dependence. Mainly, although she would not admit it even to herself, she like the dependence.

'A struggling widow,' most described Mrs Harry Wragge, and yet it was hardly so. True, Harry had disappeared into that other restful world, but he had left behind a solid unencumbered house, solid unencumbered furniture, an excellent vegetable garden, a fine apiary and a teeny but regular income. To this the boys added weekly contributions, all excepting Jimmy, who found it hard enough to make money. His contribution was mere butter, home-made cheese, fruit and fruit pre serves, but his offering was not neglected. Mrs Wragge organized living in a business-like manner, and even managed to build up a mysterious, although only hinted at, reserve. Yet, for all that, it was accepted that Mrs Wragge was a struggling widow, since all widows are by tradition 'struggling', however poor or rich.

Jean, if she did not work at accountancy like Harry, at running a grocery like Carl, or at farming like Jimmy, did look after the bees, burying herself in their domestic habits, their living and their dying, until the very sting of them seemed to have entered into her busy little form; and she was a person to be feared by all except Mrs Harry Wragge, who feared no one, possibly because she loved the world.

Mrs Wragge loved all the world. She loved the heathen

in far lands, the enemy in war, the enemy in peace, in Berlin and Burtville, the wrongdoers and the righteous. She was on everyone's side, both sides, too, and because of that had few, if any, enemies herself, and was naturally very much loved by her children, this no less than her due, and a just reward for years of 'struggling'.

There never was any thought of Mrs Harry dying. None of the children believed such a thing could happen. Old Harry's death had been taken for granted, and in any case it was an established fact, and not to be argued about, but none ever thought of Mumsey, Mum, Ma or Mother dying. How could she? She had always been there to help, to advise, assist, organize. In her capable hands problems hastily unknotted themselves, and by her hands all wounds were salved. She protected Harry and Carl, Jim and Jean from the very toughness of life, and the strange thing was that they fully believed this to be so.

She—Carl's wife—was patently sceptical of Mother's tremendous ability, disparaging about her power.

'After all, Carl,' She would argue, 'there *are* other women than your mother, you know.' She, for example.

Carl, however, doubted. 'Mother's a jolly rare specimen,' he would observe.

In equally high vein She would say, 'But Carl, you must snip the old apron-strings, you know.'

'Apron-strings? Apron-strings?' Carl would say in Nelsonic voice. 'I see no apron-strings.'

But they were there. They were there all right None knew it, not even the neighbours or those intimately connected with the family. They knew what Mrs Harry had 'been through', and they admired her for it, and when she helped in her children's weddings they said it was

really wonderful, and that there was an example to follow; and yet none were jealous of Mrs Harry. They simply applauded her, praised her at sewing-circles, and committee meetings, and socials and dances, telling her what a fine job she was doing until Mrs Harry doing a fine job became quite a tradition, a custom anyway, and a legend almost. It was generally agreed that it was due to her the family was doing so well, and if Jimmy was struggling, then it was his own fault in some way and not to be blamed upon Mrs Wragge, who couldn't look after *everything*.

And then there was the Harry Wragge home. A fine solid sort of home; none of your modern utility homes, your snug nook of small rooms and built-in furniture. The Wragge home was solid, in a cedar and redwood sort of fashion. Weatherboard, yes, but cosy because of that, and mahogany weatherboards no less, and lined with redwood, architruved with cedar and panelled with the same wood in the large dining-room. Mother's bedroom suite was also cedar, solid, and even the second bedroom suite was cedar. The dining-room table was cedar, too, and the rest of the future, still solid, was of oak and mahogany and the like. Not too many scrolls, not very ornate; heavy and pugnacious and very useful, such as old Harry had never been.

The family, when it came home on the weekends, would look at the furniture and sigh, realizing its tremendous value. If it was Harry he would look at the first bedroom suite and visualize it in his own house, and Mumsey, watching him, would drop a very quiet observation:

‘Harry, my dear boy, that may even be yours when I am gone.’

‘Oh, no,’ Harry would be quick to protest. Anyway, Mumsey would never die.

Gently, firmly, Mumsey would insist it Had To Come, but while she was here, and only while she was here, would she use that bedroom suite. After all, Harry, your father, had shared it with her. But it might be Harry’s alone when her time came.

Harry, filled with melancholic delight, would proceed down the Wragge yard to work on the vegetable garden, and might be found later, his jelly belly propped up by a dutch-hoe, his soft brown eyes staring into the blue dusk settling about his shoulders. Mumsey’s great cedar suite!

She liked the suite, too, and made no bones about it, but She also was no fool, and set her mind on the Japanese cabinet of black-and-blue pieces and the French clock.

‘Carl,’ She had breathed ecstatically on her first visit, ‘you never told me Mother had such a lovely French clock!’

And Mother watching quietly, nodding quietly— ‘Then Carl may find it is his when I am gone.’

But Carl was all protests, and She joined in, agreeing that Mrs Harry had many years yet, and more than them probably; all of which delighted Mrs Harry in a sad sort of way.

Jean would have been gone from the house many years had it not been for the grand piano. It held her more than money or love could have done, bound her to the home because she believed there never could be another piano

like it. It was a fine specimen, to be respected, loved and coveted, and Jean longed for it with the bitter hope of possession. When she was not at the piano, playing it, or polishing or just looking at it, then she was with the bees, but with her mind on the piano.

Strangely enough, it was Jean of them all who seemed not to get on with Mrs Harry. It was as though Mother stood between her and the piano, and yet Mother had given her the piano, in a loose sort of way, and she might even have been able to take it from the house. Over all was that unconscious agreement that the house must not be broken, or its furniture removed before the hour Mother died; and so Jean abided by her possession and filled in her spare time nurturing bees.

Jimmy, when he came home and brought his Milly, never seemed to notice the furniture. He would be up in the air about his farm, naively pleased about his cows and crops. None seemed to care. Harry didn’t. He thought frankly that Jimmy was making a mess of things. Now, if he, Harry, had the running of Jimmy’s farm... But then, he didn’t, which was more the pity. Carl would smile and exchange glances with Her, and She would smile tightly, for it was agreed that Jimmy was not quite ‘class’, and therefore, if tolerated, not to be encouraged. The truth was that Jimmy was a bit ignorant.

Yet Mrs Harry, if ever she was vexed, had those moments over Jimmy and his farming venture. If he raved about his Shorthorns, then she told him his father had always favoured Jerseys, and if he spoke about super and number eleven, then she told him his father would use only farmyard manure, and as for machine-milking, well, it wasn’t natural, and his father would know best, he

having been on a farm most of his life. Jimmy bore it peacefully, and even reproved Milly for her sceptical snortings as they ploughed their way homewards in the old Buick utility.

For some unknown reason the bookcase was to be Jimmy's. Jimmy never quite knew why. No bookcase was needed to house his *Farming Gazettes* or his *Dairyman's Manual*, but he patiently accepted the fact, and also he accepted the sweet melancholy with which Mrs Wragge recalled that his father had bought that bookcase on their first wedding anniversary, a fact which in some way threw the onus on Jimmy to be a better man. Other beneficiaries bore no such burden of sentiment, for their pieces of furniture had been handed down a number of generations.

There it was, and there it might have stayed, this anticipation over pieces of furniture, this subtly-woven thread which bound them together as a family, this will, unwritten, unspoken, a will that had everything to do with the cedar suite, the second cedar suite, the piano, the French clock, a dozen and one pieces of furniture, already established by the future owners in this or that room of their respective homes.

It was Mrs Wragge who suggested they should hold a Conference. Not any ordinary sort of conference, of course, such as for deciding what vegetables Father's garden would produce over the winter, or who would arrange for the firewood, but a conference about the Will, because Mumsey, Mum, Mother, Ma felt that she might not have long on this earth. This, despite her steady health.

Milly expressed deliberate scepticism. 'What does it matter, anyway, what your Ma does? If you really want a bookcase, Jimmy, you can get one for a tenner.'

'A tenner would buy me a nice young heifer,' Jimmy said. 'And besides, I haven't got a tenner.'

'It doesn't matter,' Milly said firmly. 'We don't want a bookcase, and so there is nothing to worry about.'

'So there isn't,' agreed Jimmy. 'Except that Ma expects us to come along.'

And Ma did expect them. She dressed herself in the best widow's black, the finest of her old lace, and folded her hands upon her lap, and looked grave, seated as she was at the head of the Wragge cedar table. She even looked down at it, as though pondering secretly whose it should be—Carl's or Jimmy's, Harry's or even Jean's. It's about the will,' she said.

A flush of interest in Harry's face and no less in the face of wife Effie. Sharp concentration in Her eyes, and deliberately concealed satisfaction in Carl's. Queer contempt in Jean's. Bewilderment in Jimmy's.

It was at Jimmy Mrs Harry gazed, wistfully, gently. 'It's Jimmy I'm worried about,' she said.

All eyes were turned to Jimmy. What had he done except earn a trifle of contempt for his unsuccessful struggle on that poor farm!

'Jimmy,' repeated Mrs Wragge, nodding ponderously. 'I'm worried about Jimmy.' The family was addressed; Jimmy, on the outskirts, troubled and confused.

'I'm all right, Ma,' he said. 'No need to worry about me.' Very cheerful, Jimmy. Milly smiling but not very happily, her lips a trifle thinner than usual, her light merriment vanished.

'I haven't much longer,' said Mrs Harry, dwelling on the dark thought. 'And I want to see everything fixed up.'

'But, Mumsey!' protested Harry. 'You've got years yet. You'll see us all out, probably.'

'No, Harry,' said Mumsey, refusing the kindly thought, 'we must settle this now.'

'Then what, Ma?' said Jimmy uneasily.

'Jimmy and Milly must come here,' said Ma. 'Come and stay.'

'Oh, no!' said Milly very quickly and surprised into fear.

'I'm going well, Ma,' said Jimmy heartily. 'Don't get it into your head that I'm not'

Carl looking bored. She interested, Jean smiling with some of the old contempt and Harry pathetically anxious to help Mumsey in her proposition.

'I think you should do as Mumsey says.' This in a reproving voice.

'That farm isn't going to help Jimmy at all,' said Mrs Wragge. 'He's slaved and he's laboured, and God knows it's near broken my heart to watch him doing it.' A touching picture, and to be pondered before Mrs Wragge continued speaking. 'I think it will be best if Jimmy comes and lives here. He could get a job in town and look after the wood and the vegetables.'

Jimmy looked at Milly, and Milly at Jimmy, tighter-lipped. 'We couldn't do that, eh, Mill?'

'Jimmy!' This from Mrs Wragge, patient, long-suffering, understanding, doing her very best for her wayward child, and he not understanding of course, and knowing nothing of the struggle of the years. 'Remember, Jimmy,' she said

in her gently reproachful voice, 'that it is for your benefit'

'No,' Jimmy said with surprising firmness. 'No, I couldn't, Ma.'

Silence for a moment while Ma looks about with appealing eyes. All must rally. Jimmy must be saved from himself, come here and live with Ma, he and Milly, Jimmy to do the wood and vegetables, and Milly the housework. Mother will look after them, love Jimmy and possess him for his own good, although not necessarily for hers.

'Jimmy,' said Mrs Harry. 'You must remember I have called you here to discuss the will.'

This last and awful word fell upon the Wragge family and induced complete silence, immediate discipline. Jean thinking almost breathlessly about the grand, wanting to weep over it; Harry thinking about his bedroom suite; Carl about the French clock, the lounge-suite and the cabinet, and She thinking covetously about the same. Jimmy, an age-old dread upon him, for tradition and the legend and the power of the will was heavy upon him, its purpose furrowed deeply into him. Milly ablaze with suppressed anger.

'Yes, Ma,' said Jimmy slowly, obediently, his eyes troubled.

Then a gradual puzzlement coming into his face. 'But I don't *want* the bookcase, Ma.'

'Oh!' Mrs Harry was completely surprised, but very quick to recover. 'But you are to have the lounge-suite, also. There, I never told you that, did I?' A finger poised, then pointed down into the document on the table. 'I

have fixed that—in the will, here.’ The rustle of parchment, as awful as a dead woman’s skin, as complete and final a statement upon property and possession as the world could care for.

‘Oh!’ From Jimmy this time, and an uneasy side-glance at Milly. Milly was still set in the face, her hands clenched tightly.

‘No, Ma,’ said Jimmy, his puzzlement gradually clearing, as clouds from the sky.

‘And the property,’ said Mrs Wragge dryly, throwing down her cards. ‘You’ll be getting plenty of that—if you come and look after it for me.’ Mrs Wragge’s subtle suggestion that Jimmy is needed, and therefore an appeal to cupidity.

The clouds dulled Jimmy’s sky again. ‘Yes, Ma,’ he said in a very doubtful voice.

‘Can’t be anything else,’ said Harry. Harry could not bear to be left out. A second-in-command he was, seconding and echoing his chief’s tactics.

‘But I love the farm!’ A sudden thought on Jimmy’s part, a final appeal, back to the wall, or fighting against heavy and overpowering waves.

The hand of Mrs Harry was very firm. Jimmy alone, if she knew it, would be the one to escape, and therefore was most precious. Jimmy must never, never leave Ma.

Mrs Harry had reckoned without Milly, or had not considered her. Milly was always bright, irresponsible really. ‘I don’t think I want to leave, Jimmy.’ This in a low voice, which, however, all heard.

‘Then we won’t, Milly!’ At last understanding and

triumph on Jimmy’s face. A sudden blaze of sunshine dispelling for ever the tyranny of the gloom. ‘No, Ma, we won’t. We’re happy there, even if we’re not making a lot of money.’

‘Jimmy!’ And this in an awful voice. ‘Jimmy, if you don’t come, if you don’t leave that firm, you won’t get the bookcase.’ None in the room to laugh, either, and Ma’s voice rising higher, becoming harsher than Jean ever had heard it, harsher than Harry suspected Mumsey could be. ‘Nor the lounge-suite either.’ Then, her fingers pointed terribly at the dry will. ‘And you’ll be cut out of this altogether.’

Jimmy and Milly could only stare, Milly at Mrs Harry, and then at Jimmy, and Jimmy, who should have been cast down, disappointed, repentant and penitent, being none of these at all. Jimmy, rising, his blue eyes becoming bluer, his mouth opening.

‘But I don’t want anything, Ma. I don’t want anything at all. I never did.’

Harry obviously considered this an awful lie. She was quite sceptical and showed it. Jean approved, though with reservations, and Carl was interested. All of them, however, silent characters in a drama about to rise to bursting-point, for Mrs Harry was furious.

Said she, rising, ‘Jimmy, I warn you. I’ll cut you out of the Will. You won’t get a penny, and then where will you be?’

But the old power was gone, the ancient power and glory and dominion was not for ever and for ever. Jimmy rose, his eyes blazing with delight, his voice vibrant with new

emotion, something like an actor in his first great part, but sincere for all that.

'Ma,' he said, as deliberate as she had been. 'You don't cut me out of your will at all. Oh, no. I *cut myself out of it, see?* I don't want the bookcase or the lounge, or anything.' Then, with a burst of eloquence that would never again be his, and with a touch of legal language for ever to lift him to the ranks of the brilliant, 'I hereby cut myself out of your will, and wish for nothing, absolutely.'

The damning indictment on Mrs Wragge and all her power was now uttered, and the words could never roll back into Jimmy's lips, the conference be un-begun, and the fine old power of the possessor-of-the-possessed be repeated.

Milly, who knew the new power and glory of it, and the resurrection and the life of her Jimmy, rose with a glad smile playing about her relaxed lips. She looked at Harry, bewildered and puzzled; Jean triumphant, vicariously satisfied; Carl grinning and Her astounded; and then at Mrs Harry, wrathful and astonished, and even, for once, humiliated to speechlessness.

'Come on, Jimmy,' she said to him, taking his hand. And then, with a faint show of bravado, 'Back to the cactus!' And Jimmy took her hand, mechanically, allowing himself to be led from the scene of his triumph and his crime, his heart pounding madly with the delight of it, the heady wine of his own power and the everlasting glory of his release.

The Boy With The Calves

THE BOY fed the calves twice daily. He fed them in the morning after the milking, and before sundown.

After the milking they would skim the cream. You could hear its rhythmic singing and shirring. Just a thin stream of golden cream would flow from one tap, whilst a heavy stream of blue-white skim would flow from another. A whole can of cream was a treasure in itself, whilst the skimmed milk was fit only for the calves and the pigs.

The boy knew the black Berkies, the red Tommies and the Large Whites could smell the skim, and they would set up the devil of a din—squealing and snorting and honking—long before it was taken to them in the square tank on the back of the ute. He was glad his brother handled those heavy pigs, especially the large red boar.

He took his milk to the calves in deep kerosene buckets, four-gallon cans de-lidded but given fencing wire handles. Norman his brother had cut rubber hose strips for the protection of his hands. These acted as pads on the strong wire handles.

So after milking and before breakfast he would go to the calves in the calf paddock. It was a special pasture

sown with rye and clover and other English grasses. The calves thrived on it, but the boy was uneasy about it. He knew all about the germs, the scours bacteria. This menace—hidden in the succulent green of the pasture—worried him deeply. At Agricultural High School they told him time and again about the bacteria.

It wasn't so much the disease germs which worried him as the world of which they were part. He was always a bit wistful about perfection. He would really like a world in which there was nothing that was cruel or menacing. He used to feel for the young porkers when they were taken off to the meat-works. A couple of times he had seen them being killed by being stuck, the long knife plunging down into the heart, They told him the animals were killed instantly, but they still bucked on the hook. They kept squealing and squealing, and bucking also.

He used to dislike the hard work that the panting Clydesdales had to fulfil. They looked tremendous to him, their great shoulders bearing the collars and hames, and their broad backs straining with the heavy plough as its mouldboards turned over both turf and soil in a silver coiling sod. The spectacle awed him, but he was always wanting to rest the beasts, especially when their coats darkened under the sweat, and the foam gathered under the collar back-band or was snorted and hurrumphed from their nostrils. He would have liked their work to be less of a strain, more rhythmic and harmonious, but lately he was growing to admire the sheer power of the team in its work.

The calves he both loved and feared. His love was for their full limpid eyes, their soft wet muzzles, the dancing dignity of them as they trotted around the paddock, tails

straight in the air, the tips waving like some careless banners. He loved the way they sought him, butting him in eagerness, smelling out the milk on his moleskins, and ready to rush his buckets.

He would mix the Meggitts' Meal—full of reddish-brown linseed and other nourishing things—with warm water until it was almost dissolved in the skim milk. Then he would take the buckets to the gate, leaving them far enough away from the fence so that the calves could not get to them, or butt them over.

Some always insisted on his fingers to suck the milk fluid. Others started drinking without him. He would pour the mixture into half kero-tins but stand beside them to save them from being pushed over. He would pull a stray leg out of the fluid. All the time he liked their sucking and sighing, their rushing and butting, their panting and their heaving. Only when they ceased—bloated with over-gorging—would they quiet their noise, staring ahead as though partly drugged. They would then lick one another, savouring the milk-beards of each other.

What he feared was the diseases. Once he had come in the cold morning and found a fat calf stiff and dead, its eyes half open and fixed in staring. The shock had run through him. What he dreaded on these occasions was his father's reaction. He would shiver with the thought of those stern eyes.

On that occasion his father had been rational. There were no marks on the animal and no signs of disease. His father had just shaken his head, looked puzzled and expressed deep disappointment. The calf was a heifer and valuable.

It was when the scours came that his father would be

angry. He would talk about unwashed cans, about flies, and about neglect. The boy would feel the sting of it and tears would prick at the back of his eyes because of the accusation. He knew he always washed the cans well. He put them in the shed away from the flies.

He knew it was the bacteria that hid and flourished in the old calf paddock. They needed a new clean pasture, but the old man would not let him shift them—not until they were weaned from milk and meal mixtures.

He could tell a sick calf in a flash. Its tail hung limp. The eyes looked hot and languid. The animal would stand around. It might let its mouth move along the pasture but it would not eat.

He dreaded looking at the droppings. White scours brought white stools and sometimes a trace of blood. He would try all kinds of remedies but they seemed not to work. Occasionally he would pray, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

He was always blamed, and the tears would come. Not when anyone was around. In the sunset time he would lay his head on the top rail of the fence and let the tears flow. If his brother came he would be quick to stop.

He hated the burning of the dead calves, especially in the wet weather, but he would carry it out. Sometimes his father would come to watch the holocaust. When he went away, his back would be stiff and sloping. The boy knew he was angry. Sometimes the anger was not so secretive. Then the words would be terrible. It seemed his father was lashing out at something unseen and evil, something foreign and menacing. Once or twice the boy thought that his parent was angry against God.

It all came to a climax at the time of the flood. That was

when the boy suddenly became a young man. The crisis transformed him. It toughened him into maturity. His private poems began to harden into firm reality.

The rain began on one cold dawn and persisted for days. His brother and father worked inside the sheds, repairing the farrow rails in the piggery, oiling and painting machinery. The great Clydesdales mooched around their own paddock or just crouched—reversed to the beating rain. The cows came early to the milking, glad of the warming chaff and meal.

The calves had a shed and they chewed their little cuds in coldness.

The fourth night brought a tornado. Lightning was lethal. They heard an old redgum struck like an explosion of dynamite. They wondered whether it was in the calves' paddock. Later they saw it was, but it had not killed any calves. The boy listened in bed to the roar of rain. He suspected the creek might rise, cutting off the calves in their shed. He hoped they would not try to cross the little creek. His mind was in fear: he almost whimpered.

He went down in the ghostly dawn to round up the cows. When he looked towards the calf paddock his heart leapt and almost stopped. The water was like a lake, even a sea. It had reached almost to the hut. A few calves were there, miserable in the cold, crouched and cramped.

Then he saw the devastation. Mud-brown water was racing where the dry creek-bed had been. He saw the dead calves being swept along to the fence. The water had risen almost to the height of the three-rail fence. Two calves were snagged on its top rail.

Other calves were floating in the water. At the edge of the flood were dead calves, stretched out, inert. As he

looked he could see they were bloated. He felt sick. When he broke through the fence on the high ground and ran to see, then he knew his stomach was heaving. It was like dry coughing, this retching and spluttering. Fear and pity were battling in his insides.

Suddenly he felt afraid of powers outside him and beyond him. He was not angry, although somewhat afraid. He became aware of some unseen power in his world. On the one hand he knew the bacteria and germs would have been washed away from the paddock, but disaster had struck deeply. The calves were so inert, so finally and conclusively dead.

A huge idea enveloped him.

'Oh God!' he said, 'don't let these calves remain dead. Bring them to life.' Some words came to him from the church services he had attended, services conducted on sunny Sunday mornings in the old musty building on the hill, four miles from the farm.

'Cause that these calves be resurrected,' he intoned. He knew chanting was religious and might be effective.

The wind had died. The rain had ceased. The one noise was the rushing roar of the flood waters. In the silence he waited for the miracle.

When it did not happen he was not surprised but yet was disappointed. In a way he had not expected it. In another he had hoped it might happen. He did not know how to strike a bargain with God, for he had never struck a bargain with his own father.

He felt like going around, touching the calves, trying to bring them to life, but he knew the power was not there. He stood helplessly. Misery was overwhelming him. He knew he had to tell his father but some kind of terror

paralysed him.

Then he saw his father coming. Also his brother. They were walking together. It was like the judge coming with the sergeant-at-law. He felt the sickness in his bones. He trembled.

The two looked across the roaring waters as though surprised. When they saw the calves they were shocked. The boy saw anger and fear leap together in his father's eyes. His brother simply froze. He, too, had some fear of the old man.

When the father said nothing, both sons waited in trepidation.

The father's voice, when he spoke, was curiously mild. He addressed the boy's brother.

'Get the dray,' he said. 'Harness Bonny in the dray. We'll burn the calves.'

The older boy nodded and went to get the dray. The father kept silent, thinking.

After a time he said gently, 'No fault of yours, son. There was nothing you could do.'

The boy wanted to weep. He even wanted to have blame so that his father could understand that what had happened had an ordinary explanation. Even so, he was glad. He kept wanting to weep.

After a time the man said, 'This is an act of God.'

The son had not heard that term before—'act of God'—so he stood there, ignorant but trying to guess.

The father said, 'For some reason God does things like this every so often.'

The boy was glad of the statement, half-understanding it. He looked respectful. For the first time in his life he had some window into his father's person.

He nodded as though what the man said must be true. The father nodded also, but only to himself. 'It is an act of God, without doubt,' he said. He seemed to be talking to himself.

'I wonder what God is trying to say,' he said.

The boy stood still, transfixed. His father never went near a church. Sometimes he joked about the parson. Now he was serious. Also he had given a sigh.

The boy sighed too, with relief. He liked his father like this, unusually humble.

He wanted to tell his Dad something, something that had flashed into his mind at that moment, but his mouth was dumb.

'He must have something in mind,' his father said, almost absently.

The boy thought this could be true. Even in face of the dead calves he felt a warmth within himself. Again there was the urge to speak but he had no power to do so.

Instead he kept looking at his father, who kept looking at the dead calves as though something would come to him soon, even something intelligible.

The Scarecrow And The Man

THE SCARECROW stood in the middle of the field, stating as sightlessly as do all scarecrows which have not been born or taken into the fantasy of some writer. It stared unseeingly with its eyes of coat buttons, its shaggy head made of a stuffed Balaklava, having a hat clamped down over it, almost hiding the stitched features of its eyebrows, mouth, nose and ears. Much care had been given to making its features, so that you might have called it (or, him) a high-class scarecrow.

His reasonably shaped body was not hoisted on to one central pole as is often the case with scarecrows, but he had two wooden legs jutting out from his shrunken trousers, and these were firmly planted into the ground, so that—at a distance—he appeared to be a real man, though somewhat scruffy, and since he was immobile, a thoughtful person, though you would have wondered why he stood so still in the midst of a vast empty field. Unlike most scarecrows he had arms that did not stick out horizontally but had been made with crooked elbows, the hands being stuffed into the pockets of the tweed coat he wore. The hat was khaki—a colour which matched the

bare paddock—and his coat and trousers were green, probably with age.

There he stood, alone and thoughtful. If he seemed to indicate he was a thoughtful scarecrow, then that was wholly an illusion. Scarecrows do not think, though often little children and poets invest them with such a faculty.

One thing about the scarecrow was that he had been decently made. In fact he had been made at the farmhouse by the farmer's wife, who fancied herself, modestly, as a woman of arts and crafts, and in fact this was the case. She did all sorts of things such as tapestry, patchwork, quilting, crocheting and tatting. Many of her products were displayed in the local show, whilst her husband showed his special black-faced sheep, his Large White pigs, and his variety of special fancy poultry.

Many winter nights she had worked on the scarecrow, especially on the facial features which she did with exceptional care. She conspired with her husband to have the arms and legs manufactured skilfully, so that the figure would appear to be a true person. The scarecrow became almost an obsession with them both.

This was partly because their vegetable garden had become the place of a plague of blackbirds who liked the large style of strawberries growing there. The Rosella parrots had begun to invade the two almond trees, stripping them of the young fruit, and they also attacked the three apple trees just when the fruit began to colour up.

The children never forgot the day the scarecrow was planted in the middle of the garden. The blackbirds, who were only ever scared off by the sound of a gun, now took flight at the sight of the silent figure, being quite terrified by him. He, for his part, remained unconscious of what

was going on around him, although he appeared to be considering things most thoughtfully. The children jumped up and down with delight, clapping their hands, moving around on the square path which enclosed the strawberry garden. They sang a song of their own making, whilst the parents looked on with a certain element of pride and delight.

The scarecrow became implanted in the mind and memory of the children, and remained for ever a figure in their thinking, a sort of myth and symbol to them of which they were scarcely conscious, but which nevertheless affected them as do characters in a fairy tale.

After a time the situation changed. The children grew up and were married. The farmer had grown older, so he retired from breeding pigs and fancy poultry, but he kept at his wheat and sheep activities. The wife took more than ever to her handicrafts, and the vegetable garden diminished until it just had a few rows of vegetables. The blackbirds had taken themselves off to some other place, but the Rosellas came annually to the almond and apple trees only to be barked away from them by the frisky Jack Russell terrier. There remained, then, no need for the scarecrow who—though he had aged somewhat—was still a substantial entity. He was scarcely noticed, though the affection for their artefact was still with the farmer and his wife.

One day the farmer decided to grow seeds for the new vegetable oil industry. He experimented in a fenced five-acre paddock, and grew a rich and profitable crop. The only problem was that the Long-billed and Little Corellas found it out. They came in their droves, both during the day and in the evening, around sunset. Whilst they kept

away from the small orchard and the Jack Russell terrier, they did not keep away from the luscious crop of oil-seed flowers. Not only did they do damage but the constant noise of their crying, their rising and fluttering, their dropping to the fields and then shrieking away in alarm at some warning by the flock sentinels, almost drove the farming pair to madness.

It was then they thought of the scarecrow. They went to look at him. They agreed that he was in good enough condition, but that a bit of repair work was necessary. In the evening they dug him out, carried him home between them, and set about refurbishing him. He was laid along the front verandah, and took up quite a portion of it, stating silently at the corrugated iron roofing whilst they stitched his features back to life, exchanged his weathered clothes for something more up to date, and replaced his frayed headgear with one of the farmer's more presentable Stetsons.

The next day, early in the morning, the Corellas returned for their special delicacy of oil-seed. One of the advance scouts doing reconnoitre saw the formidable person in the middle of the five-acre field. He gave a cry and the parrots swooped away towards a clump of high gums. They sat there arguing among themselves, working out strategies of attack no doubt, but after a time they flew off complaining, scolding the farmer for anticipating their coming. During the day they made a few futile attempts to come near, but finally they abandoned the idea and left the paddock alone. The farming couple expressed their gratitude. They even visited their old friend and gave him an affectionate pat on his stuffed shoulders, but there was no response from the silent figure.

The scarecrow—so to speak—watched more seasons pass. After the harvest the lambs would run up to him as the ewes cropped the grass and weeds around his legs. Legs apart, staring steadily, the black-faced lambs would consider him, and when he did nothing would get about their jumping and leaping or pumping the tight little udders of the dams.

When the winter times came the cold winds wrapped themselves about the flapping trousers, or penetrated through the tweed coat into the thick stuffing. The squalls of rain whipped fiercely about the stolid figure. Only because the hat was stitched on did it stay on the head. With the years the features paled, but apart from that the scarecrow remained intact and unwittingly useful.

The rest of the story must be wholly fantasy, for scarecrows are impersonal, without mind, soul or spirit—let alone true body—but I can only tell it to you as it was given to me. It was as follows:

The man went up to the scarecrow. He placed his hands on the eyes, and said, 'Do not yet see.' He placed his two hands on the stitched ears and said, 'Do not yet hear.' He spread his arms around the midriff of the figure and said, 'Do not yet come to life.' Then, holding the two legs with his hands, he commanded, 'Do not yet walk.'

I thought those motions most strange, and would have turned away, but a vision is a compelling thing, so I remained, watching. I wondered what would next happen.

Finally he said, 'This is the first time of meeting, but I will return at the appropriate time.' He then left.

I wondered who he was, for I was quite moved by the incident, and even more by the person he appeared to be, though what that was I could not say.

When he returned on another day I was also present. Perhaps I imagined that the scarecrow straightened up at his approach, and yet it was as though he were almost a true person.

Many writers have used this device in stories of fancy. Strangely enough, this did not seem like fancy.

This time the man placed his hands on the buttons which did service for scarecrow eyes, and said, 'Now you may see,' and added, 'if you will.'

To my amazement and shock, the buttons seemed to transform themselves into human eyes, eyes with life, not transfixed as hitherto, but alive and warm and glowing. Even so, the scarecrow remained what he was—a fixed figure. His eyes, however, were gleaming with hope, but the incongruity of human eyes and scarecrow body troubled me.

I thought to myself, 'What does this mean, and what does it portend?' I felt unusual emotions within me, and I waited for more to happen.

Nothing more happened that day, but the next day, towards evening, the unusual man came, and he touched the stitched lips of the figure. 'Here is a living mouth for you,' he said, 'but as yet do not speak. Remain silent until the time comes.' So the eyes and mouth of the figure, though alive, remained silent.

When he came the next day he placed his hands on the stitched ears, and said, 'Hear now, but do not speak.'

Listen to what I say, for the time will come when all I say will be intelligible to you, but if you speak before listening, or act before hearing, then the value of it all will be diminished.' Having said this he departed.

I thought, 'Tomorrow he will come, and place his hands upon the arms and shoulders, the hips, waist, thighs, knees and implanted feet, and he will say, "Walk!" and the scarecrow will come to life and be as all living things, especially as they happen in fantasies.'

He did return the next day, and did as I had imagined he would do, but his words were different from what I had prophesied. He said to the figure, 'When you come to full life, do not move. Stay as you are now, for I must come time and again, and talk to you, and you must listen, and only when the time is truly fulfilled will you walk off, and only then will you speak what you ought to speak.' Having laid hands upon the figure—head, shoulders, chest, hips, waist, thighs and legs—and having said his words, he left the figure in the midst of the field, and it remained immobile and silent, but I could see the eyes glowing, and could imagine the body rich with vibrant life.

As I walked away that evening, and looked back at the figure, I felt a strange uneasiness, as though I were back there, and he were me, walking away. I thought, 'How foolish can a man's thought become? I am no scarecrow, no silent figure in a field. I am I. I am alive, and know the things I need to know. I live as I understand life is to be lived.' I kept saying to myself, 'I am truly living!', but it seemed to me—most strangely—that the figure back there was quivering with some kind of merriment; but I could hear no sound, and went home, though strangely disturbed.

Next day—at the time I imagined was appropriate—I returned to the five-acre paddock and saw with great relief

that it was just a scarecrow standing in the middle of the field. I scolded myself with a sense of relief for being so foolish and indulging in such fantasy. However, when I arrived within close distance of the figure I saw it was certainly no scarecrow, but a true man, and a certain dread gripped me. Waves of fear flowed through me, but it did not seem alarmed. I cannot say that it smiled towards me, but it did indicate some kind of communication, so I stared, fascinated, until the man came, and walking past me as though I were not there he began to talk into the ear of the transformed figure.

‘No longer are you an inanimate thing,’ he said, ‘and no longer a mere scarecrow. You have now come to life, and today I give you my final teaching, and you must listen with a view to obeying all I tell you. Apart from me you will have no knowledge, and the wisdom I give you will be the basis of all your actions. I have talked to you of many things, but these are the last things I will say to you before I give you motion in life.’ With that he talked, saying many other things.

As he talked, I found to my amazement and joy that I could hear everything he was saying. What is more, I could understand it. Even more astonishing was that the knowledge he imparted was fully intelligible to me—whatever it may have meant to the transformed scarecrow. I thought to myself, ‘I have heard nothing like this before,’ although, in fact I had heard most if not all of it on previous occasions, and in many different places and situations.

Then the miracle happened. The man said, ‘Now you may go your way,’ and with those words the former scarecrow came fully to life. His eyes were radiant, glow-

ing in fact with joy. His face shone with an unusual light. His somewhat stooped shoulders straightened up. In this way he seemed quite tall. He lifted his arms high above his shoulders and then swung them as though testing them. His legs lifted from the soil as though they had never been implanted, and he stamped his feet as though, too, to test them. He shook his head, touched his ears, and rubbed his face. All of this he did with great glee and enjoyment. His eyes flashed with the wonder of it all.

Before he went he bowed at the feet of the man. His voice was gentle with gratitude. He seemed like a man in a dream, but at the same time as one who is in the midst of full life. I saw him go striding across the field, and I thought he must be going to the farmhouse. However, he swung away from this, moving towards the village, and as he passed through a grove of eucalypts he was lost to sight.

I turned to look at the man, but he, too, was gone. This greatly bewildered me. I hastened to where the scarecrow had been, and I looked for the holes where the legs had been implanted into the earth, but it was as though nothing had been there, the stubble of a past crop, dry and sere, the earth unbroken.

After a time I left the place, shaking my head, knowing I must have dreamt it all, yet knowing also that there had been a scarecrow implanted in the soil. I certainly wondered at it all—the man and the scarecrow—and I shook my head again.

Now I must tell you that the strangest thing happened at that point. As I began to walk away from the place, all the words that I had heard suddenly became powerfully real and intelligible. I felt the hot glow of my own eyes, and the warm throb of life in my body. I straightened up my shoulders, and for the first time in my life I felt myself to be a real

person. It was not only as though I had come to life for the first time, and was genuine and whole, but also I realized that I knew the man, and who he was, and that as surely as he had touched the scarecrow, so he had touched me, not only eyes and ears and mouth, and parts of my body, but that he had also touched me within and released me from a state as static as that of an impersonal scarecrow.

It was then I lifted my hands high, and swung my arms, and stamped my feet and began striding towards the farmhouse. In a flash I decided not to go to the farmhouse, but to go via the same clump of gum-trees into which the scarecrow had entered.

I tell you a strange thing. Just as I was entering the clump of eucalypts I looked back, and saw, in the early evening sun, the scarecrow standing where it had always been. It was immobile, etched black against the western light, but it seemed so calm, so serene that I wondered how a scarecrow could be like that. Then I knew suddenly, for myself, what such serenity meant, for within me was a tranquillity such as I had never previously known, a serenity beyond human description.

For a time I looked back at the scarecrow, wondering. Then the truth came to me in a flash, and in a moment of foolish joy I waved to the silent figure, and although it did not wave back to me I felt it understood. I gave it one final backward look as though we two had true rapport, as though, indeed, we were one, and it my *alter* ego, my other self. With that strange thought in mind I broke through the clump, running and jumping with joy with a thousand words in my head which I wanted to share with the world, and a new deep wisdom in my heart.

The Woman And The Wild Apple

FROM TIME to time the memory of the apple orchard would come to him. It would come to him any old time he wandered into an enclosed place which grew apples. For some reason the luscious soft fruits such as apricots, plums, nectarines and peaches did not stir him. They had not been in the orchard he had known in those days. In that orchard there were only apples.

There had been ducks in those days also, but the ducks were never allowed in the orchard. They were Muscovy ducks, huge to him as he wiggled his legs through the tall grass. He would put out his hands, spreading out his fingers from the palms like two pink fans, and they would hurry ahead of him to escape his teasing clutching. They were too fat to fly over the orchard fence, but he knew how to unlatch the gates, and would tempt them to follow him. When—with some suspicion—they would attempt it, he would put out his hands and shout 'No! No!' and he would chase them down the hill, then returning, giggling with explosive laughter, letting himself into the orchard and closing the gate behind him.

Often the sun would go out of the sky, and a soft grey mist would cover the hills. It would hide him in its soft wrapping, and he would hear the stillness, so dead and calm it all was. He would stand still, trying to see how far his peering could reach. Not very far. Sometimes only as far as the red Jonathan apples nestling in their leafy boughs.

Once, standing in the mist, he had seen his father go by, looking tall and strong, a rifle under his right arm, walking quietly to where the rabbits were. Not far from the orchard his father had raised his rifle and aimed, and after a few moments he returned, carrying two limp rabbits in his left hand. Their heads lolled at each step of the swinging gait. He had not felt sorry for the rabbits because he knew they ate the grass that really belonged to the cows. He had heard his parents say that.

At times like this he would turn his attention to the apples. As yet he would do nothing his father forbade him to do. He would not take an apple except it were offered him. Then he would hesitate in his choice between the firm Jonathans and the larger—ever crisper—Red Delicious. He loved to lie on his back when the sun shone, looking up into the blue and biting into the apple. Sometimes his father would lie with him, and they would work out the shapes of the curling clouds.

Occasionally his father, who had been to the war, would go to 'the Hospital'. He was not sure what it was all about, but his father would have to go, and he felt a small anger at that. He liked his father's company. He liked having on his own small Wellington boots, walking along beside his father, whose boots made stronger sounds than his own. He tried to make his own boots, go 'Clump!

Clump!' but they made hardly any sound.

He would never forget the orchard because of the crisis that happened in it. It happened when his father had gone. His mother called him, and he would not come. He sidled into the long grass, nestling down as though he were a hiding rabbit. He had seen how still rabbits can be, and he was a still rabbit.

Something in him wanted to giggle. He heard his mother moving about, trying to find him. He did not wish to be found. He would not let her find him. He only came out of the grass when the gong rang for the midday meal. He ran to the house for the food he liked. He could not understand his mother's distress.

'Jeremy,' she said, 'where have you been? Why didn't you answer me?' Even then he didn't answer her.

He saw she was angry so he laughed. He felt power in his laugh.

'Don't you laugh!' she said sharply. 'You have been a naughty boy.'

He had wondered about that. His father had hardly ever called him naughty. He wished he were back, now, from 'the Hospital'.

He sat down to the meal of meat and vegetables. It had smelled good, but there were a couple of the vegies that he did not like. With his father's eyes upon him he would eat them, but reluctantly. He had felt a tinge of anger come into him at his mother's words. He felt stronger than her, so he decided not to eat those vegies.

His mother was vague, stating across the hills as though Daddy might appear. She said tiredly to him, 'Eat up your vegies, son.'

He went silent, thinking about the ducks, and apples in

the orchard. He even thought about the rabbits they used to shoot and eat when Dad had declared them free of the hydatids. His cousin John had once had a hydatid in the brain and he went half-blind when they operated on him. He began wondering what hydatids are.

‘Eat!’ she said to him in tired anger. His face went stiff and he rolled the hated vegetable in a ball, hiding it at the back of his mouth.

‘I guess,’ he thought, ‘that that was when the crisis came. The big crisis. It was a time of anger too. I was thinking “Why should she make me do something I don’t want to do?” So I reneged. I had a sweet sense of power. She couldn’t make me do what I didn’t want to do. I felt excitement A new world was opening up to me—a world of self-being, of self-decision. I thought that life would be good, doing only what you wanted to do. No one to tell you what to do. I remember the thrill that ran through me.’

The father did not return that day. That was the day when she would not give him anything to eat. ‘When you say you are sorry, then I’ll give you some food.’ Her anger had gone but his hadn’t. He refused to obey her, and had a mixture of joy and dread. He showed neither to her. He felt hungry during the night but would not be forced to eat. He had not let her see him spit out the ball of hated vegies. He had spat under a Red Delicious tree in the orchard.

‘I remember him coming down the steep hill, half-sideways as he walked. When he got to the house he had gathered up my mother—his wife. He hugged and kissed and clung. Then he had asked, “Where’s the boy?” She had said something to him, and I guess it was about my rebellion.

‘My rebellion! Why did I rebel? Was it for the sake of a few vegies? It

couldn’t have been. I can still remember my awe and fear of my father. Now he seemed different than before. He came running out into the orchard crying, “Son! Son, where are you?” I had smiled perfectly when he picked me up and hugged me. I knew he was glad because I had run to him, but I was thinking of him as an enemy. I let him take my hand, still smiling as I was, and take me into the house.

‘The fire was burning in the stove, and I could smell the pie in the oven, and I was hungry. My mother set out the plates, but only two of them. Somewhere inside I gagged with anger. They were not fair. Then Dad said, “Oh, Mummy, one for him, too.” He turned to me and said encouragingly, “Tell Mummy you love her. Tell her you’re sorry.”

‘I was angry with him for taking her side. I wanted no one to make me do anything—not even him, and I surely loved him then, even at that moment. No, I would not. I would rather die than say I was sorry to her.’

The next day he refused to eat, and by this time hunger was gnawing at him. His father took him out to the orchard, and the apples were so beautiful to the eyes of the boy. He would dearly have loved to sink his teeth into a Red Delicious, or even a Rome Beauty or a Jonathan.

His father picked the largest and reddest apple he could find. ‘Would you like to eat this?’ he asked the boy. The boy nodded silently. He gave it to the boy. ‘You have that,’ he said, and the boy went to eat, hunger gnawing within him.

‘Just before you eat it,’ he said, ‘go and tell Mummy you’re sorry. Your mother loves you, and she will be happy when you tell her that.’

The boy froze. Suddenly he hated the apple, and his father and his mother, the ducks, the orchard, the trees and the fruit. He hated everything. He wanted to run screaming away. But he could not.

His father asked him, ‘Will you do that?’ For some

moments he stood in dumb silence. He had a huge sorrow within him, but for what he could not understand. The misery was too large to handle.

I did not know whether I had sorrow for being forced against my will, or for the hatred I had against them for trying to do it, even to the point of manipulation. I did know that I was up against a force that opposed me. As far back as my memory went I had felt that force. I had always wanted to oppose it, and in fact I had. Here, however, it proved to be ruthless. That was why I was angry.

‘At the same time there was another problem, and it worried me. Was “the force” wrong, or was I? I tried not to think about it, but it weakened me at that point I can remember nodding without nodding, accepting without accepting. It was in that moment I learned to “toe the line”. I clearly remember I did not really submit, and was fiercely glad I didn’t.’

The father and the mother watched his face. He would say nothing. When his father asked, ‘Son, are you sorry for not obeying Mother?’ he gave only the slightest movement of his head. They knew this was not a heart-response, but they also knew that they would get no more. Whilst they loved him and wanted him to eat, they did not want him to hold the reins of all their lives, so that they gave him a hug even though there was no response.

He ate without enthusiasm, as though a great gap had opened between him and them, and life would never be the same again. To eat eagerly before them, the boy thought, would be improper. They watched him go out with bread-crusts for the ducks.

He brought the crusts with integrity to the ducks, eating nothing on the way. Perversely he refused to give anything to the large white Muscovy drake, who huffed and hissed and worried behind his dams. The ducks ate

the crusts with great enthusiasm.

Looking at the drake, something struck the boy as highly humorous. He began to giggle, and then he broke into laughter. His laughter rang around the house, and the orchard, and even across the valley.

The man looked at his wife, and she looked at him, and light came into their tired eyes. They smiled at each other, and the smile became a grin, and they held hands.

It was just like that.

The Magnificent Male

THE BOY scarcely heard the rustle, so faint it was. He had wandered towards the greenhouse where the woman had kept her ferns and special pot plants. Sometimes he would have a peek in the early morning at the delicate maidenhair, the miniature orchids, and the other fronded plants whose names he did not know. This morning he was having his peek when he heard the rustle.

Dawn was breaking and early light was in the fern-house. His eye half caught the sudden flash of crimson, and he turned to see it. There it was—the brilliant bird. At first it did not register as a bird, but then he knew it was. Before him was the richest-hued Adelaide Rosella parrot he had seen in his lifetime—an incredibly magnificent male. The strange thing about it was that it did not move when he stared at it. It looked at him a trifle sideways, its golden eyes upon him, but no fear in its stance, no alarm in its poised person.

He drew in his breath, scarcely daring to release it. He was captured by the unbelievable beauty. He knew this species of Rosella to be elegant and noble, but had never known it so noble as this large male, seated amongst the

ferns. 'Regal' was the thought which entered into his mind, although he was not usually given to such words. Regal it was, poised and flightless, and ever so silent.

He himself merged into that silence. He was content to look at the bird, as it, also, was to regard him. So boy and bird held each other in gaze, interlocked not only in look but in affinity of mind. The bird was noble, and the boy loved all that was serene. He always liked the things of peace, but never had there been this mutual kind of peace.

After a time he thought of the man, the one who cared for him, and who had befriended him with the departure of the woman. She had left him to the man, she who had been his mother. The man had never been his father, but to all intents and purposes he was standing in the shoes of the other man, the dead man—the one who had been his father. He had never gotten over the pain of his mother's desertion, and even now was puzzled by the gruff but silent male who cared for him. It was natural enough for his thoughts to go to the man because of the unspoken concern he had shared. This man loved birds as he—the boy—also loved them, especially parrots. Rosellas were a kind of passion with him. He had collected every kind of Rosella, even to the rare Northern species. That is why the boy thought of the man.

He looked back at the crimson bird, brilliant in its full colour and plumage, and he quietly fastened the fern-house door. He had a moment of wonder as to whether the bird would break through the shade-cloth, but then knew because it was made of strong nylon that the bird was trapped. Once outside he ran towards the house. He knew the man would be sleeping because he always returned late at night, but this time it was a matter of

urgency. When his feet hit the front porch he began crying, 'Come! Come quickly! There's a great Adelaide Rosella in the greenhouse.'

The man came out in his dressing gown, looking tired and dishevelled. He was also irritated. 'What a noise!' he grumbled. 'Do you have to shout?'

The boy took no notice of the rebuke. 'It's there!' he shouted. 'The great crimson bird is there.'

'Crimson?' the man asked. 'Crimson bird? What do you mean?' For years there had been a legend about the place of a huge Adelaide Rosella, large and brilliant, but no one ever claimed, personally, to have seen it. Yet the legend grew. Bird fanciers enlarged the story in their gossip, and aviarists dreamed about seeing the mythical creature. The boy did not know this but the man did. The memory leapt to his mind.

'A huge red Rosella,' said the boy. 'You've never seen bigger.'

A gleam came to the eyes of the man. 'Rosella!' he shouted. 'Big! Where?'

'In the greenhouse,' the boy said, his eyes shining. They both began to run. The boy felt his heart beating with joy. Now he was one with the man.

The man slipped into his bird-shed to get a net. He also had leather gloves. He knew how Rosellas panic with fear, and then tear at bare fingers. A large Rosella would rip them to pieces.

They both paused before the fernhouse, as though about to enter a holy place.

The boy was whispering. 'It's in there,' he said, 'and it's all silent.'

The man nodded as though instantly understanding.

When they opened the door the large Rosella was looking at him. The man's heart missed a beat, His pulse began a slight pounding, and excitement made him mute. He looked at the bird. It looked back, imperiously.

The man was awed. He had never seen a bird of this size. It was a male bird, without doubt. It had the flat head of the cock, and not the rounded form of the female. He had always thought the flat of the head was like a crown. No other bird—not even the great eagle—had a crown like that. His awe grew. This was why Rosella males looked so regal.

The man looked at the full-orbed plumage. Never had a Crimson Rosella looked as rich as this Adelaide male. Its crimson was brighter, more living and iridescent, more dynamic. He wondered at its smooth beauty, its long soft lines, its dignity and its quiet hauteur. He wondered whether it was the legendary bird. This—before him—was no legend, but a powerful reality, confronting him as nothing previously had had such power to do so.

He whispered, as though in homage, 'You great beauty!'

The boy felt the movement and emotion of the man. He nodded his head, dumbly. This, too, was a kind of homage. His spirit bowed to the beauty of the bird. He looked at the man. 'Do we let him go?' he asked.

The man shook his head, negatively and passionately. 'Never!' he said harshly. 'Never!' He seemed to be trembling. His lips were dry, and his tongue moved over them, seeking to bring moisture. He looked down at the boy. 'You only see this once in a lifetime,' he said; 'only ever once.'

Never had he seen such. His heart trembled to catch

and own the beautiful creature. He knew it was forbidden: he had no licence for this, but the law of possession seemed to transcend the law of law in a quick moment. He walked quietly towards the bird. It looked at him as though commanding only honour from the man. To the boy it seemed to be speaking to the person with the net.

He thought it said, 'Do not come near. I am different. I am not merely a bird, but I am a creature of high rank. I bring a message to this world, and it has nothing to do with possession. I say what I say, and nothing must imperil my freedom. My freedom is for this.'

To the boy it seemed that the man faltered. Then he, too, drew himself up with dignity. He seemed to be saying something also. 'I am a man. I am *imperator*, a king. This is my domain into which you have come. I claim you!'

It was then he made a movement with the net and the great bird swooped into sudden flight. The man gasped and moved rapidly. Even as he netted the colourful creature, it seemed that the bird lost no dignity. It suffered capture with honour. The man and the boy saw that, and they loved the creature for its unfretting nobility.

The silence—regal as it was—troubled the boy, and also the man. Rosellas would quickly cry. The cry would be a hoarse one, or a metallic clicking, or even a screech, but this bird was mute. The man and the boy had the troubled thought that it might be a mute. The man marvelled that it did not bite, did not seize his finger through the leather and hold on, unremittingly. Instead it seemed to submit without being craven.

The man had built a new aviary. Its gleaming Trimdeck sheets that made the shelter, and its galvanized netting that covered the piping frame, were a bright background

to the crimson of the captured Rosella monarch. He stood on a natural perch of gum-tree, as though he had always been there.

'He's aviary bred,' the man whispered. 'He wanted to be in an aviary.' His eyes shone. 'I'll get a Rescue Permit from the Wild Life people.' He looked at the boy. 'It'll be legit,' he said. There was a certain smooth righteousness in his tone and his stance.

'He's wild,' the boy said of the bird, meaning, 'He's never been in an aviary.' He wondered that the man did not understand. Perhaps the man did know, but was persuading himself the capture was 'legit'.

The man put in parrot food and shellgrit. He hung a looped wire of cuttlefish, and cut an apple from the shed, spearing it on a feedboard near the door. There was fresh water in a trough, and some silver beet from the vegetable garden. He placed some shelled almonds in a small dish. He seemed to derive great satisfaction, as though he were giving homage without loss of dignity.

After awhile the two went to have some breakfast. The bird saw them go, and then flew up and down the spacious aviary, as though hunting for a place of escape. Once or twice he seemed to lose control and fly madly. Yet in all this he uttered no sound.

Each day when the man was free after breakfast, and when he did the round of his aviaries, he would stop longest at the large cage of the red Rosella, and his eyes and heart would glow, and he would make embarrassed sounds of joy, slap his hands together and go away shaking his head with amazement.

In the afternoons he would go off to his shift work and the boy would come home from school. After cutting a

slab of bread from the breadbox, covering it with butter from the fridge, and peanut butter from the cupboard, he would come out and munch his food, looking at the calm Rosella. When his bread was finished he would talk to it, telling it his secret, and whilst the bird never looked at him, it seemed to catch the tenor of what he was saying, and would remain as though in silent understanding. The boy would sometimes talk to the bird in puzzled tones about his dead father, his uncaring mother, and the man who cared for him in a gruff way.

The boy was thinking about the freedom of the great bird. He knew how Rosellas flew, with great and powerful swoops, taking them swiftly through the air, and up into the great eucalypts where they would eat the young flowers, drawing the sweetness from their honey, and in their joy chattering and arguing with others of their small and select flock. The boy could visualize this beautiful male bird freed from its aviary and making its way to where its silent mate waited now, dumb and lonely from not understanding. So the boy wished freedom for the male monarch.

Sometimes, as he and the man looked at their captured trophy, he sensed the man thought as he did. Pride would prevent him letting the bird go, but—more than pride—his great love of the creature. He was a taciturn man, but the boy could see the warm admiration in his gleaming eyes. He, too, wanted the bird to be free, but also he wanted to possess it for ever. Sometimes he would sigh. The boy sensed the turmoil, and the divided loyalty of the adult

What the man dreaded was the visit of a Wild Life inspector. The one who sometimes visited them was an astute person. He knew birds as no one else knew them. Not even the man knew what he knew, and the man had reared them for years. The inspector liked the man, and accepted his love for his large variety of parrots. He and the man would stand for a long time hearing the high honking cries of the Princess Parrots, the harsher cry of the Superbs, the fussy domestic noises of the Cockatiels, and the twitterings of the Bourkes.

Both of them would look up when a flock of Adelaides would come shouting and whistling into the tall stringy barks around the aviaries. All the Rosellas would set up answering cries to the Adelaides' calls. It seemed to be music to the inspector, the man, and also the boy. Now, however, both man and boy feared the coming of the inspector. He would look up the list and check out the birds. More than that, he would immediately realize that no Adelaide like this had ever been in this set of aviaries—in fact in any set of aviaries. This bird would make history: the inspector would immediately recognize him as unique.

The man was troubled, and so was the boy. Often they would eat silently, and then the man would catch the boy looking at him. Neither would say anything, but the boy always knew the struggle that was going on in his surrogate father. The man wanted the bird free but he could never let it go. It held him fascinated, like some powerful idol that excited joy in its devotee whilst it struck him with deadening fear. Day by day they lived in the alternating ecstasy and agony.

Then came the piping sound, the long drawn piping

sound of incredible beauty. The boy first heard it in the afternoon when he took his bread and peanut butter to the aviary. Up in the tree there was an Adelaide Rosella, almost wholly green, and with a plaintive cry. The boy thought immediately that it must be the mate of the brilliant bird. The bird in the aviary heard the call, and stood high on his legs. His head with its level crown craned forward, and suddenly he gave vent to the beautiful cry. The hitherto silent bird was now trembling with joy. Its utterance was almost unearthly.

The boy felt his flesh shrink and creep, with a kind of yearning. It was the ecstasy without the agony. The music was sheer beauty. The two piped backwards and forwards, each to the other. He stopped chewing at his bread, and his mouth went dry. He felt the long loneliness of the crying call.

It was not that he had never heard this call. It was common to Adelaides, but this dialogue held a different note. He felt a strong impulse to rush to the door of the aviary and fling it wide open and shout to the bird to go. 'Go to your mate!' he wanted to cry—the memory of his mother who had abandoned him blotted out. Perhaps underneath he understood her shock of life when his father had died. Somehow he had to let these two mates come together.

Next morning he broke the customary silence between the man and himself. 'The new bird's mate has found him,' he said.

At first the man said nothing, but he put down his knife and fork. There was trouble in his eyes. After a time he said sullenly, 'I thought that would happen.'

He began eating again. After a time he shrugged his

shoulders. They both went out and looked at the bird. 'I could give it another mate,' he said; 'that nice little hen we got last year.'

The boy knew it was a nice hen, but he knew—with the man—that the two would not mate. The big bird needed a queen for his nest.

The man seemed puzzled. 'I just don't understand,' he said, and he went inside. He came out again, a bit lighter in his step. 'I think I'll let my old mate Runcie go,' he said. 'I'll put the new one in his place in the Wild Life Return.'

The boy knew the man would never let Runcie go. Runcie had been with them a long time. He had sired the best of their Adelaides. He watched the man pick up the net and go to Runcie's cage.

The boy said, to comfort the man, 'Runcie will never go. He'll hang around.' The man nodded, with gloom and joy mixed. 'I guess you are fight.' He was glad not to catch Runcie and send him off.

It was then they both heard the piping of the hen, and the answer of the crimson Rosella. The man seemed to shiver, as the boy had when first he heard the sound. The man stood stating, and after a time he turned to go, but first he said, 'Beautiful, eh?' Then he went in to try to sleep.

The boy would sit in front of the aviary, and try to think his way out of their dilemma. He felt the urge growing stronger and stronger to let the bird go. He knew the man would be both angry and glad, but he could not face the anger. He had come to love the man who had cared for

him when the woman—his mother—had gone. Even before she had gone he had cared. So the boy wanted the best for him, but did not know what to do.

One afternoon he had a strange sense of something most wonderful and yet so ominous. He felt terror and joy mingled, and could not know why they had come. He was sitting in the front of the aviary, when the yellow Wild Life van drew up near the opened gates. Quick as a flash the boy knew what he must do. He dived for the door of the aviary and opened it. The inspector was coming down the path, but there was a flurry up in the trees, and a long piping call. The responding call came from the aviary. The cock-bird was alert with longing. He stood high on his legs, and his head lowered forward, parallel with his perch. His tail began to flurry with great joy, and time and again he called. The inspector man was coming close.

Suddenly the boy rushed into the aviary. He forgot the regality of their special prize. His arms began flailing, and his breath came in sobs. 'Out! Out!' he shouted. 'Out you go!'

At first the bird did not comprehend, and crashed about the aviary, surprised at the sudden invasion. His wings thrashed up against the wire netting, and the boy saw a small bead of blood on his cere. He knew then that when they had been absent the bird must have thrashed about to get free. He felt the tears coming.

He started to sob. His cries were wild. 'Go! Go! Go!' he cried, and swept his arms forward. The bird flew before him, and then up into the trees. The inspector looked up and saw a movement and a flourish. He caught sight of an unusual Rosella hen, full-bodied, tail shaking ecstatically, chattering with joy. He saw the characteristic shaking of

her tail, and her wild welcome to the most powerful and crimson Adelaide Rosella he had seen in his life. He had heard the legend of the great parrot, and for a moment thought this must be it.

The boy was looking up, too. His eyes were filled with tears, and the tears that had fallen had left streaks in his cheeks. The inspector had a sudden compassion for the lad. He knew the domestic story only too well.

'That's a great bird,' he said to the boy. His voice was kind. 'That's a great cock-bird,' he added. 'Never seen anything like it in my life. What a pair!'

The boy nodded. He was scared the man would ask him about the event, but the inspector said nothing. If he knew, then he was not wanting to say anything. They both knew there would be a huge fine for trapping, and a long enquiry, and maybe the loss of the bird licence. The boy knew the man's heart would break if that were to happen.

Suddenly he felt glad. He was glad he had let the regal bird free. Now it had joined its mate. When he told the man he knew the man would be glad. At first he would be shocked, and then sad, and afterwards very, very glad. The man had had his fill of a high possession, a heady relationship with a godlike bird. He would carry the memory for ever. He—the boy—would carry the same memory. All his life he would be glad.

The inspector said, 'Where's Jamie?' He referred to the man.

The boy said quietly, 'My Dad works in the afternoons. Sometimes he doesn't get home till late.'

He started at what he had said. He had never called him his father before. The tears began to blind him as he knew

what had happened. He had loved the man for his love of the bird, the birds, and for all the other things. Now he knew he just loved him for himself.

He repeated the information again, slowly and deliberately, as though he had not spoken to the inspector before. He said, 'My Dad works in the afternoons. Sometimes he doesn't get home till late.'

The inspector nodded. 'I see,' he said. 'Well, tell your Dad that I called in. Tell him I think everything is O.K.'

They both looked up in the tree where the two Rosellas were chattering. In a moment everything became silent. As they looked up, the Adelaide pair were looking down at them. It was curious, that looking down at them. For a moment the boy—and perhaps the inspector—thought that they must have been aviary-bred birds. At heart they both knew this was not the case. They just knew there is some indescribable affinity between man and the other creatures. Sometimes the rare assurance of it comes, and that is a special moment, and a special experience.

The inspector was breathing hard. 'What an incredible pair!' he said, and the boy heard the catch in his voice. The older man shook his head, wonderingly. 'Quite incredible.'

While they both watched the pair took flight. They flashed out of the high stringy bark and swooped across the blue of the late afternoon sky. It was only a moment or two before they were gone wholly from sight.

The boy walked with the inspector to the van. The Wild Life man settled himself in and started the engine. Over the slight roar of the revving he said, 'You're a good son. You know what to do.'

At first the boy did not know what he meant. The words 'You're a good son' sounded sweet and pleasant to

him. He liked them. Then he knew that the inspector knew: he had seen everything.

Far from being dismayed he was pleased—the boy—as he walked back towards the empty aviary. He knew his father would approve, and even commend him. Something had started with the advent of the brilliant bird, and now it was set for ever. He imagined that was why it had visited him that morning in the fernhouse. In fact, now he was sure of it. He felt the joy welling up, and he imagined his father coming back, late, and stopping in his room to talk. Sure, his father would understand.

He knew, too, that he would never lose the picture from his mind of the two birds swooping and flashing in their mutual freedom-flight. He knew that they would be with him—that noble pair—for ever.

Madness At Mersing

I WONDER why the Mersing mood is on me today. Occasionally it visits me, but quickly passes. However, today it is on me forcefully, and every detail of those days etches itself clearly, almost brilliantly. Even so, behind that brilliance is still something evasive. Time and again I have sought to grasp it but it has slipped away, something pensive, something slightly mocking in its elusiveness.

Why today the events should flood back to me I do not know. Seated up in these Himalayan hills with ghost tips of the snow-clad mountains is not really evocative of Malay as it was, hot almost to steamy, thick matted jungle so contrastive to these cool conifer-clad hills. Who knows, anyway, the secrets of evocation and association?

Mersing, I should tell, was a very beautiful place. I remember most the casuarinas along the shore-line. They had a kind of music of their own when the sea breezes blew through. It was an altogether beautiful place—Mersing. Almost, you might say, it was unique in its beauty.

I suppose Bluey Lannard stood out most to me of all the men in my section. As they say, Bluey did not have much

culture. He was a bush-bred Aussie and arrogantly proud of it. His vocabulary was bush words and farm lingo. Sheared sheep with the best he had, and the worst. Somewhere back of his history was wild Irish blood, now scarcely tamed by the 1940s.

Later, in the prison camp, he was always out on sorties, thick into the black-marketing, taking suave English officers captive with his purloined goods. By that time—in the POW camp—he had developed into a sophist, quite a con-man, as they say. He would have set in a hard brittle mould had it not been for his rough humour. That was what kept Blue human.

When I met Bluey in the early days, the time when we were in R.R.D. ('Raw Recruit Department', as we called it), there was something about him which was almost virginal. I reckoned that for all his self-protective gruffness and his loud country voice Blue had been untouched by human pretence. He was real; he was genuine and simple. He had never made sorties into sensuality or the slick ennui of the city-bred men. They detected a kind of maiden simplicity in Bluey, and set out to rubbish him. They got more than they bargained for. Blue had some sort of human power in his simplicity, much the same, I guess, as a virginal maiden has in her untouched purity.

After a time the clever ones left Bluey alone. They would listen to his rural diatribes against city slickers and just shrug their shoulders. Perhaps they had a hidden envy of him.

Not that you would have envied much of Bluey's outward appearance. He was coarse, stocky, unshapely. His arms were Esau-like in their rough hairiness. The same hair showed itself above his putteed stockings, below

his Bombay bloomers. Every part of him was freckled. The one singular feature of Blue was his eyes. Ice-blue they were, and incredibly penetrating. They were steady in their gaze, as though untroubled by guilt

I was glad to have Blue on my cable-team. He loved the cable-spewer as it flipped out the insulated line like an unchanging stream of red fluid. He was fascinated by the clear sheer action of it. On the rare occasion when it tangled he would give a roar. The truck would stop. In a flash Bluey was out into the tall lalang grass, untangling the cable.

He was good at soldering. Better than all of us. It was understood that Bluey would do the soldering. He was surprisingly neat for a man of his rough ways. Neat, I mean, in soldering his cable joints.

When we were free we liked the evenings in Mersing, down from the Rest House, sitting around the tables near the ices-man. We liked those ices, those coloured ices, ground on the blade of a carpenter's plane.

I can still see Tall Man grating the ice over the blue steel blade. The grated ice would pile up until he half-filled the glasses with it, added water and coloured syrup. Sometimes he added sherbet. It was a memorable concoction. We liked the cool relief it brought.

Most of all Bluey liked the Tall Man. He was Chinese — so far as we could tell—and unusually tall. His extremely intelligent face should have told us he was a Japanese spy. Not that he looked at all like a Japanese. He was, however, from Nippon. Later we discovered that, but then it was almost too late.

I know that the elusive element I seek in my Mersing evocations is related to the Tall Man. He seemed to have the same virginal simplicity that Bluey possessed. Together, talking, they were like identical twins. It was a bit stunning for me. Tall Man seemed to have affinity with Bluey from the very start I had no reason to be jealous. Bluey was no soul-mate of mine. Larry was as close to being a soul-mate as anyone I had known, but Larry does not stand out in my memory like the carrot-headed country boy from the back of Bourke, back of the black stump.

They would even get their heads together. Bluey held nothing back. Tall Man had long ago agreed that the Japanese were unmentionably evil, and little more than congenital idiots. This had surprised Bluey, who was wholly egalitarian when it came to ethnic matters. He was different to the ices-man in this matter. If Tall Man saw it that way, then that was the way it was. He conceded there might be something missing in the race of Nippon. That there might be something missing in his own Southern race did not ever enter his mind.

I think it was the trust he placed in Tall Man which allowed Bluey absolute interchange of ideas and information. They would talk endlessly and animatedly between the grating of ices and the pouring of syrups. I was young and largely undiscerning, so I was puzzled when I would sometimes catch Tall Man looking at Bluey with a quizzical gaze, tinged, I thought, with some kind of despair and even an element of sadness.

Suddenly it was on us. The war, I mean. There were three of us out in the jungle, laying line. I can remember having

slipped into a stream hidden by branches and piled up leaves. I was wet and confused. We pierced the cable to test the lines, and there was the news. A convoy of ships moving down the China Sea. There was nothing about Pearl Harbour. This was before that event. We knew it would break soon. The alert was given to the Endau and Mersing areas. Also at Jemualang.

Before long the Zeros came screaming across. They lacked no ammunition or dynamic intention. They were prepared to give a bomb a man if it required that. We fussed up and down the road to Endau from Mersing—about twenty-five miles. We repaired old lines and spewed out the new. Communication was indispensable. The team worked as a single entity, flawlessly harmonized.

It was then Blue came into his own. It was the day our section commander called for arson. 'Burnt-earth action,' he called it. We had to burn the houses that obscured the trench-lines. We needed clear sight when the Nipponese Navy appeared on the horizon. The big howitzers were pointed out to sea. Lines and trajectories of fire had long ago been worked out. We also had criss-crossed the whole area with sig. cables. Some of it was underground.

We watched the refugees stream out of Mersing. The first sight of people fleeing was very touching. Bluey was plainly angry. He called his rough rural vocabulary into play. Now he knew that what Tall Man had said was true. The news of Pearl Harbour had roused a fire in him.

Even so, he did not want to burn the houses on the foreshore. 'We could win quickly,' he said. 'They could be back in

no time.'

When we went to burn the houses and the shops he seemed plaintive. 'I'm crazy, Paul,' he said to me. 'I've always been a fire bug and now it's gone out of me. I just can't fire this.'

One of the things that depressed him was the departure of Tall Man. The previous night he had just left his stall, not dismantling it. 'What's the point?' he asked. 'One can do nothing on the way. No ice, no people drinking.' He

paused. 'Maybe one day we will all come back.' He did not seem to believe it.

We hung on in hope, wishing it might be. We watched Tall Man following the bicycles and barrows of possessions.

'Strange,' Bluey said. 'He has no cycle. He doesn't even have anyone with him.' He seemed depressed by this.

We had been to his home a few times. There had been friends of his and a servant or two, but no family. We just hadn't thought much about it. Now we were considering the matter quite thoughtfully.

Larry said, 'There's something mysterious about that guy.' I agreed with that. Bluey prickled a little. He would have no criticism of Tall Man, not even implied.

'He's an unusual man,' he said, 'but straight as a die.' 'Straight as a die,' I said. I didn't want Bluey aroused.

Now, looking back, I can see the humour of the situation. When we tried to start fires the houses wouldn't burn. They were made of timber with attap palm roofs. I had thought they would go up at the flare of a match.

Bernie—our largest cableman—was frustrated. 'All my

life,' he said, 'I've wanted to be a fire bug, but I've never had the guts to do it. Now, when it's all legal—fair and square and above board—it just won't happen!'

Blue went to get the jerry-can of petrol. That certainly started a fire. We moved to the next house. It took quite a time to gather paper and clothing. After a time the black smoke broke through the attap and the house was ablaze.

There were a lot of houses to go—and some shops also. Bernie and Larry were rifling the shops. Most of the goods had been taken. I can remember Larry's eyes snapping at the sight of pure Pekoe tea. Also there were bamboo shoots in tins and canned lychees. Later on we were going to need that food. They stacked it slap up against the cable-spewer. Larry discovered a crate of tinned pineapple in cubes.

We knew we had time: We wanted to bum empty houses before the Navy could use the fires as a directional beacon. I wandered a few houses ahead, with the vague idea of piling up papers and clothes.

It was then—about five houses ahead—that I found the caché of short stories. At first I thought it was childish, an amateur teenager writing in romantic idealism, but when I began to read I was gripped powerfully.

Looking back I know it just doesn't make sense. What was a Japanese writer of great prowess doing in Mersing? I uncovered some correspondence with a Nipponese journal. Curiously enough, almost everything was in English. As good English as the Tall Man had spoken to us.

I guess I hadn't spent a lot of time reading before I heard the noise. I went on reading without looking up. Then I said, 'Bluey, you won't believe this. There are

short stories here which are superb.' Quite the level of any short story writer I had read, of the Russians, the French, the Spanish and the English. I knew short stories. I wrote them and even had them published, and I was still very young.

Bluey said nothing and I looked up. It was Tall Man standing there. He had a Thompson machine-gun in his hand. It was not pointed at me.

'Tall Man!' I said involuntarily. He smiled, but there was something about the smile that I didn't like.

When he kept staring at me with the faint smile about his mouth, I said, 'I thought you had gone.' He nodded slightly at that.

While I was talking I emptied a box of photographs. They were Japanese, too. Once, when I looked up at Tall Man, I noticed his muscles had tightened. His face was hardened. Even so, I found myself fascinated by the photographs.

It was then I saw Tall Man, standing next to the woman. She was petite and very beautiful. I found my own muscles freezing. There were tremors in my body as it tautened. I kept the photographs trickling through my two hands. Any moment now the Tommy-gun would put an end to that.

'This man is a superb writer of short stories,' I said. 'He could easily be a world figure.' There was no response. I stared at a photograph which told me Tall Man was a husband and a father. I kept the photographs trickling. In one of them Tall Man was a Nipponese officer with a samurai sword.

When I looked up, Tall Man had the sub-machine-gun pointed at me. I guessed it was aimed at my chest. He

heard my sigh.

'In a way I am sorry about this,' he said. 'It needn't have happened if I had gone.'

'Why didn't you?' I asked, not that I was greatly interested. I just thought it was a great pity. In a way it was foolish to die like this. I had wanted to see the howitzers boom out at the Nipponese Navy.

'There are things that I need here,' he said. 'Things I buffed.' He did not elaborate.

As a sergeant I had my own Tommy-gun, but it was away from me, in a corner. I had no right to the pistol in my holster. That was not regulation issue. The story of how I acquired it does not much matter now.

'Don't move,' he said. 'I like you better down there.'

'Bluey will be disappointed,' I said. 'He really trusted you.'

The eyes were impassive, but I thought I detected a movement, a faint shadow of sadness. It may not have been: I was a long way from him.

'That is all a pity,' he said abruptly. 'Bluey should have reckoned on things like that.'

Looking back, as I said, the details etch themselves clearly and freshly. I pull up the blind of memory and my amnesia vanishes.

I hear the rich crackle of burning. I think, 'That must be next door. They will let that fire burn and any moment they will be here. I must divert this shy, this intelligent man, this pseudo-Chinese, this true son of the Sun. It will be difficult. He is a highly intelligent man.'

'Tall Man,' I say, 'why as a spy do you bring all these

materials with you, these short stories, these revealing photographs?'

For a moment he does not answer me. He seems to have gentled a little. 'Maybe,' he says, with a faint smile, 'I am a writer before I am a spy, a husband before I am a patriot'

I remember what I had called 'virginal innocence'. For a moment I wonder how a human being can seem to have personal integrity and warm humanity and yet be asp. At that moment I cannot understand. I am young enough to be hurt, even angry at this injustice. Eater I will understand, at least in part. Perhaps that is when I am more realistic, more tolerant. Perhaps it is the beginning of cynicism.

'But you are a patriot,' I say, thinking the word is a bit cold, a bit formal, even stiff.

'I am a patriot through and through,' he says. 'Every day I send the information and the messages to my superior officer. I also smile at you Australians. I think you are like baboons, very uncouth, very naive.' 'And Bluey?' I ask,

This time his eyes do soften. 'He is a good man,' he says, 'but also very gullible.'

Then he hears the noise. He switches his eyes and body towards the door. Then there is a burst of fire, his hands gripping the Tommy-gun and his eyes losing their habitual calm.

In an instant it is all over. The naive Bluey has not come in by the door. He has crept along the verandah from one end. Bernie has advanced from the other. Larry has made the noise in the room but not at the door. Larry keeps strictly away from the door.

I think Bluey's machine-gun burst reaches Tall Man as my pistol fires. We do not try to check on that. It is the first man we have killed in battle.

Even so, Bluey stands looking down at him. I expect him to explode with his versatile vocabulary. I expect him to curse this man up hill and down dale. I expect anything.

Bluey simply says, 'It was him or us, especially you, Paul.'

I nod solemnly. 'Especially me, Bluey.' Bernie and Larry also nod, as though agreement is important

I cannot say that Bluey actually lost his integrity at that point, but I have the curious idea that had the incident never happened with Tall Man then Bluey would have kept his simple sort of innocence, his virginal gentleness and the dynamic it contained.

Perhaps he ought to have let fly with his anger then, but he didn't-

Instead he said suddenly, 'I want to bum these places down, all of them!'

In a moment he had turned into a volatile pyromaniac. I guess that in war-time nothing surprises you. It is part of the mystery, part of the depravity and part of the elevation of war that human beings suddenly do things that seem out of character with them.

Now, as I sit in the calm hills of the Himalayas and look towards the melting snows of Kashmir, I am again back in that last day of Mersing.

I am watching Bluey and Larry and Bernie as they go

about their business of the holocaust Larry and Bernie act as a foil to Bluey. They are fairly matter of fact about what they are doing, almost casual you might say. Not so Bluey. He is like a red demon with ice-blue eyes, ice that is grated and fragmented and glittery. He is like a man possessed. He keeps ferrying in jerry cans of fuel. Mind you, he is not in the least bit foolish. When he pours petrol around and soaks a house, he stands back before he lets a burst of fire loose.

Then comes the explosion, but by this time he and the others have fled.

What I notice most of all is that he keeps going back to the Tall Man's house, which has become a kind of funeral pyre. None of us searched the house further, or tried to discover the intelligence material he had buried.

We had immediately set about making the fire. We had piled those unique and powerful short stories, those rather moving photographs and the others bits and pieces. We had piled them all on the Tall Man—now so inert, so pale of face and bloody of body, and it was a special sort of cremation. For me there was something of a salute in it, respect mingled with shattered affection.

What I see at this moment—and behind it all flickers and glides that elusive element—is Bluey, the red demon with the ice-blue eyes, rushing here and rushing there, picking up loose timber and flammable rubbish and throwing it on the fire with some kind of a supernatural energy that he has summoned up or conscripted into action.

I can see his eyes, I can catch the bent of his head, glimpse the fiercely sealed lips, but I do not know what he is feeling, whether it is hatred and bitterness that is urging

him on, or whether there is some kind of honouring in his actions, the last gesture he can make—however dumbly—towards a fellow spirit

I really do not know. I simply watch the conflagration as I have done these numberless times and try to grasp the elusive thing that lurks behind the fire. Maybe one day I will understand. Maybe I will never break through it or comprehend the deeps which a human being knows, and in which his integrity lurks, always seeking to find its ultimate fulfilment.

The Fortieth

LONG BEFORE the day, she had been preparing for it. That was her way. It had always been her way. She may have been a bit bewildered when the first baby came along, but she had had five more since then, and many years of motherly experience, so what had been in her had come to rich maturity.

She was a mother—through and through. For that matter, too, she was a wife. She had rounded out through the years—in every way—and so she was prepared for the fortieth.

It would be an event, of course. Thirty-nine years is not the same as forty. Forty is a special milestone, though where to is a matter for humorous conjecture. Anyway, she was going to enjoy it.

How then does a mother and a wife prepare for such an occasion? One way is by sitting in the Jason rocker, stitching away at some material or other, and letting the years flow over you in memory. Plenty of memories too. Being married to *that* man has not made it easy. He rarely stops, so eager is he about everything. Especially about people, their needs, and what they can become under a rich

revelation of truth. Also there had always been the writing, the endless flow of ideas, pouting out on to paper, book after book.

Some of those ideas and books put into full practice would have made the years a bit easier. She remembered, as she stitched, the saying of an ancient, 'Others' vineyards have I kept, but mine own I have not kept.' On the other hand, his vineyard—that is, his and hers—was not in bad shape, really. Quite a good vineyard in fact.

Anyway, Mamma had her own little secret. She was glad to let the children do everything on this special day, but she wanted to be in it, somehow. So she had stitched and stitched, doing a special kind of sewing. 'Cathedral Windows' they called it, and it was certainly unusual. She had made covers for cushions, as also the cushions themselves, and now they were hidden under the great queen sized bed, each wrapped to be a present and her expression of gratitude for their love and care. She had worked earnestly, hardly hoping to have them all ready for the great day, but now, ready they were. She had kept her secret well.

So she stitched, getting ready for the Day. The children had insisted it be their arrangement. They wanted Mamma and Dad to be their guests. At the moment they were doing the round of places to eat, especially good inns. They knew Mamma and Dad weren't all that keen on inns, but this was different. No alcohol of course, but a rare feed, a good meal.

In fact they had run out of places in which to eat. This one was too far away, and that one in the wrong environment. This one wouldn't suit Mamma at all, and then that one mightn't meet Dad's approval. There was some talk—

tentative of course—of coming home, because the day of the fortieth was in winter, and there was the great hearth, the big logs on the fire, and that sort of thing. Yes, it seemed to be coming closer to home, all the time.

Part of the trouble was that she—Mamma—was no longer the strong woman she had been. Vibrant? Yes! But then she could not take much excitement. It drew on her meagre resources. She could only take life these days in quietness and calmness. The grandchildren she loved, but after a bit of shouting and interchange of differences Grandma would make a sign of helplessness and they knew it was time to take the noise away, and to leave her alone by the fire. Even her stitching would stop at that point, and her eyes close. After a time they would open, and she would resume stitching.

As for him—her husband—well, he too looked forward with delighted anticipation to the day. It was really strange how you could almost boast about the oncoming years. The older you became, the prouder! You liked your years, as though they were mounting treasure. Well, of course, they were: they were great treasure. Wisdom had come through a certain amount of pain, and so it was highly prized.

Each year added to the past. New experiences, new insights, new work, and new results. Nothing of it was lost. Even the failures you had made were good friends—acerbic teachers who etched their sharp message on your brain and memory. The maturity kept piling up high, and the past in the present was quite astonishing.

It was mainly of her that he thought—how she would handle the day when it came. It wasn't that he worried about her, because she seemed to recover from times of

stress. In her organic weakness she was yet resilient. Even so, he wanted her to conserve the little energy she accumulated by deliberate carefulness. Sometimes she did worry him because she suddenly felt everything was like old times, and that she was strong again.

On these occasions she would set her stitching aside, get up, and start to dust the room, tidy the bits and pieces, and even attempt to use the vacuum cleaner. When he discovered this he would put on a pretended great rage, and storm at her. She knew it was bluff, of course, but she accepted it meekly. 'Meekly' had not been an element in her own thinking in the fast-moving days of her younger years. He had a suspicion that even now it wasn't part of her vocabulary of life.

Suddenly the day seemed very near. The inns were our Eating places were not good enough for the old couple. More intimate the big house, and more attractive the roaring open hearth! They could talk without the noises of others. There would be no waiting on waiters for courses that had great intervals between them. They would eat in the old domestic way—the three young couples, the—as yet—unmarried sister, and then, of course, Mamma and Dad.

They had arranged for minders for their children. Daughter Elizabeth would get there earliest and set out things for the meal. She would also turn on the stove to heat the food when it arrived. Her husband Geoff could do something if it was needed. He was quite a handyman when the spirit moved him. Maybe he would get more 'wood for the fire.

Daughter Anne and her husband Erik would come the farthest distance, about fifty miles, according to the old

scale. (Richard and Sue were up on the North Coast of New South Wales, and that was a long way from the Adelaide Hills.) Anne was a pretty practical woman—like all her sisters—and she would help. The oldest daughter, Carol, would come later with the food, the best Chinese take-away from the best restaurant in Adelaide, or so they said!

They both admitted to a sense of excitement. Their common sense told them that the 25th of May was only one day on from the 24th and one day before the 26th of the same month; so what was special about it? It was just another day. But not really!

'Dynamic memory!' he said to himself. 'The days when we were young, before our children came, and before we had settled the business of life.' It almost seemed 'before vocation'. Those salad-green days had been good, unbelievably good. They looked at each other, knowing they were remembering much the same things. They went on remembering before the children arrived, knowing they would have to behave themselves under the eager and eagle eyes of their daughters and sons-in-law.

It all seemed like a long novel, of course. There had been the meeting in the Repatriation Hospital after he had returned from the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. They had arranged excursion after excursion, coming home happy and tired, and moving towards marriage. At the wedding there had been the carillon and its peals, the old man who had married them with emotion, the strong mother-widow who had arranged the reception in the front garden, and the sponge cakes with jelly piled in their

cupped tops, the varieties of food which had stunned and almost hurt him, so much a contrast they had been to the rice and *towgay* of the P.O.W. days!

In the box-carriage of the train that had steamed towards Blackheath they had been most reserved. A younger couple locked in a passionate honeymoon embrace caused their eyebrows to rise. They read their magazines with slightly haughty aplomb. An indulgent older man wished the younger couple 'the best' when they alighted at Katoomba. 'Have a good honeymoon!' he shouted. Unashamed they responded, 'You bet!' and they were gone.

She and he had alighted with reserve and dignity at Blackheath. They were a bit shocked when the same man shouted, 'Have a good honeymoon!' However had he known? They began to giggle. They walked along the empty platform, he struggling with the two heavy suitcases, and she with her overnight bag.

The moment had been unforgettable. The catch on her small case had not been fastened. Suddenly the lid flew open. There, on the railway line, were all her intimate flimsies. 'First-night things,' they called them in those days. She stared, crimson-faced and astonished. He was no less embarrassed. He hid his feelings by climbing down on to the track and picking them up, one by one. So now, sitting in front of the fire, they remembered these things. The film of the past flickered before their eyes—their small farm on the North Coast, travelling to it by the aid of Joan and Gordon, whose Land Rover bumped along 'the old Pacific Highway to the small farmhouse, its Emperor mandarins suddenly gleaming like golden Chinese lanterns in the glow of the headlights.

There had been the freezing winter nights, the crisp sunny days, the woodstove burning away merrily in the semi-detached kitchen, the new calves crying for the milk, and he, furiously typing away on a small table in the 'cream-house! The excitement of the story acceptances, the surprising cheques, the long rows of brilliantly green peas, and the feathered tops of the carrots. There was milking, the marketing of cream, eggs and vegetables. Stories were sometimes written in the middle of the night, and they had been earnest lovers all the time.

Whilst the logs crackled on the hearth they remembered their first-born, who came into the world only after a long struggle, and he looked like Captain Blood with the bruise around his right eye. It had been unbelievable. So had the place and people around them. All remained imprinted indelibly on the face of their memory. It was strange how much you could store in the data bank of your memory files.

These memories stretched over the years of theological study when the spirit had been ready for it. They covered the early days of more children, an ordination, a church to pastor, and people to help. In them was also the memory of derelict people, 'no-hopers' who drank methylated spirits on Observatory Hill under the old Morton Bay Fig, or slept in army disposal greatcoats behind the Garrison Church, the very church which became packed with people anxious to hear their dynamic message.

Their memories then took them with five children to West Pakistan where the sixth was soon born. There were snows of the Himalayas, the burning sands of the Sindh desert, ventures to ancient uncovered cities, and even to Kabul in Afghanistan. Ten years passed like a flash, but

they were years of intense training, summer years that were setting true knowledge for the autumn in which they now sat and remembered.

Of course, there had been more. There had been the return to Australia, settling into teaching theology and the practice of life. They had had to give over gradually to their growing dynamic children, each a person of energy and ambition. How difficult it had been to let them have their heads without releasing the reins altogether! They had felt their lack of maturity and know-how quite keenly. Their children had been no more perfect than they! The trouble was their profession had made them live in a glass-house, and the viewers were not small in number. The children had not found life easy under glass!

Yet they had weathered even that storm. They had helped the children to marry, starting as they all had on meagre monetary resources, though with personal resources of toughness and ingenuity which had gone on helping them through those early years,

And now they were coming, the three couples and the resourceful unmarried Mary! They sat, waiting, and inwardly reminiscing.

When the first car door banged they knew the event had begun. Elizabeth and Geoff—soon to have their fourth child—taking things over. After hugs and kisses, clatter in the kitchen. After gifts and greetings, great goings-on around the dining table. Then he—the great Dane Erik—with his quiet but confident wife Anne, and she with her secret smile, and her whimsical humour ‘scarcely hidden. Mary-Grace suddenly appearing, slim and smooth as a tall tulip, and no less smart and serene. Then also appearing was her older sister Carol with hus-

band David, and the masses and mounds of Chinese dishes, all full and fragrant, being rushed to the oven amidst the clink of bottles, and the preparations mysterious which always obtain in human kitchens.

When it was time for the saying of grace over the delicious meal, the old man was bidden to be silent Young Geoffrey—the theological student—would do that, thank you very much! The growing dignity of these younger ones was a thing to be observed, as also to be marvelled at.

Then the food—hot and piping in high mounds—the glad noises, the repartee, the humour, the keen interchange of quips and thoughts, and memories. They too could reminisce! They had Mamma’s idiosyncrasies, and Dad’s curious habits, down to a T! They opened up secrets which had lain for years untold. They talked of impressions, of humorous happenings, and they crowed unashamedly at the deceptions they had accomplished. None of it had rancour, because the day was not for that sort of thing, however many hurts may have happened avoidably or unavoidably in those years.

The old couple sat in wonderment at it all. They marvelled at the special variety of dishes, suspecting that Chinese friends had directed their children to the very best, and the most exotic. Course followed course, followed course, until all were replete, and Dad was launched into a fit of anecdotage. They exchanged story for story until it was time to cut the Ruby Wedding cake, and drink a toast to the parents and share the percolated coffee. It was also time to view together their gift to the parents—the special down quilt that was to keep the old people warm for their forty-first and onwards—*Deo*

volente!

Of course serious things were said—on both sides. This was one occasion which lent itself to that sort of conversation. Anglo-Saxon—and Danish—reserve was set aside a little. Glory and gratitude had a mild field day. The older couple felt the glow of it growing. When it was time for their departure, the young people insisted on a closing prayer from patriarch Pop. There was quiet godliness in the vast room, and the fire crackled its own message of life and serenity as he gave thanks for his wife, their life, the children, and their children.

Again the hugs and kisses, the quick whispered words of affection and gladness, the banging of car doors, appropriate beeps on car horns, and they were gone. He said, 'Wasn't it a wonderful time?'

She agreed as they embraced, and remembered Blackheath Railway Station and the scattered flimsies.

For some minutes they stared into the fire and savoured again the things of the evening. It was a deep moment.

Then up went her hands in sudden shock and disappointment. 'The cushions!' she shouted. 'The cushions!'

'What about them?' he asked. He knew nothing about cushions.

She looked at him with some pain. 'Come and I'll show you,' she said. He went with her into their bedroom. She stooped and hauled out the cushions from under the bed. She unwrapped a cushion and showed it to him. He thought it was most beautiful. A lot of work and patience had gone into their making.

'How beautiful!' he said.

'I wanted each one of them to have a cushion,' she said

wistfully. 'A sort of "thank you" thing.'

'No!' he said firmly. 'It was their day. They wanted to do it, and they did it. A nice gift might just have taken the edge off it.'

She thought about that for a minute or so. 'You know,' she said to him, 'I think you might be right. Yes, it was best to let them do what they did without any kind of reward.'

'She thought about it a bit more, and then rewrapped the cushion, stuffing it under the bed.'

'You are right!' she said firmly. Then she softened a bit, looking up at him. 'It was a wonderful day,' she said.

She came nestling into the crook of his arm and rested there. Meanwhile he was saying, 'Well yes, of course. It was a wonderful day. It was great to see what has come out of those years, those forty years of double double toil and trouble, with their gifts of joy and peace and serenity.'

He smiled at her. 'It really wouldn't matter what happened now, would it?'

She knew what he meant and smiled back. 'No,' she said, 'it really wouldn't matter what happened now.'

The Boy And The Golden Gelding

IN ALL his years of adulthood he had never forgotten his father's Chrysler car. It was an awesome thing—that vehicle. Its colour was maroon, its shape noble, its lacquer and chrome unblemished. He couldn't remember seeing its tyres splashed with mud, though that must have been the case on some occasions.

Nor would he forget his father driving the vehicle. The two seemed to be made for each other. Perhaps seating was a little higher in those days, but he could not be sure. Anyway, his father seated seemed a bit monarchical. Both man and car had a certain hauteur, and they conveyed this both before the ignition was switched on and afterwards, when it was in motion.

So much one were the two that when they were ascending a steep hill his father would shrug his shoulders to help the vehicle along. After a time he would strain his whole back to urge the vehicle into good performance. There seemed to be a little thing of pride in getting up any hill in top gear. He rather liked remembering his dad this way. In those days all men wore hats so there was nothing

of the modern scorn for a man wearing a hat, or the present thinking that a driver of a car—male—must be dull, slow, and conservative if he wore headgear.

This day he was going with his father, and sitting in the front seat. That had hardly ever happened: almost always he sat in the back. From time to time his father would mellow in spirit, drop being the severe parent for a period, and would chat with this son of his. He had other sons, and seemed to feel it was correct behaviour to keep the sons and daughters at arm's length.

The two were off to buy a horse. The farm possessed four Clydesdales, but what was needed was a lighter, smaller animal, a gelding if possible. It needed to be the kind of horse that was used in a cart, but not heavy enough for a dray. Often a milkman, baker or butcher would want to sell his cart-horse and transfer to using a motor truck. The main requirement of this horse was that it could be used with a saddle for rounding up the cattle.

For weeks the family had talked about it. That really meant that Dad had talked about it and the family had listened. If they had merely talked then he—Goddie—had dreamed about it. His sisters each had her own hack, and his brothers used two ponies to round up the cows. He loved riding, but mostly he had to go on foot to bring the cows up to the dairy or to put them in the night paddock each evening. He had always longed to have a horse for himself. Maybe they would let him have this one for himself. He could use it in the sled to haul firewood from the back paddock, or the split fence-posts for fencing, or even bring up the full milk cans to the stand where the Milk Board lorries gathered the daily supply.

In the front of the car he went on dreaming. His father

seemed a bit relaxed, and shared some of his cunning as a buyer. 'Don't say a word, son,' he said. 'I'll knock him down from the beginning. He'll come around.'

The boy—Goddie—knew the ritual. First the long chat about the weather, grumbling about prices of fodder—oats, chaff, grain, and the meal mixtures for cows, pigs and poultry. Then a trifle of gossip about mutual acquaintances, a bit of general family history, complaints about the Government, and a chat about cars and trucks. The moment would then arrive when both hagglers would know their strategies were now under test. They would look at the animal, and the prospective buyer would offhandedly point out the horse's defects and the seller—not offhandedly—its remarkable excellencies. There would be some haggling, some concession, and finally the sale would be made, the buyer congratulating himself for being a bargain hunter, and the salesman—for his part—as having made a reasonable profit from the sale.

Goddie was remembering the time when the local auctioneer was trying to sell an unusually tall Clydesdale to his father. His dad had scowled at the animal. It was so large it would eat a lot, so tall it would be difficult to get the winkers on it, and when yoked together with another the pair would not be balanced. His final thrust was, 'I'm not so sure that he'll live much longer.'

The auctioneer had thought he might sell one or another beast, if not this gangling black gelding. So he was concessive. With a bit of a sly grin to Dad, and a rueful look at the horse—whose name was 'Major'—he had said, 'You're damn fight, Boss. He's a falling-to-pieces horse, isn't he?'

Goddie had giggled at that, especially when the auc-

tioneer winked at him. Dad had nodded too, being a little pleased with himself. He had said jocularly, 'Ready for the knacker's yard, eh?' All three of them had laughed and great *bonhomie* had been established amongst them.

After that they had talked about the other horses and his dad had bought a plump and passive mare, rather beautiful, being a bit brindled—a sort of English Short-horn colour.

They had then turned to go to the car, and his father had wheeled slightly, looking at the auctioneer, and had said, in a tone which indicated he was doing the salesman good, 'Look here, I'll take that old bag of bones off you. It'll save you sending him in to be boiled up for pig-food.'

The auctioneer had been caught with surprise. He must have been anxious to get him off his hands. 'O.K. Boss,' he had said, 'Don't let's haggle. Give him to you for a river.'

All the way home Dad had crowed in his own dignified fatherly and masterly way, and Goddie had wondered what they would do with the beast. He had a feeling the auctioneer was chortling with joy.

They reached the place and Goddie's heart nearly leapt from his bosom when he saw the golden gelding. It was young, full of life, noble, and even beautiful. He knew his dad was looking it over very carefully. After a time his father asked for it to be saddled up, which the owner was glad to do. He offered a bit of advice.

'Don't have a tight rein,' he advised. 'Just give it its head a bit. Not too much of course, but enough.' The boy's father wore jodhpurs, and he swung up into

the saddle. He let the horse have its head a trifle, wheeled it, trotted it, and gave it opportunity for a mild canter. He returned and dismounted.

'Strong little beast,' he said, 'and I bet a bit flighty at times.'

The owner was reserved in his answer. 'Just been on lots of green grass,' he said. 'I agree he's got lots of life, but nothing vicious in him.'

Goddie's heart was in his mouth. Inwardly he was praying, terrified lest his father lose the purchase either by putting down the horse or trying to get it too cheaply. The boy had fallen in love with the gelding and wanted to have it for himself. He was thinking desperately that Dad might buy it for him, and later—much later—he could refund the price to his parent.

It was then the perennial thought of his mind—a thought seldom far from him—came to him afresh. He could not hear the seller or buyer for the very pressure of it. Whenever the thought came he would enter into a great sadness, mixed with a bit of resentment, a smidgen of anger, but a great melancholy regarding himself as a person.

They all—his father, his brothers and sisters, schoolteacher and others—thought that he was dull, slow to comprehend, hesitant in decision and action. Sometimes they even jeered. His youngest sister, when she was a small tot, followed the family who called him 'Mister Snail'. The nickname had stuck, and the young sister had called him 'Mitter Nail'. Henceforth it had been 'Mitter Nail'. This was the thought that persisted, 'They think I'm dumb. They think I'm slow.'

He was a bit bitter about that. He knew it had nothing

to do with dullness—for he knew himself to be far from dull—but he had a fear he would make the wrong decision. That was why he was slow to make decisions. Inwardly he questioned many things that they did, but never wanted to comment. Sometimes he would simply fear their gang-like attitude and methods, so he would wait until they all settled down and he would slip into the meal quietly, hoping to escape their mirth and ridicule.

If his father would ask why he was late, he would say, 'I forgot' In fact he forgot nothing. Only his mother understood, and she would try to stuff him with courage and with faith in himself. She believed he had great abilities. She watched him closely, and when the others were not around she would give him pep-talks. Perhaps they were effective, or would one day prove to be so. He didn't know.

Now, leaning over the rails of the stockyard, he wondered what would happen. He wondered whether he would ever have a horse, and whether his father would ever trust him to do anything. One thing he could and which the family acknowledged—was milking. At that time milking machines were looked upon with suspicion by some farmers. They thought the cows dried off more quickly and that the machines were hard on the teats and udders.

He couldn't think of anything else that he did well, except perhaps his secret writing. They knew nothing of that

Now he was watching his father and the horse-owner. He had little joy in watching and listening. He had a sickening

feeling that the owner would refuse to sell it. His father was pressing the man, and the man was backing away, his face without a smile.

Suddenly—and to his surprise—the two men had completed the sale. His father had asked about the saddle and bridle, and said that if the owner would throw it in for an extra ten pounds then he would agree to the price. A smile had broken out on the other man, and the gelding was theirs.

Goddie could scarcely breathe for astonishment and delight

‘His name is Guffy,’ the man, was saying. ‘And don’t give him too much oats. Keep the grain down altogether. You need to keep him down a bit. Chaff and hay are O.K.’

He patted Guffy affectionately. ‘Good feller,’ he was saying. He glanced at the boy’s father writing the cheque. With his eyes he invited the boy to get into the saddle. The boy looked doubtfully towards his father, and his father was looking out at him from the corner of his eye.

Then his father nodded. ‘Get into the saddle,’ he commanded. ‘You ride it home,’ he added, and Goddie almost went insane through unbelief and delight. He was unable to believe his father was putting the whole matter of the horse into his hands. A second’s thought made the matter rational. His father had brought him—Goddie—to ride the gelding home.

For the benefit of the two men he wheeled the horse around, trotted a little, cantered a short distance, and wheeled it again, and returned to the men.

His father was neither critical nor uncritical. His nod was neutral. ‘All right, son,’ he said, ‘off you go. It’s a long way home.’ At the same time he nodded to the other man.

‘I see you have some good pigs over there. I’d like to have a look at them.’

The boy turned the gelding towards the road, cantering down the track, going through the gateway and turning the horse’s head towards home.

Once out of sight of the farm he urged the gelding, trying to get it to a gallop. He let it have plenty of the bit, and freedom to race. It loped slowly, taking its time. He felt frustrated. One thing the boy wanted to do was to get home—if possible—before his father. The gelding was content to be at a slow canter or to alternate with a gentle trot. The boy had never worn spurs, and so he patted the horse about the neck and shoulders, gave it gentle kicks with his heels, and expected a good response.

The gelding seemed to ignore him and the old depression returned to the boy. For some minutes clouds covered the sun, and he shivered. All things seemed to point to his incompetence. The term ‘Mitter Nail’ came back, and he was humiliated and angry. Even so he tried to keep rapport with the gelding, who—for its part—seemed to ignore any overtures.

In anger the boy pulled the horse’s head up, tightening the reins to do so. With that the gelding objected, pulled against the bit and turned his trot into a canter, then to a strong gallop. The boy’s surprise made him pull even stronger on the reins. This brought Guffy into a fierce gallop, and fighting against his rider’s strong grip he stretched out his neck and head, and was flying across the soft tuff.

Goddie was thrilled. He kept the rein tight even though the gelding seemed close to bolting. Faster and faster they went, boy and rider, and it seemed they were one as the

horse's head and neck were stretched forward. The boy was also stretched forward, holding the reins fast. The gelding seemed to appreciate the tussle between him and the boy. Neither surrendered his pride or intentions.

The boy had a fleeting thankfulness that his father could not see him. He trusted they were out of sight or that the two men were pondering pigs. The boy also had a faint wish that his father would come by in the Chrysler, and see his son handling the horse so well.

Somewhere, in him, there was a faint uneasiness that what he was doing was not quite correct, but then he didn't care. It was as though for the first time in his life he was really confident. He was certainly free of other critical human beings, and he did not need the encouragement of his mother. He was free!

He had a sense that the gelding, also, was free. He had the strange thought that this was the first time the horse had been ridden the way he was riding it. Being held tightly did not mean the beast resented the rider. In fact it seemed that rider and horse were one, and the horse had confidence in him only because he could hold fight reins. The boy had the sense that the horse was as thrilled as he was. Almost the boy melted into his steed, and the gelding into him. The boy, who knew all about Pegasus, wondered whether at this point they were not flying—as one.

The horse was unwearied, the boy vibrant with a new kind of living. They flew towards the farm, and the family. Someone had opened the gate and he flew up the track that they called 'the drive'. As they neared the stables the boy gave rein to the horse and it slackened its pace. By the time they arrived at the stable doors the gelding came to a stop.

His sisters had run from the house, his brothers were standing around in a half circle, and the last of the brothers was still waiting at the gate because he had seen the Chrysler on the road. He saw the gentle admiration in their eyes, and with it a bit of unbelief.

His youngest sister said, with uninhibited admiration, 'Gee, Goddie, you can sure ride.'

The others nodded conservatively, and one said, 'Here comes the Old Man.'

Their father drove the car into the garage, locked the garage, and turned back to the stables.

The boy had a strange feeling as he saw his father's face. His father was saying, 'Don't you know how to ride a horse?'

The family stood silent. Goddie felt the old sense of uselessness and despair creep back. The whole exercise of joy had failed!

He noticed that the family did not attack him. In fact it seemed their admiration was still on their faces and in their stance, even if slightly subdued. His mother had emerged from the house and was watching the drama from the steps. He could hear his father speaking.

'Look how you raced the horse. The man said you must not give it a tight rein but let it be loose. If you had remembered, it would have gone more slowly.' The boy felt there was little censure in the statement, only mildly given advice.

Never had he dared to talk back to his father, and even now it was not quite that. 'I held a tight rein on purpose,' he said. 'I wanted to race, and I loved it.'

His brothers and sisters drew in their breath. He waited for the explosion, but there was none. His father's eyes

had narrowed somewhat, but there was also a faint smile around his lips. More than that, there was no anger. Instead his father spoke to the family.

'You should have seen him,' he said with a gurgle, 'like Darby Munro on Phar Lap.' Then he smiled visibly. 'He was trying to beat the Chrysler, he was.' He grinned now at the absurdity of that idea. 'If I hadn't been talking to the fellow about pigs, he would never have done it. As it was, he did pretty well.'

The family was stunned, and they grinned carefully lest there would be a reaction from their male parent. For his part he had a question. 'Guess what colour the gelding is?' he asked, and then went on, 'You could think it was brown or black, eh?' he said. 'In fact under all that sweat and lather it's a golden gelding.'

He turned to the boy. 'Now you get down off that horse and get some bags and rub it down until it's dry. Then you give it a good curry-combing, and don't you come inside until it's dry and out of danger.'

Goddie slipped from the saddle. He looked directly at his father and received a clear look in return. He said clearly, 'Thanks a lot, Dad. I won't race it like that again. I didn't think about the sweat and it getting cold, and all that'

The hint grin was still there on his father's face. 'You'll race it again,' he said, 'but you better not do it when I'm around, and if you raise a lather and let it stand in the cold I'll thrash you to within an inch of your life!' There was no venom in his voice, only a dry humorous indifference.

His brothers and sisters returned to their grins, but they looked at him as he led the gelding into the old stone stables. They would all have helped him, gladly, to dry

down the horse, but they knew that was forbidden.

When his father walked towards the steps and their mother, they all looked at Goddie gleefully and with substantial admiration. He felt the dark dogs within him scamper off into their night. Everything about him blazed with light, and in his mind he was thinking of that glorious ride, the tight rein, and the horse being one with him, both letting their life be and express itself in some new freedom.

As he rubbed the horse down, and as he brought it back to be a golden gelding, the thought of doing it again, and even again and again was in his mind, and his grin resembled his father's grin, and for that matter all the grins of the family.

The Man in the War Wards

Introduction: The Penultimate Ward

HE SAID, as he came out of the anaesthetic, ‘This must be the last time—the last ward.’ He thought to himself, drowsily, ‘This might be the last time they operate on me.’ He just wasn’t sure. When he awoke the second time she was there—that wife of his—and she was looking at him anxiously. He didn’t know why she was anxious.

After a few days he knew why she was anxious. He, himself, hadn’t felt well. The patient opposite to him had read his medical notes—tucked away in the wire frame at the end of the bed. He had read ‘patient in danger’, or some similar comment. Not until the terrible sickness had come upon him, and the awful pain in his back, did he realize there was something wrong.

Later he remembered the things that happened—the sister pooh-poohing this old man, telling him there was nothing wrong. Old soldiers were always apt to find something wrong. If they were not careful, this kind of thinking could become their life—their way of living. He

hadn’t cared much for that comment, seeing he was always urgent with life.

The ward was comfortable enough, and the care taken of the patients was reasonable, but he had an uneasiness. Lying on the barouche outside the X-ray Clinic he thought his back was going to break, so painful it was. After a time he was fighting for his breath. Then came the high temperature and the terrible sweating. Eventually they rushed him back to the wards.

They had a needle in his arm, and fluid flowing into him. The fan was blowing on him, cooling him. Then they applied oxygen to him. He knew there was something wrong. Doctors—including a surgeon—who were not on the case, came to visit him. They were disturbed, and began to make enquiries.

After a time they took him from that ward to another hospital, to have a nuclear scan, and they were careful how they handled him. Then he was at peace, secure in a new ward in a new hospital. After a time he began to mend.

There was still some life left to him. He felt himself smiling. He liked his wife sitting there, holding his hand. Maybe this was the last of the many wards he had been in.

War Ward One: Gilman Barracks

There had, in fact, been many wards. The first had been at Gilman Barracks on Singapore Island, and it was in February 1942. They had told him it was near Queen Alexandria Military Hospital. He hadn’t known much about the geography of the place. There had been too

much pain for that kind of thing: so he had just grinned when they told him the hospital was really an Army barracks. 'Very nice barracks,' he had said to himself, wondering whether he would lose his leg. In his bizarre free-lance writer's way he was always collecting short stories—about himself and others. Right now, at the very moment of suppressing his pain, he was shaping stories. He knew he loved stories. He wasn't quite sure why, but that didn't trouble him.

To him stories meant persons, characters, their natural unique beings, their special personal things. Take, for example, the Irish surgeon. He not only sounded Irish: he was Irish, and he was enjoying himself, hugely. All around him lay wounded men, and he was joking with them. Mostly he was joking about them, in their very presence, and they seemed to like it. They were a bit pitiful, though. Some of the young English soldiers were just terrified, and he joked mostly with them. He even joked with those who were 'bomb-happy' ('shell-shocked' to you, if that is the only term you know). He just ignored their glazed eyes, and went on joking.

Denny heard him, watching him with some astonishment. The man was too rich in humour to be genuine. It must be some great act. Were all Irish like this? Questions such as this one kept irrupting like machine-gun stutter in Denny's brain. He grinned back at the surgeon, the medical major, as though that were expected of him.

The major had one of the sisters picking out about a millions bits of shrapnel from a man's back, and the man was groaning, but not protesting. The back was bloodied with metal acne. Denny didn't want to keep looking at that back but couldn't take his eyes away. Besides, it even

seemed to help him in his own suffering. The pain was, of course, intolerable.

'Major,' he said, 'when are you going to do something for me?' He meant, 'When are you going to set my leg?' Even from where he was, looking down at it, he could see it was a bit awry. It was smashed of course, much of the flesh blown away from the thigh. He had seen that before.

The surgeon gave him a bit of a sidelong look and then erupted into laughter. 'It's you Aussies,' he said, 'you are a strange bunch.' There was nothing in his tone to give offence. It was just admiration: that was all.

'This big Aussie,' said the surgeon, as he was laughing, 'this big Aussie came in holding his head on. He had it between his two hands. "Let me look at it," I said, but he wouldn't let me take his hands away. "Doc," he said, "it will fall off if I take my hands away."'

The major was running his hands down the legs of a wounded Tommy. 'Take him away,' he said to a sister. 'He doesn't need an operation now. He'll be all right' The nurse took him away.

Denny said, 'There's a fair bit of pain, Major.'

The major nodded. 'Bet there is,' he said. He added, 'It won't be long, now.'

That was an old Army statement, 'It won't be long now.' It was for people who grinned foolishly and were airy about life.

It was long. About a million hours, that was all. Pain which surged and kept exaggerating itself. He had hardly ever had pain. He knew so little about it. It was a new world for him. He had a world of his own now, in this pain, but around him there was another whole world: men crying out like children, and pitiful, looking for

comfort Denny had been taught by a Stoic father, so he only sought his right to have the pain banished. He wasn't angry about it. He was not even bewildered. It was his own damned fault, anyway. He had rushed the machine-gun nest and the Japs had shot him down. Foolhardy stupidity. He had actually gloried in his idiot rush towards the nest. 'Got to stop that yammering gun,' he had said. So he had, but they had got him like this before he got them.

They had hunted for a vein—that surgical major, and that altogether too beautiful English Army sister. They had giggled a bit about not being able to find the vein. The strong blue eyes of the major actually showed a trifle of pity, and the sister gave a beautiful smile which made him feel like a hero.

After a time they found the vein somewhere deep down in the sunken flesh. They looked triumphant.

The major said, 'It's going to hurt a bit. Like a balloon in your chest.'

It wasn't just a party balloon or even an aerial balloon. It was a dirigible, growing in him. Now something like terror came to him. He nearly cried out, and this against his stern Stoic creed. His chest must burst. The pain and the thought combined horrifically. While they were doing that, the transfusion was resurrecting the pain about the ligature. The doctor was laughing at the blood as it poured down from the beaker connected immediately with the discovered vein.

He knew nothing about blood coming into a person so fast. The doctor was enlightening him, even though he was only addressing the sister. 'Ever seen this before?' he

was asking her, and she was shaking her head, wonderingly. 'Hope he doesn't get an air-bubble,' he was saying with a chuckle. He glanced sideways at Denny and laughed. 'Could finish you, Aussie,' he said, but there was pity in his voice. A realist was the Irish surgeon: of that there could be no doubt.

Denny thought the relief must come now. The operation must soon happen. The sister was still finding bits of shell acne in the sobbing soldier. They were giving anaesthetic to another of the wounded. Denny felt a great jealousy welling up in him. He broke his Stoic creed.

'When are you going to do me, Major?' he asked.

There was compassionate laughter in the Major. 'After a while,' he said. 'Got to let the blood get around in you. Too soon right now.'

The sister gave him a bit of her love. She was giving it to all the serious cases.

When the Irish doctor had gone for something in another room, she whispered to Denny, 'Can't give you a needle for pain. It would kill you if I did.' Denny thought he wouldn't mind risking it, but he said nothing. Behind the pain the love of the Tommy sister got to him. He kept enduring the bursting chest, even though his own breath was coming in heaving gasps. He thought he might die.

Most of eternity seemed to have passed when they wheeled the anaesthetic machine towards him. It was like a sweet and useful dream. It happened and yet it did not immediately happen. They left him for a time. Then it did happen. 'Keep breathing but not too deeply,' a voice said.

What he would never forget, even into old age, was the relief from pain. It had been fire in his veins, his arteries, his bones. It had been from tip to toe. It had been an angry

storm, an excruciating surge, a wild fire bursting all over him, flooding him until he wanted to cry out. Only one thing kept him from doing that and it was not his Stoic training. It was just the knowledge that somehow this was how it had been meant to be. He was far from a fatalist but he always had joy in knowing this was how things had to be. He had always had rich predestinarian blood in his veins, and somehow it had remained.

He felt the pain drain away. The sweetest richest thing in all the world and in all time is the cessation of pain. Denny had never known pain of any dimension. Nor had he ever known the delight of pain slowly ceasing. In fact at that moment all life was ceasing and he was going into a beautiful white mist.

When he came out of the white mist he was in a ward. He was at a loss what to do. Somewhere there was pain but it was localized. He must have been saying things because on one side of him was a Tommy, an English soldier. He had a large field dressing on his left thigh. Denny thought, 'He hasn't had his operation yet.' He felt everyone should have an operation. Then he saw the platform splint, and his own leg on it. It seemed like a foreign object to him, but he guessed everything was under control.

The Tommy said, 'You feel all right, chum?'

Denny nodded. His throat was dry but he could do more than croak. 'I'm O.K.,' he said briefly.

'I'm lying on my back,' he thought. When he was young he would get vertigo if he lay on his back. The bed would go around in circles. Here it was stable. Then the groans came to his ears. They were coming from everywhere. Some were muted and some weren't. He listened to

gasped mutterings, and angry cries, and pitiful pleadings. He saw a sister going about and she was jabbing people with needles. He thought a lot about needles. Then he thought about hospitals and their wards. Months ago he had been in a military hospital. He had contracted typhoid fever, or was it typhus? His mind wasn't working properly. Anyway, it had been feverish and painful. There had been lovely Aussie nurses. Come to think of it, they had been very kind. Drowsiness took him again, and he slept.

The next time he woke it was to see the Indian in the bed on his other side. The Tommy was on one side, all talkative, but the Indian on the other side was rolling his eyes and saying nothing. He looked to be filled with fear. After a time his eyes stopped rolling. Denny's heart contracted a bit when he saw that the sepoy had died. He was so still. After a time they came and took him and put another Indian in his place. That one was also about to die. The Indians seemed to die quickly. He wondered why that was.

He remembered meeting with a British officer and his Indian troops on a tennis court—of all things. The Indians were Sikhs—fierce looking—and they were refusing to go into action. 'Cowards!' Denny had cried, thinking he was helping. They rushed him, with their bayonets, but their officer swept them aside.

He was looking at Denny. 'Don't ever say that to Sikhs,' he said fiercely. 'They'll kill you for that'

Denny had not been amused.

The pain had come back of course, but it brought no storm with it, and Denny reckoned carefully that he could

live with it. The other patients who were having needles would cease their pitiful cries. After a time they would start up again, and there would be another needle. Lots drowsed under the hypodermics. She came to him in the evening, the little nurse with his mother's maiden name. She was Irish. She was sentimental: she was romantic. She was kind. Also she was practical. 'How is your pain?' she asked.

He said, 'I'm O.K., Sister.' He felt he was meant to have pain, and because it was not the tempestuous pain which had been prior to the operation, he was content enough.

She was doubtful. 'You're not being the tough Aussie, are you?' she whispered. He rather liked the intimacy of the whispering but shook his head.

'I'm O.K., Sister,' he said, and she left him.

The noise had been all around them, the noises of war. They had not escaped them in this privatized place, the place with the great red cross painted on the roof. Somewhere there was the bursting of mortars: he knew that sound. Shells often screamed overhead and humphed somewhere in the distance. He could hear the sound of the Zeros, the deadly Jap fighter-bombers, as they hummed higher than the shells of the barrage. Sometimes a bomb dropped, not near, but his leg rolled and rolled on the platform splint. Once or twice the sisters rushed to him and held it, but the shaking was brief. He noticed the Tommy in the next bed was terrified. He seemed more terrified each time an Indian would die. He would hide his face in the pillow. He wouldn't look as they took the corpse away under a white sheet, on a stretcher.

When he talked to the Tommy he had an impression of guilt. That was strange, because the Irish surgeon on his round wanted to look at his wound but the patient waved him on to more needy cases. The major took that at face value and was grateful. He was a busy man. He nodded to Denny. 'Won't disturb your leg,' he said. 'We'll give it a bit of time first'

Denny admired the young Tommy and yet wondered about the guilty look. Later the surgeon discovered there was no wound to speak of, or anyway only one about the size of a sixpence. It held a neat little piece of shrapnel. The surgeon's lips had curled. The soldier replaced the field-dressing. Someone giggled, but the Tommy just stared at him.

Looking back, Denny thought that to be quite a ward. The shells thumped closer and then into the ground of the improvised hospital. Bombs landed close by. Mortars shrieked and so did Japanese voices. Then there was quietness and one of the orderlies went to get water from the swimming pool. Machine-gun fire drove him back. They were given a cup of fluid a day. Fire began to visit their veins again. Some looked pitiful without water. Some kept pleading for fluid. Like him, they had lost lots of blood. At the same time there was a conspiracy of bravery. The nurses fostered this.

The lovely Irish sister gave him a needle one time. She came each night, whispering. She had a torch which was shielded. It shone somewhere near his face. 'You're in pain,' she accused him gently.

'It's O.K.,' he said, but his body cried for relief. There

had been shakings and rockings from bombs and shells, and the pain would keep coming in surges.

'I think you're a liar,' she said in a whisper. He wanted not to cry, and he didn't. He was glad she knew. 'When did you have your last needle?' she asked.

'Haven't had any needles,' he said as softly. 'I wanted one badly when I came, but no one ever gave me one.' He had not had a needle in all his life, not in all his twenty-three years.

She was amazed. She knew patients lied about needles. 'If we had given you one then you would have died,' she said, 'but now it is all right.'

She paused, searching about in her pocket. 'You sure you haven't had one in the last couple of hours?'

He felt a trifle angry because he loathed lying. 'Just leave me,' he said roughly, being close to tears. 'I don't tell lies.'

It was her turn to be angry. 'They never gave you a needle?' she said with astonishment. She took out a small bottle and rubbed his arm with something. Then he felt the needle bite in. Astonishingly she bent down and caressed his face with a kiss. Later, when he thought about it, he knew it to be a gentle gift: nothing else.

'You'll sleep well now,' she said, and he felt the tears stinging him. She went away like a solitary and beautiful angel. If he was never to forget the anaesthetic and the retreating pain, no less was he to forget the morphine injection. The pain receded, the throb ceased, the mind tired with pain became cool. The drowsiness was from heaven: he knew that. Pain cancelled had a whole vast message in it somewhere, but he was no longer thinking. He was sleeping.

It was the next morning the Japanese came. From dawn until mid-morning the fighting had been explosive. The yammering of the machine-guns had been close, and the cries and the explosions. He knew those cries. He had heard them on the foreshores of the Straits, looking towards Johore, and he had heard them at Bukit Timah. Now they were close, and the Tommy in the next bed was afraid. He kept looking at Denny as though he, Denny, could protect him. He had given up his pretence of having a wound. Sometimes he helped Sister, but now he was back in the bed, cowering. Denny decided he was only a kid, a raw recruit without training, and a conscript at that. He pitied him gently. All the ward pitied him.

There was a period of silence between the dying away of the machine-guns, the cessation of the mortars, and the entrance into the ward. The small Jap soldiers seemed alert and polite. They kept their eyes open for any attack, but none was forthcoming. An officer came to Denny. 'What nationality?' he asked simply.

Denny said, 'Australian,' and the man nodded delightedly.

'Australia is very good,' he said, still nodding. 'They helped us in our earthquake in 1924.'

Denny had been too young in 1924 to think about those things. Now he was partially grateful.

The Japanese officer peered at the platform splint. He sheathed his bayonet. A large samurai sword was swinging from his belt. His look was almost tender. He shook his head. 'No good fighting Australians,' he said. His English was perfect.

Denny asked him for some water. Day by day he had dreamed of fluid, and of food. They had only one Army

biscuit each a day, and one cup of fluid—nearly always cocoa. No one could get to the swimming pool.

The officer sent an escort to the swimming pool with some of the orderlies. Meanwhile he gave his water-bottle to Denny. Denny shared it with others. He didn't offer it to the Tommy in the next bed. He talked to the officer.

Then the officer was gone. The soldiers were gone. Only a guard or two remained to keep watch. What the patients did not know was that the Koreans had burst into the Queen Alexandria Hospital, not far from them, and killed everyone. They had been heavily drugged— those Koreans. They had slain the wounded, walking them to slit trenches and then bayoneting or machine-gunning them.

All the staff had been killed, even a patient on the operating table. One orderly had fallen under an officer who was bayoneted. The officer told the orderly to keep quiet. His blood flowed over the hidden man. The orderly was saved by his blood. Later he escaped with the gruesome story. The soldiers who had come into Denny's hospital and ward were the Imperial Japanese Guards. They were Emperor Hirohito's personal troops.

Denny was wondering about being in a ward. He seemed so protected. Everything was going his way. Without protection he was helpless. He liked the Irish surgeon. He loved the Irish sister. Sometimes she would come with her needle in the night, trying to make up for the long hours when he had been unaided in his pain. Perhaps things would change. Maybe the Allied troops would come to the Island, and the nightmare would be over.

Then the order came. They were to go to Singapore City. They were to be transferred to another hospital. He

thought, with some weariness, and some pain, 'It will be another ward.' Later he wondered why he had had that thought. Just at this moment he was remembering the painful ride in the truce his leg dangling on the backboard, and jumping with each jolt of the rough roads. He was remembering the crying Indians. Sometimes they shrieked, imprecating Ram, but at other times they just sobbed pitifully.

He hoped the transference to the next ward would be more peaceful.

War Ward Two: Fullarton Building

They were taken by Army ambulance to the Fullarton Building which was next to the G.P.O. in Singapore City. He remembered seeing the building during a period of leave in 1941. With the General Post Office, it fronted a large playing area. He was a bit vague as to whether it was cricket they played there or not. Perhaps it was polo. He wasn't sure.

They hadn't been able to see much in the travelling which brought back the pain. They had taken his leg off the platform splint and it was strapped to the stretcher. Denny could look sideways a little, but mainly he saw the sky with its white clouds and washed blue. He could hear the cries of the city, and the noise of traffic. Japanese soldiers were moving everywhere. Some of them stared at him, but he didn't mind. He knew their code about non-surrender, about committing hara-kiri rather than the dishonour of surrender, especially unconditional surrender.

The Fullarton Building had been a hospital during the last days, along with other buildings, but with the surrender its numbers grew. He was carried into a long ward, and placed on the floor. There were cries everywhere about him, the cries that whimpered or complained or grumbled or protested, or which rose to a crescendo because of the intolerable pain. There was also the unmistakable smell of surgical cases, a sort of putrefaction where wounds had deteriorated, or were badly corrupted. It was the sickly sweet smell of decay.

The medical staff were busy. Stretchers were unloaded on to the floor. Most were without mattresses. His leg lay hard against the concrete floor. He felt the tears in his eyes, but he said nothing. Occasionally he would beg water, and a harassed orderly would give it, almost impatiently. He knew that for the rest of his life he would never forget the terrible and burning thirst he had known at Gilman Barracks hospital.

Here there was no Irish nurse to single him out, or the Irish surgeon to stop by him and enquire. There seemed to be no end to the wounded, and he knew there were other floors, other doctors, nurses and orderlies attending to the old wounded and the new wounded. He lay in the confusion, sensing the irritations of the overworked staff. Once or twice he slept, faint from the pain.

Late in the day they were fed. They had to beat off the flies from their food. Some whimpered with emotion as they ate. They had been starved, and the food they were eating was good. It was out of cans, but it was tasty. Denny watched some wolfing it and calling for more. He marvelled that so many men could be attended to when there was scarcely an aisle anywhere for the passage of the

orderlies. They stepped over bodies, doing their best in the enforced haste.

Denny was left all day, except for food and water. Someone had placed a sheet over his leg, but it was on the floor without any kind of splint. Towards evening a doctor moved amongst them again. He lifted the sheet, looked at the leg and then stared, aghast.

The roar he gave brought an orderly running. 'What's up, sir?' he asked.

The surgeon pointed with anger at the leg. 'You'd better hurry,' he said, 'or we'll lose that leg.'

He was lifted on to a stretcher, gently, and they hurried him to an annexe at the end of the long ward. There were others in there, serious cases by the look of them. They were trussed like turkeys, and it wasn't long before he was one with them. A sister was giving him a needle, and another was fussing about his bed. He could see the doctor was angry. He was even more angry when he found out the nationality of his new patient.

They kept him comfortable during the night, and through the next day. They cleaned out the maggots in his wound, and put in fresh vaseline gauze. Denny wondered at the yards of it spiralling down into his thigh. He wondered too at the good food, until someone told him that next door was the General Post Office, crammed with Christmas parcels, and lashings of food. The contrast with the last ward was so vivid that the tears kept pricking his eyes.

It was the next day that the senior surgeon had an argument with the Japanese officers who wanted the building. They wanted it quickly. The surgeon knew he could not oppose this. He pleaded for the dangerously ill

patients to be left until they were out of danger.

The Japanese senior officer shook his head. 'We need the building,' he said, 'and it is urgent.'

The surgeon was an Englishman, hardly able to conceal his contempt for an Asian. Like the rest, he thought it would be only a matter of days before the Island would be retaken. He was concerned for his patients. The Japanese officer was adamant, and refused.

'They'll die,' the surgeon said. 'If they're shifted they'll die.'

The other officer shrugged his shoulders. 'Too bad,' he murmured, 'but this is a war.'

The English surgeon was incredulous. 'You mean you are going to have them shifted?' he shouted in anger. When the officer nodded he rushed at him, slapping the Japanese before he could be hauled off. A commotion arose, and there was shouting. Miraculously the other Japanese officers did not kill the doctor. But there was ominous silence, and the senior officer turned on his heel.

'Tomorrow,' the Nipponese officer said grimly, wagging his stick high in the air.

The men in the wards knew little of the matter. It was a year later when Denny heard the full story. In Changi Prison Hospital he caught a glimpse one day of the wardmaster who had looked after him in the Fullarton Building ward. The man did not recognize him, for by this time he had lost a lot of weight. He listened with interest to the story.

'Do you remember those nine fellows in that annexe?' the wardmaster asked him. Denny nodded, for he had

special reason to remember them, being one of them himself.

The wardmaster retold the story of the senior surgeon and the Japanese officer. 'We had to get those fellows out, because they were the worst hit of all our patients,' he said, 'but then we knew they would never make it. We knew they would die on the way to Changi, so we filled them up with morphia. Lethal doses, you know.'

Listening to the English wardmaster, Denny remembered the sisters coming with needles every hour, so that they, the patients, had felt no pain—just a continuous ease of body. He also remembered the peaches and cream, the sultanas and the rich fruit cake they kept plying the nine patients. What he, himself, had never forgotten was the deep pity in the eyes of the English medical sisters. He had never seen or sensed such compassion—not anywhere at any time in his life. Now he knew: they—these sisters—had been pitying them because they were dying, being put out of their misery by lethal doses of morphine. At that time he had not known the word 'euthanasia'.

'What happened to the nine men?' he asked the wardmaster.

The sergeant shook his head with sorrow. 'Seven of them were English and two were Aussies. I don't know what happened to the Aussies but I guess they died too. The seven Englishmen were dead before they reached Changi.'

'I was one of the Aussies,' Denny told the wardmaster. He saw the look of shock in the eyes of the medical man. At first he was stunned and then he said in a fierce whisper, 'For God's sake never tell anyone! There would be a furore.'

In many, many years he had never told anyone, but just marvelled that the two Australians had survived.

When they had put him in the ambulance with the other Australian, he had felt marvellously comfortable. When he woke he was in another ward, in a surgical bed, and his new splint hoisted into the air. He had arrived at the prisoner-of-war camp called Changi.

War Ward Three: Changi P.O.W. Camp

Over forty years later Denny could not remember all the details. He wasn't quite sure of the order of events, or even of the wards he was in. He knew the prisoner-patients were placed in a well-built barracks—Selarang Barracks—and later taken to Roberts Barracks where the conditions were different but, then, tolerable. Later they came back to Selarang. What he remembered after being brought by the ambulance was the despair and apathy that he saw in the eyes of many around him.

Medical and surgical cases were all in the one ward. Most of the cases were suffering from bacillary dysentery, and he could hear their cries of pain. Later he came to know the same pain. Some of them looked panic-stricken, and with their cries were the cries of the badly wounded. When the cries became screams then the orderlies would administer morphine, though only on the orders of medical officers.

The food they brought for the patients to eat was thick gluey rice. As yet the newly conscripted cooks—shanghaied to do a job they had not previously known—scarcely knew how to cook it, but later they learned. From

a child he had loathed rice, although he could eat just about anything else. A thin vegetable stew scarcely gave it any taste. He envied the dysentery cases who were given canned tomato soup. He was shocked to see some of them refusing it, complaining about their pains. He would have given anything to sip the delectable soup.

Denny saw those who had lost heart just die around him, and they died because they saw no hope. Given other circumstances and encouragement they would have borne with their lot, and perhaps not have died. The shock of failure in war, the weariness of battle fatigue, and so many other factors combined to destroy the will to live. Later he was to learn that it is not only in prison camps where such things happen, but for the moment they were a surprise to him.

In the wards, at night-time, they slept only when given something for the pain. Often they heard the stuttering of machine-guns out on the shores, knowing the Japanese were disposing of the Chinese whom they hated, and— even more—feared. The sound was unforgettable. The prisoners in Changi—in their mind's eye—could see them taken out to the foreshores and massacred, arms jerking upwards, bodies falling into the low surf.

The surgical cases were moved to another ward, being taken by ambulance, and here they were crowded in, with almost no space between beds. The ambulances were then requisitioned by the Japanese. From that point onwards they used devised trailers, old lorries which were stripped down to their tables, and these were pulled by the prisoners.

The beds were close to one another in those early days; scarcely room for the doctors to have access to the patients. Sometimes the beds had to be pushed together to give the surgeons access for emergency operations in the ward. All day and night there were the groans of the badly wounded patients. Some had lost two and three limbs. Others had been wounded in the head, needing metal plates or bone grafts to cover their wounds. Some had gaping exposures of their stomachs. Many amputations had already taken place. Others lay with multiple fractures to limbs.

The surgical smell pervaded everything. New chums to ward-visiting went outside as quickly and quietly as possible and retched. Some visitors just could not recognize their former mates, so reduced were they in body and spirit. They brought what they had, meagre little offerings of food and perhaps the first infiltrations of black-market purchases. Already men were breaking through the wire at night, bartering with 'the boongs'—that homogeneous Chinese-Indian-Malay mixture of population. It was dangerous, but it was the first step in survival for some.

Denny watched his own body grow thin. At times he seemed like a spectator to his own self. His wounded leg began wasting because it was partially paralysed. From time to time small operations were carried out, draining away an abscess or trying to mend the nerve. The foot of his bed was raised high, and his splinted leg even higher. His injured leg was fastened within a Thomas splint, and the splint had its end fitted into a shoe which held everything in place—all of it lying on the slings which supported the wasting limb.

Once he saw small ants going in and out of the shoe and

he asked about that phenomenon. When they gently removed the shoe, they saw the tunnels the ants had made in the anaesthetized flesh. The surgeon was furious at the thoughtless neglect. A dead heel also came away with the removal of the shoe. Even so, his leg was retained.

Not all days were grim: far from being grim, many of them had fun. The news kept coming through from the hidden wireless, but whilst it was not good, some of it had the troops laughing. Once the Japanese claimed they had bombed the middle pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge!

Some of the most wonderful times were the Concert Nights. Even the Japanese attended, but they were mystified by the beautiful ladies on the stage, and had to be convinced they were not ladies. There was plenty of humour there, but only the healthy patients could attend.

Friendships grew between patients and medical orderlies. Perhaps 'camaraderie' is the word to describe it. Doctors were more detached but had their measure of fun. Denny remembered the day when a patient was under anaesthetic to have a stiffened arm manipulated, and the surgeon was pressing the unconscious man's shoulders to the floor, saying, 'Do you give in? Do you give in?' whilst the patients laughed helplessly. There was plenty of humour around the ward.

This was the ward in which he learned more than in any other. Denny learned lots about himself, of course. But he was more intent on finding out what human beings are. He was able to read as never before. Sometimes he consumed three books a day from the hospital library. Even though his head was lower than his feet he learned to write at great length. Some friends saw to it that he had plenty of writing material.

Then there was the thinking. Denny's mind had grasped the fact that if he read for so many hours a day, thought for so many hours a day, and wrote for so many hours a day, then he would learn a special self-control and discipline—something he may never have been able to accomplish had he been free of his prison camp. His great plan for using his life had its beginning there.

Denny watched human beings—how they reacted to life and circumstances under which they had to live. He saw the dread of fear of wounds and illness in some, and the calm and quietude of others. He saw those who used their wounds and sicknesses to induce support from others, whilst there were those who rejected any kind of help. They had decided to battle it out on their own— stoically.

He learned how low-spirited and despairing some became under adverse pressures, and how others seemed to flourish most when matters were difficult for them. He also learned from those who visited the patients. Some could scarcely tolerate the sight of men who were wounded, especially when some of them were dying: Perhaps it was fear of death, or even anger at God for not changing their situation. Whatever was the cause, anger showed in their eyes, and after a time they would leave. Some stayed and were irritable. Others showed the most amazing capacity for compassion and help. He watched them as they cared for their mates, willing them into life and healing.

Denny was shocked beyond measure when they brought him the news one day that some of their number were filching special supplies of food and medicines from the hospital store. The food was kept for those who

became exceptionally ill. The medicines were as valuable as gold. The depravity which the human spirit can know and exercise etched itself upon him. He felt a great wave of depression envelop him.

His own state of living was carried on in illnesses and fevers. He had known no illnesses in his twenty-three years of life. Now he had a succession of them—malaria, dengue fever, the painful visitations of dysentery—until his body was so thin that his backbone showed through where his stomach seemed to have collapsed. His whole body was a living skeleton, and his limbs so skinny that he could put his thumb and longest finger around his thigh. His eyes receded, his facial bones had the skin tightened on them. His closest friend came to see him after a long absence and ran from the ward—from the sight, the smell and the horror of the living death.

One day they took him to the operating theatre for surgery. The doctors were short of surgical gowns and had discovered—somewhere—a cache of new butcher's coats. He grinned as his favourite surgeon hove in sight. 'How appropriate!' he had commented, but the surgeon had not smiled. Later he discovered the previous patient who was simply having a circumcision had died under the anaesthetic. Nor did he know until much later that his own heart had stopped during his operation.

When the pain-killing drugs ceased, he learned not only about others but had painful revelations of himself. Denny had always pictured himself as a person of integrity, but he felt the waves of yearning beat up against him—the waves the drug addict knows only too well.

There was something terrifying about the withdrawal from pain relief. It was confronting to know his strong dependence upon morphine and lesser pain-killers. He found himself ready to cheat and to lie—to do anything in order to force them to give him morphine. Later he realized the source of his addiction—the treatment they had given him at the Fullarton Building ward.

When that barrier was overcome, another presented itself—the unloosing of his knee joint, the stretching of his ligaments, the dread of the thigh breaking again, and the fearful prospect of learning to walk again. He had been many months in his bed with its upwards slope, and felt he would slide off the end when it was set down level with the floor.

Years later when Denny looked back, he could not believe a grown man could be as fearful as—or even more fearful than—a child taking its first steps in life. The pain of bending the knee, of his leg dangled over the side of the bed—these would have been laughable had they not, in fact, been pitiable. At night he would worry over the next day's exercises, and after them, over the pain they brought. The surgeon used severity, chiding, discipline and encouragement, even to promising a special copy of one of Dickens's novels if he would get the leg to bend to a right angle.

When Denny could walk it became an adventure, though not without danger. Long ago the amputees had learned to flash around the ward on their crutches. The nerve pain, which was never to cease in his leg—not throughout all the years ahead—often made him wish his own leg had been amputated so that he could have been without pain. Later, of course, he was grateful it had not

been taken off.

One day, as he was passing the officers' ward, he heard a stern voice: 'Stop that limping! Get rid of that walking stick! Walk naturally!' The orders were barked out with military precision, and it was a brigadier who, whilst being an artillery officer, was also a surgeon. He told the story of a man who had been his friend in the First World War, and who had never let go his walking stick,

'Made it his moral and psychological support,' the brigadier growled. 'Let the world know he had been wounded,' the surgeon said critically. 'Don't get into that syndrome, son,' he told Denny in a kindly voice. 'It'll sap your manhood.'

It was difficult walking with a dropped foot whose toes were still and would not move; even so, he never forgot the kindly but gruff old First World War artillery officer.

One night Denny had to return to his ward. He had been visiting a friend in another place, and suddenly the lights went out. He had to descend flights of steps which were inordinately steep and had no hand-rails. There was no moon, and all stars were hidden by cloud.

He looked down into the murky depths of the night, and suddenly felt afraid. One movement of his thin and shaky legs might mean he would topple. His vivid imagination saw him falling and tumbling incessantly, and the shattered body still and useless below. There was no one about. Not a sound broke the uncanny silence. He remembered a phrase from somewhere, 'The dark night of the soul.' He shivered, knowing he would never forget the fear of that night. *The dark night of the soul!*

A warm gruff voice said, 'Like a hand, mate?' They made their way down the steps together.

Denny the Convalescent

He still lived in the ward. He guessed he would until they returned him to his own country. And he was treated as a patient; they kept him from the working parties. They made him to be a librarian to the officers, and he liked that. It let him get amongst books. It also gave him a better atmosphere in which to write. He learned to bind books. He also learned to write them. He amassed hundreds of poems—his own.

Now he was not really a patient—not, anyway, when the malaria was distant, and the dengue did not dun him. Once he had a swollen diphtheritic ulcer on one hand, and because he was not strong really, this kept him within the confines of the ward.

He had his times of thinking, still trying to work out man's moral dilemma, still trying to work out the ethics of law and love. Others of his mind gathered together and talked, but without coming to any conclusion. Even so, they were thinking in terms of how to live when they returned home,

Then it happened! The men from the working parties which had been on the Burma-Thailand railway project returned to Changi. Not all of them, for at least one third had remained north, dead in their graves from typhoid fever, tropical ulcers, dysentery, beriberi and other weakening diseases. They had been cruelly treated, beaten, starved, and weakened to the place of no return. Some had lost their memory of once having been men of a proud race. They had sunk into their own filth and expired.

Many of those who had returned no longer looked like human beings. They looked like little monkeys—thin arms and legs, wrinkled faces, eyes receded, hair little more than a weak thin fluff. Some had the scabrous elephant-looking hide of malnutrition. Others were bloated with beriberi, faces puffed and shining, but were they to be drained of that oedematous fluid they would have been skinny and deathlike.

Denny came closest of ever to know what human zombies really are. The spirits of many of them had retreated from reality. He had a great desire to give them a recall to life, but he felt helpless. Now they were in the ward and—in a sense—he was on the outside. They were patients, and in a curious way he was a doctor—a doctor of the soul. The things he had thought of over the past couple of years now began to bear fruit. He sat and talked with them through the smell of sulphur ointment—the only treatment for scabies.

Slowly they began to mend. Timidly they made their way back to where their mates were, but the hesitancy remained. Denny wondered whether it would ever go away, whether these would ever stand upright again. All of them bore inner scars. He guessed some would die of the mauling they had had—'man's inhumanity to man.'

War Ward Four: Kranji

When the prisoners finally had to go within the confines of the Changi Gaol—as distinct from the Changi Prison Camp—the sick prisoners were removed to a camp at Kranji. Denny, of course, did not even dream that one day

he would come back to this place, or rather to the War Memorial Cemetery which would then be close by the old Kranji Hospital site.

In that hospital camp they lived beneath the leafy rubber trees, in huts built of bamboo and attap palm. For over a year they were to attend to the men who had come back from up north. They were to receive patients from Changi prison who suffered heavily from claustrophobia—fear of confined space—and send back the patients who suffered from agoraphobia—fear of open space.

Denny watched so many die. Some of them had been his friends. He also shared what faith he had with them, and that seemed to make a difference. He grew to know when men were about to die. A couple of times it seemed he might be dying himself. Sometimes he felt so weak. But it was the weak he wanted to help, and he knew that meant an almost impossible infusion of moral courage.

They watched the silver ships sail high in the sky. They heard the drone of the great flying fortresses, and dreaded the sound of sirens, and the scream of falling bombs, but marvellously the bombs missed their camp. They could even hear the shrill sound of the bombs as they passed over them, but pass over they did, and that was the relief.

One day he had to bury a friend, and the cortege wound its way up the hill to the open space of the cemetery. Up there Denny could breathe in a manner different from the way he did in the covered campus of the hospital, hidden in the rubber trees, full of unchanging shade. He looked across the Island and marvelled. It seemed so large, so impossible to bomb, even by those flying fortresses. That day he experienced a freedom that soaked into him and kept him in the months ahead—kept

him free behind the barbed wire, and the duckbeat of the Nipponese guards.

Sometimes life and release seemed so remote, so far away, that they dared not dream. At other times it was all dreams. Alternately the news was good and bad. Bad, because as Pacific island after Pacific island fell there were yet so many more to fall. Good, because the tide had turned. More silver fortresses droned overhead. More bombs fell. Victory was in the air, but there was trepidation in many a prisoner's heart at the thought of the immutable Nipponese. Would the prisoners of war be wiped out in a cold bloodbath?

Denny thought it might be good to climb a tree, but he looked woefully at his gammy leg, and thought it an impossible feat. He grinned—an adrenalin charge might get him to the first branch, anyway! In any case he had been landed temporarily on his back again with his first acute attack of renal colic, A rare phial of MSA sent him off into freedom from pain and a mild hallucinatory condition. He saw himself climbing into leaf venation. He knew how a leaf felt! It was all fantastic and a bit debilitating.

Then suddenly Kranji was finished. The war was over. Planes invaded the air-space over the camp, and air-crews filmed the ragged skeletons that turned up their faces and cheered. A few died in the wards, and others were ill with the sudden increase of rations. Well-dressed commandos came into the Hospital Camp, and suddenly everything had changed.

The day before he was to board the elegant Dutch

luxury cruiser-cum-hospital ship he had his second attack of renal colic. The new nurses—fair, brunette and feminine-dosed him heavily with morphia, against the pain. When they took him on board he was hurried to his luxury cabin. They called it ‘The Oranje Ward’.

War Ward Five: Oranje Ward

It was all a dream, of course. Nobody could believe it was true. Nor—to Denny—had a ward ever been so sheer white—its walls and furniture all of brilliant enamel. No germ could have hidden out for a chance moment.

The other beauty was the ward sister. He had never seen a woman so beautiful, and his appreciation of her seemed returned. He wondered how anyone could even notice so skinny and worn a creature as himself. His mind was filled with a thousand thoughts about men and women, and life and the future. He felt his spirit to be radiant but—even so—wondered how she could devote such time to him. He mooned over that in the luxury cabin, shared only by one other, another soldier half-crazed with the joy of everything, and not a bit jealous of Denny since there were other sisters aboard.

The luxury cruiser made its way towards Darwin at the amazing rate of twenty-four knots per hour. At this northern entrance to the southern island-continent they received a tumultuous welcome, were finely féted, and treated to exceptional entertainment. What these repatriated men wanted more than anything was bread and butter to eat, and milk to drink. The bakery worked twenty-four hours a day, and the artificial cow knew no

end to its production.

Darwin gave way to Brisbane, and then Brisbane to Sydney, and at Sydney—being the first prisoners of war of the Japanese from the Pacific arena—they received a welcome such as Australian troops had never known, and perhaps would never know again. Denny could scarcely believe his ears and his eyes—so warm, personal, loving and appreciative were those who welcomed them back. Tears flowed, ticker-tape littered, ambulances paused whilst relatives, Mends and admirers hugged and hugged, kissed and kissed, congratulated and adulated, until the whole world was crazy with joy.

Denny received it all into himself with tremendous joy, detailing every bit of data, checking it with his critical mind, filing it away for a day of pleasurable recall. His own family interrupted this activity, and he was thrown into a maelstrom of emotion, of tears, of delight and sweetness, such as he had not known. He could not believe how beautiful his sisters could have grown, or how strong his brothers. The former adulated and the latter stood with noble but restrained appreciation.

By that time the ambulances had arrived at the Repatriation Hospital, Concord. This, he hoped, would be his last War Ward. If he hoped it would be his last ward then he was to be disappointed, but certainly it was his last War Ward.

War Ward Six: Concord

They did not wish to detain him—not now. He could scarcely believe the rapidity with which they put him

through. Questions were asked, notes were taken, signatures were given, and in a moment—not of hours, but of minutes—he was freed, even if only temporarily, from this, his last War Ward. He was on his way to the near country, to home and to the family reunion, and—withal—to unbelievable liberty.

When his short leave expired he was back at the ward. The weeks were spent in tests, examinations, recalling for the doctors the diseases he had had, and when—if possible—and what happened, and how was he now? The questions came thick and fast. The files grew thick and fat, as data was recorded.

At the same time the medical teams were both baffled and fascinated by these newly returned ex-POWs. They seemed to have little or no psychiatric problems, at least in comparison to those who had been prisoners of war in Europe.

Denny spent some of his days thinking back on the four and a half years of war. Within weeks he had earned some fame as a writer of war stories, and stories to do with his POW days. As yet he kept silent on what he had learned, the problems of the struggle to live under difficult conditions, the competition between men and men, and the never-ending effort to survive. He wondered how he could utilize what he had learned, how he could put it to work, especially for others. Sometimes dark thoughts would come, and he would have to battle with them. Often they seemed to touch his body so that he could not eat

He appreciated the renewed life with his family, seeing

them as he did from a new perspective, but he knew there were limits to family intimacy. There were some things you could not speak about

He began to wonder about this last ward. When would he be free from it? When would he be ready to emerge from his years of living in wards, and seeing life from that perspective? Talks with ward sisters and male orderlies never seemed to come to the point which he needed to share—what he was to do in a world which he had scarcely known as a youth, and to which now he must go as a reasonably mature adult. These were the things he often thought about—stretched on his bed.

One of his friends—Sam—came to visit him. He was an ex-POW himself, and from the same camp. He had never been in wards, and there were things he did not know, but he had worked in the Convalescent Depot, though in clerical work. Denny had always been a bit of a mystery to him, but he had always carried a certain amount of respect for him.

He was one of the few to whom Denny could open his mind and share his ideas. Sometimes they differed from each other, and even quarrelled strongly. Afterwards they would laugh, but Sam always held strongly to his ideas. This day they weren't differing. They were reminiscing over their POW days, and sharing the humour they remembered. Occasionally the ward sister joined them, and laughed over their vagrant bits of humour. In between calls she would stand watching them, and smiling. It seemed to Sam that she was calculating, working them out, and making up her mind about them, though for

what Sam did not know.

After a call the ward sister returned to them, looking down at Denny. She was affectionate towards him in a professional way. Personally she liked him, although he was a bit young for her. She often eyed him thoughtfully— though without his knowledge.

‘A friend for you,’ she said briefly.

Denny gathered from her voice that she wasn’t over-enthused about the visitor. Perhaps because it was not the official visiting time.

She seemed to read his mind. ‘She’s a nursing sister herself,’ she said, but the edge was still there in the voice.

He looked up with interest. When he had arrived home there was a batch of almost one hundred letters awaiting him. He had gone through them slowly, thoughtfully, and answered them meticulously. Some of the writers seemed to have suspended their thinking back at the point where he had known them—about six years before. Others were just warm and welcoming, and others diffident to what had happened to him—fearing it perhaps because it was unknown.

Sam said, ‘You know who that is, don’t you?’

He remembered as he looked up that he had known this woman when she was a girl. He remembered her quite clearly, but the change in her over some five years was so complete that he had difficulty in adjusting to the mature woman who greeted him.

He noticed that Sam was looking at her keenly, interest growing in his eyes. That made Denny look a second time.

She was blue-eyed and dark-haired. Her skin was red—almost browned—by the summer sun. She wore a dirndl skirt of flowered seersucker. Also she wore open sandals.

Her hair was done up in a bun. He wasn’t sure whether she was beautiful or not, but something started in him at the look of her. She seemed very free, with a touch of pertness. She was obviously glad to see him. Also she was glad to see Sam.

He had watched women over the past months, trying to puzzle them out. For the most part they seemed shallow or empty. It was not that he was a good judge. He tried to talk to some of them, but they thought he was a bit high-brow. They weren’t interested in his ideas. He hadn’t minded that. He had just hoped they would have ideas of their own.

He had recalled the early years of the war when femininity seemed to go a bit wild. So had masculinity, for that matter. There seemed to be a style of freedom that many people affected. Maybe there was a mixture of cynicism and despair—elements born of a kind of fatalism that happens in war-times. It was as though no one was quite sure of what might happen. So life was suspended from its norms. It hung—without purpose—and people filled in their moments as they felt inclined.

He looked at her as she shook hands with Sam. Then she came across and kissed him as though it were the natural thing to do. He saw pity in her candid eyes, but it was not pity which would anger a person. It was companionable compassion. Maybe she was comparing his old state of full health with the sickness that still haunted him.

‘Good to see you, Connie,’ he said lightly. Sam looked as though she were a meal and he were starving.

Denny and Connie chatted, and after a time Sam wandered off to meet other friends. The two talked about

old friends, but their heart was not in the others. He began to think that he had at last met an unmarried woman who had more ideas in her head than quick sex. Night by night he had seen the couples tucked up on the hospital lawns, and he knew they were sharing a mutual passion. He wasn't sure that all of it was genuine love. He used to shrug at it with a bit of despair. Maybe he was odd. Women sensed that, and, apart from the older women, never made up to him, eligible as he was now that the war was over.

He walked to the gate with Connie. It seemed natural for her to put her arm through his. He wasn't sure of what it all meant, but it was pleasurable enough. She gave him a light kiss when they parted at the bus-stop. She put a slip of paper in his hands. It had her address and phone number. He scarcely noticed it as he tucked it into his dressing-gown pocket. What would he want with an address and telephone number?

When he returned to the ward the sister gave him a strange look. Maybe she knew what had happened to him, even more than he did. He would talk to her at the time of the late cup of tea in the duty room.

Sam was there, too, not looking happy. 'Where's Connie?' he asked.

Denny grinned. 'Gone home,' he said. 'Why?' 'Nothing,' Sam said irritably. Then he added, staring hard and impatiently at Denny. 'You always get what you want, eh?' he said, but it was more of an accusation than a question.

Suddenly Denny knew his ward days were ended. He was thinking aloud as it came to him. 'Get what I want, eh?' he asked back. He grinned. 'You could be right,' he said.

Sam saw him go into that withdrawal every POW had learned to effect. He had done it so many times himself. He knew Denny was in the midst of a soliloquy. It only confirmed what he had concluded—that Denny was already captured by the brash young woman in the dirndl skirt.

Sam rarely related to women—especially young women. He was near to scared that one of them might entrap him, but Connie had opened him wide. She was too straightforward to be subtle, too truthful to use cunning. For the first time he had come to like a woman in a few moments. Like Denny, he remembered her from past days. She had always been honest, and nothing had changed in her. It was just that she had matured and was extremely feminine. The strange thing about her femininity was that it didn't embarrass him.

'What are you going to do about Connie?' he asked bluntly, and he saw Denny return from his state of withdrawal. He saw the strong, determined look in his friend's eyes, and knew his own case was hopeless. Connie had talked with him, but not in the way she had talked to Denny.

Denny answered his question from afar off, his voice a bit dreamy. 'I don't know what I'm going to do about Connie. Maybe I'm not going to do anything. I just don't know.'

He stared strongly at Sam. 'You going to do anything, Sam?' he asked.

Sam looked as though he were about to argue. 'Just don't you waste her,' he said, in a half-angry voice.

Denny couldn't remember having wasted anyone—let alone a person like Connie. Suddenly he knew that Sam

appreciated her deeply. Maybe he—Sam—wanted to follow up his own feelings about her—Connie. Denny thought, 'Maybe I want to follow up my feelings, too.' The thought intrigued him.

It was then Denny became aware that his ward life was finished.

Sam had left him silently, but with a friendly smile. Sam had accepted his defeat, but then there really hadn't been a battle. What Sam didn't know was that Denny had finished with wards, for ever.

Denny lay back on his bed, and when the sister passed him she looked down quickly. He didn't see her, nor notice the spasm of anger that passed across her face. She realized that any hope for a relationship was gone for ever. She had not thought much of the dirndl skirt, the sunburnt legs, the blue eyes, dark hair and the bun. 'Nothing attractive about her,' she had sniffed, but then she didn't have Denny's eyes—'his inner eyes', you might say.

For his part Denny continued to lie and think. His mind ranged back to the first morning of pain when he had lain in enemy territory and when Todd and the boys had come to take him out and place him on top of the wounded Indians, as the truck headed along the bumpy road to Gilman Barracks—not that he, Denny, knew where they were going. He could just see the tears in the eyes of his section mates as they laid his wounded leg on the tail-gate of the Army truck, and as they saluted him. He understood the salute and returned it, weakly. The pain was occupying his mind.

He was remembering, too, the Irish doctor, and the sweet Irish nurse, and the whole matter of pain and Stoicism, and the sudden quiet freedom from pain. He

remembered a thousand things—bombers overhead, and bombs falling, the terrible shaking of the hospital by the artillery shells, the fear on faces of both staff and patients, the Tommy in the next bed feigning a state of being wounded, and the terrible thirst that almost drove him crazy.

Then there was the Fullarton Building Ward, his lying unnoticed on the concrete floor, his bandages filled with maggots, and no one noticing. There were the sisters and their deep pity, and their regular needles with lethal doses of morphine. There was the Roberts Barracks Ward and the incessant crying of the pained men, and the orderlies trying to relieve them by words and needles.

There were the shocks that had come with the revelations of man's weak humanity, and his elements of moral degradation. There was the puzzled query of what anyone would do—himself not excluded—to keep living.

The ward at Kranji came back to him, crammed with memories both good and bad, both rich and painful. He lay there, thinking, thinking, thinking, and the sister was almost savage as she glowered down at him.

He knew nothing of her. He was in another world. It was a world of wards, and then, as though he were in mental vertigo, they began to swirl around him, at first slowly and then, like the centrifugal separator machine in his father's dairy, faster and faster, with a long silent note like a soundless moan gathering momentum and whirling to a muted humming, until the wards, all of them, were thrown together and mulched, and one dissonant harmony, one experience in which thousands of thoughts, ideas and experiences flew into conscripted collusion, and danced and sang and whirled and flew, until the unity of

them reconciled all his disparate thinking and his endless questing, and thus accelerated his faith in the eternal order of things.

'I am done with the wards,' he said, and it was clear, cool and distinct relief to him.

'I am neither their victim nor their product,' he said, and he was referring to the wards—one, two, three, four, five, six of them—the first to the sixth.

'If ever there will be another ward,' he told himself, 'it will be a Peace Ward.'

The term 'Peace Ward' echoed in his brain like a refrain that he could not bid 'Cease!', nor did he care to command it so to do.

As he lay there he kept thinking of Connie, and the way she had come into the ward with swinging dirndl skirt of seersucker, and her frank blue eyes, and her understanding that was deeper than that of most other women.

In fact he felt the switch of paper in his fingers which had unconsciously come to him within his dressing-gown pocket. He thought about it for a time, then gathered a couple of bronze pennies and went towards the phone box to ring that very number.

The Girl In A Cossie

THERE WAS a tinge of excitement as he made his way to the long stretch of water with its dark afternoon shade, and the dappled sunshine breaking through the leaves of the flooded gums, the stocky cedars that sent out their roots into the banks of the river, and the soft-leaved, clematis-covered shrubs that grew down to the level of the water.

He stood for a moment, wondering whether some creature of beauty might appear—as once had happened—but today the whole place was silent. Only the murmuring of a distant cascade sent any music into the still silence. What kind or kinds of creatures could appear? Each time he came—in those past days—his mind would be filled with the dreamy romance of Keats, or the enchantment of Wordsworth—and other-worldly inhabitants such as laughing maidens who sang and flitted and flashed through the summer afternoons in such a bush place as this. Dryads! That was the name. He looked slightly puzzled. He had always imagined dryads might appear, surround him, laugh their pleasant laughter, mock him gently, and dissolve back into and along the ways they had come.

He shrugged his shoulders as he stood on the dark rounded boulder rock that stood stolidly in the river, but rose above it to a great height. 'Plum Pudding Rock', he had always called it, so smooth and black and shiny it was. From it he had fished for the lurking eel, catching them with live frogs or even the tiger worms that flipped and flapped on the three-pronged hook. Sometimes in the early dusk of the hot summer's evening he would send a brilliant artificial lure speeding across the surface, and with excitement would watch the perch rise to it. The reel would cry out on its ratchet, and he would see the pale silver of the flying perch, only to lose it in an instant to the dark depths of the river. There were the times he had won, wearying the fish until it flopped on to the bank where he had flicked it.

This time he did not shrug his shoulders. He had come in his bathers, and had slipped off his leather sandals. He stood, his hands high, his arms stretched—as she had taught him. Then his body slowly arched and he dived, his body straightening to an arrow as he dived towards the water. He felt the coolness of it as it closed about him, and as he sped on into its depths. The minutes seemed all too short until he moved upwards, broke the surface with a shout of breath, and settled himself to float for a moment or two.

As he floated he wondered whether she would come again, as at that time before. Something like a gentle sigh broke from him, and he drifted as a dead body, silent as the stream itself.

He looked up into the late afternoon sun, shining through the leaves of the cedars and eucalypts. His strong gaze was on the blue avenue between the high gums.

Parrots had come jostling with their cries, eating—he knew—the creamy eucalyptus flowers that foamed in the high tips. One lonely Rosella piped to its absent mate, awaiting its reply.

He was like the Crimson Rosella. He could not see it, but he could hear it. It wanted its mate, and that was enough for him. His imagination took him back again to the day when she had come—the girl in the cossie. He wondered whether he would ever see her again. He floated idly, but without any sense of loss.

It was early afternoon when she came that first and only time. She had surprised him in the midst of his gloom. He had been sitting on the black rock, his head down, his mind thinking. The river he now loved he had then deeply dreaded. He had always been afraid of its dark depths. His boyish imagination had often seen lurking monsters and treacherous creatures that would pull any stripling down until his breath was gone and he was drowned. How he had shuddered at that!

But it was the failure which had distressed him—his inability to swim. The most he had done had been to venture into the water, ankle deep where there was a rare beach of white bush sand, and when he ventured to knee or thigh-depth, then he had stiffened with fear. Once he had ventured in to shoulder-depth, challenging the river, but the water had been cold, and he had hurried out, gripped by some kind of nameless panic. He sensed the silent water had been reluctant to let him go.

The times he had hated were those when his high school class went on a picnic. The fellows would laugh

and joke and chiac all the way to the river, would strip and plunge into the deepest and longest stretch of water that was known. At first they had jeered at him for not swimming, and the teacher had looked at him sideways, but he had let him be. It seemed that he—the boy—could never get his head out of Keats or Browning, or his enchanting Wordsworth. It was not that they thought him to be a freak—he was too much of a good cricketer, footballer, and boxer for that! So after a time they let him be, puzzled by his poetry, and seeing it only as an idiosyncrasy.

He would lie on the bank reading, but he had no heart for what—at other times—was an experience of sheer beauty. His heart was restless and his mind chaotic. He wanted to be in with them, but he was afraid, afraid of drowning because he could not swim. It was about the only sport he could not capture, and he blushed hotly and often as he remembered this fact. He knew he had reasons for his fear. The one great reason was what he had seen after the great flood. The memory always gripped him, and never let him be at peace.

At nights the dream would come back to him, but then it was only in a dream, and not really a dream. In the stark white dawn and the blatant daylight he had seen the dead calves, the sheep and the cattle floating down when the storm cleared. That had been terrifying enough, but it was the sight of the boy floating upwards, his sightless eyes staring at the blue sky, that had unnerved him. He had run home shrieking, and his steady father had had to shake him out of his babbling hysteria. They had fob lowed him to the river, run with him along the grassy path by it, until they had found the body turning giddily in a

whirlpool. He had collapsed, weeping, and they could not stop his retching.

The family knew of this, and so they were gentle with him. On the occasions they went to the river together, his older brother would strip, glide into the water, splash about or shoot off with long powerful strokes, and the younger boy would sit watching him with despair and envy. His brother rarely said a word, but one day he offered to teach him to swim. Somehow the wildness of fear and shame had gripped the boy and he had cried out his rejection. 'I can't! I can't!' he had kept saying, with dread and a sickness in his gut.

His brother had understood, his brown eyes being very gentle. 'One day it will come,' was all he said, and the younger boy had been grateful. They had walked home in silence.

He remembered the afternoon she had come. As usual his river world had been peopled with dryads and mythical creatures. They darted about in his mind. Flashes of poetry kept coming. 'Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey' was one of his favourites, and it vied only with Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale':

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

The verse seemed to take away the fear in his head of the river, and the dread which haunted him, even in its beauty.

While these things were happening in his mind she

came—the girl in the cossie.

He was, of course, surprised. No one ventured so far from the town, into the bush, and along these dark stretches of water. He had not seen her until her foot broke a stick. Startled, he had looked up, and at that his eyes had opened from their dreaming; but then he was not sure that it was other than one of his dreams. She was a dryad, a legendary goddess, a golden wonder—'a thing of beauty' and 'a joy for ever'.

She stood still, regarding him. If he had known the term 'Scandinavian beauty', then it would have fitted her perfectly. His mind puzzled for a word, and not until she had gone—later—did it come to him. It was 'Junoesque'. Looking back he knew how it fitted her. She was much older than his fifteen years. Her body was mature, strong-limbed, well-formed. Her arms and legs were beautifully rounded, her facial features were regular, smoothly chiselled, and her blue eyes as clear as that of the sky above them, seen—as it was—through the avenue made by the river and the trees that had gripped the bank and grown themselves high into the sky.

As a boy of fifteen he had been afraid of girls. They mystified him. He had conflicting feelings about them. He knew the other boys did too, in spite of their sly boasting and their empty claims. Girls he had sat with in the primary classes now seemed to have gone beyond him into another world, and he was not sure he liked what they were becoming and where they were going. It seemed so far away from his own poetic world.

This girl—she really was a woman—was different. She was calm, assured, mature. It seemed she had no conflicts. Perhaps she had passed through those stages which the

high school girls knew, into some special realm of serenity. She seemed tranquil enough to him, and he could not stop staring, gazing with a fascination that may even have had some sense of maleness in it.

'Hullo!' he said, not afraid. He made the kind of joke his older brother or his father would have made. 'You're a long way from home,' he ventured.

She smiled at that, and ceased being a goddess. Then she nodded, and felt warmed. 'I love the bush,' she told him, 'but I get few chances to see it, these days.' When he said nothing for fear she might disappear, she added, 'I've never been in these parts before.' She kept looking at him and—alternately—at the river.

Finally she said, 'It is a beautiful river.'

He nodded, gulping with joy. 'Sure is,' he said, 'Would you like me to show it to you?'

'I'd love that,' she told him, so he led the way, chattering happily as he went. It seemed that the river was in its best of moods, and dressed in its most beautiful modes, for as he went he saw the things his mind had unconsciously absorbed over the years. He pointed out the giant tree-ferns, the wildflowers, the variety of trees used for softwood furniture, the pool where the platypus swam, looking for the hiding perch or the silent frogs. He told her the times of the wild ducks, and pointed her to nests she would never have seen without his help.

Finally he led her to the smooth black rock, the silent pudding in the deep water.

He saw her delight, a look almost of recognition, as though in some recess of her mind she had always known that one day she would find this very rock. 'How wonderful,' she cried, 'and just made for diving!'

It was then—and there—that the golden dream died. He had scarcely noticed the bathtowel in her hand, and he had taken her dress—the bathers—to be part of her character. He had not thought of her as swimming. Now he knew—with a catch of despair—that she was a superb swimmer. His heart shrivelled. In a painful moment he was a small, lonely and empty boy. His great weakness and deficiency had been discovered—unmasked in fact. On the cricket pitch he had power. On the football field he had strength. In the boxing ring he had prowess, and because of these things the boys respected him. Some even admired him. For this reason they had ceased jeering at him as they swam, and as he read his poetry on the bank of the river.

Now, beside this rich and golden goddess, he was a timid little boy.

She was not thinking that as she eyed him. She could see the strong lines of him. Whilst she was not brilliant, she was wise. She sensed his sudden change and felt gentle for him. She asked, 'Do you dive from that rock? Do you swim in this river? Is it O.K. to swim?'

The old sickness had returned. The despair made the blue sky grey, and the late afternoon suddenly darkened. He could see the rushing white waters of the flood and the open sightless eyes of the dead boy. He could not tell her.

He could only say, 'I fish from the rock, but it's more useful to do it from the bank. The fish slip off the rock. Sometimes I can flick them on to the bank with the rod. Then I jump across to the bank to hold them.' She could visualize his magnificent leap, and it helped her to get his measure.

She kept at him, gentle as ever. 'Do you dive or swim

here?' she asked.

The misery had set on his face—frozen. She felt a strong pang and wanted to hold him. There was a strong desire to tell him he had no need to fear, but he kept sending her the message that there was, and she was quiet.

Together they sat on the bank silently, looking at the water. After a time she slipped into the water, propelled herself forward and came to the rock. It was a bit of a scramble to get up its smooth sides, but her strong feet gripped by pressure, and her hands were flat on it. After a time she was sitting high, looking down at him. He was staring back at her.

She put out her arms as a mother does to a child. It was a gesture, a beckoning. 'Come over to me,' she invited.

His misery—were that possible—increased. He looked at her, dumb with pain. He wanted her more than anything in the world. It was not just a masculine wanting, the stirring of puberty in conflict, but a wanting for the reason that all have wanting. He wanted her strong serenity, her quiet competence, her gentle tranquillity. Out of it he could find assurance, and kill the nagging failure that his fear always brought.

He shook his head. He wanted to weep, but knew that was intolerable. He also wanted to go to her and be with her. She looked at him, and then she stood up.

He was almost sick with joy and pain. The beauty he had known before had been abstract, a thing of his own mind. His imagination had given him the world of the Romantic poets. He had known the strong beauty of the river, and the silent power of the bush, but this was different. The line kept hammering at him like a pulse in his temple: 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'

He saw her superb beauty. The lines of her body rippled in the late afternoon sun. Her golden hair flowed down about her breasts, and her thighs were strong and flexed. Her hands went high, palms thrust upwards, turned together. Her eyes glowed as she stared ahead.

Then suddenly she had dived. He saw the curve of her body, the straightening of it as she became a pointed arrow, cleaving the water with only the faintest of splashes. One moment and she was gone. He saw a flash of gold and white and then she seemed gone from him—for ever.

Wild pain came to him, and he shouted for fear. Then suddenly the strong face, the blue eyes, and golden hair—darkened by the water and clinging to her—broke into view, and his heart started beating, and his spirit singing in relief. A few strong strokes took her to the rock. She was more adept this time in reaching its smooth rounded top. He noted every glistening pearl of water that clung to her, but she was a creature far away, farther than before.

This time she raised one pointed arm, curled her palm towards him, beckoning. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘come across. It isn’t impossible.’

Looking back he marvelled at the explosion within himself. There was incredible anger at himself for past failure, and strong hurt that somehow he had never been able to make it. But with the anger and the hurt there was also impatience, the knowledge that he must break the fear and defeat it. He even sensed that his manhood would never be complete without such a breakthrough.

Here—before this strong and wonderful creature—he wanted to become a man. He wanted to be no less strong, even if in some way he had to draw strength from her. He

was not ashamed. It was as though he discovered that others have to make us strong when we cannot be strong by ourselves.

To his own horror and joy he had plunged into the dark waters he had always dreaded. At first he did not feel their coldness, and his fear of them was lost in his anger and his yearning. He had never swum. His arms flailed, beating the water. His legs shot out about him in a flurry of water and fury. His body inched towards the black rock, and just when fear would have paralysed him and defeated him he felt strong hands grasp him, and he was dragged up the rock, breathing and gasping and climbing as much as he could.

He sat on the rock beside her. His clothes dripped water. His socks were soaked in his sandals, but nothing of this mattered. He was still gasping with the cold, and vanishing fear, but some kind of a glow was spreading throughout his body. He noticed she still held one of his hands, and he felt neither foolish nor surprised. No one had ever held his hand. But then he had never sat with a goddess, either, and it was all doing him good.

She guided his face with her other hand so that he had to look at her. Her eyes were so deep that he wanted to shiver with delight, and not just with the cold. When she smiled he thought the best that would ever happen had suddenly come to pass. She chided him gently, ‘See,’ she said, ‘you can do it. You’ve done it!’

At first he wanted to protest, and then he knew that what she was saying was true. ‘Look!’ she said suddenly, and stood up. She stood only for a moment, strong and firm. Then she dived, and shouted as she did, ‘Come on! Follow me!’

To his own amazement, fear and delight, he did just that. He dived awkwardly, his hands high, and yet he fell flat to the water. His arms—as though by instinct—began to move out, and his legs kicked automatically. He felt the sheer pleasure of following her, and the flurry of his own movements in the water did not trouble him. He followed her to the bank.

She made him take off his shirt, his socks and sandals, and she burnished him with strong movements of her large towel. She rubbed the water off her own arms and legs with practised sweeping strokes. They sat in the sun on the bank, and watched the shadows lengthen across the water. ‘Now you must let me teach you,’ she said gently.

Later he wondered whether he would have done what he did for any other. She slipped into the water, and talked as she swam, sometimes gasping a bit, and sometimes laughing, but she was always encouraging. He let himself slide into the water, no longer afraid of it, and—wonderfully enough—thinking it to be not his enemy but his friend. He felt buoyed up by it, and not at all threatened.

He kept wondering as she tutored him. In his youthful way he worshipped her every move. Often his body wearied, and he was still learning how to breathe when for her it was effortless. Every stroke and mode she taught him implanted itself within him, stored for days ahead. But it was the ecstasy of triumph, the release from his dread and fear which exhilarated him. The same joy and power he had known in his other sports he now knew in this. He knew that he would no longer read his Keats when the fellows were cavorting in the water.

He marvelled that in the end she was tired. He saw faint shadows come across her face, and her eyes were tinged with a sadness he could not understand. He would have been bewildered had she become vocal about their event.

They both sat on the bank, looking at the rock. He had wrung out his shirt and socks, and now they were close to being dry. Long shadows came chasing one another up the river. The chirping of crickets and the evening cries of the river birds were in the air. The frogs were beginning an occasional chant. Even so, there was silence between them as they sat, gazing at their rock.

When they stood up to go, he started to thank her, and she smiled. ‘It was wonderful,’ she said. ‘I really enjoyed it.’

They had both enjoyed it. She had come suddenly, and as suddenly she was going. He felt a tinge of sorrow, but no despair with it. He knew how much he loved her, but not even as a man or a boy loves a woman, but as a liberated person loves his liberator.

She looked at him warmly. Then suddenly her arms were about him, and she hugged him close to her. He returned her embrace with immense joy. No one had ever embraced him—not even his parents—not, anyway, like this. He realized with a tingle of joy that ahead of him lay what is in store for all who are given to be males or females, but there was no other stirring. For this time—this brief ecstatic period—that door was closed. It would open later, perhaps. It might even open—one day—at the memory of her.

He did not quite understand the tiredness in her eyes, but he saw her deep joy and held her strongly.

Afterwards he watched her as she walked along the grassy path by the river’s bank. He did not want her to go,

but then he did not want her to return—not at this moment, anyway. Time and again she turned and smiled at him. When she was almost out of sight she waved, and was lost around the bend where the tall flooded gums were in a slender cluster.

He kept looking at her until she had vanished, and then he stared back at where she had been. After a time he looked into the silent dark river, and across at the black smooth rock. His path home led the other way, and he took it without reluctance. All the time he was feeling the miracle of joy, and with the joy was an unaccustomed serenity, and a rich memory that would be a joy for ever.

No Fear For Jeremy

Where is he?' the father asked the woman. She had her hands in the bowl of flour, but was looking out through the window down on to the grove of trees where they had the small dam. The dam, of course, was out of sight.

'I don't know,' she said. She gave him a bit of a smile. 'Maybe he's playing at the front.'

His heart missed a beat. The little fellow might have gotten through the fence! He felt he ought to run, but he didn't want to scare his wife. Instead he came over to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. She nestled back slightly, enjoying the nearness. She gave a little sigh, half of contentment, half of sadness.

'I guess he'll always be careless of danger,' she said. He nodded gently. 'It seems that's the way it is. Stands at the back of the cows when I'm milking, but none of them ever kicks at him. He seems to have some kind of rapport with animals.'

They were both thinking of the brown snake, and him — the boy—searching for it in the bracken fern. Simultaneously a thrill of fear ran down their spines as they remembered. He had been giggling as he searched it out. The weather had been abnormally hot and they had been

sitting on the log beneath the large pear tree, grateful for its shade. She had suddenly sat up, her back stiffening.

'Look!' she had said. 'He's chasing something!'

Somehow neither of them had been able to move. When the father had moved it had been with a sickening dread. He had crept silently towards the back verandah, and had eased the wire, twisted double to make it a strong weapon, and with it in his hand he had gone on creeping with silent movement.

The boy had gone on giggling, rushing the low bracken, and making snatches at whatever it was. Both husband and wife were praying that it was only a rabbit, and maybe just a rabbit kitten, but then how could they be sure?

At that moment the brown snake had slid out of the bracken on to the well-cropped and now lawn-like kikuyu grass, near the house. The boy had shrieked with delight and chased after the snake. He had been sure he could catch it. In a flash his father had rushed at the snake, and the snake, sensing a new danger, had turned to face him. The fury in the man had given him acceleration both of legs and hands. He had struck, using the wire weapon with deadly accuracy. Its back had been broken, but its body thrashed with reflexive fury.

The boy had been surprised. His rush had brought him up to the snake, and he was about to take hold of it. 'Jeremy!' his father had shouted. 'Don't touch it!'

The little fellow had looked up at him, trying to understand. Head on one side, his looks alternated between the thrashing snake and his father. His father was white in the face, and his body was shaking. It was then the boy had felt something which puzzled him. It was a new sense, and strangely enough a thrill compounded both of terror and

delight. He kept feeling it as his father had raised the wire weapon a second time. The snake had gone still, quivering only slightly.

Remus the Queensland Blue cattle-dog had joined them. Her paws kept tentatively stabbing at the snake, much to the little fellow's joy. He had sobbed when his father would not let him have the snake to play with. His parents had led him away, and his mother had given him sweet saffron cake, warm from the black oven of the stove. After a time he recommenced his secret giggling. They—his parents—had looked at each other, smiling with relief, but the boy had remained puzzled. He was sensing something new, and he had no word for it, although it was forming an image in his mind. Sadly he was knowing that in future he must not chase the slithering thing that Remus was now tossing around on the kikuyu.

It was years later they had told him about the snake, and he had marvelled a little. Now, as he thought about it, he wondered about his parents. He had taken them for granted along the way. 'I must have been a selfish little beggar,' he told himself. 'They certainly cared for me.' He seemed, now, to remember the event directly, but perhaps he had built their view of the matter into his memory. He could not quite get back to the thing itself, but he sensed that there must have been an unconscious awareness of all things, and that nothing was in itself dangerous. He knew, now, that things were dangerous, but wondered whether that were truly the case or whether alarmed parents bred fear—in every generation—into their offspring. He felt that, back of everything, there might be an innocence and fearlessness that was part of what it was to be a creature in the universe. Again, he could not be sure.

The Father was agreeing with the woman. 'He could be outside the fence or just in the front. I'll have a look.'

She heard him tramp through the leaves under the pear tree. He must have looked and not found the boy. She heard him go around the other side of the house. Then she heard him coming up the stairs. Now he must be looking from the height of the verandah, eyes shaded against the sun.

Then his voice came, tight and apprehensive. 'Come quickly, darl,' he was saying.

She lost no time, slipping away from the cooking. She stood beside him, and there they saw in front of them, but yet some distance away, the boy with the horse. The horse was Major. They had called him that because horses had such simple names, but in his case it fitted. The dark Clydesdale carried an imperious air, and he was always irascible. At times he showed a foul temper. He disliked work, and loathed being harnessed. For some reason he would quieten down if they could get the winkers held before his head, but—because of his height—that was not easy to do, especially when he swerved his head aside when he was cornered.

He had a reputation for lashing out with his hind offside leg. He had done this many times when he had moved over the traces and the man sought to loose the chains from the swinglebar, and reconnect them. Everything had to be done from the legside, and that was not always simple. Their neighbours warned them against Major.

'Saw him kick a man almost to death,' the neighbour had said. 'Wouldn't like to have to handle him, myself.' That was why he had always been careful. Many a time he had thought of selling him.

He hadn't sold him for two reasons, the first being that

the horse was as noble a Clydesdale as you would see in a show, and he often wondered why he had bought the gelding so cheaply. The other reason was that he got some kind of satisfaction from handling the horse. Maybe the danger was like a little spice, adding flavour to the dish of life.

Now he wished he had sold it. There, his arms wrapped around Major's hind offside leg, just above the hoof, was their little boy, Jeremy. He was in a singlet and a small pair of short pants which could not cover the drooping happy. Major—for his part—was browsing quietly, cropping the spongy kikuyu.

She clung to his right arm, almost sobbing. Her breath was gusting, so terrified she was. He patted one of her arms which was clinging to him. 'Don't you worry, honey,' he said to her. 'It'll be all right.' But he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure at all.

Nor was she. She wanted to cover her face, but didn't dare to look away. 'Oh, Ray!' she kept saying, and then, 'Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!' He kept patting her arm, thinking. After a time he unloosed her arms, gently, and slipped down the steps. He walked bent, making a great circle so that the boy would not see him, nor the horse know that he was near. He crouched behind a clump of acacias. The horse came level with the wattles, but it was some distance away.

The boy was giggling again, and hanging on to the hock of the beast. He was playing some sort of game, as though trying to pit his strength against that of the Clydesdale. The horse seemed oblivious to him, or perhaps he liked the game. Occasionally he would bring himself forward, stretching his head to crop some small clump of the grass,

and the napped boy would hold firmly, being dragged along, to his own great delight. Once he shrieked his delight, and the father felt his body weaken. His bowels melted to water.

The bitch Remus was sitting on her back legs, watching. He knew her to be astute, but knew, too, that if she were to bark, then the horse might bolt, slewing around and crushing the skull of the child to pulp. He trembled with terror. He kept praying that Remus would use her instinct.

If Remus was not understanding then the woman above was praying also that he would. He saw—even from where he was—the clenched hands and the knuckles white with tension. He hoped she would not let go and scream out of fear and hysteria. That would startle Major even more than the bark of a bitch.

He knew it was the moment. He sent his voice along the level and frequency which would reach the boy. At least he hoped this would be so.

‘Jeremy,’ he said, ‘let go of Major and come to Daddy. I’m just over here.’ If Jeremy heard then it was only to go into a louder fit of giggling, and a closer clinging to Major’s leg.

His father insisted, ‘Let go, Jeremy. Daddy wants you to come here.’ There was no answer other than the continual crowing of joy.

He felt the sweat coming in the hot flush that was spreading throughout his body. With the hot fear, a cold paralysis of the heart. His brain thumped with rising blood and intense worry.

Then a thought struck him. ‘Jeremy,’ he said, ‘Mummy has some hot biscuits.’ There seemed to be no response, but the giggling stopped. His mind worked quickly. ‘She

has some cupcakes,’ he said, ‘with cherries on the top.’

There was silence. It seemed the boy was thinking. His father then felt sick in his stomach because now was the test. The boy might push and shove in his delight, so that Major might kick him; or he might walk forward to run to his mother, in which case the horse would certainly lash out, as he disliked anything on his offside.

Then the miracle happened. Jeremy’s arms came apart at the moment when Major was taking his next slow step. Jeremy was behind him, and his father was rushing forward, silent as could be. One arm shot out and he dragged the boy back.

Major seemed oblivious of what was happening, but not Remus. She barked as though relieved. Major looked up, then put his head down to graze again. The man’s wife came tumbling down the stairs, running towards them, laughing and weeping. Jeremy had his arms out towards her and she was taking him from the arms of her husband, and tears were streaming down his cheeks as they hugged the boy together.

He—the boy—seemed impervious. ‘Bickies, Mummy,’ he was saying, ‘and cakies. Cakies wiv glass cherries!’

The man and the woman both knew there were no hot biscuits, nor were there—as yet—any cupcakes with glacé cherries, but they knew there soon would be; oh yes, there soon would be.

They kept carrying him whilst Remus was barking her head off, and Major was ignoring all, and the boy was saying, over and over again, ‘Cakies, Mummy. Cakies wiv cherries!’

How Come You Kept Corrie?

THAT IS the question they often ask me. They say, ‘How come you kept Corrie?’ Corrie is our Long-Billed Corella—sex as yet unknown. They ask the question because all my other aviaries are empty. Those who question me remember when the aviaries were filled with other parrots, always tostling and jostling with noise and cries and busyness.

Some of them then ask, ‘Where’s Bill? Where’s he gone?’

They cannot imagine the place without Bill. Nor could I for a long time.

I may be a mediocre sort of short-story writer but some folk have latched on to ‘Bill’, our famous Long-Billed Corella who has featured in numerous stories—always to his fame and credit, for Bill was a very clever Corella. He could not only talk endlessly, but he could caper capably. He could do various things on a perch such as jig, joggle, wobble, walk sideways, swagger, walk and nod to fight and left, as is customary with royalty, and he could sit as still as a frozen statue, and stare at you as though he were a moron with not one thought in his head, or look at you as

though that were the case with you. His variety of walk, stalk and talk was endless and ever-changing.

But he died. Former stories will tell you that Bill flew into our place unannounced, nipped off my young corn seedlings, dug out root vegetables, and ate the juiciest of crimson strawberries. I suspect he got himself caught as he was probably tired of hunting his own food. Once when he escaped from his aviary he walked back voluntarily, and looked at us as though we had deliberately caused him to escape.

He would bite you hard on the hand if you neglected him. A day or two away from him and he let you have it! He required attendance every day with fresh seed and water and silverbeet leaves. He also required the kind of attention an actor demands. If any of this was lacking he could be counted on to set up the most raucous din you had ever heard.

When the other parrots came, he was sullen and silent until he could imitate their cries and their songs, and then he sent his communications rocketing across the campus of our Centre. One day he was a whistling piping Rosella, and another day he was a pure Princess with high cry, or even a Red-Rump with its trilling whistle. What was more, he had them in, too, with his deception. Oh, he was a one, was our Bill.

In another story I tell the sad tale of the fox who partly mauled him through the aviary wire, but most blood around the place seemed like fox-blood. The sad thing is that later that fox—with the harsh and bitter spirit of revenge—returned to tackle Bill. What happened to the fox we do not know, but when he went he took with him Bill’s mandibles—upper and lower.

To be honest the sight was sickening. The famous Bill — highest and greatest of all Corellas—was beakless in Coromandel. The team at the Centre felt faint as they looked, and we spared Bill the indignity of a life of mushy mash and immutable muteness. We knew Bill would agree with us, and we quietly put him down.

I did not intend this story to be about Bill, but he being dead yet speaketh. He takes the stage even in death—the blighter! No, it was about the calming of another Corella—Corrie—of which I presently wish to speak, or—rather—write. It is a relief to write about Corrie the Corella after the demise of Bill the Bitter Biter.

You see, there are some pretty dastardly things that I have never written—things to do with Bill who is even now intruding himself into my thoughts. We gave Bill a bride, and that is a story all on its own. Now whether the bird was bride or a male competitor we will never know. No sooner had we put her/him in with Bill than he gave her/him what-ho! (From henceforth we call her Billarina—whatever may have been her/his sex.) This was because Billarina made up to a short-billed Little Corella in the next aviary, even feeding him/her through the wire net-ring. Bill was furious, and in the end we sold the Little Corellas, who fetched a great price because they could talk the perch off any parrot.

When they went, Bill made a motion like a judge washing his hands of an unsavoury case. It was he who had taught them just about everything in his repertoire, and I have since wondered whether he knew that was how things would work out—their going, I mean.

Shortly after this event Billarina was savaged by the same fox who had attacked Bill in its penultimate endeavour to eat him. Billarina seemed virtually dead, and we saw that Bill wished to complete the work left unfinished by the fox. He attacked her with disgusted cries, and showed a side of savagery which appalled us. I have since heard this was really a work of mercy, but I am not at all sure. With sorrow we hurried her to an empty aviary and there she sat for some days, as is the wont of sick birds when they are healing themselves.

True to her kind, Billarina healed herself, and we placed her again with Bill, who eyed her off, waited until we were out of sight, and then attacked her. It is with great sorrow I record the death of Billarina. I also remember—with something of selfish sorrow—that the log in which we had thought the two would bring forth their progeny had cost me forty dollars, and now it lies useless.

All of these things combined to convince me that we would have no more Corellas.

‘No more Corellas,’ I said to my wife.

She nodded, thoroughly understanding, and said as solemnly, ‘No more Corellas.’

That was what we thought! Pam was the problem, the unmentionable in the wood-pile. She was a warm person, plump and tender of heart. She had heard the stories of Bill and knew how heart-broken we must have been, i.e. thought we had been. All over our city she went. Sometimes she just rang the bird-shops and pet-centres. ‘Do you have a Long-Billed Corella?’ she would ask, and they would shake their heads and say, ‘No. Not at this time of the year. You probably won’t get one at this time of the year. Not cheaply, anyway.’

Pam was the only woman who has ever given my wife a poodle, and a French one at that. It was a curious gift and a strange occasion. My wife was mesmerized. Her thinking seemed frozen, or at least suspended. The little brown poodle took over our house. Indeed it was just about taking over our bed. In fact it was taking over everything. I had heard of French women, their scents and their grooming, but I had never dreamed that a French poodle requires as much if not more pampering than a French female.

In one stroke Pam had given us a parrot and a poodle. Before we knew it they both were there. I make no attempt to describe how my wife escaped from the poodle, and was firmly fixed with a new Corella. But what a story! My wife, who is the last to pamper herself with manicuring and incessant shampooing—to say nothing of elaborate hair-doing—found herself under the fierce but feminine eye of Cocoa, the persistent poodle.

I have never forgotten those hours. Pam had been under pressure with numerous poodle and poodle-pups, and the brief respite which came to her was a tremendous relief when we took Cocoa. I understand there is a lot of jealousy goes on where poodles are more or less in the one pool. Little, lithe and lovely, Cocoa came to us with all furniture, pharmaceutical and veterinary appurtenances, and all pertaining thereto such as bed, basket, manicure set, selected shampoos, and the best of barbering instruments, which things almost caused my wife to lose her identity—a hitherto pretty sane, down-to-earth, no-nonsense identity which she had retained from her own cot-days. Now she was in a whirl and world she had not known.

If I was a trifle amused, my better nature helped me to sympathize with her. I stayed with her, supporting her in a bewilderment which could have swept her into a neurosis. The strange thing was that she liked—even loved—little Cocoa and never even cast a glance in the direction of Corrie the new—if not captivating—Corella.

Corrie—for his/her/its part—was the last Corella available for sale in the City. I know the price was high, but I wished there had been no Corella for Pam to buy. However, Pain was as persistent as her pretty, pouting poodles and had hunted down the last Corella, and suddenly in one of our aviaries there was a fluttering, flashing parrot—all angry, turbulent and raucous. Had we not known that Corellas are for the most part brave and boisterous bluff-artists we would have been alarmed. As it was, Cocoa kept our attention for the few furious and fast days she was here.

Then—as suddenly—she was gone. Gone to a widow who was longing for such a poodle as Cocoa, and what is more Cocoa knew it. She flew to her new mistress. Perhaps she had sensed the rather realistic femininity of my own wife, and had seen little future for her own. Anyway, she was gone, and we turned to analyse—or as they say these days ‘discern’—the new parrot in our midst.

It was about that time that a certain kind of weariness had come into my life—not boredom, but just weariness. Perhaps it was being without Bill, or a sheer relief reaction. I know not. I suddenly felt I could cope no more with the large family of highly individualistic parrots that I had gathered around me. The loss of one of them through cold, sickness or old age would always make me sad, in fact inordinately sad. I backed away from their bickering. The

Cockatiels never stopped having babies, whilst the higher-priced birds never started having them. I was caught in what might be called an emotional vortex of parrots, and I proved unworthy of them. Mind you, I had just enough sanity left to drive some good bargains in the sale of my beauties, but the heart of me had died in regard to that parrot community.

Only Corrie—named after Coromandel and Corella—was left. It either sat in still and sullen silence—a favourite and indifferent ability of all Corellas—or it screeched up against the wire netting and shouted that the pickings were good at this time down in the South East or up around Wilmington or near the Remarkables. Gloomily, sentimentally, I could see it screeching out its heart near to sundown, but instead it was virtually glaring at indignant and raucous—all because of Pam's pity.

'I'll tame you,' I said. 'I'll take you out of your big aviary and put you in a metre-cube cage, and I'll let people pass you in the hundreds every day until you are immured to their very presence. I'll feed you with the best of foods, the juiciest of vegetables, and the finest of fruit, and after a time you will calm down. You'll become the calmest Corella in Coromandel and all points west, east, south and north.'

It said nothing to that, but tried to sink its long mandibles into my leather gloves. It snapped at me when I put it into the small cocky's cage. Corellas, Galahs, and even Sulphur-crested cockatoos had had their time in this tough but small enclosure. Like them he bit hard on the high tensile wire with mighty mandibles, but—as it had been with them—to no effect. He climbed up and down, over and under and around, and finally seated himself

sullenly on the perch. I left him to become what was his/her innate self—wild or winsome, cantankerous or calm.

Other things occupied my mind—things of work, things of accomplishments, things of relationships. I would barely give the time of day to that white and pink thing as it began to make its personality known to us. After a time it did not draw back when someone approached it, but showed interest. When some began to talk to it, it would put its head on one side, roll its tongue between its mandibles, stare thoughtfully and store up the phonetics and phonemics—for all we knew.

One day it said a word, namely, 'Ullo!' Folk gathered around it, all saying, 'Ullo!' and it stared—not without interest—but politely refused to be drawn. What it had said it had said—and that was enough. Even so, it seemed greatly encouraged, and since it had already developed a strange habit of nodding, it kept nodding and nodding, as though things were really getting better.

Some of the team I work with have rather harsh accents, especially when they are speaking what they imagine is 'parrot talk'. They do not speak as humans do, but as—they imagine—parrots do. I suspect parrots have a good sense of humour, and are not unduly troubled. Perhaps they are secretly amused. Anyway our Corrie was rather tolerant, and even quietly gentle.

At least that is what my wife discovered. She sat on our patch of turf just outside the large dining room, and began to pay court to Corrie. Corrie appreciated this, evinced interest, and spoke to her a lot and a long. Moreover, he never bit the finger that tried to scratch his head. He appreciated this one person more than any other.

The day came when she put her hand inside his cage. He refused to bite her finger. He let her tickle him, and responded with some companionable nods. He had come to like one human being at least. He discerned the heart of gold that beat beneath the rather casual exterior. He was not deceived. He had hooked a gem of a human, and he responded well. The human for her part wondered how two Corellas could be so different—Bill and Corrie. She marvelled a lot, and took courage.

Now he sat on her hand. He had no desire to escape from the cage. He liked it when she sat near him. He kept nodding and doing a little prance on his perch reminiscent of the famous Bill. He would sit on her hand, liking it, but not knowing what it was all about. It just seemed pleasant and social to him.

There were days when he would speak copiously, not with much variety but with good pronunciation. He could say, 'Ullo Corrie!' and 'Ullo Kay!' and a few things like that. Much of what he said was below his breath, as though he needed to practice a few of these things until he was expert and could gather courage to come fight out with them. My wife became emotionally attached to her Corrie, and began to see what I had sensed in parrots since I had been knee-high to a grasshopper. Grandpa's Giant Macaws had for ever been in my memory, and sometimes they had invaded my dreams.

In other words, my wife had caught parrot fever. I do not mean psittacosis—a virulent disease—but bird-fixation, which is a pretty powerful drive in anyone. Some clever animal-and-human psychologists may simply put it down to poodle-reaction, emancipation from Cocoa, but it went deeper than that.

She was a little worried when I said it was now high time Corrie went into a large-sized aviary so that he could fly at will and to his fluttering content. On the one hand my wife saw the wisdom and joy of that, but on the other she felt that Corrie might now revert to being a wild bird.

The day came, then, when the experiment was to be tried out. We put Corrie in a centre aviary, double-wired too, so that no fox could get its nose in or Corrie put his mandibles out. Putting down the small cage with the door opened, we left the tamed Corella.

He took hours to get himself out of the opened cage. He was mild in his adventures, taking time on the ground before he left rooting out weeds and grass, to climb up the wire, and to seat himself on the perch from which achievement has come the idiom—'top-cocky'. Both he and we had sheer delight when he flew—tentatively at first, and then with boldness—from the perch to the front of the aviary where he tried—unsuccessfully—to nibble his mistress's fingers.

Next day was the test. My wife went in, and came up to him on his perch. Do that with a wild Corella and it will scream its head off. Do it with a tamed Corella and it might have the cheek to attack you or snap at a finger or two. Do that with a Galah, and it will have a piece of you in no time. A Sulphur-crested Cockatoo might just ignore you, but then you could never be sure.

Corrie was different. He did not retreat an inch. He did not bite, fight, feint or falter. He leaned forwards and nibbled her hand. He nibbled her hair. He walked off the perch on to her shoulder. He submitted to caresses and—is it possible?—returned them. He snuggled into her from her shoulder.

I swear I saw her flush with pleasure. I watched her drawn—day by day—to that fascinating aviary. The pair became so very close that another husband—not as equable as I—might have become mad with envy. To the contrary, I was fascinated to see her do what I had seen no other do. Deep down I blessed Pam and her extravagant kindness. My wife had never been built to be a Cocoa's woman, but she was—in every part of her—a Corrie's person.

If you are waiting for a story with a twist to its tail you shall have none. If you desire a perfect ending you shall not get it. If you are waiting breathlessly for some drama, some perverse happening of grim fate, then you will be denied it.

I just tell you that I marvel each day as she visits her Corella. And if, for that matter, should you or another visit it, you will find it is loving and gentle to you. So I tell you again that I marvel because I have never—repeat *never—seen* a human being actually cuddle a Corella, or for that matter *any* parrot

To use a saying of one of Australia's more elegant poets—Dennis—I say, 'When I see a parrot submitting to being cuddled by a woman, a woman even of my wife's stature, then I *dips my lidd*'

To tell the truth this is the only way I know to finish off my story, and to tell you the truth again, it is no story concocted in the mind of a crazy bird-lover. It is the living truth! And if that does not amaze you—a woman actually cuddling a parrot—then *you try* to do it!' I mean, try to do it with any parrot other than Corrie. In all my long life I

have never seen, heard, or heard tell that a parrot submitted itself to a personal cuddling of it, arms over wings, hugs to the breast—and all the rest of it!

If you succeed in showing me another parrot which likes and submits to cuddling—and I doubt strongly that you will—then I'll dip my lid to you, too!

Oh, yes, I almost forgot to answer your question, 'How come you kept Corrie?' Well, no need to tell you. You know the answer, anyway.

Being Grandpa

THE DAY was hot—oppressively hot. They had just come out of the dining room where there had been no circulation of air. The perspiration had come freely, but it brought no relief since there was no breeze to flow on it, bringing momentary coolness.

The grass was inviting, so green and soft it looked. When he lay on it, it was not soft. It was Kikuyu which had grown thick and spongy under constant mowing and persistent watering. Still, it was a relief to lie on it. The night before had been hot and humid, the air as still as that in an oven.

The children and young people were playing cricket. He had watched them in the late light of the previous evening, and they had been clever in the Eastern game of touching the elastic. They were small but taut, and unbelievably lithe. They had run forward, suddenly turned about, flicking a leg high in the backwards position to touch the elastic held four to five feet above the grass. The two who held it—about eight feet apart—gauged the capacity of the player and sought to raise the elastic higher than he could reach.

He had marvelled at their ability to turn, twist, jump high and flick the leg upwards and backwards. He grinned, thinking how impossible it was for him to do it. At nearly seventy years of age one doesn't attempt that sort of thing!

Now, as he lay on the tough spongy turf, he felt that one didn't attempt anything—not, anyway, on a day like this. He leaned back a little, resting on one elbow, and his eyes kept the players in sight. They were using a rubbish bin for stumps, and the bin had no lid. Sometimes the ball landed in it, and there was a roar of laughter. They had a spring-handled bat, and that was something. He remembered being given a block-handled bat one Christmas when he was a boy. The humiliation of that happening came through to him, just in the mere memory. How he had hated that block-handled bat—the sort of things girls used for *vigero*, or little children used to play their infant cricket,

Remembering, he could afford to grin. Later he had saved up and bought a genuine bat. It was one he could lubricate with linseed oil until it had glowed bronze like deep honey. His tired mind remembered the strokes he had made with it in their local park.

Here—today—they had a yellow tennis ball, new and vivid in its colour. They bowled sometimes, and other times they just threw it. The girls used their awkward feminine half-bowl, half-throw, and the boys laughed. They emulated the World Series cricketers with aplomb, even though it had not been their native game. He wondered idly where they had all come from.

He liked their screams, their shouts, their quick humour. Sometimes it was in Khmer language, sometimes

in raw Australian. Sometimes there were shouted Chinese phrases. His ear had come to recognize the languages even though he was ignorant of the word meanings.

He was tired. He had been teaching them in the morning, and they—the ex-Khmer young people—had looked at him with a mixture of reticence and acceptance. He had sensed they were trying him out, seeking to discern how he came to them. If it was with honesty and sincerity then they would accept him. If not they would leave him to wander in his own maze of ideas.

They were tactile, wanting to touch, to feel, and to experience. They were cautious with his words, not wanting just to cerebration. They would rather celebrate—do something, have a ritual, and feel something. They liked to link up with one another by words and shouts. Sometimes they danced and jumped for sheer animal joy, as last evening they had twisted and cavorted and flicked the elastic with a skilled toe. He liked their energy, but had no desire to emulate. A man nigh on seventy wants to be at peace on his Kikuyu patch of turf. He let them play on—himself half dreaming.

He marvelled at how they had picked up the Australian idiom. Repartee flicked and flew with startling rapidity, and with it the bursts of laughter. There was nothing harsh in it. Sarcasm was absent. Nothing niggled. He felt like sleeping, but their actions kept him watching them.

Often his mind would drift back to matches he had played. He had loved cricket in those past days. With a sudden tingling he remembered the time he had written to Bradman—the Young Don in his heyday of record-making matches—and had received back a personally

autographed picture of his hero. He sighed for the memory. Had he kept that photograph it would have been worth a lot of money in these days. Probably he had bartered it for some bit of trivia. He sighed again at the thought.

‘I am in my anecdotage,’ he told himself. ‘I keep remembering back to stories and incidents, and I would like to tell them to someone.’ No one came near him to hear stories—life occupied them too much in the now-moment—so he grinned to himself. It was enough to endure the humid breezeless heat without exerting the memory too much. He had no wish to exert the body!

A group of young Kampuchean girls sat on the sideline. They were wanting to play but not to show their incompetence—especially before the Australian-born Asians, although they were gentle enough. One of them was a restless little eleven-year-old. She simply could not keep still. She would laugh and run, jump and cavort, rush after a ball, throw it foolishly towards a player, but ever so wide of the mark. Everyone laughed, though not at her. They laughed with her, and she with them. It was uproarious for her, and for the others. ‘Quite the life of the party,’ he thought, but he knew there was something compulsive about the child. He wondered what drove her on so incessantly. Maybe some tragedy. He knew family tragedies lay back of most of these young players.

After a time he sensed their mild interest in him. He hoped they didn’t wish him to play. He occasionally played with the grandchildren, and that was enough. Maybe he had an eye to his dignity. One could bowl widely with a tennis ball—even without trying! As for

batting, how would he stand? He settled back further in the knotted spongy tuff.

One of the girls called out, 'Come and play, Grandpa.'

Reflexively he shouted back, 'Don't call me "Grandpa". Call me "Uncle".'

The girl grinned at that. 'Grandpa!' she repeated. 'Uncle!' he said with a touch of asperity and humour. 'Come on, Grandpa,' the girls urged together. He winced and wondered why. He was grandpa of eleven so why worry about being called Grandpa. Mostly a matter of dignity, eh?

Dignity! He wondered about that. What did dignity mean? Did it mean he would lose control as a teacher? Maybe. Maybe it was just plain human pride.

After a time he stood, and watched from the standing position. Once or twice a catch came close, but was lost because he did not move fast enough. They applauded politely—even at his failure. He felt his old pride in the game return. Occasionally he chased a ball. Once he found a ball hidden in the undergrowth of a scrubby tree. Others—the youngsters—had not been able to trace it. There was a slight murmur of appreciation. He felt a little emboldened.

A few of the young bloods went for a trip to the lavatories. He picked up the ball and began to bowl. Of course the light tennis ball went wide. He longed for the weight of a six-stitcher in his hands, the grip of the fingers curling around it. 'That's an excuse,' he admitted. 'Save your silly old pride, Mr Dignified.' So he bowled again and this time it was on target. It just missed the bin.

A few more bowls, a tricky bit of spinning such as he had done as a boy. (Can you spin a tennis ball on spongy

Kikuyu turf?) He grinned, and the next ball bowled out the leggy teenager. The boy handed the bat solemnly to the old man.

'Good on you, Grandpa!' the girls cried. Others were more respectful—in their polite Asian way. The Kampucheans lacked finesse. He grinned. The balls that came to him were mostly wide, but one of them he put onto the roof of the dining hall, and there was restrained applause. The bloods had returned, tried out their prowess, grinned at defeat, and were not embarrassed. It was all a game to them. Maybe they even admired Grandpa's looking so earnest about his playing.

He, too, grinned when he was caught out. The girls on the sidelines cheered. He became wicket-keeper, but it was time for the next teaching session. They began to drift towards the dining hall.

The girls remained seated on the sidelines. One of them—the one who specially called him Grandpa—was grinning at him.

'Grandpa!' he growled in mock indignation. 'Just call me "Uncle".' 'Uncle' was the word on his name tag.

'Grandpa!' she teased insistently. She had apricots in her hand—a bit golden and a bit yellow. Also, he knew, a bit hard. He had tried them before in the dining hall, and had rejected them. She offered him some of the small fruit. He shook his head. 'Too hard,' he said.

She shook her head again. The teasing look was in her eyes, but something else also. There was a slight plea, an insistent command—even a demand.

He evaded the offer with a smile. 'I tried them out,' he said, excusing himself with the fastidiousness of age. 'Can't come at them.'

‘Go on, Grandpa,’ she urged. The look in her soft brown eyes was not fully translated.

‘Uncle!’ he said. ‘I’m not your grandpa.’

Nor for that matter was he her uncle. He sobered on that thought.

The small restless one had come up to him. She was a ‘Miss Independent’. He liked her much.

‘She doesn’t have a grandpa,’ she said pertly and maturely. He looked at her and a pang went through him.

‘Lots of us don’t have grandpas,’ she said, and her voice was quiet. It held pain back, but it was not subdued.

After a pause she said, ‘I don’t have a grandpa, either.’ They had gone before he realized it. He had stopped, catching up with their statements, enveloped in his own thoughts.

They had not intended to shame him. They had reached out to him, not he to them.

No grandpas! He felt an edge of sickness, a deep inner nausea, and then a full sorrow.

He wanted to run after them and say, ‘Call me “Grandpa”!’ but they had gone, hurrying and hustling towards the hall. Even then he wasn’t sure whether it had just been a teasing match, but the conviction kept growing that it hadn’t been and he was near weeping.

A sudden flash came to him of his own grandpa—a solid, florid-faced, white-haired, and white-moustached man, smelling of Mexican cigars and something else which he could never define. Grandpa had been a man of dignity, of humour, and—towards him—of generous condescension. He remembered the gold sovereign Grandpa would press into his hand when they met on rare occasions, and a rush of gratitude came to him.

It just wasn’t that it wouldn’t have been good to be Grandpa to them. He had very much liked being Grandpa to his own. Now the idea of being Grandpa to others in the place of their own liquidated grandparents took hold of him. It gripped him, and nothing else could hold his mind. Not for days, and perhaps not for ever. He looked towards the vanishing girls with some pain, and also with some joy.

He could still hear the teasing wistful voice of the girl as she called, ‘Grandpa!’ and he thought it to be one of the best sounds he had ever heard.

The following morning he waited for the small group to emerge from their huts. When they did they scarcely noticed him. He did not know whether this was by intention or just something cultural. Even so, he felt a sharp pang of disappointment. When he smiled at them they scarcely responded. One of the Chinese boys chose to sit with him and pull away at the spongy Kikuyu grass.

Uninvited the boy said, ‘They like you very much.’ The comment surprised him. He sat in silence. The boy went on, ‘They don’t know whether your interest is temporary. People get excited about refugees. They feel good when they help them.’ He looked at the older man and said gently, ‘They want you to be Grandpa, but not just for a time or a mood.’ The statement struck him powerfully, ‘Not just for a time or a mood.’

He thought about his own grandchildren. The bond was—of course—permanent. He wondered how deep it was with his own kin. Was it ‘for a time or a mood’?

The Chinese youth was saying, ‘They don’t even have

fathers, let alone grandfathers. They have seen their fathers killed—some of them—or they were just taken away. Sometimes it is harder for them when they don't know whether a father may be dead or not dead. It was also this way with the grandfathers. Now they just have mothers, and they all have to work hard, and to study hard, and to make new families.'

In the hot, hot afternoon he watched them play in the surf. They were content to leave him on the beach, linn-hatted under the fierce sun, whilst they frolicked. They seemed to be like other Australian children. Indeed they made sure there were no differences. They drank Coke and ate chocolates. They gambolled on the sand, or played in the water. They chattered their Australian friends and brought laughter from their keen humour. Even so he seemed more separated than ever. Were they laying down conditions for his being grandfather to them?

Back from the beach and now on the Kikuyu sward they played again with the elastic, flicking upwards and backwards with the left foot, catching the elastic with the big toe, and quickly releasing themselves. Their laughter was clear, but teasing. Sometimes they would look back towards him, half inviting him to try the impossible and to jump with them. His negative grin and shake of the head seemed to stimulate them. He wondered how they could be so vigorous in that immense heat.

Wenda—the broad-faced one—came across and sat with him. In a sudden confidence she poured out her life, and the life of her family. She kept looking at him to see whether he was really interested. He was hearing all she said, looking at her and the others—the girls who were so small and yet so beautiful, the young men who were so

lithe and competent, and yet so calm and full of humour. He was unconsciously comparing them with his own grandchildren who, too, were full of fun and intelligence. This was all happening whilst she told one of the saddest stories he had heard. She was not asking for sympathy, just glad to find a grandpa person who would listen and share some of the years she and her friends had known. He wondered whether she had ever shared it with a man, even an old man.

Each confidence humbled him more. Each unveiling of the terrible years brought a closer bond with these small but mature ones. The others looked across at the two on their own and yet bound together. They guessed what was happening, and in their feeling accelerated their actions—running, jumping, cavorting, calling out, teasing their Chinese friends into imitating them. All this they did despite the heavy heat of the late afternoon.

The bell rang for the evening meal and they ran past him and Wenda, teasing and laughing and making jokes. For his part he scarcely thought of the meal, and it was she who told him they had better join the others, for food. She left him alone at one of the tables, and joined the others. He did not feel the separation, as though being alone was necessary to digest what he had heard. He was glad to be alone and thine When other friends joined him he scarcely heard what they were saying, so gripped was he by the story Wenda had told him.

In the late evening the Southerly Buster came. It came up through the Gulf and on to their place. Looking out to sea he could see the grey waters whipped up. Some of the

young people remained at the tables, playing their games of cards, and others came out on to the sweeping lawn. The Kampucheans remained with him on the verandah. They had been lolling there, seated on the benches and rails, but when the Southerly wind came they seemed invigorated beyond measure, as though in a moment they were suddenly energized. They leapt at him, shouting, laughing and teasing. Any inhibitions they may have had—any self-protection—suddenly dissolved.

It was as though some spirit had swept into him, too, with the wind. The cool flow of the Southerly reinvigorated him. He discovered old elements he had forgotten or had thought to have gone for ever. He rediscovered his rubber face, and sent it into a thousand contortions. Eyes rolled, nose twitched, eyebrows shot up and down—one at a time, or both—ears flipped and waggled, his dentures moved at his will whilst his remaining teeth made a still contrast.

At first they stared at him in unbelief. Then peals of delighted laughter broke from them. They rushed at him in fun, spurred on by his madness. They forgot they were young men and women with sad pasts and fearful memories, and they became children for this time of happy idiocy. He chased after them as though he were a fearsome dragon and they shrieked with delighted terror. He caught them and they moaned in their laughter. Then to his—and their—amazement, he lifted Wenda bodily, and threw her up, caught her, and pretended to throw her over the verandah. He had done that with his own children, decades before, and his children had shrieked with the same delighted terror—and now they were suddenly as his children, and he their father, and not only their

father but their grandfather, for he was a suntanned man with silver hair, and with an ageing body. Whether for always, or just for now, or even for perpetual memory, he was a grandpa, enough, anyway, to send Wenda and her friends into such laughter that the past was purged, and they were all one—grandpa and the grandchildren—and all of them without restriction.

The Boy And The Bitch

Remus was a six-week-old pup when she came to the family. She was a pure-bred Queensland Blue Heeler, a cattle-dog—or cattle-bitch—of good shape and size for her six weeks. The small boy was about fourteen months in age, and a tough little character. At least that was what the man thought

He was proud of his tough man-child, taking him with him to the dairy and squirting him with udder-warm milk straight from the teat. The tough youngster delighted in the warm, creamy fluid. He threw up his arms and danced about, giggling and crowing as he did so. He was not a bit frightened by 'Tich', the undersized Jersey heifer calf which had walked in one day off the main highway, never to be claimed by anyone—which was not surprising since in those days bull calves netted two shillings at the sales or abattoirs, and heifer calves one shilling. Even so, Tich was big alongside the boy, but he, as it turned out, was not afraid.

He was not afraid of Major, the bad-tempered Clydesdale gelding, and the large Rhode Island Red roosters brought him no fear. All of which pleased his father, who,

having been in a war, had returned more 'macho' than when he had gone away, and looked forward to a macho son—not that he understood that word way back in those early post-war days.

What disappointed him was when the farmer from the alluvial flats brought Remus to them as a present. Not having a dog they needed one, and Remus being so small they thought—the man and the woman—that their small boy Jeremy would love the pup.

Far from it. Seeing the fat pup with its long wagging tail, he took it to be a creature from some other planet, turned tail, and went shrieking to his mother on the front verandah. His father looked on, disgusted.

'Come here, son,' he said in a rich and mature masculine voice, his contempt scarcely concealed. The little boy set up an unending wail, and fled around to the rear of the house. The father, catching up the pup, followed the boy. The wail turned into high-pitched shrieks, and then the tears began to flow. The mother tried to comfort her small son. The father was disgusted, indeed deeply hurt inside, and he went off to the dairy yard to load his barrow with cow manure to offload on to the pile of already maturing dung. Later the father would plough it into the vegetable garden soil, getting the earth ready for the spring sowing and planting.

Could anyone so small remember an incident like that? Strangely enough he could, perhaps because his father had reminded him of it time and again. He could remember the terror he had felt, but why it had to be so he could not explain. The first great terror seems to remain with many for ever, if not as a crystal-clear happening, then as a time of deep shame. Something was impressed upon him that seemed to repeat itself at other times. Even so, it all remained a mystery.

For days the little boy would run screaming at the sight of the puppy. Attempts to unite him with the ball of fat and fur only increased the shrieks. They let both be, although the pup insisted on following the boy without seeming to take delight in the lad's fear. It seemed to think it belonged to the boy.

One day the miracle happened. The little boy was seated on the back verandah, eating a crust that his aimless sucking had made soggy. There was a slatted gate in the back verandah, originally put there to prevent the boy falling down the steps. It just happened that the boy's hand was stuck out through a space between the slats. The frisking puppy had made its way up the steps, and was reaching out for the crust, but it was just beyond her. The little boy stared at her, not knowing whether to shriek or remain silent.

The matter was decided for him, mainly by his own sense of humour. The puppy stuck her nose between the slats, trying to get the crust. The boy withdrew it, and the puppy became frantic. The boy thrust it out through another space, and the puppy twisted to get it, but tumbled down the steps. The boy crowed with delight, and more so when the puppy angled itself up the steps again and strained towards the crust. The little boy let her have a tiny bite and withdrew it.

It was then he giggled. The puppy gave a friendly yap, and begged with her eyes for another bite of the bread. It was then the mother arrived. She watched with horror the little boy taking a bite of the bread and then offering the next bite to the pup. Alternate bite by alternate bite brought the two youngsters together in a union which would prove inseparable. Meanwhile the mother was

thinking of her attempts at asepsis and careful hygiene.

She also had a sense of humour, so she watched the two dining together—so to speak—off the one plate. She could not resist listening in on the conversation carried on with yaps, barks, bites, squeals, crows and giggles. The father had been over in the cream-house—his study and office—and feeling hungry for lunch arrived below the verandah to see his wife's eyes running with tears of merriment. After a time he took in what was happening, and his guffaws rang out, none of which disturbed the bliss of the new marriage between pup and boy.

This part of the happening the boy never forgot. Years later he would see himself sharing his bread, and the laughter of his mother, and the look in his father's eyes which highly approved. Maybe his father could see he was not a coward, after all.

The two had many adventures together. The pup was not allowed into the small house, but all the boy had to do was stand on the verandah behind the slatted gate and cry, 'Wemus! Wemus! Tum on, Wemus!' and the pup would disgorge itself from whatever part of the farm had caught its attention. With tail flowing level with its back, it would get itself up to the verandah in no time, standing, barking and squealing all at the one time.

The mother and the father seemed less anxious whilst Remus was around. The boy would follow the pup everywhere. The father taught him how to train Remus so that the boy would say, 'Heel, Wemus!' and the pup would obey. Of course the puppy was under the hand of the man, and was trained by him, but when the training was

done it would cock its head on one side, asking permission to go with its little master, Jeremy. When the man would nod his head, it would scoot away to follow the small boy on his wanderings.

They watched the relationship with wonder. They also watched the small pup become a young bitch, and then mature into fullness, ready for mating. The mating came all too soon. The man realized what was about to happen as she was coming on heat. For a day or two dogs came sniffing around, and she rebutted their approaches with barks and squeals. After a time she received them and the pack of local hounds of all kinds followed her everywhere. Sometimes during the night they would hear the barking, the fighting and scuffling, along with the howls of those who had been wounded in the competition.

When Remus had finished with that episode she returned to recover, and to be by the bewildered boy whose heart had almost been broken by her seeming defection. Life sealed down on the farm, crops continued to grow, and the man built a lean-to laundry for his wife. Prior to this she had had to wash out in the open, the man having to bring water from the small dam, in drums on a sled pulled by the redoubtable Major.

The boy loved the laundry for some reason they could never fathom, so they kept the door locked, knowing mischief came as naturally to him as blossoms to the eucalypts. They remembered the time when a whole crate of eggs—kept on the back verandah—had been invaded by some animal or another. The slatted door on the verandah was still up, and they had only left the farm for an hour whilst they went to the village to collect mail and buy food.

Their detective work on this occasion had been fruitless. Remus was asleep under the verandah, and they found the little boy asleep in the kitchen, so they let him sleep on. They went out to pick pears, and as they were returning they saw a new thing. Remus was taking a running jump at the verandah stairs, and she sailed over the low slatted gate on to the verandah. When they looked at her on the verandah—hitherto denied to her—they saw the bitch licking the verandah floorboards. Then they heard the little boy crying for the potty. Detection of the mystery of the broken eggs was solved. The boy had passed bits of eggshells as well as other matter.

‘I know what happened,’ the father said. ‘He broke those eggs and began to eat them raw. Some fell through the spaces between the floor boards and Remus ate them, wanted more and came up the back steps. Smelling the eggs, she leapt over the low door and she and Jeremy had a wonderful time.’

That was why they kept the laundry door locked. The crates of eggs were stored there until the milk lorry would take them off to the Co-op.

They all watched Remus grow in size and sleekness. It was hard to believe this was the little pup that had once frightened the small coward, Jeremy. She still worked the cows when that was needed. She barked at foreign cattle and other animals when they were driven past on the highway. Being in pup, she was even more fierce towards strangers, and sometimes had to be kept on the chain. But she was warm towards the small family of three, and obedient to the man when he worked her.

The little boy, who found every lock a responsibility to be known and conquered, soon conquered the lock on the laundry door. At first he climbed up to the key hanging near the fireplace, but later did not bother using it. It was a mystery how he could open the door without a key, but he did it. Once, when they came in from pulling carrots and picking peas, they found the boy and the bitch in the laundry, but the eggs were intact.

The boy ran down past the poultry run, as though having suddenly decided to go on a special mission. The bitch was not so quick. The man had picked up a length of split firewood, and now he laid it across the back of the animal. There was a howl from the bitch but it made off after the lad. They both were lost in the high bracken.

The mother giggled, 'Leave them there,' she said. 'You've taught them what's what. They won't do that in a hurry again.'

The boy and the bitch returned promptly at the hour of the midday meal. The bitch slunk her way up to the back steps, turned on her back and lay with belly and legs upturned, as though to say, 'Go on, hit me. I deserve it.' Her appeals for pity proved her to be a con-man, or rather a con-woman. The little boy—for his part—smiled and laughed as though nothing had happened. Both bitch and boy were given a lesson for the future by many pointings to the laundry, miming of great beatings, and voiced threats of what would happen to the two if ever they tried that again. These were the terms of reconciliation—for all they were worth!

The offending pair then had a good lunch.

The truce lasted a month or so. One night the mother

went down with the storm lamp to do a little washing. The door was unlocked, and from within came a growl. The woman lifted her lamp, and there in the corner, lying on some grain bags, was the inflated bitch. She whimpered, seeing her mistress, but when the woman tried to dislodge her from the sacks she drew back her lips, showing sharp white fangs, and snarled.

Heart beating, the woman backed away, but without taking her eyes off the animal. She called out, 'Ray, come quickly!' The man darted from the kitchen in a flash, picking up a pallet of firewood on the way. It must be another brown snake, he was thinking, but when he saw the bitch he laughed.

'No worries,' he said. The bitch thought differently. She snarled, showing her teeth, and stretched out to attack the man and the woman. They backed away and went into the kitchen to talk over the matter.

'She's ready to pup,' he said, 'and we'll never dislodge her.'

'What about my washing?' his wife said.

He laughed a bit about that. 'You'll have to go back to the old way,' he said, 'out on the grass at the back, near the clothes-line.'

She stared at him with anger. 'Is that bitch going to tell me what I can't do?' she asked.

He smiled a bit, and this increased her anger. 'So you're frightened of a dog,' she said. 'Is that where Jeremy got it from—his fear of dogs?'

He winced. 'That is why they are called bitches,' he said, and then—with *double entendre*—'I'm scared of any bitch.'

She shook a clenched fist in his face. 'Coward!' she ground out from between gritted teeth.

He laughed, and made a cup of tea, whilst she cut some of her famous saffron cake.

The next morning they waited until the boy wandered into the kitchen. They had a casual discussion as to how the laundry door could have been opened and the bitch establish her pad in it. The little boy seemed very vague about it all. He indicated that he was hungry so they gave him breakfast. They could see he was eager to go to Remus and so they followed him down to the laundry.

Unbelievably she had had the puppies during the night. They were all around her, tiny balls of fur, but in various shapes and sizes—all dedicated to the Heinz principle. The little boy cried with glee and rushed in to look at the pups.

‘Careful!’ his mother warned. ‘She’ll bite you.’

The boy wasn’t a bit careful. He just crowed with delight, ‘Lots of them!’ he cried gleefully. ‘Lots of puppies.’ He rushed into the laundry and knelt down in front of the miniature puppies. Remus looked at him with gentle eyes, and with motherly pride. She let him fondle the puppies. That made the boy’s mother venture into the laundry, but she was warned off with a low growl. She retreated swiftly.

The man said scornfully, ‘Here, let me go in.’ He knew who was boss. He advanced purposefully into the lean-to. There was a warning growl from the bitch. The man spoke to her strongly. ‘Now you just keep quiet, young lady.’ His voice was strong and commanding. The hair rose on the back of Remus’s head. Her eyes glared, her lips were drawn back, and the bared fangs looked formidable.

He put his hand out to calm her or to pick up a pup. She rose on her legs, growled, and then flew at him.

He retreated hastily, but knew he must assert his manhood against the fussy little bitch. He advanced again, and this time the bitch flew at him, ready to bite at the outstretched hand. He lifted his other hand, the one which held the pallet of wood. He would establish honour—come wind, come weather! That enraged the bitch beyond measure. She probably thought her pups were in danger. Her savage shrieking bark rose in a crescendo.

The man backed out permanently. He knew it was hopeless. Remus’s hackles settled back. She became soft again—though remaining alert. She settled back whilst the puppies nestled in. She whimpered as they sought her udder, and as the little boy fondled her pups. The mother and father, staring at this picture from a distance, had indignation written over their faces.

Then she said, with a bit of wonder, ‘This is the boy who was afraid of a puppy!’

He said, with no less wonder, ‘What do you know? He ran crying from her when he and she were both pups together!’

Suddenly both began laughing. It began as a laugh of some little shame, and then the humour of it broke on them and they burst into great peals of astonished laughter. The little boy ceased from his fondling for a moment, looking at them, and being a little baffled. The new mother gave small whimpers. She too could not understand, but she was reassured.

The laughter ran around the hills, and came echoing back, only to trigger off further laughter. They looked at each other as the tears began to trickle through. He

slapped her back, and she hugged him. They both stood there, the spasms still visiting them, and the humour of it kept repeating itself. At one stage it seemed that neither the bitch nor the boy fully approved, and that set off further waves of joyful laughter.

They knew this moment was immortal. Time and again they would look back on it, and the joy of it would come again. Meanwhile they kept looking and staring, staring and looking, the laughter bubbling within. The bitch and the boy returned to their own private session, ignoring the foolish mystery of the two adults.

After a time the man said to his wife, 'Come on. Let's have another cup of tea.'

She was thinking, 'He just wants to have some more of my saffron cake,' and she went into new peals of irrational laughter.

Arms about each other, they tripped up the back steps, and went in to make fresh tea from the large boiler on the black stove.

Of Birds and Beings—An Occasional Essay

MANY, IF not most, fiction writers are preachers of a kind. They try as subtly as possible to get across their ideas. They know their function in life is to entertain, but they trust that entertainment can be something valuable—beyond the mindless futility of empty thinking. The essayist is a person who has announced his intention to teach—if not preach.

To find an essay in a book of short stories may be a trifle disturbing to the reader who simply expects entertainment. In this case the reader can merely bypass the essay, and move on to the next story. It is possible, however, that he may sympathize with writers in general, and permit them—even if only once in a while—to express the feelings a writer sometimes has in connection with his craft.

I remember putting down the phone, and walking away, slightly niggled. Perhaps 'slightly' is putting my feelings mildly. Certainly I was reacting to what the woman had

said. She had said, 'I like your stories, but one day you are going to write not only of birds and animals but about human beings—men and women—and I'll be interested to read that kind of story.'

'So I've not written about human beings!' I said to myself, running my hands through my hair and being generally hulled. After a time I laughed—goodnatureedly of course because I knew I had not only written nearly all my stories about human beings, but even when I had written about birds and animals, it all had to do with human reactions and responses to such creatures. I also remembered that one critic in a review had said I wrote few, if any, stories about women. That also I knew to be untrue, not that there was not a smidgen of truth in both statements. How can you possibly talk about animals apart from humans, and how can you go on for ever talking about humans and never about creatures of all kinds? For that matter, how can you talk about men and not talk about women?

I do not know what my friend on the phone was inferring when she said she would be interested in reading stories about humans. I think she had read many of my tales about humans, but perhaps they had not struck her as anything of an unusual nature. I do not know what she had in mind, but I know what others mean when they say similar things. They mean, 'You have not gotten down to the nitty-gritty of life. You avoid the things of blatant sexuality, the vices and deviations of human beings, and you do not enter into the orgies and events of people who live life out there in a way you do not live it in your ivorycastle existence. You do not understand the temptations of the rich, the agonies of the poor, the terrible dislocation

of sexually obsessed heterosexuals, and the deep passions of those who seek fulfilment in other humans, however deviant their approaches may appear to be. There is a world of which you are ignorant, and your quiet and gentle stories will mean nothing to those who live in the vortex of conflicting passions and purposes. They battle with the problems, and you do not. You escape from reality whilst they have to face it.'

Obviously there are some weaknesses in this sort of reasoning, but enough of fact in it to confront anyone who lives in an ivory castle of his—or her—own making. Had no one ever confronted me with this sort of statement, I would have had to face the principle it expresses. As a fact of life, this principle—and its confrontation—has come to me many times. If I had not lived where men live, had not been six years in the Army and three and a half of those in a prison camp, then it might be true that I had not seen life. If I had simply gone from high school or university to seminary, then it might have been even truer. Had I not been married, raised children, living in a community with others, then the building of an ivory castle may have been unwittingly the case.

Of course we can build an ivory castle when and where we desire. We can construct a closet on life's highways and freeways, and privatize ourselves even where life is at its noisiest, and its most public exercises. We can live next door to a brothel, and know nothing of it. Time, circumstance and context do not necessarily place us abutt what some call 'the reality of life'. It is surely an attitude of mind and our own persistence in passion which thrusts us into the kind of living which we choose to call 'full-blooded life'. Simon Stylites, atop his pole, may observe more of

life than the evil man who is greedily snatching at every opportunity to fulfil his compulsive desires. The quiet monk may have more time for reflection on the genuine realities of being than the salesman or commercial traveller on his restless rounds. The terrorist-tyrant may keep retreating from the truth of life with each murder he manipulates.

You can see by these strong words that the matter is really quite close to my heart and mind, and that phone call from the well-meaning lady has only served to give me a pulpit from which to preach, a podium from which to pronounce that all of life is life, whether lived in sleazy places, or pursued in palaces. It is all life of one quality or another, whether lived in high intensity, in high density population, or calmly and serenely in some far-off nook of the woods. One can be a thug in a concrete jungle or a Thoreau in a place of placidity, and each variation of time and tempo will be called 'life'.

Sometimes I feel driven to suspect that the most confident, flamboyant, and extroverted of us are even the most insecure at heart. Whilst as a writer I feel driven to envy at the size, substance and sales of brilliant blockbuster novels, my jaundiced jealousy is somewhat mollified by the knowledge that the readers are men and women who are starved of such success and passionate fulfilment as their heroes and heroines so naturally achieve.

Another unworthy thought that I have often had when trying to write realistically about birds and bees and human beings, is that the authors who gobble forests for their paper pulp are really shrewdies. They know—whether intuitively or by calm and calculated reasoning—

that man desires to have justice in the here and now, and any tough-and-tackle human being who will do what God is so tardy in doing will meet with something of applause. The lantern-jawed general who takes his troops through mega-mountains and outsized odds—no matter how many the horrific (justifiable) homicides on the way—will meet with adrenalin-stimulated applause. The tough terrorist who pauses in passing sentiment with lissom ladies but is primarily bent on, and successful in, toppling tyrants, will get our approval anyway. The cleaner the great guy, the less emotional, and the more able to stare-you-in-the-eye-without-betraying-any-feeling, the more our admiration grows. If God will not be like this, then we must have guys—and/or gals—that will! So on with you super Superman, Wonderwoman, brilliant Batman, slender Spiderman, Bionic Anthropoids, and all the slick and successful sleuths who bring justice to the world whilst the angels dither and God waits grimly for His ultimate—eschatological—opportunity.

You will have further gathered from this added accumulation of hardcore irony and senseless sarcasm that I am fairly unhinged by any suggestion that I do not know what life is about, and you may well be right. My problem is that for me much of the great opera of life is like any old opera itself—full of tragedy, murder and mayhem, suicide and infanticide, homicide and fratricide, and nothing grand in any of it. The players may sound plausible, and the singing superb, but to me all forms of evil have no grandeur, and indeed they are pathetic, piffling, piddling and paltry. I have never seen a great sin, and never expect to do so. To me it is man's endeavour to justify his evil by seeking to give it grandeur.

The writing of Macbeth is great writing, but the acts of Lady Macbeth and her monarch husband stink of the most dreadful of all evil. Shakespeare was great in writing because he understood the themes of good and evil, and did not bend them only to his personal fame. Even the witches of Endor bear testimony to that! There is nothing great in murder. It is hideous sacrilege, making obscene the gift of life once given to their victims. Our Robin Hoods and Ned Kellys become heroes to us, for they filch in better ways than the characters they demean. When truth is on the scaffold in the market-place, then a new truth acts as its surrogate, and evil rules the day in the name of new justice!

This new truth scoffs at the old principles and the old ways. A woman gives the most sacred of all in her surrender to her lover, and her friends tell her freedom from binding marriage is the best of all things, when she invested the most precious possession she had in seeking the highest order of human love—true marital union. The child is tutored by some vagrant teacher to cherish liberty from authority, and emancipation from its parents as the best of all goals. Governments are said to be evil because they have authority, and because humanity wishes to be free-standing without the inevitable anarchy such autonomy introduces. Human anger at injustice is so incited and exacerbated by manipulators that even stronger and bitterer injustice is done in the name of justice.

These things—and more—do not invite me to retire to an ivory castle or to seek some idyllic Arcadia, but rather to be honest and ask myself whether the illusion that there is greatness in lust, majesty in murder, solace in sex,

excitement in deviation, richness in rebellion and wonder in war is all that there is to so-called full-blooded life. I do not need to be told that men can be mediocre, people pedestrian, and that we therefore need to glamorize greed, and titillate the sleazy appetites of bored beings that life might seem to have some gleam and glow. Because for decades I have listened almost daily to the stories of men and women, heard of their forays into sin and suffering, heard their broken dreams, and been told of their huge hurt, bitterness and anger, I have no doubt that human beings are both sinners and saints in the one bundle. One does not need to go off in a rage to some desert to write cynically of them, or into some besotted paradise to pretend that man is good in spite of spasmodic appearances of evil.

Man's tragedy, as I see it, is that he does not fully know his beginnings, and has little knowledge of his end. He does not understand the brilliant truth of creation, let alone know the very Creator Himself. In a world which spends millions of dollars on pet-foods and pet-care, there are few who understand the nature of what they call 'Nature' but what the old writers called 'creation', and this in lower case because they, themselves, were understood to be part of it.

Man—for the most part—is scared of his world. Some ecologists have gathered that nature—as they will call it—hits back at man when he exploits it. Others see themselves in the grand role of earth-protectors. Yet others see themselves as 'friends of the earth', and this without conscious patronage. The earth-exploiters are increasingly annoyed at the reality of ecological retribution. Others exploit nature by worshipping it, and

come under the common tyranny that accompanies any form of idolatry. Sooner or later they develop a world view which debases the genuine morality inherent in creation.

Others—and perhaps those mentioned above—see tragedy and terror in creation and human living. Not only do the acts of nature, such as cyclones, earthquakes, volcanoes, and massive landslides—to name but a few—frighten and anger them, but they fear what is stored in the earth, such as fossil fuels and dynamic minerals. They are wrathful and fearful of diseases and plagues, floods and famines, and even the venoms and poisons which are found in animal and plant life. They come to hate the eagle that takes the rabbit in its talons, the snake that swallows the toad, and the lion that ravages the gazelle.

The religious spirits of mankind spend much time rationalizing the existence of both good and evil, often using dishonest devices of the mind to make both good and evil one, and essential to the good order of things. More honest animists simply set out to placate the spirits about them, whilst the secular scientist either scoffs at supernatural reality, or rationalizes it as a system of hitherto undiscovered 'laws' and 'principles' of the developing cosmos! Desperate humanity seeks either signs of a good God, or human intelligence brilliant enough to rationalize all things into a knowable system. Others of our race simply wish to live and extract what enjoyment is possible, and evade—where possible—suffering, pain and tragedy. They leave the religion, the morality and the future to those who have interest in it.

What then is this creation of which we speak when we are sane? What, too, of its Creator? Are miniscule flowers,

unseen by the eye, as beautiful, appropriate, functional and important as some other things on this scene. Is Everest more significant because it is quantitatively greater than the eidelweiss? I will descend from these giddy heights of reasoning and come down to the area I know and in which I move—man and the other creatures I know.

Theologically I can speak of *creatio ex nihilo*, i.e. God creating all things out of nothing so that all things are as He would have them be, and their functions as He determined they must be—i.e. every creature, including proud man and splendid angel—but because at this point you may not care for theology, I will come to the point of contact that you may have with what you would call 'nature'. I mean, when you dig a garden and plant seeds, when you have a pet and give it affection, and when you have a spouse, a relation or a child, and relate to it as seems fitting—that is the nature we know apart from theological reasoning.

All people know about nature to some extent. Something in them knows more than they care to show or to explore. Perhaps they are troubled about the knowledge they have, as though it might drive them on to other things in life if they were to let that knowledge come into action and be free to drive them—they know not where! Why do people not just eat and drink, rise and work and play, have entertainment, children, accumulate possessions, grow old and die? Why are they not content as though somehow they 'have eternity in their heart', and they must explore it, or spend their energies resisting that exploration?

Why do they have pets of dogs and cats, rabbits and

special mice, fish, birds, reptiles and crocodiles, and even personal menageries? What is the fascination? Why do they do skin-diving, and other allied things, seeking out creatures in their habitats, photographing them, observing their habits, peering into their nests and lairs, watching cohabitation, gestation, birthing and growth? What drives them?

I return to my own meagre relations with creation, for they have moulded much of my life. Indeed it is life I look at all the time. The death of a creature once saddened me, and brought me into strange moods. Perhaps I thought the Creator had not observed the sparrow fall, and was indifferent to the swooping kite and the wee mite in his talons of steel. I have learned that death and life are alike to the Creator. His plan behind it all is partly hidden from me, but I sense it most powerfully.

I remember the delicious mornings when I ran barefooted into the dawn, through the scrub and fern and crimson-tipped eucalypts, when I tried to give my own names to ferny trees, tough bush grasses, and the birds whose names I had not remembered from *What Bird is That?* I watched silently as the Sydney Waxbills—'Redheads' we called them—flitted and swooped silently into their nests. I watched sleek Martins wait until they were sure none was watching before they dipped into their cupped nests to feed their young. I climbed where Magpies and Peewees had their young. I knew the banks and nesting places of the Diamond Sparrows, and small Earth-tits that flashed their yellow wings in delicate movements.

The insects fascinated me: great Golden Wanderers, Bluetails—butterflies of every ilk—the beetles that stayed silently under bark, or the metallic-coloured Jewel species

which hung and crawled and feasted on the foamy flowers of ti-tree blossom. One day I saw the miracle of their colours, the memory of which has never faded. I have seen butterflies in tropical jungles which rivalled the large beauty of the Birds of Paradise, and snakes writhing below a house on stilts, whilst the inhabitants looked down at them with indifference.

I have also wept with my Queensland Blue cattle-dog, and told him—in boyish sorrow and joy—what my life was all about, and cherished the way he licked my face because he, too, was a romantic and a sentimentalist I also remember the small Malay boy we found wandering in the jungle during the war, and how we took him to our camp and cared for him—bachelors though most of us were. Weeks later when a machine-gun burst smashed the thigh of my fight leg I wondered whether I would ever again ride in a saddle, and gallop over grassy undulations, or mount up on high ridges, or bend down to talk to the mare that carried me or the gelding which seemed to be one with its rider.

I say all these things because they are a rebuke to those who talk of 'nature' as though it were a strange entity on its own, and as though all creation were not one, and eternity were not in every man's heart! All creatures that on earth do dwell should sing to the Lord with cheerful voice, for He made us and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Whilst everything was made differently, the diversity of it all saved it from homogeneity but made it a wholesome unity.

All this is a long way from the tough *macho* man who takes on God's work of justice, from the hardened terrorist who rationalizes his murdering as though it were for

good, and the cruel torturer who defends the State—the idol whom he never questions—by trying to twist the minds of men. Wherein lies the greatness, and the grandeur, and the splendour? Who is the genuine messiah among men, and who will shape up utopias in the midst of nepotism, chicanery, mayhem and untamed greed? These are not the questions of cynicism—though cynics may well ask them—but they are the questions of honest realism.

And now I come to the heart of the matter the puzzle and passion of the curse. Were creation all it should be—in essence—from the hand of the peerless Creator, then there should be no flaw in it, no cruelty, no decay, no dread of death, no thing preying upon another, and no incursion of the human or animal spirit by sudden disasters or universal cruelty.

It is a very simplistic mind which refuses to see that human evil is a fearful thing. Only a person wearing mental blinkers will be unable to see this. Countless thousands mourn man's inhumanity to man, as Burns said, in one of his poems, and it is petulant reaction which seats this home to God because He is Creator. Doubtless the great human writers have tackled the gargantuan nature of human evil, as also its utter banality. Well, let them continue to do so—by every form of art—always taking into account the magnificence of the Creator in giving man the ability to make his own choices. Somewhere in the understanding of this is the greatness that poet and painter, sculptor and preacher, writer, publicist and essayist must seek to understand and unveil. Merely

to use one's ability of superb description is to refuse the responsibility of artistic gifts. Entertainment can be merely an anodyne when it does not stimulate the magnificent mind that is man's.

So then, I am wondering why I was so miffed when the lady rang to tell me she wishes to read about human beings, and not only about animals and birds. I suppose I was huffed because I had spent so many hours trying to puzzle my way through the human dilemma, studying almost every human being I have ever met, and then sketching the results of that character research. Maybe she desires the titillation I am unable to give in regard to telling the story of humanity, and is not contented with the story itself.

I doubt, then, that this little essay of mine—if it be not a sermon—will have much effect upon her mind. Like some other readers, she will see it only as a trifle of passion expressed, or as an exercise in self-justification.

Dear Death

WHILE THEY were bringing the coffin into the cool church on that stormy day, he was thinking about being on the Fordson tractor two days ago with his father. His father had given him a curt nod to get up beside him and ride, leaning against the heavy mudguards, and he had done this. Formerly he had been terrified by the roar of the machine, and its powerful trembling. It was a bit like old Major, their jet-black Clydesdale gelding. Before being caught it would tremble, and you had to watch it, as it would lash sideways with no hesitation. When it was in the harnesses and pulling the double-disc plough it would tremble if a disc hit a root, and go on trembling until the sharp edge cut through it. Its strong muscles bulged beneath its silky coat and he had always thrilled to the trembling.

Likewise on the Fordson he had thrilled. He liked to see the disc-cultivator churn its way through the ploughed soil, setting up ceaseless waves of dirt. Looking back, he would keep setting the soil waves in his memory, and this without knowing it.

Today he had conquered his last fear of the tractor. He had always thought of it as a huge nervous creature, sensitive as Major, and more angry underneath—else why did it roar ceaselessly? In the shed it was always silent and immobile, though looming largely amongst the other implements as though caught in internal thought

They had roared up to the house, and were passing it on their way to housing the machine, when his sister came running out, shoeless and sobbing. Her hands were waving helplessly and to no special effect

‘Dad!’ she had sobbed, her hands now wringing desperately, ‘come quickly. It’s Mum.’ He remembered his father putting the tractor into neutral, leaping from it, and running towards the house. A huge fear gripped him inside, and he jumped down, following his father. On the tractor his father had been his regular uncommunicative self, keeping his eye in to drive a straight furrow whilst he—the boy—had had to jump down for a loose root or a small boulder and cart them to the margin of the paddock. Only when they were drinking hot tea from the vacuum flask would his father ever venture a grunting word or two.

Now he was silent as he ran. He rushed with the boy’s sister into the room, and saw in a clear moment that the woman—his wife—was dead. Like others in similar situations he hoped against hope, but hope had gone, and his hoping was hopeless. She was dead. She had not seemed all that ill. Even the doctor had not thought it was a dangerous illness. It was not like his wife to be ill. She was always so well, though not a strong woman.

The boy’s father knelt beside the bed, taking one hand in his, and his eyes burned fiercely until the fire died out

of them and he looked tired and lost. He kept saying to himself, 'Emma! Emma! Emma!' as though uttering a plea, and a benediction of finality. The boy came and stood beside him, staring with shock and unbelief.

He and his mother had been good friends, though without expressed affection. She would often take him aside, talking to him. Much of it had been conspiratorial. She seemed to know he had a separate veiled life, as though he were living in the family but was not much of it. She appeared to know his dreams, although she had never said so, but then she had hinted.

'Don't take their estimate of you at face value,' she would often seem to be saying—though not in so many words. 'You go ahead and do it, that's what I say!'

She also knew that he and his father had little understanding at his—the boy's—level. On the level of calves and cows, pigs and horses, they had plenty of understanding, but there it would end. They never seemed to break through to a mutual understanding of each other, or—for that matter—of life. She had always worried about it, hoping that one day the two would achieve a union.

She looked tranquil enough to the boy, lying gently as she was, her eyes closed. He felt the affinity of silence that he had often had with her. He was sorry she was gone, but not deeply shocked. Death had come so softly and so gently.

He was amazed at his father's tears. He had never seen tears in his father's eyes. He also felt sorry for the bewilderment they held. He wanted to touch the man and help

him, but this was no custom of their family so he desisted. His own mind tried to think about death but there was a numbness which prevented thought. He stood there, as helpless as his father.

They got through to his brothers and his married sister on the trunk-line. It took time to get from the city to the country place, but they were all home by the next morning. The undertaker had taken his mother's body to the funeral parlour, and arrangements had been made for the funeral for the following day. The family sat about, talking spasmodically. This had always been their custom, but today there was none of their habitual humour. He thought—with faint surprise—that the only way they had of intercommunication was humour, and most of it was ironic. Today no one wanted to joke, and the only smiles were gentle and sad ones. He was surprised at the way death could change a family. He had the strange feeling that this was the true family, that they were habitually thoughtful. He had always believed himself to be the only thoughtful one—with, of course, his mother. Perhaps it was his mother who had stimulated their unspoken relationships. His father always appeared to live in a world of his own—though without contemplation.

After a time he went to his favourite private place, the empty silo pit. Even the snakes had vacated it, and nothing had touched his writing materials stacked on an old kerosene case. Today he hadn't thought of writing, but as the silence lengthened vagrant thoughts came butting into his mind like mindless calves, and he began to write. After a time the tears came, and he put down the pencil, staring vacantly ahead. He had not seen human death before, and the stillness of his mother had stirred

him. There was something he had to understand, and it was evading him.

On this day—the day of the funeral—they had set out together in the shiny Chrysler. His father had polished it until it gleamed. Not unusual, perhaps, but he felt that the older man had wanted it to be special. He had never seen his father so gentle or humble. Mostly he knew how to handle things, but not today. He had not learned to cope with the absence of the woman he loved, even if at times his love had seemed so distant to her, and from her.

When the car failed to go fast up a hill he would shrug his shoulders as though riding his gelding and getting it to go faster. The boy would always see him like that, shrugging and urging. He knew it was a distraction from the pain of the parting.

They could not be called a church family—he had never seen his father in church, though he himself sometimes attended services. Even so, his father was not awed: he sat as though the main actor in the event. They had all walked up to the coffin and looked down at it. Their father had strictly forbidden the undertaker to open the coffin. They sat down together as though they had always been a close and intimate family. In a way they had never been, they were a close and intimate family. They kept thinking about their mother.

The boy thought how neat the minister's garments were—white and black and having no frills. The clergyman himself seemed sensible. He thought the undertaker's men were acting gravity rather than having it, but he could not be sure. He felt they had overdone the march

down the aisle as they had brought in the coffin. They had really been over-solemn. He gathered they must have been trained for it. His mother would have been bewildered by such attention, and in her way would—like him—have thought it overdone.

There were no hymns. The church was full enough and they could have managed the hymns, but hymn-singing was not typical of the family. He thought, idly, how he himself loved hymns. He did not quite know why. He had often thought it was a most unusual thing to do, that people together be told a hymn number, look it up in the book, and begin singing it at the bidding of the organ notes. Even now he wondered why.

The clergyman came out of the vestry, knelt at the prayer desk, paused in silent petition, stood up, opened his book and began the service. The boy thought it was a solemn service but sensible. His sisters and brothers kept looking at the prayer-books. They seemed to be drinking in every word. He knew it was because they were loyal to their mother. Also they were liking their father since he had put aside all the things of himself, and was concentrating on the service. They could scarcely remember when he was not concerned with his own things. Once or twice he had told them that all he did was for them, and for their mother, but they had received that in silence.

The boy noticed that some of his aunts, and even his female cousins, were weeping. He wondered whether it was improper for him not to weep. His brothers were not weeping. He guessed his sisters were doing the family thing, that is, they were not weeping because it was not a family custom.

The words of the service moved him with the seriousness of death, but he could not understand why it was so solemn, and so serious. At one time he realized with a spasm of alarm that his mother would not be with them tomorrow, and in fact, not ever! Something like grief began to move within him. It was like pain in sadness.

Then the picture began to come to him. The minister was reading the prayers, the lesson, and giving the address, but the pictures kept coming to him. The most prominent was his mother with a hoe. She would wear a large sun-hat always, and she would be a bit bent forward as she hoed. She persisted in hoeing—day in and day out. It was her way of making a garden. She would water a patch for some time, softening it up, and then—a little later—she would hoe. She would heap the weeds up, taking them later to her humus pile. She would scatter some of their farm fertilizer. After a few days she would plant seed or the seedlings she had germinated in a special seed-bed.

He remembered that one part of her garden was for flowers, and another part for vegetables, but her pattern had always troubled him. She rarely—if, indeed, ever—planted her seeds or seedlings in rows. Her garden was a collection of variegated patches. He sometimes thought of it as a rather joyous patchwork quilt. He had been taught at agricultural college to do things in rows. He loved looking up and down rows of cereals and vegetables. But then he also appreciated his mother's garden.

It was a bit like her mind—full of ideas and pictures and thoughts. Nothing about her was formal, and nothing was stereotyped. At the times when she talked to him he found it difficult to follow her reasoning. One day he realized that she never reasoned a thing, anyway. She

just talked as she knew things to be. In his own way he realized she lived life by contact, by relationships, and by doing things. She really did not think in terms of theories. That had always puzzled him.

While the minister-man was drawing the service to a close, the picture kept coming back of his mother hoeing her large garden. He wondered whether she would now have another garden—perhaps a better one. The thought cheered him, but then he couldn't be certain it was right.

His brothers were going forward—the four of them—and, with them, his father. His father was to walk behind the coffin—that was what the undertaker had told them. Then he and his sisters were to follow their father. The grave had already been dug in the churchyard.

The minister's voice was not a chant, but it had a quality which was not just ordinary speech. He was declaiming, 'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he teeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.'

The words to the boy were awesome. They were old, and he scarcely understood them, but they conveyed something to him of great beauty. He suddenly knew that death was greater than life. He had never met anything immensely solemn in life. Things were either fun, or entertaining, but never solemn. Sometimes they were frightening, sometimes just boring. Only in books had he found anything so awesome as these words he was hearing, and the march he was sharing.

At the open grave the minister was finishing his verses: 'In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek

for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins are justly displeased?"

He wondered about his mother's sins, finding it difficult to remember anything specially wrong that she had done. He knew she prayed, so that probably meant everything was fight with her.

When they lowered the coffin he knew suddenly—as did his family—the finality of death. He heard the words, 'ashes to ashes and dust to dust', and wondered why they spoke of ashes. He saw his father crumble dirt on the coffin, and then the grave-digger began shovelling earth to cover the handsome box. One part of him wondered dully why such a fine box should rot in the ground. The main part of his mind was seeking to find something he had lost, or perhaps stored away for such a time as this.

In later years he would recall that event in the country churchyard, for—although he knew it not then—he would attend funerals which were to be so different. Appropriate soft music would be played prior to the service. The service itself would be of words much more gentle than those of the ancient liturgy. Artificial grass would be laid around the grave, and the soil would be hidden by it. Flower petals would fall on to the coffin, which would be called 'the casket'. Folk would be led away from the grave-digger's filling-in operation, with special soothing advice. Death would be hidden.

Suddenly the memory shot into his mind. He remembered his mother's saying, 'Dear death! Dear, dear death!' The memory startled him, and he was even a little shocked. Why had his mother called it, 'Dear death'?

She had said it to him one night on the garden seat as they had sat in the cool of a late summer evening. The

evening meal had been finished. His father had gone off on his perpetual round of work—doing something until darkness fell. The family were washing the dishes, and having one of their interminable discussions. He could hear their voices raised. They always felt freer to talk when their father went off on his working spree.

His mother had uttered the statement, and somehow had expected him to understand. He had not understood. In fact he had said with some distaste, 'How can death be dear?'

She had just smiled. Then—after a time—the words came out with a rush. She had told him about life, about her girlhood dreams concerning it, and about wanting intimate friendship, and never quite finding it. He gathered that even her children could not give what she really desired. Certainly his father had not supplied her need.

There was something very gentle in the way she was sharing her mind. He remembered that nothing had rankled her. Her voice held no anger. She talked about her garden and how she loved it, and how it was no work to her—not a bit. He wondered whether anything had ever been work to her. It was quite remarkable since she had come from a family where there were maids and servants, and she had never worked. She had not even known how to sew a button on to a garment.

It seemed that in the garden she had visions of what ultimate life was to be. What one missed here—in the world—one would be given in the world to come. Yet she did not think it was a world to come. She simply believed that what was yet to be was really with her, but as yet unveiled to her physical senses.

She had talked much, and he could not now remember it all. There was one thing he could remember, and the memory of it brought him close to the edge of tears, when in fact it was not really a matter of pain.

She had looked at him with the clear blue eyes that had come to her from her Irish mother. She had said, in a strong whisper, 'We never really die.'

That had amazed him, but he had always thought his mother lived in the world that was about her—a world other than the one he knew. The boy had known that human beings really die. That was a self-evident fact. So he had been kind to her, smiling with some condescension, but doing it very gently.

He had said, 'Mother, everyone dies.'

She had nodded. 'Of course. Outwardly everyone dies. But then that is not death.'

'What, then, is death?' he had asked her, and he had seen the dark sorrow in her eyes.

'There is a death for some,' she had agreed, 'but I do not know what it is. I have never met it, and I think I never shall.' The thought seemed to trouble her, but then her eyes had cleared again. 'I shall never die,' she had told him. 'Don't let them tell you I have died. You will see what they call my death. and you may even think it is, but then I shall not have died, but have lived. I will come to have lived better than I have ever lived.'

At the time he had thought her talking to be very strange. He had grasped what she had meant, namely that the outward act of human death was unable to touch such as she was.

Now, as they stood looking down at the fresh earth piled high over the coffin trench, he was not sure of his

own logic. Nothing could convince him her body was not dead—that she was not in that grave—but then nothing could convince him that his mother was under that load of earth.

He remembered her bright yearning for things which had not come to her life, not material things, but things of love, and of relationships, and knowledge which was beyond the ordinary living within three dimensions and five senses.

He knew she must be fought. At first the conviction was mediocre, but after a time it seemed to gather vitality and strength and even movement. He had seen what they had called her death. It had seemed so final, but then he could hear her saying with gentle delight, 'Death! Oh, dear, dear death!' and he felt that what she had said must be true, though just how it could be he did not know.

After a time he turned to catch up with his father, his brothers and his sisters. He saw tears in his father's eyes, and tears in the eyes of his family. It worried him that he had no tears, but only a plain down-to-earth sense of satisfaction. It startled him to hear wails and cries from some of his relatives, for they rarely had come to visit his mother.

He pondered that as they moved towards his father's car. He decided that he understood both sides of the matter, but that he could explain neither to anyone, not even to the minister who was talking to his father.

He wondered in fact whether anyone would really understand what his mother had been on about. With a sense of joy he realized that he himself did, and to him that thought was quite a remarkable one. It satisfied him, but he wondered why he kept imagining that his mother

still had a hoe, and was richly enjoying herself in a better patchwork garden. He also kept thinking that his father was coming to her without reserve, and without his perpetual obsession with his own work. and so was no longer neglecting her, and—for that matter—the whole family.

He knew then what the word and experience 'fulfilment' could mean to two deep and clear blue eyes of pure Irish origin.