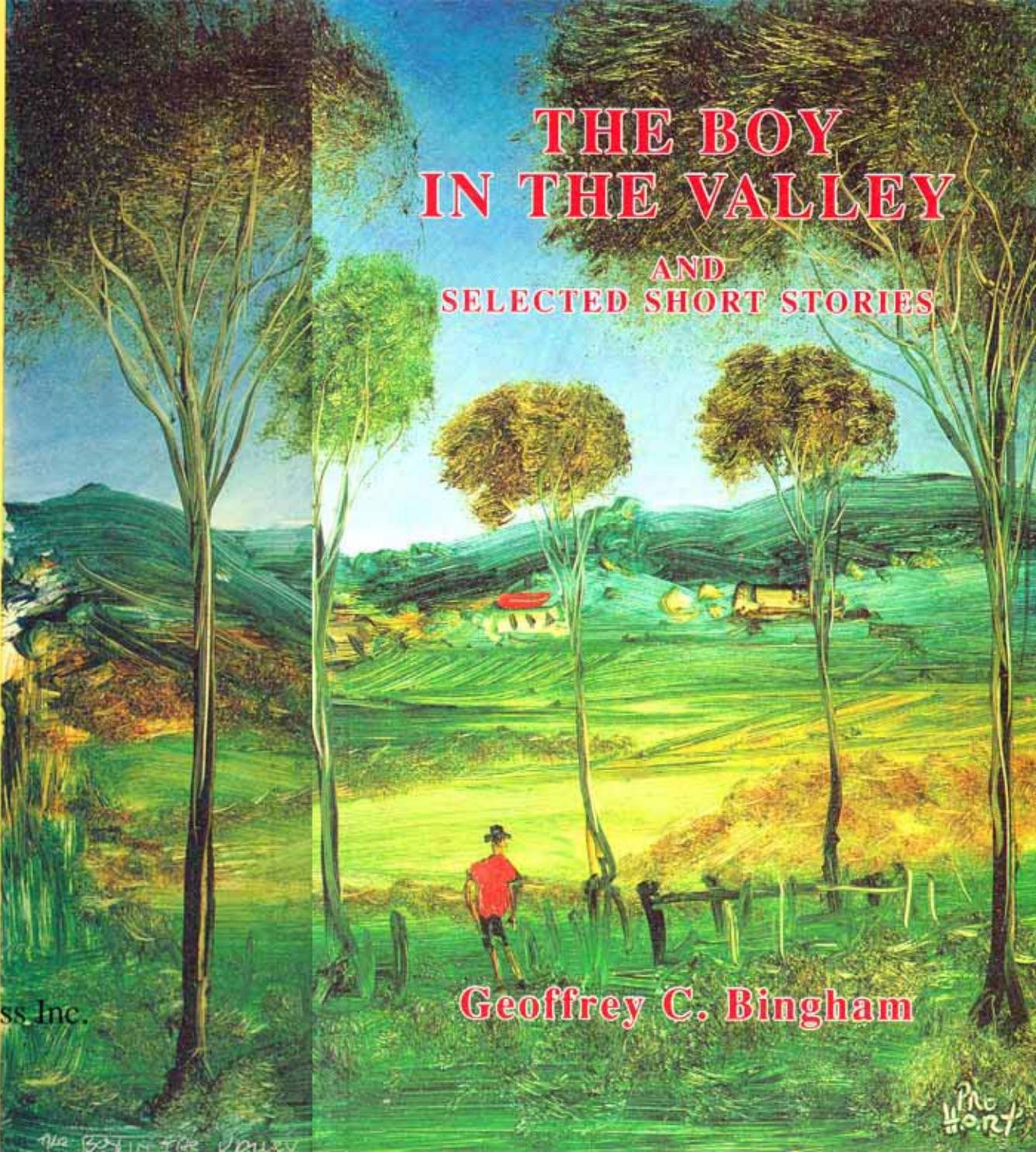


**THIS VOLUME OF
SHORT STORIES
CONTAINS:**

The Photograph
A Taste of Elegance
Trial by Fire
The Mind of Corrie
The Hate Holocaust
Slipped Disk
The Abyss
I Murdered Him
Passing Visitation
Mr Pelagius's Perpetual Problem
Oh, Maisie! Dear Maisie!
The Boy in the Valley
Beach Girl
Rankin Springs
Sentimental Journey
Ordinary Days: Ordinary People
Nimble Minds
Regeneration
The Transmogrified Genius
Eight Dead Men in a Bed
The Creeping Carpet
Tom and the Magpies
The Kranji Clique
The Magic Axe

Troubadour Press Inc.



**THE BOY
IN THE VALLEY**
AND
SELECTED SHORT STORIES

Geoffrey C. Bingham

PHOTO

THE BOY IN THE VALLEY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Tall Grow the Tallow-woods
To Command the Cats
The Translation of Mr Piffy
The Days and Dreams of Arcady
The Raymond Connection
The Boy, the Girl, and the Man
The Spirit of All Things
Laughing Gunner

AND OTHER STORIES

Geoffrey C. Bingham

TROUBADOUR PRESS INC.

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FOREWORD

STORIES bring themselves into being, almost miraculously, as though they conceived themselves, found a mind-womb somewhere to grow, and then suddenly caused themselves to be born. The writer of them is almost incidental in his connection with their conception, gestation and birth.

Of course, it is not quite like that. Writers do have something to do with the shaping, gestating and birthing of stories, but having played their part they are always a bit astonished at the resulting yarn. I have been in this business—with some lapses—for about sixty years. I know that stories need to entertain, but I also know that there are varying levels at which people are entertained. Crass entertainment leaves the viewer, listener, or reader empty. The wise old preacher of Ecclesiastes said, ‘The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of the fools is in the house of mirth.’ *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is the title of a recent book, and it is a thoughtful critique of entertainment that comes through the media, and mainly that of television. The ‘house of mirth’ with all its cackling is not as useful, or fruitful, as the hen-house. Most cackles announce recent results.

I believe every story should entertain. Hours spent in ‘the house of mourning’ bring thoughtful contemplation of the human scene. Thoughtful contemplation helps to describe and interpret our human situation: hence the variety we generally find in the accumulated treasury of human fiction. One may find it difficult to change one’s personal style of writing, but varied subjects and themes can save stories from being monotonously monochrome. For me this series has been an experiment in variety, and I hope it will not only satisfy the varied tastes its readers may have, but that it will bring thoughtful satisfaction, that which I believe is the highest and the best form of entertainment. Whether we like it or not, stories are teachers.

We may not be able, ever, to ‘know the end from the beginning’, but we can be informed and enriched along our journey. I trust this volume of yarns will meet many tastes and bring substance to its readers.

Geoffrey Bingham

THE PHOTOGRAPH

THE old man had been going through his pile of photographs. She had set them all out in big albums. That was in the last years before she had left him.

Every so often he would get out an album and look at it. Sometimes he would stare at them—far into the night—as though resurrecting the past. He had a mind, did the old man, and a vivid imagination. He could revive the past and set it throbbing again, as though it were really alive. She used to say—time and again—that he ought to have been a writer, and she meant it. Sometimes he had had the same thought himself, but then he had never learned to handle a typewriter, and his writing was painfully slow.

Not too many could make the past relive as he could. Sometimes when the children came—and particularly the grandchildren—he would tell them about the past. They never thought him boring. They thought he was pretty good.

‘Go on, Grandpa,’ they would say. ‘Tell us about when you were a boy.’ When he was a boy! That was always enough to start him off, and yarn after yarn he would spin, and no one ever suspected he was putting over tall ones, which sometimes he was, but only because he was such an artist with words, and his funny rubber face could relive the looks and feelings of others. His voice could relive their words, and any number of characters would come tumbling into the minds of his listeners.

Sometimes they would talk to her—Grandma—asking about him. They would say, ‘Did that really happen to Grandpa? Did Grandpa really do that?’

She would look at them thoughtfully, seem a bit serious, and then a smile would crinkle on her face, and she would say, ‘That’s what Grandpa thought had happened, anyway, so I suppose it did.’

No one was able to check up on Grandpa, so they had to be

contented with that. They just hoped it had happened. They wanted to sit and listen by the hour, and then go away with dreams in their eyes and memories in their minds. They half envied him his ability to keep them listening.

Sometimes—if they were staying with Grandpa—he would tell them story serials, and those stories were a real riot. Nobody believed they had actually happened, but the characters were so vivid that they lived with them for ever, and so they had to be true, even though it was impossible for that to be so.

There were the times when he took them fishing. That would be on spring evenings when the air was humming with insects, and there was a kind of endless throb of the frogs in the creek, and something rose—time and again—on the dark stretch of water. He would send chills and thrills through their spines as he talked about the queer creatures of the creek. Again, they didn't know whether or not to believe him. He would have them hunting for frogs, and the girls would squeal when he slipped the hooks through a frog and sent it swirling across the black water with the moon behind the flooded gums, and the night birds whooping past them, or small animals scurrying across the long grass by the edge of the creek.

They would be breathless when he caught the long, sinewy eels, and retreated in terror as those water creatures thrashed in the long grass until it adhered to them, until he knocked them with a waddy and they lay still.

All their life they would remember Grandpa, and they would be forewarned against old men whose faces crinkled, whose eyebrows raised, who mimicked man, bird and beast, and all of this tongue-in-cheek, with silent laughter or with sudden outbursts of hysterical joy. They never knew how to take him, and this he liked—very much.

WHEN Grandma died, it all changed. They could not believe the change. When they visited him on the farm they would find him sitting on the front verandah in his old Jason rocker, and his gaze would be down across the valley, as though expecting her to come up the valley from the creek, or over the horizon of the last hill so that he could see her and wave.

She never came. The last years had been quiet ones when she could not work as in the old days. She sat making quilts for the teenage grandchildren. Soon they would be married, and they would need her brilliant and original patchwork quilts. She also made tapestries of the most remarkable kind, and he would see they were framed. She did other things, like knitting Fair Isle jumpers and sweaters, doing crocheting and embroidery, and even making rugs for their fireplaces out of chance wool and sliced pantyhose.

She was a remarkable lady, with dry wit and a shrewd knowledge of human nature. She was kindly to her children and even more so to her grandchildren, but she never let them get away with anything. If anyone tried to trick her with cleverness or deceive her with lies she was on them like a flash, and they felt uncomfortable until they came and set it right with the old lady. They loved her even as they feared her wit and admired her gifts. They often wondered how she had been as a young girl, but then it was difficult to imagine Grandma as a young girl. However could she have been like them, for they could never imagine her in that way, and it never struck them that one day they—the girls anyway—might become like her!

WHEN Grandma died—'Passed over,' they said—they took her to Barretville to join her ancestors in their many generations.

Grandpa never seemed to grasp the fact that she had gone to heaven—for ever. He had no doubt she was a fine candidate for heaven—so full of good works she had been—but there she would have differed with her old running mate. She had little time for good works. Didn't know what they were, in fact. She saw no merit in anything she did. She just did the next thing that seemed right, and underneath was a woman of faith. That was all that mattered to her. She didn't know how anyone could live without faith.

GRANDPA seemed glad enough when the children and grandchildren came, but he reacted sharply if they suggested in any way that he was nigh unto senility and it would be better to leave the farm and come into the town and take one of those new

units they had for aged people. He snorted away such suggestions in a flash of scorn and contempt. There were cattle on his acres, but they were agisted and he had nothing to care for. The few chooks, the clever galah that talked and chattered when you went near and which screamed its head off at sunset—along with old Bluey the cattle dog—were enough companions for him.

His eyes would gleam at the sight of the children, and he would welcome them, and encourage them to go to the strawberry patch, but you could see he was tired when they had run their strength into the ground, and he had to wait for them to go. If they came on their cycles he would be glad to see them mount. If they burred in on their motorbikes he was glad when they roared off. If a car-load came he was relieved when it was repacked and they were out of sight. He just tired quickly when there was much excitement around.

He would go into the living room and sit down opposite her photograph, and he would nod at her as though she were still there, and after a time he would feel the prickling in his eyes, and shake his head and even snuffle, after which he always made a cup of the Twinings Tea she had loved, although he would leave out the lemon which she had so liked. He would imagine they were both sitting there together, sipping at the tea, and watching the foolish TV screen they had come to stare at for some of their time. Often he felt the urge to make her a cup also, but knew he wasn't that far gone that he would do it. He would just shake his head, cough in his moist throat, and sigh for the change of it all.

ONE day his sister-in-law came with her husband. They had a few things to give him—relics from the past. One was a photograph which he thought he had never seen. Later he remembered it was taken at the time of her engagement. He was struck by the youthful beauty of the woman who had been his, and he muttered some kind of thanks. His wife's sister shouted at him a bit, thinking that being old he must also be deaf, but that wasn't his problem. He would keep nodding at everything she said, just hoping that it would cause her to speak less or to lower her voice, and most of all to stop talking about the past. He knew she had the past a bit wrong. It hadn't been at all like the past she

remembered. Somewhere she had gotten the facts wrong. Oh, he could remember the past, all right, but it wasn't quite as this sister thought it was.

Even so he smiled and nodded, and after a time the sister and her husband went, and he was a bit sorry that the reminiscences from the past had ceased. No matter how much off-key they had been, they were still sweet. The sister had always worshipped her sister—his wife—and that was enough for him. The husband of the sister also admired the woman the old man called 'Kitty', and that was enough for the old man. His eyes were a bit moist when they went, but he made a beeline for the table where the sister had left cake and scones for him, although it was the photograph that really interested him.

He took it up, stared at it, and laid it down. After a time he made some Twinings Tea and set it down on the table. He picked up the photograph and stared at it until his tea had gone cold. He threw out the tea, came back to the table, and stared again until his tiredness bid him go to bed.

In bed he kept wondering about her, and fell asleep still pondering the unusual beauty of the aged photograph.

Early next morning he awoke and took his torch out to the living room, and trembled lest the photograph had only been a dream of his, or a figment of his vivid imagination. He almost gasped with joy when he found it on the table, and his eyes began to gleam. He took it back into the bedroom, heaped up his pillows, and began another bout of staring.

What he saw delighted him, and he could scarcely believe the reality for the joy it brought. It was then he conceived the idea of having it framed. At present it was a photograph on its own—unfaded, unblemished by time or insects. Nothing had been spilled upon it, for it had been kept intact. He thought, however, that it ought to be framed, and he found some brown paper and wrapped it carefully. After that he made his breakfast, ate it, shaved and showered and dressed in his clothes for the town.

The bus always stopped for him if he stood at the gate. Long ago he had been bidden not to drive, and he rather liked the bus, for its passengers were generally the local folk. He appreciated the colour and movement of people, the eyes he could look at

with appreciation, and just the warmth of being one person amongst them all. His old trick of discerning persons was still with him, but he used it secretly.

None of them called him 'Grandpa'. They all called him 'Mister McKittrick'. When she was alive it was 'Kitty and McKittrick', but then never to their faces. They always respected the aged couple and, indeed, almost revered them.

IN the town, at the shop that framed pictures and photographs, they gave him the same respect. They rather wondered what would come out of his brown paper, and there was a bit of a gasp when they saw the beautifully set features of his young wife. They looked first at the young woman, and then at the old man, and he felt a thrill of pride go through him.

He knew what they were thinking. 'How could this old man have had such a beautiful young wife?' Of course they would soon realise that he, too, had been young, and for that matter something of a good-looker, although he knew she far surpassed him in looks.

In fact, that was not their thought. These people who framed pictures and photographs—especially old photographs—were experts at reading back an old person to his (or her) middle age, then back to younger ages—such as the twenties—and then down to when they were in teen age, and even childhood—so practised they were in discovering the pasts of people. That is why they saw the old man as a firm young man, quietly assured, and the best of companions to this serene young woman of the coloured photograph.

They shared with him the kind of framing he needed—the colour of the wooden frame, whether it should be ornate, plain or in between. They suggested the best size, the surround, and whether it should be freestanding or hung. He listened patiently and was glad of their ideas, but something had fixed itself in his mind, and they were forced to agree with him. They recognised his natural taste.

'When will it be ready?' he asked them. They suggested a few days hence, but he was adamant. It had to be that day, or not at all. He could wait for the last bus, even if it was the one which

left in the dark. He would not be separated from his photograph. They agreed to do it in the afternoon, and they had difficulty getting him to go off and have a bit of lunch. He bought a pie and polystyrene cup of tea and was back on his chair, watching them and keeping his eye on the photograph.

He approved of them for the way they handled the photograph with care, and even reverence. He liked their remarks about the beauty of his wife. He quite understood why they were envious, and that they congratulated him on having such a treasure, but he said nothing about his Kitty—not one word. He just watched them do their masterly job of framing, and didn't care that the cost was unusually high. Normally he was quite thrifty, but he had thrown thrift to the wind. In fact it seemed to him that the high cost added value to his treasure, so that he nodded with pleasure, accepted the wrapped parcel, and delightedly made his way to the bus stop.

It was not the last bus he caught, but the last but one. He had the evening planned. On arriving home he would make his evening meal, eat it and listen to the six o'clock news. When that was finished he would wash the dishes and tidy up the room. It was his custom to keep everything tidy. He knew that when an old person slacked and did not keep a routine, then he steadily deteriorated. He could not remember having failed to shave each day, indeed every day of his adult life. Not shaving would have left him feeling uneasy.

When the meal had been prepared and eaten, and when the news was finished he switched off the TV. He had a small table set before his Jason rocker so that he would look up slightly at the photograph. The table was under the main light in the living room. In fact it was in the spot where Kitty had sat with him as they chatted or watched TV. He had pushed his Jason chair away from that spot, as though it were hallowed—not that he would ever let anyone know he thought that!

His opening of the wrapped frame was like a delicate ritual. He eased the Scotch tape, and slid his hand under the brown paper. It came away easily under his touch. He wrapped it neatly and put it in a drawer of the sideboard. Then he turned the frame face up. It could be freestanding, for it had a prop support. It

could also be hung if he wished. For the moment it was to be freestanding.

He set it in the centre of the table over a doily she had once made. It was embroidered with tatting. He fussed for a few moments to get it truly into focus. Indeed he went backwards and forwards a number of times until he was satisfied that the perspective was correct. Then he settled himself in the Jason and let his eyes feast on her.

IT happened as he thought it would. His memories of her were evoked by that superb photograph. He let himself be led by his memory. His mind went back to the time he had met her, and how he had been taken by her, and how she seemed to find him a bit too mature and even severe, but how when they started having fun together she changed. It had startled him—her acceptance of him. He had not thought a person could be so assured of another, and so adoring.

But then he had adored her. Even so, his adoration was not mindless. Little things about her even irritated him, but the thought that one day she might be his wife excited him greatly. He had always thought it was an incredible thing for a man to have a woman and to live with her for always. No sooner had they parted from one another during their courtship than he would make a phone call to see whether she was still alive and no accident had happened, and so his impossible dream had been ended for ever.

The wedding day had been a time of torment and delight—torment because he had wondered whether it would really happen, and if so, then would he be an inadequate husband? His real knowledge of women had only been with this one—Kitty. All the years of the war he had kept away from other women, for—rightly or wrongly—he had feared them. For the most part they had seemed somewhat empty to him, always talking about things which for him rated as inconsequential. It was not so with Kitty—she was sensible, but also sensitive. She went to the heart of any matter quite quickly, and for the most part, too, understood his ways of thinking.

Anyways she had looked beautiful, and so beautiful that he had

been terrified. For all her beauty she was simple and shy. He remembered their honeymoon of passion and peace, of intimacy and assurance. He knew that these days—if the TV screen was to be believed—that there was nothing new in marriage—no excitement, no surprise. Couples unwrapped the present of marriage long before they came to it, and the parcel was found to be empty. Not for her, and not for him! For them it had been a richly packed parcel.

His mind went to war days and his mates who had come in from being with women. There was a kind of bitterness in their triumphs, and—he thought—a sense of cheating or being cheated. How easily they made fun of persons and bodies and intimacy. Some instinct had kept him away from it all.

But then it was not all fun and laughter, intimacy and joy. He remembered the battles they had had—with each other. She was a proud person and even a bit imperious, and that he could not accept. So they had struggled until the misery of it drove them back to each other, and it had been like starting all over again. They both had the sense to know that this sort of thing was universal. Knowing that helped them.

He went through the years of their marriage as though he were going on pilgrimage. The strange sight of her when she was heavy with child, and the mystery of a new person coming through her body all came back to him. There had been anticipation and then the birth with its own pain and mystery—none of it had escaped him though he would not talk about it.

She had been good on the farm, good at cooking and cleaning, sewing and housekeeping. She could paint rooms with the next one, and would help on the farm. She knew how to pick beans, and peas, scrub the carrots, help with the potatoes for market and get the eggs off to the Egg Board. She let him do the milking but she reared the poddies. Even now he could hear her melodious cry, 'Sookie! Sookie! Sookie!' and when the calves had heard that they had rushed to her.

Bringing up the children had been fun, then work and then heartache. They had battled with a new age which came suddenly upon them—an age in which young people were urged to be independent of their parents, to do their own thing, even to drugs

and promiscuity. He had never gotten to understand the wild elements of that age. They seemed so ugly, so distorted, so unlovely, but she had set herself out to understand. Not that she had agreed with the new practices and ways. She disliked them no less than he did, but she was easier with the children, and they appreciated her. She helped them over many of the humps, and so, having left home, they were always coming back and—after a time—bringing their children with them.

He remembered when they had decided to quit farming, though not the farm. They were both aging, but still had plenty of life. Building fires for her in the winter had delighted him, though he kept his delight secret. Having her sit on the verandah in the sun during the warmer months was a delight to them both. Her feet would be swathed with the quilts she was making, or the table cloths she was embroidering.

The strange idea came to him one day that her needlework would one day be famous. He could imagine people saying, 'Old Kitty McKittrick's embroidery is unique.' He could see them admiring it, and collectors going into antique shops to see whether a McKittrick quilt or tapestry had drifted from its family mooring into a place of sale. Once when he had told her his mind on this she had laughed. He noticed, however, that she had been pleased. He also noted how she wove personal messages into her tapestries and handiwork. She was setting up a mystery for future generations. He wondered if that was why a smile often played over her lips.

He felt a trifle tired and knew he was almost at the end of his sentimental journey. Well, in accordance with his custom since her death, he would have a cup of Twinings Tea—Earl Grey perhaps. She had liked that best of all the flavours.

When he had heated the water, warmed the teapot and poured the fragrant tea into one of her favourite shell china cups, he placed it near her photograph, drew up his Jason and stared steadily at her youthful beauty. For him it was a feast which was appropriate—right and proper.

As he looked he wondered why it was he had been so quiet since her death, why he had done little but sit and think. It suddenly came to him that he could resume life, go back to his

farming, utilise his machinery, use the grass for a herd of his own instead of agisting it. Even as he thought of it he knew he would tire easily, but then life would have renewed purpose and meaning. Seeing Kitty so young reminded him of his own youth, and the plans they had shared, and the work they had done.

He took up his cup of Earl Grey and began sipping it, slowly. For the first time since her death he began conversation with her. He did not feel sentimental but only full of peace and satisfaction. He had enough sense to know that if he were to keep up the practice of talking to her photograph then he might slip into being a foolish old man, eventually becoming sentimental, tearful, rheumy, looking for the impossible and full of self-pity when it would not come to be.

'Kitty,' he said gently—and his voice did not startle him—'Kitty, I'm off on a new thing. I'm going back to work. I'll take it quietly, just as you would have me do. I just can't sit here any more and do nothing but remember. Not even in front of this beautiful photograph. You know I didn't have it framed for myself, but for the family, and for the friends. I want them to know you as you were when I fell in love with you and married you.'

He paused and said, 'How beautiful you were—and are.' He could see her as she had been in death, after the terrible pain of the heart-seizure. She had been at peace, her faint wrinkles gone and her features as close to youth as can be in an aged person.

He had finished the tea, and pushed his Jason back from the photograph. He was like a man who is replete after a fine and satisfying meal. For a moment he closed his eyes. He could not remember ever being so tired, but it was a pleasing tiredness—a good weariness.

When he opened his eyes it was as though he had drifted a long way away, and he was surprised to see her looking at him, as though it were not her photograph on the table, but she—herself. He knew it to be a trick of the mind and the imagination, but he liked it.

'Kitty,' he said sensibly, 'I know it's your photograph and not you, and that is the way it has to be. If you know about these things you will be glad I am starting again—tomorrow. You won't be here, but that won't matter so much. I'll make it somehow.'

The weariness had overcome him again, even more than before, and he felt himself swimming in a sea of pleasant ease. It was not that he was drugged, but just that pain had left him, maybe for ever. Somehow the phrase 'for ever' was there at the back of his mind, and then it drifted away, and he with it.

Anyone looking at him might wonder whether he was simply asleep or had gone, but just looking at him it would have been difficult to know.

A TASTE OF ELEGANCE

WHEN she looked up her heart missed half a beat. The woman had touched her arm, but she had been looking into the car park of the wildlife sanctuary. Her thoughts were far away. Somewhere, maybe over where the black swans were, her own husband was looking at the birds he so much admired.

What startled her about the woman was her elegance. Not that she had not seen elegance before: she had. This woman, however, was the epitome of the elegance she had once admired. Her thoughts flew back like homing birds to her own childhood, to her youth and the days of her young womanhood.

'I wonder if you could help me,' the woman was saying. 'I was to meet someone here today. A Mary Luscombe.'

'Yes, yes,' she heard herself saying, 'I know Mary. I imagine she hasn't yet arrived or she would be about here.' This was the place where people sat, awaiting the arrival of others. You could pick them up, being in sight of the car park.

The tasteful clothing of the woman entranced her. She was not overdressed, and certainly not ostentatious, but everything about her attracted attention. She—Elaine—surmised that, in fact, not many women would think to look at her unless she confronted them, as she was now doing.

She felt a little awkward. 'Why don't you sit down, and relax,' she said. 'You can see everything from here.'

The woman seemed grateful. 'My husband is in the car,' she said; 'I will get him.' She hesitated. 'It is cold here.' She shivered slightly.

Elaine said, 'He would be better in the car, I imagine. It will be warmer there. If we see Mary come, then we could call him.'

The other woman nodded. 'My name is June, June Seely. We

are visiting South Australia for the first time. We have heard so much about your beautiful Victor Harbor.'

Elaine knew the voice. She could almost have pinpointed the North Shore suburb. 'You are from Sydney,' she said. 'From the North Shore.'

The woman looked surprised. 'How would you know that?' she asked. Then she herself answered the other woman's statement, confirming it. 'Yes, of course I am.' She stared without seeming rude. 'You are from there yourself, is that it?'

Elaine Delaney seemed to be in a reverie. She shivered slightly, memories coming like flocks of seagulls. Then she saw the living gulls themselves, fluttering down around the midday diners as they picnicked at the bush tables. As gulls do throughout the world, they cried stridently in competition with one another. With a shake of her head she recovered and smiled at the visitor from another State.

'Yes! Yes!' she said, 'I lived at Pymble, back near the Kuringai Chase.'

'Wahroonga,' said June Seely gently. 'Also in the back part.'

Rapport was established. They were talking shop of a social kind. Perhaps the Seely woman was a bit puzzled as she stared at her new acquaintance, and Elaine knew why. The years had battered her somewhat. Pymble was only a memory. Life had taken her out into other places. It was not that her dress sense had evaded her, but that life had demanded stronger measures of her.

The two played their light game. What schools had they both attended? Whom did they know? What were their histories? They circled each other gently, finding out, assessing, surmising, coming to conclusions.

At last Elaine said wistfully, 'Much has happened since my Sydney days.' The other woman waited, drawn to this one she had happened upon in a South Australian tourist town. When there was no reply, she opened the game more widely.

'I have been in business,' she said, 'and big business at that. I've made my way up that special ladder. It has been good. Mary Luscombe could tell you all about it. We have kept in touch over the years.'

Elaine knew Mary was in big business herself—rural

business. She was a leader in the sheep-breeding and wool-production industry. Years before, her husband—Arch—had been crippled in a tractor accident. Following that he was able to keep the books, but could do little else. Mary had developed the breeding of Corriedales, and her stud-stock was the best on the South Coast. In fact, it was one of the best in the whole country. The Luscombes had not been able to have children. She wondered whether the Seelys had children. She kept looking at June, honestly envying the exquisite frock and accessories. They were distinctive, but yet not out of place, not even in this wildlife sanctuary. She decided that the make-up was as perfect as a mature woman could hope for.

June Seely was saying, 'We just couldn't have children, and Arthur was against adoption. Somewhere back in his own family it hadn't worked out.' She smiled quietly. 'I guess it has given us both time to work at other things.'

They let the autumn sun play on them softly. The air was cold, but not dank. Even so, Elaine shivered. The other woman had opened up a wide gulf. She wondered whether her own Dennis was still caught in his swan-watching, or whether he had moved on to the large aviary of indigenous birds—especially the parrots which he loved. A vagrant thought filtered in. She was curious to know what this June would think of her man. For that matter, what he might think of June's Arthur, if they were to meet. She hoped Mary would delay her coming.

She switched her attention back to the stylish woman opposite her, thinking just how beautiful she was. Everything about her was tasteful, graceful, symmetrical and lovely. It was not that she—Elaine—envied her, but for a moment she wondered what might have been her life had she not met Dennis. Of course he had swept her off her feet and that was what she had wanted. He drove every thought of her background from her. He had little time for the palatial and the luxurious homes, for the select life of the upper crust. It was not that he despised it, although much of it seemed—to him—to be inverted snobbery. All of those things had just seemed inconsequential to him, and she had come to learn his ways. Yet even as she ruminated, the sane, solid structure he had built seemed to be crumbling. This slight anger

she was feeling within, was it because she was still caught by her past world and resented this renewed factor, or was it because he had never let her become what she had wanted to be?

AT this moment she could visualise the might-have-been. It was not that she had wanted to achieve ambition like this Seely woman or like Mary Luscombe, but she had wanted the best, nevertheless. Social position, a professional husband, a home with spacious land—gardens, lawns, shrubs and towering trees, tennis courts and swimming pool, and friends who admired her and her children—all these suddenly became desirable, because in a way she had lost them. The children of course would have had the sort of schools she herself had attended. They would have attained to elite professions, or have been amongst the best in the business world. Social life would have been delightful, and she could have been of use in some of the service clubs.

June Seely was saying, 'Perhaps I had better call Arthur. He might like the sun we're enjoying.'

Elaine watched her walking to the Volvo, and she let her envy run riot. These days women achieved so much. For the moment she could feel no bitterness against her new friend, and for her evident wealth and high achievement. She was almost professional in her objective analysis. She noted the classic lines of the woman, and the quiet confidence of her walking. She frankly wished it were she. An agony of desire almost made her tremble.

She had occasionally bought a glossy magazine or two—journals that told her what women were doing. It fascinated her to know how successful some of them had been. They seemed to live a life of their own. Husbands were often absent, or, if present, then enviable appendages, quiet, courtly, accepting the success of their spouses, living a life alongside their wives. Some of the single women had achieved unbelievable success and the enviable independence which seemed to go with it. She felt a sharp pang for the thought of such pleasure.

She watched Arthur coming towards them, and saw how perfectly suited were the two. As she had expected, he was charming, granting June her own womanhood, slightly admiring,

in some detached and deferential way. He fitted into his wife, being quietly poised and pleasing. She decided she liked him. Wistfully she compared him with Dennis. She hoped Dennis would stay away with the birds for just a little longer. Not that she was ashamed of him, but she wanted to continue the luxury of her own reverie. Dennis would quickly break that.

June Seely was explaining her meeting with Elaine, and Arthur was showing interest in an aloof way, as though he was surprised to find one of their own ilk in this southern State. He opened a desultory conversation, trying to discover mutual acquaintances whose mention would manufacture contacts. There seemed to be none. Elaine noticed that he seemed physically frail, and walking seemed difficult for him. He shivered in the South Coast cold air, and she suggested they go into the kiosk and have coffee together.

He brightened up at that, and they ordered coffee. The management had started early fires in the open hearth, and he rubbed his hands together before it, trying to increase the circulation of his blood. Elaine noticed how dry his hands were. His eyes seemed dry also. They were without sparkle.

'He is old,' she thought, and was glad Dennis had kept himself young. At the same time she was aware of her own skin and some of its premature wrinkles. Things such as this had rarely troubled her, but today it was as though June had caught her living out a life that was different from what it ought to have been.

When Mary Luscombe arrived—fresh, alert, pert and self-confident—Elaine lapsed back into herself, ruminating, liking the luxury of her private thinking. She and Mary had been good enough friends, although in a somewhat detached way. In any case, she and June were busy talking about the things that interested them both.

To Elaine the present moment was like an invasion from another world, one unreal because it was so real. Arthur hovered on the edge of the conversation, being ready to confirm what June was saying—if that would please his alluring wife. He was a willing foil to her gracious charisma. For herself, Elaine alternated between hearing what was said, and thinking of life as she had known it.

First—and as always—she thought about the children, and then about their children's children. They would never understand her social background, her early ambitions, her anticipated pattern of life. That was because she had never told them. If they were to know what she was thinking at this moment, they would be surprised beyond measure: stunned in fact! Probably they would think it hilarious. They were down-to-earth creatures—like Dennis. They loved fun and laughter. They were not crude in their humour, but rough, salty, and undebonair. The girls bought their clothes from the supermarkets, alternating between rough jeans, careless tops with matching footwear, and then frocks and accessories that made them look beautiful when they wished to be so. The boys had depended on her to choose most of their clothes, and later, their wives had traded with her for the opportunity to carry on the same tradition. The grandchildren had minds of their own, and battled with their parents for what was in fashion amongst the young. She thought ruefully of the dynamic personalities they all were, and of the toll they had taken of her life.

She sighed now, for a lost world. Whilst it all seemed far away, she found herself in deep envy of Mary and June. She had to admit that she felt more than a little inferior. Her mind went back to the glorious glossies, and the exciting world they portrayed. She knew that elegance was the true name of the game—elegance and wealth, the power to choose and have what one wanted. She would have loved the luxuries that tumbled around the fortunate ones. She would also have liked the rare and fascinating freedom of feminine independence. Her honesty compelled her to ask whether she could have made her way into this sumptuous world, and in honesty she believed she could have done so. If she had been unable, then her present envy would be foolish, without foundation, and simply stupid jealousy.

She kept visualising the process Dennis had interrupted, the process—and progress—that would have made her one with the Marys and Junes of her previous world. Sometimes, on women's sessions on TV, she had seen the successes that had come to women in the past few decades. This in contrast to a world which previously had rarely seen a woman reach the top. Not only in the world of business and the professions, but in

the fascinating world of education, art, music and literature women were making their way. She knew she could write, even if not quite in the way Dennis had been able to do. In earlier days her poetry had been unusual, even partly recognised, and she had dabbled with the brush, having been told she had a good gift.

Even so, her mind was not only on professional success. In her reverie she luxuriated, imagining she had attained the gracious way of life she had coveted. In a way, it was a dreaming—luxurious mental window-shopping. Dennis and the children were now far out of her mind. She was her own self—the one she had once dreamed of becoming. There was nothing that June and Mary had achieved that she could not have attained. Had she paid more attention to her figure she could wear clothes just as well, and her personality she knew to be vivacious. As she ruminated she did not tire in her imagination. She was vividly living the life she must have always wanted, the life which Dennis had thoughtlessly obliterated.

SHE almost hated her man when he came blundering in. He looked in such ruddy health, and was so handsome that she felt a bit homely, unable to match him. His tweed jacket and his grey slacks were the only acknowledgement that he ever made to the days of his youth—his own living on the North Shore about which he often talked with uproarious laughter.

His eyes immediately took in Mary and June. She swore that he barely kept himself from whistling, but his eyes admired the lady with the classic lines. He grinned at Mary in familiar fashion, and wrung Arthur's hand when he was introduced. He busied himself getting coffee, piling it with sugar and cream before returning to their table.

He looked at Elaine with the grin that both irritated and warmed her. 'Boy!' he said, 'you ought to see the lovely pair of King parrots they have imported from the east. They are superb.'

He looked at June. 'Guess you have seen King parrots,' he conceded, 'but never better than these. They are gorgeous.'

Elaine tried to imagine June in the parrot aviary, but failed to visualise the scene.

June Seely seemed to be fascinated by Dennis. She shook

her head. 'I couldn't tell one parrot from another.'

Arthur broke in surprisingly. 'You should see her parrots in her fabrics,' he said. 'They are exotic.'

'Stylised,' June said a trifle apologetically.

'I'll bet,' Dennis said, 'but then these are the real McCoy. Right out of the rain forests, brilliant and beautiful.' He grinned at June. 'A bit like yourself,' he said, intending a compliment.

Elaine froze. She felt the pain of his roughness. So did Arthur and Mary, but June seemed undecided.

Elaine thought, 'Dennis is too male for the three of them—even for Arthur.'

Arthur was not agitated, just aloof. Elaine sensed this was his way of self-defence. She suddenly wondered what the man would have been like had they had children. This made her ponder June's case also. Would she have been so elegant, so superb, so poised and confident, or would children have altered that?

SUDDENLY she was seeing Dennis and the children in the vast juniper forest in the 10,000 feet altitude above Quetta on the North-West Frontier of Pakistan. He was romping with them, trying to find hundred-year-old tortoises, so he could place the children on them for an imaginary race. She could smell the high, dry air, and see the brilliant blue sky almost exploding behind the juniper-clad hills. Dennis was explaining to the children that you made gin from the juniper berries. They were wondering how they could make gin!

She saw him then, in the marketplace, the fascinating bazaar, bargaining with the vendors in polished Urdu, confounding them with their own language and making outrageous puns, filling the noisy air with explosive laughter. The Moslems were arguing with him about their faith, and he was not criticising it, but they were respectful of him for the penetrating questions he asked—questions which they could not answer—and for the things that he told them, things they had never known.

THEIR life had been a strange one. Dennis on returning from the war had looked her up and hustled her into marriage. Then he had hustled her into children. He had scrambled through his

training, and taken her—with the children—into more than one continent. His writing was fresh, but acerbic. His astringency offended, but his patent honesty helped many. Readers were always being outraged, and he would be patient with his written replies or interviews. He had tried to think his way through the issues of the day, and say something useful about them. He had always been more a person than a journalist—as such. He had always had a kind of contempt for people who did not think about life. He had taught her to think. Out of it all he had made little money, and little fame, but they had loved the life.

That was why she was surprised at this moment—surprised at her yearning for the good life, for gracious living, for the plenty of luxury. God! How she had battled when they had so little, and how often she had wondered at the children she had raised. In all honesty she knew they would never fit Pymble or Wahroonga. In fact, she never quite knew where they would fit, that is, other than where they now were. There was Tom down in the Mallee grinding out a living on indifferent pasture country: nothing so superb as the first-class land or stock of the South Coast. Jonathan was up at Leigh Creek in engineering, and Phoebe was married to a West Coast farmer who had faced seven years of merciless drought. Yet they all seemed to have fun. They had the rough doggedness of their father, and seemed to know little of depression, and appeared to envy no one.

The thinking made her uneasy. Today—this autumn day—she was caught between two worlds. Her envy was not crass—she knew that. She highly admired the Junes and Marys for their accomplishments. They had worked as hard as any Mallee farmer, and not only with their minds. What she admired was their aristocracy of spirit, and that made her see what she might have lost. She could see that Dennis admired them too, but his was the appreciation he gave to women who battled against odds, as he, likewise, had battled.

WHEN the women had gone, and Arthur with them in June's Volvo, she felt a sense of loss. She knew that June and Mary had both run their eye over her, knowing her background, and wondering at what had happened to her. Incredible pictures of

their classic beauty, their equipoise in success, their outward assurance, and their effortless elegance kept returning to her mind. She herself seemed empty, alone, and purposeless. She wallowed in envy, self-pity and desire.

That was how Dennis found her. He knew her moods, and sensed her loss of serenity. He knew that when he pressed her to himself—against his rough tweeds and strong lips—that she would respond, but he knew intuitively that later she would revert, caught again in her pitiful mood. She would come back to a slow misery. He held her hands and led her towards the solemn black swan who could outclass any human form in elegance.

‘Look at them,’ he said gently. ‘They have it all naturally.’ She marvelled that he seemed to know.

‘You have to watch them with their cygnets,’ he said; ‘they can be as savage as hell. They look beautiful in anger, and it is then that they are dangerous.’

He did not seem to be implying anything. It was his natural carelessness of everything which now strengthened her. For a moment the small faces of their grandchildren rushed up at her, and then her own children—their faces as strong as their father’s, and, she supposed, as strong as her own.

It was then her beautiful bubble floated away, its rainbow iridescence captivating her for a moment, but when it burst it was gone—gone for ever. She felt his mind touching hers. His hands were coarse enough on her arms, and his tweed jacket rough as heather, but his mind caressed hers as gently as a goose’s down. She thought, ‘How tender he is!’ and then wondered where he had learned this. She thought of Mary Luscombe’s man, crippled, and June’s Arthur with his dry hands and almost impassive face, and she felt no envy for them. Her compassion killed envy for ever, and she felt quietly free.

Nor for that matter did she feel pity or patronage for any. She just felt the marvel of variety, and the rich things that go to make humanity. Because of this she snuggled closer to his jacket, returning the caress of his mind.

TRIAL BY FIRE

HE came in the early morning, walking the long distance from the station. They had not known when he was to arrive. He had sent a letter, but did not know whether it had been received or not. So now he trudged with his suitcase along the ochred road, his *shoes* shooting up dry spurts of dust. Because he was still young enough to feel things deeply, he was shocked by the havoc the bushfire had wrought. The young eucalypts had turned to black ghosts, and the old gums held out tortured arms of grim despair. The fence posts were charred stumps, and the fence wires hung crazily with little or no support. Here and there a house had been immolated and the smell of it all brought back memories of former fires. Here, however, was something stronger than before. It was the stench of dead animals that emanated from the bush about him as he walked. Beyond the bush were the farms, and he felt pity for the stock lost, as well as for the owners. He tramped on.

One part of him knew a strange but sweet delight. He was coming home. Home was home—whatever. That is, whatever he felt to the contrary about home, home was home, and this was the first time he had known it in this way. He wondered how his Dad would take the return, even though it was temporary. He knew his mother would be pleased. She had never not loved him. She seemed to have a special bond with him. He had often wondered about it.

The main road was now in sight and his pulses quickened. A sweet, fierce joy flooded him, but it made his legs weak, and he staggered a little. When he turned the bend and saw the property away in the distance, he grew even weaker. Tears came welling up, and his stomach was a small pit of horror. There was also indignation, anger at the utter desolation of it all. It was nothing

but blackness. The hundreds of acres had been burned. Only some of the tall blackbutts had—up high—partly escaped the snarling venom of the fires.

Up on the hill the house was there—untouched. His eyes quickly sought out the wishing tree—that talisman of time and security—and to his relief it was still there. They called it ‘the bottle tree’ and the girth of its circumference was nigh on thirty feet. The other kurrajongs, pines and the cedars which surrounded the house were still standing, but he guessed they were somewhat charred. He walked the road rather than cross the deeply ashed paddocks. The fences along which he walked had collapsed. The perimeter had been bounded by post-and-rail fences, but the internal divisional fences had been of the posts they had sawn and split from felled timber. He looked at the tangled fallen wires, and something groaned within him. Endless man-hours and heavy labour had gone into the digging of post-holes, the sighting of the posts, the drilling, wiring and straining. All this so that there could be rotational grazing. Now it was all ashes.

The main gateposts had withstood the fire, strangely enough, and the gate was there, open, waiting for him to come. He had a visitation of hysterical laughter at the thought of a welcome, and when he looked up again they were coming down the long drive to him—the brothers and the sisters. One took his suitcase, and they all greeted him with the indifferent affection characteristic of his family. His brothers shook his hand and there was a touch of grimness in their smiles.

‘The old man?’ he asked anxiously, and the tension between them broke. They grinned. ‘He’s OK,’ they said. ‘He’s glad we’re all here.’ There was just the faintest touch of cynicism in their voices. The girls began chattering as they turned to go up towards the house. His own eyes were on the burnt maize stems. Somehow—in their own way—they had resisted the fire. They had been charred but not consumed. They stood like sturdy sentinels, boasting their concentrated power against the holocaust that had passed. He could see the burned cobs.

His mother rushed to him and hugged him. ‘No need to have come,’ she told him, as though she was immediately making a

point. This puzzled him. His father looked at him, nodded a welcome, gave him his hand, and even touched his shoulder. This was unusual intimacy from the old man, and they both knew it.

He knew there was some conversation unsaid. His father was grateful although he would not express it, and yet his mother was opposed to his return, although she would not voice it plainly. The latter puzzled him. His two brothers and three sisters were silent about the matter, but they all went with him to the large room they called ‘the kitchen’. They had finished breakfast but consumed more tea and toast to keep him company. After a time his mother left them, to hoe away at her precious but charred vegetable garden. His father went to his office. They chattered on, full of the events of a few days ago.

TODAY was the third day—two days after the Saturday fire. ‘Black Saturday’ would go down in history. Someone had been burning off over near the vineyards, and had set off a series of fires. The wind was constantly changing and the place had become ringed by the fires. They told him the story as he drank the hot, sweet tea. Gloria was the most talkative of the girls.

‘Dad got the car out under the portico,’ she said, ‘so that we could have a clear go to the road. Norman was bringing the tractor and other implements up out of the round-house on to the road at the side of the house. The fires were terrible. We saw them coming across from the main road and Dad put us into the car with his special papers and things. We got out just in time, down the road, and under the bridge at the Creek. The fire passed by, but did not cross the road.’

He could see the three girls, his father and mother, all crouched under the bridge. Their father had kept saying, ‘I hope nothing happens to Norman. If anything happens to my boy I’ll never be able to handle it.’

Their mother was a woman of faith and she kept praying, quietly. After a time they came out from under the bridge and it was at that moment the hay shed caught alight. It seemed to them that it exploded. A fierce, high stream of brilliant red and yellow flame shot up hundreds of feet into the air. Their father said, ‘Oh my God!’ and the girls screamed. People miles away said, ‘The

house has gone! The great old house has gone!' but it was not the house. They could see the fire had swept around it, but miraculously it was still there. They could see its solid lines even through the white haze of the smoke.

Everywhere the fences had collapsed. The rail-and-post fence—tinder dry with the years—had been almost totally immolated. Not a post stood, and rails were burning on the ground. They were stunned that so much could happen in so short a time, and the tears came unbidden. Hot winds had whipped up the ashes and blown them against their faces so that pink runnels showed where the tears coursed down their hot cheeks. They just stared and stared, and suddenly there was Norman rushing down the drive in his 'Red Terror'—his hybrid Rover-Singer sports car—and in a few moments he was with them.

He told them what had happened, how he had taken out the tractor and the truck and planted them on the drive. How he had gotten most of the implements out, too, and then how two men had come rushing up from the road to help. They had crossed the eighty-acre paddock just ahead of the fire and had dived into the Creek, just saving themselves, and then followed the fire to the crest of the hill. There had been tea towels laid out to dry on the large palm tree near the kitchen, and they had doused them under a tap and had begun beating at the flames.

HE could see the terror in Gloria's eyes as she relived the scene. The movements of her hands were dramatic. 'Both doormats near the kitchen were alight, and they doused them with hose-water. Norman and they kept rushing backwards and forwards putting the flames out, and when they saw everything was safe in the house and the stables they rushed towards the dam. The ducks were out in the centre of the water, and they escaped, but a wall of fire rushed Norman and the other two men, and they had to run into the maize crop. The fire passed over the top of the corn, but the men were crouched down low and they escaped.'

He asked her, wonderingly, 'Who were the two men?'

They were all silent. No one knew. 'You don't know?' he asked, astonished. 'You don't know who the two men were?'

Florence said quietly, 'They just came because they wanted to, and when it was over they went back across the black paddocks to their car, and it was untouched.'

Valmai said, 'You should have been here, Goddy. It was terrific.'

Norman said, 'It all happened at lunch time. We left everything on the table and went. When we returned there was black ash over the meal, but we ate it.'

Cecil had not been there, but they had phoned him in far away Tallong and he had travelled through the night to get there. He was good on fencing, and that morning they had begun felling some of the blackbutts, and he and Norman were already splitting logs. He grinned his roguish grin and said, 'You reckon you can get back to digging post-holes?'

OUT on the paddocks there were old stumps burned to the ground, and some were smouldering below the soil. The danger had passed.

The girls wandered on with him, with Cecil and Norman, and they were ceaselessly talking about the fire. He knew for a fact that they were still in shock, for he could detect hysteria in their laughter.

Cecil said, 'You never forget. It's always with you. Like when our orchard was destroyed down south. We often see it in flames—all those mature apple trees, and everything gone down the drain.'

Norman said, 'I don't know what will happen tomorrow, when it all comes finally to the Old Man. He's just so glad we are all alive. That keeps him going.'

Valmai said, 'Under the bridge he kept weeping and saying, "If anything happens to you, Mother, I'll never be able to live."'

Cecil, who had had many angry clashes with his father, and had left home in a rage, just shook his head. 'I'll never understand the old fellow,' he said. 'He just isn't consistent. How can he be so hard-headed and yet weep about Mum?'

No one quite understood Gloria when she shook her head and said, 'Mum is a bit of a mixture, you know.' She was putting in a word for Dad, and he—Goddy—knew that. He had wondered at the silent hostility his mother had shown towards him. It was

as though she had not wanted him to return. Yet he had been a bit of a favourite in the old days. He sensed, now, that he was on the outer with her.

HIS working clothes were in his old room, and after a time he came out, hat on head, and joined them where they were digging post-holes for the perimeter fence. After a time his mother and the girls brought hot scones and tea, and they rested, sitting on leftover portions of old rails. They asked him questions about his study and his life in College, and whilst his mother showed interest in that, yet her hostility against him had not diminished. Often there was silence among them, as though all were uneasy. They knew something he did not know. When the scones were finished and the billy emptied they went back to work. He grinned at the softness of his hands, and the tired muscles in his arms and shoulders, but the line of the fence lengthened.

Norman brought posts on the slide, with old Dolly pulling hard, her head going up and down as she strained. He liked that. He liked the old mare as she blew and snorted.

‘How come,’ he asked, ‘that all the stock escaped?’

Norman shrugged his shoulders. ‘It was just one of those things. The horses were free, and the fences were burned and so they fled before the fire, back into where it had been burned. We had to collect most of them from the Andrews’ place. The ten-acre paddock near the house escaped the fire.’ Goddy began to wonder whimsically whether the two men had been angels, and some similar unseen force had saved the stock.

‘What about the pigs?’ he asked. ‘How did they go?’

‘Nearly all the pigs had gone before,’ Norman said. ‘We have expanded the dairy herd. Got some purebred stock—AIS stuff. We had to sell the pigs so we could buy them.’

Goddy saw the tiredness of his brother and wondered about the shock. Cecil said suddenly, ‘Grab the crowbar. We’ve got to get this fence up.’

THAT night he asked Florence a question. ‘What’s Mum got against me?’ She shook her head and said, ‘Nothing. She loves you too much.’

‘Love’ was a word they rarely if ever used, so he wondered at it. They were all sitting on the front verandah above the wishing tree. He had asked the question quietly whilst the others were chatting. Now Florence began to describe the night of the fire.

‘It was so beautiful,’ she said, ‘more beautiful than anything you would ever see. Every fence post was burning, and the stumps of all the trees were glowing, and it was like a lighted Christmas. The fires had run up the trees and they were burning—some of them—high up. Also their trunks glowed. Wherever you looked it was just glowing lights. I’ll never forget it. It was all so very beautiful.’

It came to him suddenly that his family were very closely tied together. His father he had known mainly as a grim and dominating man, but now that image had been partly destroyed. He saw the weakness of his father, and liked it. His weeping about the possible loss of their mother was a revelation of weakness and softness. It made him akin to them all. He knew Cecil was not finished with his anger, but he had come back to help, and that was something fine.

IT was the next day that stark reality seemed to settle on them all. His father had reverted to gloom that was close to neurotic. He went around without a word, and they all felt it. Cecil got into one of his black moods, and despondency settled over the place. The naked farm seemed lost and indecent. A few groggy posts had survived but they lent a weirdness to the whole scene. Their father drove the Chrysler into town to talk over things with his bank manager.

He worked silently at the post-hole digging. Cecil and Norman were splitting posts, and Cecil drove the wedges with rage. He would curse and rave when the timber was resistant. Goddy could hear them in the distance. Norman brought the huffing, breathing Dolly and the slide, and, loading the posts, would depart without a word, although his eyes greedily took in the progress of the fencing.

He wondered why the whole place gripped him so much. Last year he had been anxious to leave it, to get to study and to graduation. He remembered the angry collision with his father,

the roaring row they had had, and the invective that had passed between them. When he left, it had been a mixture of anger, a sense of injustice and the low thrill of freedom. The freedom had not been pure. This fact had troubled him over the many months.

Now, breaking the soil with the crowbar, digging it out with the post-hole shovel, and sighting and stamping the posts by himself, brought an exhilaration he had not known in his exile. The evident gratitude of the Old Man had pleased him, as also his acceptance by his brothers and sisters. He brought the crowbar down with practised hands, not worrying about the rising blisters. Yet with it all was the faint uneasiness concerning his mother. He wondered whether the fire had turned her mind somewhat.

THEY were gathered around, waiting for their father before beginning the midday meal. He would be angry if they did not wait. Goddy was grateful for the soft sofa, and his eyes closed for a catnap. Suddenly the Chrysler was rushing up the driveway, and Dad was jumping out of it, and waving his arms in the air, a letter fluttering in his right hand.

'We've got it!' he shouted. 'We've got the Milk Board Licence! They've given it to us at last!'

His eyes were glowing with joy and wonder. The girls jumped up and down in their excitement, and a grin spread over Cecil's face. His good humour had returned. Norman was looking with unbelief, and their mother rushed to their father and began hugging him.

'Oh, Henry!' she kept crying. 'Oh, Henry!'

Henry was like a man in a dream. He kept reading the letter, and putting it down, unable to eat, but the rest ate voraciously, and after a time he began to eat, but his eye was on the letter as though it might disappear, so unreal was its good news.

Cecil said quietly, 'This will change everything for you, Dad.'

Norman said, 'It's great that we sold the pigs and got the new stock. Most of them are ready to come in. A bit of fodder from somewhere and we should make it.'

Their father nodded, 'The fodder shed is full, and the ensilage pits are untouched. We'll keep going all right, but we will need a

bit of help.' His eyes looked to the ceiling for a fraction, and their mother looked delighted, as though he were giving a nod to God.

Whilst they were eating, Goddy was aware that his father's eyes were on him. He knew his mother was watching, and he saw the barely concealed anger in her eyes. Because his mother had plenty of Irish blood in her—about one hundred per cent—he knew she could get angry, but she had rarely been angry with him. Not, anyway, since she had chased him around the old fern house when he was a boy—when they had lived in an outer city suburb: not since then had he seen such anger.

His father was asking Cecil, 'How long can you stay on, son?'

Cecil seemed pleased with the question which was really a request. 'Les's Dad will manage,' he said. 'I'll help to see the fences through. You'll need them. You can't keep the stock behind that electric fence for long. You can't keep the horses in the stables.'

Goddy saw the gleam in his father's eyes. He saw the grin on Norman's face. Rain had fallen on the night of the fire, putting out the glowing beauty which had enchanted Florence, but bringing hope to the pastures. Already the short green was showing.

Then Goddy knew what his father wanted. He wanted him to stay and to help, and to become part of the family again.

Unexpectedly his mother said to them all. 'Don't ask Goddy to stay on. We don't want him. He'll be no good to us here.'

Their father said in mild protest, 'Don't say that, Minnie. The boy has been good. He has come back to help.'

He could not believe the bitterness in her voice. 'Where was he when the fire took place? Where was he when our lives were in danger? Where was he in all that, eh?'

He could not believe his ears, which, themselves, were burning. This side of his mother he had never seen. Never had her voice held such acrimony. It was she who had—time and again—urged him to go to College. The whole thing was incredible. Indignation mounted inside him and he barely kept his temper. He, too, had some Irish blood!

His father was saying gently, 'The boy came as quickly as he could when he heard about it all.'

The sudden flash of even deeper anger in his mother's eyes stunned him. All these years he had thought of her as having a special affection for him. He wondered about the whole matter of human duplicity, and felt sick inside. He rose, stood for a moment, looking down at his plate, and then went outside. He could feel the silence close behind him.

He went back to his crowbar, stabbing the earth not with anger but with sickness of heart. His rounded shovel grated against the small gravel in the soil. He piled up heaps, set up his sighting dropper, and rammed soil home with sad vehemence. Later he sat silently amongst them at the time of the tea and cakes. The fruit-cake his mother made, and which was once the richest of all foods to him, was tasteless in his mouth. He noticed she was absent. The family joined together in verbal sniping of one another—an old characteristic of theirs when they were uneasy.

They all left him but his father, and the both of them stayed silent. His father rammed the earth whilst he dug more out of new holes.

Once his father said, 'You have a good eye for sighting, Goddy. Your fences are always straight as a die.'

He wondered about that. He had always thought of his mother as 'straight as a die'. Her present crookedness worried him.

'If you want to stay, Goddy,' his father was saying, 'then you stay. Don't worry about her. Women are strange. What with the fire and all the trouble, she's a bit queer, as you will know.'

The talking cheered him somewhat, and after a time he nodded and spoke. 'I can't understand it at all,' he was saying. 'I really came to help, and she hates me for it.'

His father shook his head tiredly. 'No, she doesn't. She loves you. Even I have been jealous of her love for you, at times. She has some bee in her bonnet and I don't understand it. Let her be. It will all come well.'

When his father had gone a certain comfort came to him, and he worked patiently, extending the length of the fence, adding yards—even chains—in a new rapidity of working. His hands felt no soreness. Norman was both amazed and amused at the speed.

'We can start some of the wiring tomorrow,' he said. He turned Dolly around, and the slide, and was gone.

The next day they worked with the augers, the wiring and the strainers. Cecil kept at the log-splitting, and Goddy, their father and Norman began enclosing the perimeter. He knew there were weeks ahead before the work would be finished. One part of him was rooted into the farm, the other felt the enmity of his mother. He lived in the tension with little grace. The memory of study and his ambition to graduate were fading. Sometimes he would remember the secret study at night, in his old room before he had left the farm, and the feeling of liberty as he studied in College, and a wave of nostalgia would sweep over him, but the growing green of the grass, the renewal of the farm, and the delight of his family—his mother excepted—gripped him and held him.

He saw the mounting opposition of his mother, the sniping statements that bit at him. He also saw his father's questioning of his wife, and the placating words he would speak in support of him. Once his mother took him aside and said acidly, 'The quicker you go back the better for us—and you, for that matter.' She explained nothing, and he saw that her eyes were hard.

His father would pass from mood to mood. One day he would be fearful lest they would not have sufficient cash flow to keep them as family. When they needed more dairy equipment for the milking and the growing herd he would seem to falter. When Cecil had to drive off home in his battered utility—having built a high pile of fence posts—he was almost tremulous. Cecil would not take the proffered cheque, but they both shook hands warmly—more warmly than the two had ever done.

Cecil had said one word to him before he had left for the station. 'Our Mum is right,' he had said, 'the quicker you go the better.' Goddy had wondered at that, puzzled. Florence—the quiet but thoughtful one—had agreed with Cecil. 'Cecil's right and Mum's right,' she said. 'You had better go.'

He tried not to let the bitterness grip him. So he worked harder than ever until his father had told him to cut down the pace and effort. He milked the cows with them in the early morning because he loved the feel of the cows, and the mounting foam in the milk bucket. He also loved feeding the jostling, boisterous

calves, and he would linger in the evening as the sun lowered over the night paddock. Nostalgia was there for other days that had been, and he could even visualise a stream of better days ahead, but the shadow of his mother was over him.

WHEN finally he said he was going, his father's mouth set grimly—the look that Goddy had always dreaded.

'We really need you,' his father told him, and he had nodded numbly. When he had said nothing his father had then talked with anger in his voice. 'It's your mother, isn't it?' but he hadn't nodded. He had seen bad blood between his parents on previous occasions and tried to keep the peace. He had turned away, saying tiredly, 'I'll get behind in the study if I don't go.'

His father had looked even more grim at that. 'I thought you loved the land beyond everything,' he said. 'That's why we rowed and argued when you were going to leave. I felt you were going against your own better judgement. You really belong here.'

He felt bitter about that. His father's judgements always came worst for him—Goddy—and best for his father. Even now he had worked and would—like Cecil—take nothing for it. He would battle to work his way through College, but not by his father's help.

When he announced his going the girls were dismayed. Norman said he thought he understood, but he could see his mother was jubilant. He knew he could not go quickly enough for her. She packed food for him to take with him, and there was a tin of her fruit-cake, but the gesture was tasteless to him. He accepted it all in silence. Nothing of this kind could buy him off at this late moment. The girls thought they would not go to the station. He knew they had not yet recovered emotionally, and he understood. Indeed he was grateful.

His mother gave him a faint hug. He saw the flash of triumph in her eyes as he turned to pick up his suitcase and the parcels she had made. Norman took the things from him and placed them in the boot of the car. Goddy sat next to his father—the special place of privilege—but he and his father were silent.

At the station his father changed to good humour. 'Don't forget there is always a place for you here. And don't forget your

mother is a very clever woman.' He paused and said dryly, 'Extremely brilliant, in fact.' Goddy saw him give a wry grin to Norman who nodded. 'She always gets her own way,' he added. Then he laughed dryly. 'It would have been good if you had stayed, but then it was not to be.' He was genuinely disappointed, but had erased his own gloom.

He shook hands with his father and Norman. Norman grinned. 'Don't take it too hardly,' he said. 'Ultimately everything will be OK.' He paused and then added, 'You did a cracker job. Helped us to get on our feet.'

He thought about that as the country train steamed away towards the city, towards College and all that there was for him in the future.

Suddenly there came into his mind something that Gloria had said to him. 'Mamma is a fantastic actress, isn't she? She used to do elocution, and she worked with the J. C. Williamson Theatrical Company for a time. Of course she plays the piano brilliantly, but her acting is even more brilliant.' At the time he had wondered why his sister had said this. It had seemed irrelevant to him. Was Gloria trying to tell him something?

At the time he hadn't thought of her statement. Now, as he stared from the window and the country rushed by him, an idea leapt into his mind. At first he could not believe it, but then it became more credible, the longer he pondered it. 'Why,' he thought, 'she was having me on. She was acting the angry mother and the hating parent.' It struck him afresh how much out of character her actions had been. If that had been acting, then how superb it had been.

Then he remembered the agreement of both Cecil and Florence—that his going was right, and that their mother really knew what was best. His father's words came back to him, 'Your mother is a clever woman. Extremely brilliant, in fact.'

Now he was startled. This might be the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. His mother had not been angry with him at all! She had seen him getting more and more roots down into the farm, and drawing away from what she believed was his life's work—a great work. Time and again they had talked about that. Time and again she had told him that the farm would destroy that

goal for which he had been made. It would absorb him until he and Norman and their father would be one with cows and horses, cattle feed and calves, and the other things—the sensed vocation—would be lost.

He sat trembling at the thought of it all. Now that his mother was not his enemy—unaccountably his deadly enemy—his own anger dissolved. The sights through the window suddenly became lovely to him, and even things of joy. It was that joy which was welling up in him. In a flash he understood the sympathetic and understanding looks of his brothers and sisters, and his mother's enmity seemed to be a most beautiful thing. He knew in that moment that his father had fought to keep him on the farm, but that his mother had won. 'She always gets her own way,' his father had said. He had added, 'It would have been good if you could have stayed, but it was not to be.' Even his father—strong and grim as he was—had bowed to the opposition and wisdom of his own wife.

He marvelled at it all—his own guilelessness, his mother's powerful wisdom and discernment, and her battle for him. His hand rested for a moment on the cake tin beside him, and he felt its smooth, cool surface. One part of him wanted to taste afresh the good cake she had cooked, but the other part of him was just glowing in his new discovery.

He looked out at the racing fields, the paddocks of new green, and the cattle grazing. He knew it was part of him but then not the whole. The thought of his study came rushing into his mind, and the vocation which he had always planned—which had always been his goal. If for a moment he regretted the loss of closeness to the soil and the rich, strong life of the farm, yet that gave way to the renewed conviction that the study was his to do, and the degree his to get, and then the life beyond that the real thing to live.

The joy in him was sturdy and strong, and it grew as he marvelled at what had come to him. That his mother did not hate him, and that his father could not hold him and dominate him for ever, gave him a most incredible sense of freedom. It rose in him, mounting up and up, and the exhilaration in him was so sweet as to be almost painful. Even so, he tolerated it with joy.

He knew now that when he had left the first time there had not really been freedom. Now there was freedom. In between there had been some act of propitiation which his father had accepted, and his mother had witnessed.

Now he was free—for ever! He was at peace with the cows as they flashed by his window. In fact—for the moment—he was at peace with everything.

THE MIND OF CORRIE

THE experience was only a short one, and Andy the birdman was grateful for its brevity. Looking back on it he could appreciate the unusual nature of the event, and even laugh a bit about it; but in fact he didn't find it greatly amusing at the time. He would have called it 'weird', for that is the contemporary word for anything unusual that one cannot understand. Life wasn't meant to be weird in the estimation of Andy, who was, himself, a fairly down-to-earth man.

The way it happened was that Andy went in to feed Corrie, his favourite Long-Billed Corella (*Caculus Tenuirostris*). Corrie had always greeted him profusely, and with a certain amount of ceremony such as noddings, fairly low bowings, a bit of a shuffling away on the perch and then a shuffling back, and finally a climbing on to Andy's shoulder. What happened after that can be described only as smooching. He would snuggle against Andy's neck, do a bit of rubbing, effect some contortions of his own neck as the head swivelled—first clockwise and then anticlockwise—after which there was a constant rubbing on the birdman's neck. It was deeply intimate, and both bird and man experienced a certain amount of emotional and sensual satisfaction from the happening. This, as every lover of creatures would understand, is the mysterious bond between man and his fellow-beings—a thing which seems to be proper throughout the creation. Both man and creature delight in this most wonderful rapport.

This morning it certainly was rapport, yet far more, even, than rapport. Later Andy grumbled that it was 'total identification' or 'empathic oneness'. You might almost have called it 'total union', but to satisfy the down-to-earth scientists I guess we will have to call it 'telepathic interchange'—whatever that may mean.

It was simply this—Andy began to think with Corrie's mind! He sensed also that Corrie was thinking with his—Andy's—mind. The latter, of course, could have been imagined, but not the former. Oh, no, not the former! Andy got into Corrie's mind without doubt, and he could not be blamed for calling the experience 'weird'. Perhaps it would not have been too bad had the parrot's mind been what Andy had previously estimated it to be—a blank.

Andy is no fool, as those who know him will tell you. He isn't taken in by soft looks of birds and dogs. He has always known their actions are truly Pavlovian—that they are conditioned reflexes. A dog isn't really guilty when it pinches a string of sausages from the butcher, or pulls down from the kitchen table the leftover of yesterday's roast. The so-called 'hang-dog' look that it gets at such times when caught is simply an unconscious defence mechanism. It is merely an anticipation of the father of a hiding that it will get. Likewise when a parrot says, 'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo, I say!' it is not really looking for a telephone conversation, or any kind of a chat for that matter. Probably it is wondering whether more seed is coming its way, or anticipating that delightful neck-scratching sensation which is—again—only sensual and so merely behavioural and never to be taken for personal intimacy. So thought Andy up until the time of that encounter, when he was forced to change his mind.

THE first experience went something like this. He could feel his own cerebrations change for those of the bird. He heard himself saying—to himself—'This Andy is a real nice guy. Pretty friendly for a human being, and with it quite humble—so far as human beings go. I like him. I'll give him a bit of 'come on' fondling, and we'll have real rapport. Yes, I like him. He's real smooth.'

The curious thing was that Andy's own feeling for the bird was fading, and he was the bird more and more, feeling for Andy. The whole thing made him uncomfortable, even embarrassed, and he kept shaking his head, only to find that that head had two beady eyes, was smoothly feathered, and had a long—a very long—bill. The whole thing was distinctly strange.

Resisting an overwhelming urge to scratch himself, Andy began to explore this new mind he had been given. Meanwhile Corrie adopted that fatuous look human beings have when they are dealing with other creatures, that is, a mixture of affection, condescension and patronage, as one does with a foreigner when explaining matters of importance which one knows will not be understood.

Andy's shiny left eye fell on the feed-bin below him. He had to cock his head a little to glimpse it, and he found a new interest in the mixture of corn and varied grains, especially the shiny black sunflower seed. He had a distinct urge to skip down to the seed-hopper, but he resisted it. He had company who required attention, and he could eat later. Even so, he suddenly knew why parrots like to climb up and down wire netting by means of their beaks, and the clever harmonising of their neck and leg actions.

After a time these new sensations wore off, and Andy was just a bird as is any other bird. Then the past came crowding into that limited cocky brain that had become his.

'Why,' he thought to himself, 'I am a bantam rooster!' How then could he be a bantam rooster? His limited Andy mind—that is, Corrie mind—could not quite tell him, but some months before he had temporarily put a bantam rooster into Corrie's cage, and Corrie had at first been affronted, showing great indignation in having a mere domestic fowl brought into his territory. Obviously human beings were creatures without an understanding of territorial rights. Back in the parrot (*Caculus Tenuirostris*) Dreamtime, the good Lord of all parrots had given them sovereign right to certain areas of creation. Most dead trees with hollow branches had been accorded to them, and even the ability to pick off twigs, thin branches and leaves so that living trees could gradually be made to die, to the commendable end that more Galahs, Yellow-Crested Cockatoos, Black Cockatoos and both forms of Corellas—Long-Billed and Small—could be suitably accommodated. In this way parrots were helped to further populate the Great South Land.

Andy first registered the Corella's indignation at the intrusion of the bantam rooster, but—as with Corellas—he soon evinced curiosity. Corellas are nothing if not curious. Corrie had flown

down to talk with the bantam, and after some time the two different species of bird achieved some kind of rapport. At that point Corrie had firmly believed himself to be a bantam, the proof of which was that he had absorbed into himself everything that was bantam. He strutted like a bantam, held his head high, and—after a little practice—crowed like a bantam. When, after some days, the bantam was taken away, Corrie still went on being a bantam. Regularly he crowed as a bantam crows.

He had a bit of difficulty when, temporarily, five White Leghorn hens were put into his aviary. These were awaiting execution, for they were old hens, but they kept on laying eggs, and boasting to the world of their accomplishment. In his mind Corrie became a White Leghorn hen, and incredibly excited and boastful when—so he imagined—he had laid an egg. He, too, knew how to tell the world. The confusion between being a bantam and a White Leghorn hen was no problem to Corrie. He had at times been a Currawong—emitting sweet but mournful cries—and at various times a Princess Parrot, a Galah, a Yellow-Crested Cockatoo and a Wattle Bird. His identification with these, far from being confusing, had simply strengthened his identity as the most clever of all parrots on this earth. It is no wonder that a Corella has learned to step, strut, talk, roll, sway and swagger in one great theatrical act that would be the envy of any human stage.

All of this was very confusing to Andy, who was forced—by reason of this extraordinary identification with Corrie—to do, think, and be all that Corrie had done, thought, and been. It was as though some avian psychiatrist had forced on him the unconscious mind of the bird, making him play out the events of its life. He, too, had this vast memory of being so many birds. There was, however, the extraordinary double take when as human he had become a parrot who prided himself on being a human.

Take the remarkable event when a Corella came flying into the orbit of the aviary, curving and swooping down because it had spotted a bit of fellow-feathered affinity. The Corella had landed on the aviary and cocked its head and eye to take in the redoubtable Corrie. In avian language it had said, 'Hi!' which in fact was a harsh screech asking, 'How the heck did you get where you are, and what are things like in there?'

It was Corrie who answered, not Andy, but Andy, being one with Corrie, answered with the mind of Corrie. Corrie said, 'Who do you think you are, Corella? You're a parrot, and we humans don't have to do with parrots. Scram! I mean, shove off! Push off! We're busy!'

The parrot did nothing of the kind. It was a bush parrot and had little respect for domesticated Corellas. It jeered at Corrie with a harsh screech: 'You're nothing but a put-on! Human? My eye! So's your Auntie Jane the Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo! Lot you know! Human? That's real funny, it is!'

Andy felt stifling indignation. He knew—in a bewildered way—that Corrie was truly human, and because his mind was Corrie's mind he saw himself—as Corrie—and so as a human being. The sudden shifts and changes in identity made him feel quite insecure, and even angry, but since Corrie had no difficulty in shifting from a Wattle Bird to a Domestic Fowl, Andy felt the human misery of not wanting changes in identity but yet—as a Corella—welcoming them when they came.

WHAT broke the spell was the coming of his wife, Edna. She was fond of Corrie, as indeed she was of Andy. Never had she had to make a choice between the two of them. When she came into the cage, Andy had the look of Corrie in his eyes—that intelligent avian look—and Corrie had the less intelligent look of a human. Edna, having long identified with both males, but never having come into total identification with either, looked at them both a bit suspiciously.

In her friendly but blunt way, she asked, 'What's going on here?'

Corrie said, 'Hullo, Edna!' That was his typical greeting, but he always said it to her in her voice, for she had taught him thus. Now he was speaking as Andy would.

She looked even more suspicious. Also she looked at Andy. 'What's on?' she asked.

Andy sounded like Corrie. 'Hullo, Edna,' he said.

Edna snorted, 'Don't talk to me as though you were a parrot,' she said, 'and don't mimic Corrie to me.'

'Mimic?' queried Andy. 'Mimic? This is the way I always talk.'

'Oh!' said Edna impatiently. 'Come off the grass! Stop trying to have me on, Andy.'

At that point the cat was out of the bag. Andy said, in a hurt Corrie voice, 'I'm not Andy, I'm Corrie.'

'That's right,' said Corrie, 'he's Corrie and I'm Andy.'

'He is?' asked Edna incredulously. 'You are?' She snorted at her own foolish questions, but a suspicion was growing within her which was at the same time a sort of dread.

She went silent for a few moments, thinking. Then she looked Andy in the eye and said, 'How come you think you are Corrie?'

Both Andy and the bird began to protest: 'Think?' they both said in unison. Corrie said, 'I am Andy, Edna,' whilst Andy said, 'I am Corrie, Edna.'

That was how the cat was let out of the bag. Edna stared at them, unbelieving. Then horror began to dawn in her eyes. She said nothing—still staring. Then she fled.

She fled into the lounge room, grabbed the phone in one hand and her teledex in the other, and began a series of calls. First she phoned the vet—Amis McTavish—and when he heard what she told him, he said in a choking voice, 'I'll be right around.' Next she phoned Alex Wrightson, who was a bosom friend of Andy and a psychiatrist into the bargain. When he had listened to her story he went quiet. That alarmed her even more and she shouted anxiously, 'Are you coming, or aren't you coming?'

'Oh! Ah! Oh yes, I'm coming all right. Coming? Oh! Ah! I wouldn't miss this for the world.'

Her last call was to Mick O'Brien, who—beside being a natural humourist—was a bird expert, an aviarist of the highest order. He crowed like a rooster as she detailed the problem to him. 'Shut up!' she snapped, 'and get your lazy self around here at once.'

'You bet, lady!' was his chortling reply as she slammed down the phone.

ABOUT fifteen minutes later the three men converged on Corrie's aviary. Corrie was asking such intelligent questions as, 'What are all you fellows doing here? Why have you come?' Andy—for his part—found himself mouthing stupid statements

such as, 'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!' and 'How are yuh?' and, 'Hullo Mick! Have a good time,' and similar pointless remarks. He also swayed, felt an urge to strut, but couldn't find a perch large enough for himself.

Alex the psychiatrist was greatly intrigued. He asked Andy a series of questions which Corrie answered promptly, along with a trifle of scorn. Andy found himself resenting the psychiatrist, particularly as he had a strong desire to repeat phrase after phrase that he had heard Corrie utter so many times, but which now made enormous sense to his new self.

Tears were running down the battered face of the experienced aviarist Mick O'Brien. He was slapping his thighs and going into harsh shrieks of a laughter which was near to maniacal. 'You're a comic, Andy,' he was saying, 'a real comic. How come you have trained Corrie to this point? How clever!'

Amis McTavish wasn't laughing. He was plainly bewildered. 'I've never seen anything like it in my life,' he said. 'That Corrie thinks he's Andy and Andy thinks he is Corrie. That is as plain as the nose on your face.'

'Oh!' Alex the psychiatrist said. He added, 'Ah!' His eyebrows shot up as he contemplated the unusual situation.

'I think this is what they call "transferred identity", but it generally takes place only between humans.' He looked at Amis McTavish for confirmation, but Amis wasn't being drawn. Up to this point his vetting had always been sane. Humans might need psychiatrists, but not animals! He snorted—a bit like a horse with hay fever.

'It's transferred identity,' Alex insisted firmly, and he looked at Edna, whose eyebrows were almost lost in her blonde hair.

'Alex,' she said, 'I can guess what you mean, but Andy must have gone stark mad. How can all this be?'

Alex told her that he didn't know. With all the shrieking of Mick's laughter, and Corrie's reasoned arguments, and Andy's incessant parrot chatter, the place was like a madhouse.

Edna was wringing her hands. She looked first at Amis, and then at Alex, and a little impatiently at the tearful Mick, and asked in terrified tones, 'What are we going to do?' Her voice was rising to a wailing crescendo.

Corrie was saying, 'For goodness sake, Edna!' and Andy was chattering, 'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!' most excitedly—if not inanely. Alex was most thoughtful, and Amis most disgusted. Edna looked as though she could have murdered Corrie—or was it Andy's neck she wished to wring?

Alex said, 'The first thing we must do is to get Andy out of that aviary.'

Andy crouched back as though he were clinging to a perch. Corrie sat still, self-confident, self-assured and urbane. 'I'll have nothing to do with any of this,' he was saying. 'This is all for the birds.'

Mick was about to become hysterical again, but a look from Edna silenced him. He just stared at the comic event being played behind the aviary wire-netting.

Suddenly a voice said, 'Corrie wants a cuppa!' The team outside the parrot's aviary was not sure who had spoken—whether Corrie or Andy. However, Alex took up the statement with alacrity.

'Like a cup of tea, Andy?' he asked, 'Or would you prefer coffee?'

There was silence in the cage. Andy suddenly felt an urge to have strong black coffee—without sugar—but what parrot has strong black coffee, especially without sugar? Parrots have a sweet tooth, or—as one might say—a sweet beak! When it came to the point, Corrie the parrot didn't want coffee, but Andy—the object of identity transference—did!

Alex's eyes gleamed. He looked cunningly at Amis. He winked. Then he asked the parrot directly, 'Corrie want a cracker?'

Corrie stared at him stonily, as only a Long-Billed Corella (*Caculus Tenuirostris*) can. Andy suddenly said, 'What about that coffee?'

Alex looked severe. 'No coffee with crackers,' he said. 'Just coffee with sunflower seed, or, if you like, straight parrot mixture.'

Corrie said, 'Just coffee, or maybe coffee with biscuits, but strong black coffee.'

Andy said, 'Corrie wants a cracker.'

'No sunflower seed, then no coffee,' said Alex.

Mick caught on at that point. 'Right you are!' he said triumphantly, 'no seed, no coffee.'

Alex went across to Edna and whispered in her ear. Edna's eyes opened with comprehension. She nodded, and slipped away. Alex talked in low tones with Amis until Corrie said peevishly, 'Speak up! Speak up! What are you talking about?' Andy echoed, 'Talking? Talking about?'

All the way back to the house Edna was congratulating herself, not so much for having phoned the three men as for the marvellous urge which had caused her to make one of her famous banana-cakes that morning. She and Andy had been going to have it with coffee—later in the morning. Now as she entered the room she realised what a fragrant and delicious aroma a freshly baked banana-cake can have.

She half-filled the kettle with water from the hot-water service and flicked the switch. She then cut large slices of her wholesome and sweet-smelling cake. She made a large tray, putting a jar of instant coffee in the centre, flanked by a sugar bowl, a milk carton and man-sized mugs. The water had boiled and she carried the feast towards the aviary.

THE next ten minutes were the most memorable of her life. Confusion had already begun in the man-bird identity crisis. To cut a long and hilarious story short, Corrie the parrot did not want coffee. When he saw it being poured into the mugs he had a desire to flap and screech and carry on a treat. Andy had a yearning for banana-cake and strong black coffee—without sugar.

Alex would give no ground. He let Corrie shriek and cry with harsh lamentings, but he refused to speak to it, or even take notice of it. He said to Mick, 'Get that hopper of parrot seed.'

Mick had to enter the aviary, shoo the chattering Corrie away, brush past the salivating Andy, and grab the hopper. Corrie's eyes followed him with a slight madness in their stare.

Alex said to Andy, 'Andy, if you are really Corrie, then have a feed of birdseed.'

Andy looked bewildered. Corrie said, 'Why, of course!' Andy looked with distaste at the seed, but obeyed Alex. He put his

head down as Corrie had done a thousand times and picked at the hopper. Corrie shrieked in disgust. Andy spat out the stupid seed.

'Eat!' said Alex firmly.

'That's right,' crowed Mick, 'that's the best parrot seed this side of the black stump.'

'Coffee!' gasped Andy, as though he were a man dying of thirst in the Ninety Mile Desert.

'Are you Corrie or are you not?' Alex asked sternly.

Corrie said, 'I'm Andy,' and Andy was about to say, 'I'm Corrie,' but then stopped short. The smell of strong instant coffee and freshly baked banana-cake were in the nostrils or beaks, or whatever they were—whosoever they were.

Mick said to Andy, 'Your name is Andy, isn't it?'

The bird-brain of Corrie made a last effort, 'Cut it out,' he croaked, but his voice sounded like that of a parrot and not of a man. He flew to a high perch and screeched, 'Cut it out! Cut it out! Cut it out!'

Andy pushed past Mick—he with the seed hopper in his hands—and rushed towards the coffee and cake. Edna stood in his track.

'No coffee and no cake until you tell me whether you are Corrie or Andy,' she insisted. Her hands were on her hips, her eyes were blazing, and her expression was set and severe.

Andy hesitated, and then he said, lamely, 'I'm Andy.'

Edna remained in his track, arms akimbo. 'Promise,' she said, 'that you and Corrie will never neck again.' She had always thought the necking a bit disgusting. Now she knew it could be downright dangerous.

Andy hesitated again. He loved Corrie's necking. No other parrot in the world was so gentle, so loving—ah!—so intimate. Yet the smell of coffee and banana-cake was strong in Andy's nostrils which no longer were Corrie's beak.

'I'll never neck again,' he said. Then an inspiration came to him: '—except with you, of course.'

With that Edna began to cry—mainly, of course, with relief. They clung to each other, whilst Mick capered around, giving way to huge guffawing. Alex looked somewhat self-consciously triumphant, whilst Amis kept shaking his head in mystification.

The four of them set to drinking coffee and eating banana-cake, and the moment they did Corrie flew down to the abandoned hopper and started flicking up the seed in the wasteful way that Corellas generally exercise.

A certain kind of silence settled on the whole group—the kind of silence of satisfaction that comes with repletion—repletion born of coffee and cake.

It was Andy who broke the silence. ‘I can’t believe it all happened,’ he said. ‘Just how did it happen?’

Amis said, ‘You just went loony, man.’

Alex said in his most professional voice, ‘A case of transferred identity.’

Andy said slowly. ‘Yes, but how?’

Edna had disdain in her voice, ‘Necking,’ she said, ‘necking did it.’

Mick, who, after all, was an aviarist of the first order, and very knowledgeable, said, ‘Long-Billed Corellas—*Caculus Tenuirostris*—are the most intelligent of all parrots in the world.’

Corrie, snapping away at the hopper, looked up for a moment. The five humans could have sworn there was a gleam in the parrot’s eyes, a gleam of recognition and dignified assent, but then that could have been an illusion, born of a rather remarkable event.

Corrie, having stared at them, turned to the hopper again and began cracking sunflower seed.

THE HATE HOLOCAUST

I MET Gerry Bolton after about forty-three years. He recognised me before I recognised him. We were both in Alan Walters’ reception room, or—as they used to say—the doctor’s surgery. I was there just to get a medical examination for my seventieth year driving licence. They check up on you for all kinds of details. This other man in the reception room kept looking at me, until I wondered about it. Then he burst out, ‘Denny! Denny Forrest! After all these years!’

When he realised I had not recognised him, he said, ‘Gerry Bolton! You remember me, Gerry Bolton.’

Well, of course I remembered him. ‘Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,’ was what Browning’s Rabbi Ben Ezra had said, and I had to agree. You grow old along with the rest of the fellows, but what a problem when you don’t recognise one another. Then the years peel back, clearing away the crowsfeet and the other wrinkles and the stance of us, and we are young again. At least that is what I like to think.

I COULD remember Gerry as he was on my line team. I was a sergeant and he was a signalman. He was the man who was very bright. He had invented a cable-spewer which was geared to the engine motor, and when we would run out the line it was like a strong, thin and endless whip, flowing out.

‘Gerry!’ I said with tremendous delight, because we had been in things together.

The other folk, waiting for the doctor, looked interested, curious and faintly amused. We dropped our voices a little, sitting together. We had hardly started conversation when Alan Walters came into the room, dressed in white, looking around.

'Ah, Denny!' he said. 'Come in and we'll get that examination over.'

Gerry nodded. 'I'll be back,' I said. He nodded again.

Alan took little time. He knew my health. Gave me a run-over, and tested my eyes. All was in order. He filled in the application form. 'That should do it,' he said.

When I started for the door he said, 'You know Gerry Bolton?'

'Well, of course,' I said. 'He was in my unit. As a matter of fact he was in my section.'

Alan stared at me for a moment, and then smiled. 'I guess he needs a bit of help at the moment. He is over here because a daughter of his has been killed in an accident.'

I had seen a shadow in Gerry's eyes, but surmised it was a leftover from the prisoner of war days we had spent after the fall of Singapore. Gerry had gone up to the Burma-Thailand Railway, and had come back pretty shattered. Even so, my brief glimpse of him in the reception room had showed little of sadness. He seemed to be mighty pleased.

Alan called Gerry in, but he and I exchanged a few short words, arranging to meet at my place the next morning.

I keep thinking it a bit strange these days when I meet some of the old team. For years I had seen none of them, but now it is different.

BECAUSE it was mid-morning we had coffee together in my den. Connie, my wife, is happy about that. 'Gives you more time,' she always says. If a wife comes with an ex-POW, then the wives get closeted together, and join us later.

We did the rounds a bit, reminiscing about the past, remembering the strange things that happened, and the humorous things also. They seem to stick most in your mind.

The week we met just happened to be the week of Emperor Hirohito's funeral. I had always thought Gerry to be a fairly even-minded man, but his anger showed savagely on his face. 'The old bastard!' he said furiously. 'He was Number One war criminal.'

I nodded sympathetically. 'I never did like to see him get away with it,' I murmured.

'When you think of it,' Gerry muttered.

I was curious. Many of the returned men hated the Emperor, but mainly because he was a symbol of the mind that dominated the Japanese troops, and of course the Japanese people. I think many of them realised that MacArthur did the best he could under the circumstance. It is easy to be wise in hindsight, when the same problems do not beset a Commander as had beset him in those years.

What I was curious about was Gerry's emotional involvement in the Emperor. I knew it had to be more than the Emperor. It had to be something else. I was never on the Burma-Thailand Railway under the Japanese. I never saw those terrible mounds of the dead who had to be incinerated because of the cholera that had killed them. I had never watched men suffering from emaciation, malnutrition and beriberi being forced to work, to pull on steel ropes to hold bridges whilst they were being made.

It was not that I hadn't suffered my share on Singapore Island in Selarang and Roberts' Barracks at Changi. Food was short, and my body had been badly wounded. We were without painkillers after the first week or two. I can remember sicknesses like dysentery, dengue and malarial fevers, along with a diphtheritic ulcer, beriberi and the like. Imprisoned in an extension splint, I grew so thin and bony that my vertebrae showed through my collapsed stomach.

Even so, I did not go through the suffering the fellows had in Burma, Thailand, in Borneo, and some of the mines in Japan. Of course, suffering depends a fair bit upon the sufferer. Gerry knew I had pretty strong ideas about life, and I knew he wouldn't bring up the past without sense.

I could see his daughter's death had deeply affected him. Having myself lost a daughter through an accident, I was able to share a bit with him. I think we talked fairly calmly. We sympathised with each other. I was just a bit puzzled about his family situation. I knew he had married when we returned, but hadn't heard anything more.

What puzzled me was that he hadn't seen his daughter May for some years. Perhaps it was because she was married and lived here in South Australia, whereas he was a New South Welshman.

When it filtered through that she wasn't married, I was a bit mystified, and he saw that mystification. He was diffident in giving an explanation. He told me simply that he had divorced his first wife, remarried, and that May was a daughter of the first marriage. She had come across to South Australia with her mother. That was all he said.

I could sense his pain and diverted our minds away from family matters. I asked him whether he had ever travelled to Japan.

His eyes were steely. 'No way!' he said. 'You would never get me there.'

I had an idea where some of the anger lay. I wondered whether we could sustain conversation without it becoming a hate session. I had done a fair bit of reading about Japan and the Japanese. I guess I have rarely opened up on the subject, keeping my ideas to myself.

I asked him, 'Did you know that the Japanese people suffer from a deep sense of inferiority?'

Gerry shook his head. 'Never even thought about that,' he said.

I told him how the Japanese people at home are pretty much like any other race—very domestic, a bit proper, quiet and gracious. The business and professional men are fairly ruthless, but that is not confined to their nation alone.

Gerry interrupted me. 'Have you read Russell Braddon's *Other Hundred Years War*?'

I said I had. I said I believed he was substantially correct, and that the Japanese would try to take over every bit of the world they could by commercial means.

'They have to,' I said. 'They have to prove themselves. Anyone who is insecure is driven to be right every time, never to be wrong, and always has to succeed. Believe it or not, the nation has always highly respected the Chinese. They actually got the basis of their script from them. Given in they needed—and need—more land, their invasion of China was partly to overcome their sense of inferiority.'

Gerry nodded at that. 'I guess we are all in that—the inferiority thing,' he said a bit sadly. 'It's like being on a treadmill that you can't get off. It's like being on the back of the tiger.' We

remembered the Chinese proverb, 'He who rides on the tiger cannot easily dismount.'

I was not trying to defend the Japanese, but since I have some very good friends amongst them I know they are quite human. I have seen them weep as well as laugh. Some of my own Australian friends in the Forces had been angry during the war, when they came into contact with Japanese prisoners, and had shown little mercy under such circumstances. History has not recorded all the atrocities both sides perpetrated, and they were certainly not all committed on the one side.

We both talked about the uproar when the Australian Government had asked for flags to be hung at half-mast for the funeral day of the Emperor of Japan. The people of our land hadn't quickly forgotten, even though Japan is our best customer. I wanted to get the conversation away from this sensitive area, but still thought the best tactic was to convince Gerry—if I could—that the Japanese people at home are like any other race at home—happy, domestic and industrious enough. I wanted him to see that in times of war humanity breaks down under the terrible pressures. Morality disintegrates, ethical sensitivity hardens, and a callousness sets in. This is the case with all nations.

Gerry agreed with all that. He also thought that having hatred against the Japanese would solve nothing. He sighed, 'The brutal facts are that we have to live with them and they with us.' Even so, he was disturbed at their freedom—and desire—to buy large tracts of Australian land, especially to hold the tourist market with their own travellers. 'They get their money there,' he said, 'and they get it here.'

I think he really did get my point, that to hold bitterness was to destroy oneself. He had watched the same SBS programme that Connie and I had seen the night before—of a tragic band of Dutch survivors from the Resistance Forces in Holland who had carried bitterness over the years, constantly angered by the sharp memories of brutality by the SS troops, especially those of some of their own countrymen who had collaborated with the Nazis, and had even destroyed their fellow countrymen and women. The final scene was of an old Resistance man ferreting out the killer of his wife and child, and terrorising him, until the man pleaded

for mercy. He was not about to give mercy but to bring his enemy to a slow and horrible death. In the midst of his own cruel revenge the truth broke in upon him that he was virtually no different to the former collaborator. In horror at himself, he withdrew, staggering away from the scene of his own brutality, leaving the now terrified man to live with his awakened memories of the former terrible days.

Connie and I had gone to bed, greatly sobered, knowing the futility of hate. I wondered, as Gerry and I talked, whether that had been the case with him—with Gerry.

After a time I took him out into the property, showing him the garden and the birds. I was puzzled by the delight he had shown me the day before when we met, whilst now that delight had fled and he had become a morose man. I had to suppose moods just took him at odd times.

On our property we have a large number of giant stringy-barks, and so we made our way down through the tracks between them. There is good undergrowth with natives: tea-tree, grevilleas, heaths, bottlebrushes, banksias, wild cherries and some of the native wild flowers. The honeyeaters and pardalotes and finches find it a welcome haven and a source of food. The rosellas and lorikeets love the creamy blossom in the high branches. Soon we found a log and sat on it.

Gerry looked at me. 'You know,' he said, 'I envied you when I heard you talking. You are quite calm, quite serene.'

I could hear the rising anger in his voice. I knew he admired serenity and yet was angered by it. He said, 'I know you had a terrible time from the wounding and the sicknesses, but you didn't see much of the cruelty.'

I nodded. 'Yet,' I said, 'I can still hear the yammering of their machine guns, night after night, as the Chinese were driven to the beaches and gunned down in the surf. I can never forget that.'

'But does it anger you?' he asked. I saw the desperation in his eyes.

I thought about that. 'No, it doesn't, but then I have a deep sadness whenever I think of human cruelty. It affects me most whenever I am cruel, myself. I get startled sometimes by my own cruel drives.' I spoke slowly because I was thinking with some

difficulty. 'I suppose I have come to see that man is sometimes depraved in his acts, and sometimes almost angelic.'

He said to me, 'Was a Jap ever angelic to you?'

'Not exactly angelic,' I said, 'but I remember the time when we were wounded, and the Imperial Japanese Guard came into our hospital at Gilman Barracks. About that time the Koreans, who were filled with drugs, made their way into Queen Alexandria Hospital and slaughtered everyone—patients, medical staff, men and women. I didn't know that it was happening, of course. We were thirsty after not having had fluid for a long time. Prior to their coming no one was game to go outside to get water for fear of snipers, even though our place was marked clearly as a hospital. The Japanese officer had no water in his flask, but he made sure we got some from those under him. He was very kind. Said he regretted fighting Australians since they had helped so much during the earthquake of 1924 in Japan. He hadn't forgotten that.'

Gerry's head was down. He nodded dumbly. 'You do hear of those things,' he said, 'and then you hear of other things.'

He looked up at me. 'One has to forgive, or you would go mad, but one cannot forget.'

'Of course one cannot forget,' I said. 'That would be against nature. Why should we try to forget anything? It is all part of memory. It is the way you remember that matters. It is the way we have reacted against those things which matters. If you have forgiven, then when you remember it will not have to be bitter, or rip you to pieces.'

'Bitter,' Gerry said, looking down at the mat of bark and leaves and tangled undergrowth, 'that is the word—bitter.' He stared at me. 'But you aren't bitter, are you?'

'I never was,' I said, 'and no credit to me. I was brought up to believe man was capable of anything—good or bad—so nothing surprised me.' I thought about that and amended it. 'No, that's not wholly true. I was shocked at some of the things we did inside our own camp, such as stealing medicines and selling them on the black market, and such as working rackets with the rations.'

'Some people did that,' said Gerry, 'but then not all. People do terrible things under pressure.'

I said, 'I guess I came to accept that anyone of us can do terrible things. At first I was offended, but my training caught up with me. I was tempted as much as anyone else to do the same things.'

'But you didn't,' Gerry said. He was silent for a long time as though fumbling with his memory—thinking something through. His face screwed painfully as he said, 'Maybe much of our criticism of others is really anger at ourselves, for our own failure.' It was as though he had discovered this thought after years of thinking.

Over the hills we could hear the rollicking of kookaburras. Closer at hand there were two magpies warbling to each other. The whistling of small birds could be heard, but above them was the song of the grey thrush. The song of the grey thrush is incomparable.

Gerry said, 'That film on SBS last night affected me greatly. Those old Resistance fighters in their monthly jazz club were trying to keep up their spirits through music, trying to sedate or drown their memories. Memory of cruelty dies so hard.'

A flight of rosella parrots made its whistling way into the trees above us, and the birds began their musical chattering. Gerry said, 'It is very, very peaceful here.'

The sun was warm, even through the trees, and we almost drowsed. I was thinking about the sorrow men and women feel, and nearly all of it is to do with our humanity—our relationships. I remembered looking into the eyes of weeping Japanese. I would have shared this with Gerry but it did not seem to be the right moment just now. I suppose I have felt a certain pity for the Japanese since, with all their success, they seem only driven on by it to further compulsive effort.

We talked about Gerry's impending retirement. He had a small orchard in an outer Sydney rural district. He liked the land. Indeed he had come from it, and had always wanted to return to it. I hoped he would open up, volunteer something about the quality of his marriage and family.

Instead his rage suddenly became loosed. It was as though the peace of the place irritated him, building him up to explosion point. He stood up and moved between the trees. One moment he

would be throwing up his arms, and at another moment he would be clasping his arms about his own shoulders or his chest. Words babbled out of his mouth in hot streams. Invective poured from his mind. I had heard recorded cassettes of some men's prison sufferings, but recordings are somewhat distant to the hearer. Here was the man, himself, doing what I guessed he rarely, if ever, did.

I can still remember that tirade, yet it wasn't an empty one. 'What do you do,' he asked, 'when your guts inside are boiling? When you remember the men like walking skeletons, some of them puffed with beriberi and others with dry, calloused skin like an elephant's through pellagra? When their eyes were hot and staring, or sunken so you could hardly see them, barely living bodies with dead eyes, and wills paralysed? When their dignity seemed gone, and when they died like flies through cholera and dysentery? When some of them just laid down and died because it was easier than living? What about the stench of putrefaction, the unforgettable smell of human bodies burning, and the hopelessness of it all, because your mind was so tired you couldn't remember when it had ever been good? When you saw your mates beaten or starved or just sent crazy down the tube? No wonder a man's mind was dazed. No wonder his bowels boiled. No wonder!'

He came back, his chest heaving, his eyes wet with tears and his face pale with rage. 'Denny,' he said, 'you don't understand. You've always had it good.'

His common sense told him that this was a bit stupid. Having a leg smashed, being left in no-man's land, being carted off in a utility truck with a broken limb dangling over the backboard, and jolted all the way to hospital—that wasn't good. Being sick with fevers and hungry and emaciated and having a heel come off with dry gangrene, whilst your wound suppurated after so long a time; learning to walk again like a baby, especially when your limb was stiff, and then living with nerve pain for forty-five years hadn't been exactly good, but I knew what he meant. He meant somehow it all hadn't twisted me, and he was right.

What he didn't know was that none of this was by accident. He never knew the eighteen months of hell I had known in trying

to figure it out—the mental darkness, and brassy heavens, and the hard despair all in the flight of faith from the mind that had once known it vitally. If that hadn't happened to me, I wouldn't have had much understanding of Gerry or sympathy for him. As it was, I ached for him, and knew I could do nothing.

I didn't blame him for his thoughts. It seemed a curious twist of life that people now boasted of their suffering, as though the greater the suffering the greater the merit, or even the character. They—some of them—almost despised a person if he had not suffered as much as they had. Yet they were still angry at their captors for dealing out the suffering. They claimed the notoriety of suffering, but wanted the bitter-sweetness of undying hatred. They clamoured for revenge when all over the world millions were dying of present suffering—futile wars, futile rivalries, diseases, famines, and political devilry. How different our case in 'the lucky country'!

I just wondered whether you could have both—merit for suffering, and hatred for the persecutors. I remembered the demagogic cry of an ousted prime minister, 'Maintain the rage!' So what does maintained rage do for a human being? I thought of the many stories I had heard and read of human cruelty. It wasn't that I hadn't seen the evil of cruelty but I knew that at rock-bottom we are all the same—no matter what our breeding, our imagined superiority of training, or our inferiority of self-deprecation. Man can be as desperate and vicious as a rat when things corner him.

Gerry was looking at me, but I don't think he knew what I was thinking. Then he said a strange thing to me. 'Denny,' he said, 'I think I could forgive the Japanese everything, but I can't forget what my wife did to me.'

I didn't know which wife, and he knew that I was baffled. He said slowly, 'It was my first wife, Marie. I met her when we came home, before we were demobbed. In those days no woman was not beautiful to us, and she seemed beautiful enough to me. I had never messed about with women over there, or even before we left Australia to go there. Anyway, I was very young. I just thought she loved me, and we wasted no time in getting married.'

Now his head was in his arms, and the tears were flowing. I

wondered whether this was the first time. He poured out a story I had heard a thousand times—not that it did not move me. Infidelity, promiscuity, greed, laziness, and neglect of him—along with abuse. To begin with, it had not been that, but as they were bringing up the two children she became bitter, and served notice on him. In his strange idealism he had let her live in the house and he had moved—to give grounds for desertion. He lost the house and the two girls. One of those girls was May who had been killed a couple of weeks ago.

'God!' he said. 'Do I hate her? I hate her more than Hirohito. I hate her memory. I hate her guts. Forgive? I'd do that if it would release me, but it wouldn't. It wouldn't be real.' His sobs were harsh in his chest. 'No one could ever forgive that bitch—the lies, the cheating, the deceit, and the hatred, after all the promises and the things she said in the early days.'

His eyes were red, his face drawn. His hair hung over his brow. His body was heaving.

I said, 'You'll rot your guts if you don't forgive. She's got you where she wants you, if ever—in fact—she really wants that. You can't afford not to forgive.' I knew enough of the shattering effects of divorce: the loneliness, the sense of failure—the dreadful rift.

His eyes were staring. 'How the hell does a man do that?' he asked.

I said, 'You just do it, mate. You just do it.'

He looked at me as though I was crazy. 'You just do it!' he shouted, incredulous.

'It's been done more than we would ever know, in history,' I said.

He was still trembling. I could see he was weak. He was tired.

I said, 'Your anger wasn't really against Hirohito, for God's sake,' I said. 'Nor even against the Japs. They were bad enough. We were bad enough. We're all bad enough. Some do this, and some do that. None of us has not failed. So what's great about bitterness and hatred and anger? It never did a real thing for anyone, but it has made hell enough for us all. It's a hideous holocaust.'

He began to say, 'I have seen some terrible things,' but his voice trailed away. It was part of an old script for a worn-out scenario and had done nothing—not ever—for anyone. I think he saw it fully at that moment. Don't ask me why not before. My only answer—trite as it may be, and all that—would be that anger blinds you to reality. The angry man cannot be rational. Anger breeds itself, and takes over all territory.

He seemed fairly calm. 'I wish I had understood this before I came to May's funeral,' he said. 'It might have been different.'

'If it's different now, then that is what matters,' I said.

He had a faint grin on his face. 'We all used to call you a bloody wowser,' he said, 'but nobody really thought you were.'

'You remember,' he added, 'when we picked you up on Reformatory Road, and I held your leg up while the fellows took you to the truck? I really thought it was about the best thing I did in all the action. I hoped like hell that you would get to the hospital in time. I never saw so much blood poured out as there was on that road.'

We stood up to go back to the house. 'Funny thing,' he said, 'all these years I wanted to see you, but I was scared of a sermon.' He smiled. 'You really aren't preachy,' he said, and then added, '—maybe you should be.'

As we went through the trees, he would stop and lean on a trunk. He was certainly tired. I felt a little sorry for him, but knew he was over his hump. A transition can take place in a moment, in a flash, even if one has been working towards it for years. When you don't have to be afraid of your memories because you are no longer chained to them by anger, then life is much better.

I guess I will never forget what he had said. 'I can forgive Hirohito but not her.' I thought a lot about that on the following days, wondering how many people were blaming someone who wasn't the real reason at all for their hatred.

GERRY had to go back the next day. He told Alan Walters he didn't really need those sedatives and anti-depressants, but Alan told him to keep up a mild dose for a day or two. I don't know what he did, and it doesn't matter. His grin was strong

enough when we parted, and no less his handshake. He hasn't written yet, but I guess he will. I suppose I won't forget him carrying my leg that was smashed, and maybe he won't forget the gully of stringy-barks with their parrots and finches and pardalotes, and the warbling maggies. I bet he remembers the grey thrush best of all. It has a sweet song, not overjoyful but then not too sad. In fact quite beautiful.

SLIPPED DISK

MR Jerry McWhirter had a slipped disk, and a slipped disk can be a very painful thing. However, Jerry McWhirter's slipped disk was not the one which occasions deep back-pain, inability to lift weights, weed gardens, do press-ups, and be an active member of the jogging cult. No, Jerry McWhirter's slipped disk was entirely of another order. I am a little reluctant to pronounce that the nature of his particular type of slipped disk will require you to read just about the whole of this story, as it is not a thing one can explain in a paragraph or two.

When I tell you that this Jerry McWhirter had just reached the ripe old age of forty years you may well prick up your ears, for if ever you have reached that age you will know that it is a critical time of any person's life—whether he be man or she be woman. It is true that on this particular day of his life, Jerry had been granted a holiday, simply because it was a public holiday anyway. It was one of the famous State holidays granted for purposes of having the most prestigious horse race of the particular State, namely that of South Australia, which, as every Australian knows, has a Cup Day that is quietly but surely creeping up on the famous Melbourne Cup Day of the State of Victoria. All of this is purely coincidental to our story, but had Mr McWhirter not had that holiday, things might have been different. What is also a feature of our story is that the McWhirter children were away at a sports' camp for the entire weekend. They were to return home late on the Monday evening.

Mrs Jerry McWhirter woke that Monday to find her husband still asleep by her side, in bed. You might think that this would not be unusual, especially on a nominated public holiday, and the celebration day of the man's birth. To Mrs McWhirter it was a

wonder, a blinking marvel. For a few moments she let her husband sleep on as she thought about the marvel. Then, because he always insisted on giving her breakfast in bed, she nudged him slightly.

'Jerry,' she said in her most encouraging voice, 'wake up.'

There was no responding movement. She gave him a stronger shaking, and lifted her voice a couple of decibels. 'Jerry, it's brekky time.'

At that Jerry awoke, looked at her, bewildered, snatched at the watch which was on the bedside table, and asked in a confused voice, 'The news! Is it news time?'

'It could be,' she said gently.

She settled back into her soft pillows. How she loved the morning, the warmth and softness of the bed, and the joy of a relaxed body and mind.

Jerry was staring at his watch. 'A minute to go,' he almost yelled, and bounded out of bed, shot into the nearby kitchen, reached out to the radio, and switched it on. The man on the ABC was telling the weather. 'Fine and mild,' he was saying, 'the maximum temperature being twenty-four degrees Celsius.' Then he added, 'This is the Early Morning Edition.'

The ecstatic and spasmodic music of the news voluntary blared out, following which the happenings of the night and day were recounted. More air crashes, a famine or two, a fisherman lost in St Vincent's Gulf, and a further rise in interest rates for Home Loans. Nothing startling, really.

The birthday man, Jerry McWhirter, noticed a slight disorientation in his breakfast-making. As you know, preparing breakfast is quite an art. Jerry had it down to fourteen minutes sharp. He would let the water run into the sink, putting the plug in when it began to flow out as warm. He would put in the liquid detergent drops, slip in any used supper dishes of the night before, and then catch some hot water in the automatic electric kettle, start it off with the switch, turn and put out the two trays, and proceed in ordered fashion until all was completed.

He always put the trays in order on the kitchen bench—his first and then hers. This morning he had put hers and then his. A trifle confused, he put her cup and saucer on his tray and his mug

on hers. That puzzled him, so he reversed the order. He always ate toast and she muesli, so he put her breakfast dish on his tray and his bread-and-butter plate on hers. He did not notice this until he had spilled a little muesli on to his flat plate. He had to stand a moment or two to work it out. He felt himself to be mentally dyslexic.

He spent some moments changing the order of crockery, and then decided he had better reverse the order of the trays, but this served only to further confuse him. He had certain mental exercises to get things in order, so he drew on one of these, and in no time the kettle had boiled and clicked, his orange and her grapefruit were cut and quartered in the cups of their halved skins, the tea was poured to perfection, the toast was crisp, buttered, Vegemited and marmaladed, and he was carrying in her tray. The news finished just as he was bringing in his own tray, so that despite a bit of confusion he had only lost a minute. He felt pleased as he settled back into his propped-up cushions. Life was good on this, his fortieth birthday.

Birthday! The remembrance came with a rush. He stole a look at her. She was taking something from behind her pillows. It was a wrapped gift. 'Many happy returns!' she said, and then gave him a slightly mueslied kiss.

He felt warm and happy, and began unwrapping the present, trying to save the paper for another occasion, but then surprised himself by ripping it off in impatience. There, with a card accompanying it, he saw a box of ten three-and-a-half inch computer disks. He was deeply moved.

'How did you know I needed these?' he asked, and she just smiled. She passed over another wrapped gift, which turned out to be his favourite Jersey Caramels, by reason of which his cup of joy was filled to overflowing.

He had an order in his breakfast-eating: orange, Vegemited toast, then toast with marmalade, and finally, his tea. Halfway through the first section of his sliced toast he suddenly stopped eating. 'How come,' he said slowly, 'that I did not wake up early?' He could not remember this happening previously except on rare occasions of heavy sickness.

'It doesn't matter,' she said softly. 'Just enjoy it.' She always

did. She generally woke to his nudge with the morning tray. Sleep to her was a great treat, the nectar of the gods which one drank with enjoyment.

He pondered the matter, and then decided to let it drop. He went on to the thought that today he was forty years old, and didn't yet have to wear glasses. He was rather proud of that fact. Also he could do twenty press-ups without any trouble. He was regular in rising, shining, doing and living. He always left a margin of time for whatever he did, so that he would not be dressed late, leave late, arrive late and so put others out. He, his wife and children always arrived before others, but left exactly when things ended. His seeds and plants in the garden were always sown on time, grew on time and matured on time.

What Jerry McWhirter did not know was that he was a computer which had a never-ending digital watch which preset the times of all happenings in his life and kept its master—or slave—strictly to its schedule. Now of course Jerry was not really a computer. He was a man. He did, however, have a computerised life, a strictly digitalised existence. Not until the approach of his fortieth birthday did he begin to realise this. Even before that special day he had begun to discover something about himself which was quite uncanny. It was that at any moment of the day he would know what time it was, and the time was always correct.

At first he had tried out his theory casually. If walking, he would stop and say to himself, 'It is now 10.30 a.m.' He would then look at his watch, which was a digital one and kept perfect time. Sure enough, his watch would tell him it was 10.30 a.m. The knowledge awed him a little, and also brought a faint sense of fear.

When he woke in the morning he would know it was 5.00 a.m. Fair enough, for he had awakened at that time almost all of his life. But the strange fact was that when the State went on to Daylight Saving Time, that he still awoke at 5.00 a.m. DST. This was a bit of a stunner. Not only did he do this, but the change to, or back from, DST never fazed him. At any moment of the day he could give you the correct time.

When he discovered this surprising ability of his, he thought of

using it on TV. The announcer would blindfold him, after searching him for hidden bugs, and microphones, and—when asked—he would calmly announce the correct time. He often played this over in his mind, but then decided it wasn't all that special, and so gave up the idea. He simply concluded that just as others had the gift of prescience, so he had the innate ability to tell the time. He left it at that.

As he lay back on his propped pillows, and thought about the crisis of his life—'Life begins at forty', and all that—he began to wonder whether his ability to sense the time had somehow deteriorated. He said to himself, 'It is now 7.45—time for the next edition of the news.' He switched on the transistor radio on his bedside table, and again the ancient signature tune of the late morning edition blared in his ears. He relaxed. His gift had not altered. He began looking at his disks to be sure they were of 800Ks' capacity, and being reassured, took a Jersey Caramel and began to suck and chew at it. Jerry was not given to having a caramel with or after his breakfast, but it being his fortieth birthday he decided this was in order.

By now you are wondering why you have been taken through all this drivel just to be informed that a certain Jerry McWhirter had the ability to tell the correct time at any time. Yes, but there is much more to the matter than this. The real heart of the matter is that this forty-year-old man had always been the slave of his inner computer. You see, Jerry's time-telling ability had been present from when he was a mere child, and all his life he had lived in conformity with the programme computed for him. It was not simply that he knew the time—on time—but that everything within time was dictated to him by this inner computer. He had never really been Jerry McWhirter—baby, child, teenager, young man, married man, and now, middle-aged man. He had always been a machine-driven creature, bound to time, bound to certain regularised forms of action, having a will perhaps, but only able to do that which coincided with the will of his internal infernal machine.

The facts are that Jerry McWhirter would have to rise at 5. He would have to begin his programme for the day as the inner monitor dictated. As a baby he had to go on a round of disturbing

things, pulling books down from shelves, cutlery out of cupboards, toys out of their boxes—and the like. At school he had to learn his 'times tables', to write with a certain angle to the slope of the letters, and to play games with exact precision. In his youth he had to attend to his vegetable garden, his budgies and his terrier Tim. He had to wear his clothes in regulation fashion, go to regulated parties, laugh at jokes by regulation, play games on time, return home on time and even relate to girls—on time. There was no sweet careless choice of will. All his action was monitored, and he had not even realised it.

Long ago a phobia had been built in him regarding time. If he did not use his time—in season and out of season, come wind, rain and other weather—then he would feel he had wasted his life. He knew what it was to improve the shining hour, to go to the ant, consider her ways and be wise. He even had guilt when he was about to squander time on imaginative thought—especially speculative thought. The monitor inside him would frown on contemplation unless it were on the Quantum Theory or some such. This, then, was how Jerry McWhirter had lived, up until the day of his fortieth birthday.

It was on that day that the internal disk slipped, throwing J.M. out of gear, and it happened in this wise.

JERRY M. decided he would do work in his vegetable garden. He knew certain patches of soil needed organic manure with tilling, and other patches called for seeding, or the planting of seedlings. Yet others required weeding or the tiny seedlings would soon be lost—choked by the encroaching weeds. So then, he went into his vegetable garden.

When he arrived he had a sudden distaste for gardening on this, his birthday morning. Fair enough, and, after all, he rarely rebelled. One part of him argued that if he did not do this today he would get behind. The thought of getting behind had always worried him, but strangely enough when the inner monitor said, 'You will get behind, today!' he found he did not care. 'So what?' was his unusual reaction.

In fact he found a certain delight in refusing the monitor. He walked about, enjoying what he saw, but refusing to be coerced

by the urgent demands for sowing, tilling, manuring and weeding. The strange thought came to him that he had been the victim of time, the slave of the clock, the duped servant of all things he had ever had to do.

So peculiar was the thought that he felt he should contemplate it. Since his monitor only had time for a utilitarian contemplation, he found a still, small voice insisting firmly that he had better get off this track. This insistence niggled Jerry and he rebelled against it. No, he would contemplate—whatever! And so he did. His contemplation yielded some strange fruits which took time, in turn, to be digested.

He was surprised to hear his wife's melodious voice calling him to morning tea. Now such a calling had not previously been necessary. He was always there by the time she had poured the tea, ready to put in his own milk and sugar. She seemed a little surprised—and perhaps, gratified—to know he had arrived late. She dared not tease him about the fact, but he seemed mighty pleased with himself.

He pushed back the tea. 'I think I'll make a cup of coffee,' he said. She could not believe her ears. Jerry had always been against coffee in the morning. In fact he rarely drank it, and then only socially, when friends were present who wanted to drink coffee.

Having made his instant coffee, Jerry settled himself on the imitation iron garden-seat. He looked thoughtfully at his wife and then made his pronouncement: 'I think anyone can become the slave of time.'

She could not quite believe her ears, but was quick to respond. 'Oh yes,' she said, 'anyone can be the slave of time.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'Take my vegetable garden for an example,' he said. 'Why should I always be weeding, seeding, planting, and harvesting?'

She did not catch on. 'Because that is the only way you will ever have vegetables.'

He nodded in agreement. 'I have been thinking,' he said, 'that we live to work, to eat, sleep, procreate, bring up children, grow vegetables and flowers, but we never seem to live.'

She still did not understand. She felt there was something

odd, this morning, about her Jerry. Maybe the strain of having arrived, officially, at middle age had affected him. Poor Jerry! Yet, she had to admit that there was a certain difference about him on this morning—such as being late for morning tea, drinking coffee, and philosophising. It was all quite out of character.

When they finished drinking he said suddenly, 'I think I'll take the car and go for a run. I'll just go anywhere.'

She was alarmed. 'You mean to the Garden Centre for plants, or fertiliser and seeds?'

'No,' he said, 'just for a run.' Seeing her alarm he smiled and said, 'I'll be OK. I won't do anything rash.'

Well, he had never done anything rash, that was certain, but she did worry about him, although his driving was not erratic, had never been erratic. Nothing about him had been erratic.

The fact of the matter is that a disk had slipped in the McWhirter computer, though not in the McWhirter vertebrae. The time sequence, and the time imposition on the forty-year-old man, had somehow gone astray. From the moment the birthday-man got behind the wheel the old slave of time died and a new creature emerged, albeit in the same body as the man had always known.

It came to him as he whirled along a back country road that he could live as he wished. He realised there were certain exceptions to this new rule, certain factors which would condition his new way of life, but the whole prospect greatly pleased him. For example, he considered the new kind of thinking he had recently seen described in an article. 'Lateral thinking' it was called. A person just didn't think in a linear fashion, but allowed his mind to contemplate laterally. Take this road he was now on. Normally the road was there for him to travel to work, or travel home, and occasionally to travel to a sports event. Now he could see it differently. For example, he could turn off the road and explore the country—laterally.

With an unaccustomed bit of decision-making, Jerry suddenly braked, turned the car to the left, and brought the vehicle into new territory. He felt the pleasure of being in different country. He looked at the homes of the wealthy, and had no envy. They were there to be looked at, and that was a great idea. He even

stopped from time to time, gazed at gardens with growing satisfaction, roamed through a bit of scrub, returning to the car with a growing delight.

Once he wondered what the time was, did not know, was forced to look at his watch, and so realised with a certain glee that his ability to tell the time had become somewhat impaired. He also realised that he did not care. What was more, the insistent monitor seemed to have lost its ability to be vocal. It might even have died. By the time he reached home he was a joyful man.

That delight his worried wife saw immediately. She ceased to be worried. She was now simply intrigued.

'What has happened?' she asked. He said he didn't rightly know, but that he had lost a lot of time in life, and wanted to make up for it, now.

She couldn't comprehend; so he explained. Even then she wasn't sure she understood.

He said, 'Get in the car. We'll go off to "The Sizzlers".'

She answered, 'The children are due home from the camp any time now. They'd never understand.'

He nodded cheerfully. 'Of course they won't,' he said. 'How could they? But they'll be OK. They can get the key from under the doormat, and they can rustle up a meal on their own. This is our night off.'

'But they have presents for you, and they were looking forward to a birthday party.'

'We can have a late supper,' said he, who had never had a late-supper birthday party in his life. 'Now get in, and off we go.'

AT 'The Sizzlers' she looked at the man opposite her. She had heard about men having a change of life sometime, but she knew he was too young for that. He was certainly different. He was a bit like a large butterfly emerging from a dull chrysalis, coming out in jerks and starts of liberating transformation. She rather liked what she saw.

So did he. He liked the food, and the music, and the woman sitting opposite him. He knew he was seeing her with new eyes.

'It could change everything,' he was telling her. 'My job, our way of life, even where we live.' She heard the delight in his voice.

'Why, it could even mean that we have abilities we have never used, ideas we have never thought. Anything could happen.' He tried to explain lateral thinking, and—with it—lateral action, lateral living. It was on the last he gave much time to speculation. 'Just think,' he said, 'you might want to do something you've never done, go where you've never been.'

She thought about that. For years she had thought him competent, but also fuddy-duddy, and she was not sure how she was going to adjust to this new life, and adapt to this different man, but she did not worry. Right at the moment she was thinking about the children and their return from sports' camp, and their finding the place empty. She had a shrewd idea that they would not mind, that they would help themselves to meals from the deep freeze—especially the french fries. More than that she could not visualise. She wondered why Jerry was not worrying, not glancing at his watch, not reminding her of the time. He seemed as though he could laze for ever at the table, and talk on about the new way of life.

On the way back she thought, with a sense of panic, 'What if tomorrow morning he wakes up at 5.00 a.m.? What if he works until breakfast and prepares it at the same time, getting ready to listen to the same news, bringing me the same breakfast, and going to work the same as all other weekdays—bar this special birthday holiday?' The thought dismayed her, and she wondered whether Jerry could go on as he had, this day, determined he would.

Jerry was an astute man. He also knew computers. He knew there was no such thing—technically speaking—as a slipped disk. Even so, he knew he had a slipped disk. He knew some gremlin had gotten into his system and wrecked the regularity of it, had jammed up the circuits, had silenced the monitor, and that he was no longer a module—or a nodule—in an immutable system.

He knew as he drove that at first the children would not understand. None of them had anything like an internal programme—a thing he had often deeply regretted in his 'tut-tutting' mind, but now he was glad of it. He thought they would understand quite well, being very young and intelligent.

He knew his Adrienne did not yet quite understand, but he could easily make allowances for that. She would come to know, and be glad for her emancipated husband and lover.

He drove carefully, knowing that the headiness he was feeling could easily lead them into an accident. In his mind's eye he was seeing the children in the living room, eating away at their mounds of heated-up french fries, and gorging themselves on other things not good for them. At first they would not be surprised at the return of their staid parents, but after a time, when he had explained it all, there would be great surprise, even astonishment.

They would say, 'Gee, Dad, that is great!' and he would nod, casually of course, and reply, 'Yes, it is great when you think about it. Who knows where it might take us, and what might happen?'

He was not sure whether he had heard a faint whirring within him, the last efforts of a failed computer to reassert itself, but he knew it was finished—kaput! He rather liked that idea, and he permitted himself the luxury of speculating as to how all this would later affect Adrienne, and what times they would have together—he and the children.

He also wondered what would be the effect of all this on his garden. He did not greatly care. He thought joyously—even rapturously—on the new life which was now his. Not being a slave to time, to programmed commands, to stereotyped ideas, and practices, but the amazing freedom of fresh thought breaking in upon him from everywhere. Most of all he wondered at the enjoyment that lay ahead of him as he would not wake at 5.00 a.m. to begin his day, but would sleep in for any length of time. He was not sure of the exact length of time, but then since time did not now worry him, he just thought of the relaxation itself, and that was enough to help him to drive surely, safely and certainly to the children and the late-night birthday supper.

THE ABYSS

TONY Wayville could not remember when the first prick of hatred had come to him. What he felt at this moment was more than a prick: it was a stab. Like the searing edge of a knife when a man carelessly cuts himself. Does one feel guilty at cutting oneself?

The pain lingered for moments before it was gone. He wanted to recall it, not in order to suffer it again, but to kill it—to kill its cause. He felt helpless because he did not know its cause. He just knew he ought not to hate her.

The other times when prickings had come he had killed them. He had ordered himself to think properly, to reject the idiot ideas that came to him. They had no reason to be—his angry thoughts. Then why did he think them?

He looked sideways at her as she watched the television screen. She liked the dramas that came and went during her days and her evenings. Right now she was gripped by the emotional conflict of the man and woman before her. She lived in their passions: they were real to her. The flesh-and-blood man next to her scarcely existed. If she was aware of him it was only because he brought her coffee in the commercial breaks, or offered her crisp nuts, or spoke about something of the day. Her mind was not on him. It was on the soapie.

He tried to stem the bitterness, the thin line of cynicism which was growing. He could not believe this was the woman he had known so richly in his youth. He knew that dreams and ideals are generally unrealistic, but they are better than mindlessness. How beautiful she had been, how incredibly beautiful! He knew her eyes were no less beautiful even though the years had brought faint ravages to her face and her hair.

At the moment she was tensed, but it was not the tension of fear, or of deep anguish. It was the tightness of passion which

came when she identified with an emotional crisis on the screen. His stomach seemed to contract. There was nothing of greatness in the film. She had a Mills and Boon mind, a Barbara Cartland mentality, and it sickened him to be part of it. No prig, he yet felt the slopping of a stupid sea.

He was in it, and he could not escape. If he withdrew mentally then his own mind accused him of deserting her. If he were to stand up now and mutter that he was off to the study or would turn in because he was tired, her large eyes would grow larger, and a hand would touch him, and the voice would be tremulous, and he would have to sink back into his silken cell.

'Darling!' she would say, and his gut would feel empty, its walls touching. The faint nausea would come, and he would sit back in childish resignation.

'Let's see this one through,' she would say, appealing to him with the eyes that he had begun to loathe. So he would sit there, and the sentences would come into his mind. Like 'Gutless in Gaza!' 'Eyeless in Israel!' 'Banal in Bourke!' Even the sentences were not original. They were like cotton wool, a stuffing of words to stultify his pain.

HE understood the problem—the immediate one. Masculine middle age they called it, but he knew that was not it. Days of their children's weddings—but that also was not it. In a way it had been a relief to see them married—the three of them—one by one. It took away the problems that had been with their growing up, his and her arguments about the freedom the children ought or ought not to have. He knew it went on in every family—this fight for genuine morality. He also knew that men and women differed in their approaches to the children. Perhaps it was a matter of different roles. Somehow they had muddled through, but then he wasn't sure about what lay head for his two sons and their daughter. Some unease was within him.

He couldn't believe it, but she was starry-eyed. She even held his hand softly as the plot climaxed: as usual, blue lights and wailing sirens, hand-to-hand fighting, with the hero finally belting the suave criminal to the pavement; restraining hands grasping the victor so that he did not beat the villain to pulp; and

the grateful eyes of the ravishing woman. In a few moments it would be a victory feast at a restaurant, whilst the victors mouthed their triumph afresh. He loathed it all.

The effects of the 'cops-and-robbers' romance were still upon her when they reached the bedroom. He lay still, wondering about the emptiness of it all. When her hand found his he knew she wasn't thinking of him. He was her surrogate lover, the tough guy who hauled in the bad guys. He held the hand for a moment, slipping away from the call to a union which would have been empty and mindless—a chimera of her thinking, raised out of plastic emotions. He mumbled his way into sleep, glad to escape, ashamed of what seemed to be disloyalty, relieved because he had escaped the empty play.

In the morning—before leaving for work—he unlocked the door of the garden shed, and switched on the light. Usually he would feel a thrill at the sight of his lathe—the one he used for wood-turning. The leg of a stool lay on the bench, partly turned—its Jacobean shape emerging. He felt it with satisfaction, his fingers moving over its curve. He liked his hobby but this morning the taste for it was gone. Somehow his hobby was traitorous—an escape from her. He knew his hobby gave him time to think, time to go over his failures, and somehow plan for his future. He understood the pleasure that comes to a person when he makes things. When they were finely sandpapered, skilfully stained, and wholly polished, they were the gems of his creation. He had tried to tell her that the things were for her, but she scarcely saw them. Her mind was elsewhere, and he wondered why it never centred on any one thing—even temporarily. She had always been restless. She was always looking for what she never found, and probably that thing was fulfilment.

In the car he wondered for the millionth time what it was that had gripped him in those early days. He tried his old trick of seeing her as she had been in her late teens and early twenties—alert, vivacious, earnest and intense. She had not merely been good-looking. She was ravishing. Her eyes had been of the same deep blue, with the dark eyelashes against her blonde skin—an effective combination. She had worn her fair hair long, and just the sight of it had excited him.

Everything about her had excited him. She was tall, well-rounded, and fitted his height. She could pick up ideas quickly, and had been sensitive to his moods. There had been something which she promised but which she had never fulfilled. Probably it was the same with him. It was as though that something was always ahead. Even now it was there—the promise. She had never mocked him with it, or led him on, but the element of mystery had intrigued and held him. He had been sure in those days, but now he felt it to be empty. If there was promise then it was empty.

At the office there was the other woman. She was his escape from his own Irene. He nodded each morning, passed through as though he was scarcely aware of her, but knew he was. He didn't know what she thought. He was contented that she was there. He demanded nothing of her, and he gave her nothing. He was simply her boss, and she was willing to serve in the way a secretary serves—detached, deferential, unintrusive. He kept her in mind as one who might have understood him, might have related well, one who might have been a good mate.

In his honest moments he knew this was simply mind-play. He had no way of assessing her. Her smiles were warm but professional. Her concern for him—his health, his plans, his work—were all impartial. She lived outside of him, and he liked it that way. It gave him more room to dream his dreams and know they would not affect him. He wanted no relational connection, nor—for that matter—did he want to touch her. He just wanted to know there was a woman—or women—other than his Irene and different in character. If they were all as Irene, then life was empty. Not even his work counted, if this was the way of the human race. Even his wood-turning was a pastime—a clever, stimulating pastime, leading to nothing.

He was surprised how his work absorbed him. He kept to time for Irene's sake. She didn't like him arriving home late. Not that she was suspicious: she had never been that. This evening his secretary worried a little when he was still in the midst of a problem, and it was past leaving time. She asked if he would like some tea from the local restaurant, and suddenly he thought that would be a good idea.

'You have to get away quickly,' he told her. She shook her head, pleasant and impersonal as ever, volunteering no reason why she could stay. On an impulse he ordered two take-aways, and they shared them. He stared at her thoughtfully, knowing he had never known her. There had been no point in trying to know her. He thought of the soapies: the boss and the secretary, and the little woman at home. She would just about be ready for the news and the evening feature that followed on their regular TV station.

He rang her, and explained. She seemed to understand. He smiled apologetically at his secretary. He knew her name was Winsome. Quite a name. He had never used it, always calling her Miss Frome. There was nothing exciting about her, and he had no qualms in explaining all to Irene, including the fact that Winsome Frome was staying behind to help.

When he arrived home she was staring at the screen, and scarcely heard him when he entered. He prepared coffee and brought it to her. She smiled absently and sipped. She liked it hot. He let his cup cool down, looking at the telly, and noting it was the next episode, the one following the previous night's billing. He contented himself by running ahead of the plot. He knew how it would be. He even knew the inflections of the voices, could predict the type and length of a smile, the regulation innuendoes, and when the passionate clinch would come. He even knew the shape of the clinch. It was all fairly stereotyped. He drank his coffee—though it was somewhat hot—to keep himself from yawning.

During the commercial breaks he tried to use the remotely controlled silences. She wasn't listening. She concentrated on the commercials, as though they were full of life. They meant something to her. She might have resented the forced silence each time.

His mind went back to Winsome. Nothing about her had attracted him but her deliberate detachment. He wondered now whether he could break through it, and have conversation with another fellow human being. The cops-and-robbers drama was coming to an end. Again the fast breathing, the deliberate releasing of the adrenalin into the system, the brightened eyes, and the drugged adoration of the macho man.

IN the bedroom he lay back, wondering how it had all come to this. Her mind was still in the entertainment system. She looked out at him from the other world which was hers. There was expectancy, but again he knew he would be a pawn in her game of stimulation. Something within him struggled to resist. His old desire stirred faintly but flickered to nothing. He smiled sympathetically, nodded a little as though in encouragement, and then turned on his side, looking away from her.

It was then, at the moment of his turning away, that he caught sight of the anger. Her eyes looked even more beautiful with the sudden gesture, but with it they went hard. She said harshly, 'The game's over. It's all finished.'

He lay there for a moment, pondering in surprise. Then he turned back, looking at her, wondering whether he had heard her aright.

'Finished!' she said savagely. 'Finished! Finished! Finished!'

Even then he wondered whether it was part of an old script, a chance soapie fragment that had come into her mind. She liked a bit of the dramatic. He kept staring at her, trying to decide. He concluded that it wasn't an old script, or if it was, then it fitted her case. She really meant it. Their marriage—everything—was finished.

He sat up slowly, propping himself against the pillows. 'Then what do we do?' he asked.

For a long, long time she said nothing. She seemed to be far away. Perhaps she was searching in her memory. Finally she said, 'It's over to you. You're the man.'

HE knew it was foolish to ask the question, but he posed it, anyway. 'Why are you angry, so angry?'

When she answered, she was coming from a long way away. 'I'm just angry,' she said, as though it called for no explanation. Anger was there—that was all.

As he looked at her, she seemed to recede. Her eyes closed off, and she was blank. He knew she was thinking, but he couldn't know her thoughts. He wasn't wanting to know them. His only curiosity was in regard to the anger. Somewhere he had heard—or had read—that anger meant there was still feeling.

there was still life. He wondered what there could be to resurrect, if resurrection was called for.

He felt no need to answer, no need to make a decision. He was wondering about her obsessive television viewing, her compulsive addiction to emotion-packed scripts. Somewhere, in the midst of these, there was some clue to her anger, to her hard blankness of face. Long ago he had thought everything was ended, indeed that it had never lived.

His mind went back beyond the present wastage of her mind—back even beyond the marriages of their children, and into the early days of their own marriage. It had all seemed good then—average, but good: the delight that they had had in each other; his pride in her beauty, his hope for her character, and some sort of dreaming of a useful life, some hankering after purpose.

Often she had looked at him, puzzled, and then enquiringly, although she had never asked one question. All she would say to him in those days was, 'You are the man. It's over to you.' Now, strangely enough, she was saying the same thing. He had to make the decisions. Well, he had made decisions, but they were small ones, routine ones, which had to do with their house, with furnishings, relationships with neighbours, even with holidays and passing enjoyment.

They had built nothing. After a time the adventure had died down, the romance had weakened. Life became routine. Gradually he made progress with his firm. Sometimes it meant he had to be away, and they would almost lose touch as the weeks passed, but when he returned it was like it had been at the beginning, fresh and vivid. That was how he had begun to formalise their relationship, set their marriage, settle for less than his romantic ideals. He called it 'realism', but then it had become more and more unreal.

She had lost life, her vivacity fading. Only when the first child came—little Sarah—had she revived. Her intensity for the child was a fierce thing, all but cutting him out of the old relationship. But she had needed him when the first boy had come. He was a large child, heavy in face and limb, and she had been afraid; but their young Tom was just a boy—nothing in him to cause fear—and he had reassured her. Even so, her nerve was affected. The

boy's birth had been a shock. She moved slowly. He remembered she kept looking at him, silently appealing to him, as though somehow he could help her regain her former lightness of spirit, her large-eyed vivacity.

Damien's birth had changed things again. He was small and quiet, almost mouse-like, but as he grew he came to life. He had her eyes, her gaiety, her spritely liveliness. The family seemed completed. Tom—far from being a threat—had grown into a steady person. Only Sarah had kept herself apart from them, living in a private world of her own. Even so, there was no shadow from her, and they existed happily enough, even if life was somewhat bland, tonelessly domestic, and monochrome.

At times he had asked himself what it was all for. He knew this was a question young people asked. Older people had to get on with the business of life, because it was demanding enough. He had often looked at the rows of houses in their own suburbs, and wondered what they were all about. Housing persons, he supposed, but the answer wasn't good enough.

As the children grew he had seen them develop themselves, in the beginning simply insistent little personalities, and then determined beings, pressing on to what they wanted. Sarah had first been boy-mad, then discerning, and, as she realised she possessed the repeated beauty of her mother, had been selective of the men she met. Something about her had kept him uneasy. It was the steady, calculating look she gave to the men who came seeking her. It shocked him one day to realise that that was the way he had always been—calculating. He had looked around as a boy, calculating everything that he did, evaluating people and situations, wanting his own in all things.

With Irene he had calculated. He remembered her warm love for him, her soft yielding, her expectancy of his leadership, her looking to him for the plan of their lives. She had been simple and guileless and trusting. Looking back in these moments he felt the first strong stab of guilt, and with it the pain of fear. What had he done that memory should bring him to this sense of guilt? He tried to puzzle his way through a wall that was bland but firm.

He turned away from the wall. His thoughts caught up the

years of tension they had known with the children. Damien's gentle brightness had turned to a restless quest for things they could not afford to give him. He had professed some disgust at the family way of life which he called 'crass materialism', and he had joined the 'flower people' with their peaceful power philosophy. They rarely saw him, and when he came it was on his motor cycle, with records, charts, and his guitar in its battered case.

Tom was different. He was steady and sturdy, pushing his way through high school with little brilliance but large determination. At university he had made it in economics, again not brilliantly, but he had his own idea of life which was more than his father had. Tom and his father both knew that.

Apart from her protection of Sarah in all that she did, Irene stayed in the background. He had almost come to fear her regular utterance when the tensions arose: 'You are the man. It's up to you.' From time to time they would try to recover the family unity. They would ferret out Damien, capture Sarah for the moment, with Tom always ready to support, and they would take the caravan down the South Coast, and find a haunt in the quiet valley from which they could hike and fish and swim. Sometimes they would go blackberrying and lose themselves in the entangling vines, putting up with the cuts and scratches, laughing their way through the high, harsh bracken, making billy-tea and drinking fresh milk straight from a dairy.

Those were the years in which they had rehabilitated themselves as a family. Damien had left the hippie people and begun working. Then he had met Shirley—tiny and fragile yet firm and strong—and they had married. Sarah had narrowed down her search and selected Peter, who found her choice amusing, but was faintly grateful. They seemed to be making it well, in spite of Irene's uneasiness about their relationship. Tom and his Martha were as quiet and strong a couple as you could find. Tom was steadily making his way up in his firm.

Christmases were the times when they met, and these had left faint prickings of worry with him. The humour of Sarah and the two boys was dry, and quick to mount to flashpoint. Somehow they kept the peace, but he sensed the tensions that came quickly.

They were repeats of an old and droll scenario. Peter and Martha and Shirley were not quick to come in on the humour. They were a little wide-eyed at the dry conversation, the brittle repartee. Tony the father and Irene the mother would be glad when the day was over. Their thin disappointment prevented them from discussing their misgivings.

NOW she had said to him, 'It's over to you. You're the man.' There was another stab of the pain that he must call hatred. Why did she always return the responsibility to him? He knew the answer to the question. That was what he had demanded at the beginning of the marriage—responsibility for their lives. His mind went back to Winsome Frome and his imagination drew no flicker. He realised now that no one could take Irene's place, but since there was nothing to her, then he was eyeless at home, earless in talk, lifeless in bed.

He said to her, 'What about us seeing a marriage counsellor? One of those might help.'

She said dully, 'I've been seeing one. They don't help.'

He looked at her sharply. 'Been seeing one! How come?'

She was still toneless. 'I knew I had no resources left. I've tried everything.'

He wondered how her eyes could be so brilliant, until he noticed the tears. These astonished him. Then he wondered, ungenerously, whether she was using some script from her Mills and Boon mind. Something told him she wasn't. The tears puzzled him, even frightened him. The stab of fear came back. Underneath there was an old and long line of scarcely recognised guilt.

'Maybe a counsellor could help me,' he said.

She seemed surprised at that. 'Would you let someone help you?'

Let someone help him? Would he? He thought not. He knew you had to be desperate to seek help, and he wasn't desperate, only tired and cynical. What if he were to open up to his secretary? He sensed that she would be surprised, and a bit affronted.

He said slowly, 'I guess it would be a relief for you to be free from me.'

She said nothing. Perhaps she was thinking it would be a relief—a release into a world she could have for her own.

He was surprised by the misery her silence brought to him. In a rare flash of insight he saw the wide world of disappointed humanity. It was as though dark curtains dropped their folds over the spirits of his fellow-humanity. He knew the dread that comes to a person when he is cut off from the warmth of another. He had died: she had died. They had died to one another, but then had they ever been alive to each other? Something told him they had. How then had it faded, lost its life and impetus? How did one regain that?

She said in the same toneless voice, 'When I told the counsellor we had been married for twenty-five years, he said we were lucky. We had had a long innings.'

He felt a faint irritation. 'It wasn't luck,' he said. Then he asked, 'What of the counsellor? Has he been married, and if so, for how long?'

Her smile was faint and tired. 'He's in his second marriage,' she said. 'The first one lasted for five years. He said you and I are incompatible.'

A new uneasiness was invading him. He could see her watching the TV shows, draining off the emotion, living in the lives of others. He felt a bit ashamed. He also felt anger—her anger and his.

Suddenly he said, scarcely able to believe his own ears that he was asking the question, 'Where did we go wrong? Where did I go wrong?' Strange that he had never thought of it that way.

She said, 'I have asked that question a thousand times. I haven't even asked it for my sake or yours, but for the sake of the children.'

Alarm signals were shrilling in his mind. It was strange that he had never felt pain at their separation. When he thought about it, the abyss had probably been there always, even in the early days. But then, what causes an abyss?

It was with that question that the loneliness came. It came like an ocean beating towards the shore, wave upon wave, deep calling to deep. His alarm grew. There was something this woman knew, and for years he had thought her mindless. Maybe he had been the mindless one.

‘How long have you been angry with me?’ he asked.

She was surprised by his question. She knew she had almost always had the anger, though in the early days she had not recognised it as anger. Time and again she had felt the pain of it, since anger hurts its host. Even now she could not tell him the extent of it.

‘I guess I’ve had anger most of the time. Now, in these days, when I realise the marriage is over, the anger grows at the thought of so many wasted years.’

For some reason the sight of the partly turned Jacobean stool-leg came into his mind. How he had loved turning those things. They kept his thoughts away from what was really central to them both—the relationship. When the family became difficult to handle he would make his way to the shed, close the door, and find himself in another world. Yet, now he thought about it, there had always been an incipient guilt that had troubled him. He had not been able to handle relationships.

As though she knew his mind, she said, ‘You are like your Dad was, Tony. He could never handle relationships. You remember, he would always go out for a walk, or go down to the pub, or get busy in his shed.’

He winced at that. He had considered himself a good disciplinarian, both in his own life and in the life of the family. He had always thought his father a weak man, a person who avoided the difficult issues of his family. He had resolved to do better than his father, but maybe he hadn’t. If his father had evaded problems, he had nevertheless loved his children, and they had known that. However, they remained puzzled by his weakness, his compliance with his wife’s strong will. What Irene had just said made him ask himself whether he had ever really been strong. Strong enough at work, but perhaps not at home.

He stole a look at Irene. There were traces of the tears but she was a stone, immobile. Again the faint line of fear spread through him.

‘Do you think a counsellor could help me?’ he asked.

She said lifelessly, ‘You wouldn’t hear him.’ Then she added, ‘Or her.’

NEXT morning, in the office, he looked at his secretary. A thought was forming in his mind. Maybe some marriages are not recoverable. Maybe a person has to start afresh. He looked at her trim figure, her neat appearance, trying to penetrate to her womanhood. She was unconscious of his stare and waited patiently for dictation, instructions, material to work on.

Slowly it dawned on him that to change relationships mid-life was to alter one’s mores, to put past relationships behind, and to break new ground. He felt faintly excited by the idea, but also somewhat afraid. How could he put Irene behind him, and—even more—the children? What of the grandchildren who would soon come, and his new role as a grandfather?

Her tone was neutral. ‘Do you have something for me, Mr Wayville?’

He did have something, but even while he was giving it to her he felt sick within. The prospect of divorce dismayed him. It might prove exciting to begin life again, but when your roots were in the past, the extraction of them would be painful. He could imagine the shock that would come to the children, the unveiling to them of an exhausted relationship, and the damage it would do to them. He wondered how robust Damien’s marriage was, and for that matter Sarah’s. About Tom he had no doubts. He wondered how intending divorcees could go through the misery of separation. He thought there could be no loneliness like their loneliness.

As he looked at his secretary he knew he could not start a new relationship. He was beyond that. Whilst she busied herself with her typing, the computer and the printer, he sat staring. His mind went over the friends of his who had been through divorces. Some of them had been through two divorces and were on their way to a third marriage. The thought of these things had always shocked him. Now they seemed more terrifying than ever.

He knew he was no fool. Anyone could see the stages of defection: boredom with the other spouse, anger at marriage failure, but moral loyalty to the union; the gradual disintegration of the relationship, the splitting apart, the widening abyss, the mixed emotions deeply down, and the frustration of life without fulfilment. Then the break, the separation, the feigned promise that

both would have time to think it over, and maybe get to the root of the matter. Then the anger breaking out, the divorce application, the solicitors and their correspondence, the Family Court and the pronouncement of divorce. After that the haggling, the incredible bitterness born of hate, and the endeavour to pick up the pieces. He wondered how two who had been so deeply infatuated could become so hated—one by the other.

The only thing that seemed real to him in all his thoughts were Irene's rather beautiful eyes, and he wondered how two eyes could mean anything. When he went on with his soliloquy he knew what its end would be. Something in a man and a woman desired a mate—no matter who or what the mate would be. Sooner or later the drift would come, and he had sense enough to know that a person in anger and disappointment would choose a mate to fit the situation, and that would be fatal.

His friends had told him how exhilarating it was to be free of marriage ties. He had watched them enjoy their freedom, but the thought had always nagged at him, 'Freedom without responsibility is not true freedom.' He didn't even know why he had thought that. When a new couple had made a commitment and gone into marriage, the old problems had surfaced—in both of them. The refusal to have an hierarchy of authority, the non-submission of one to the other, the new haggling, the division, and then the abyss. That was generally what happened. A few made it past that, but they were only a few.

When he looked at his secretary he realised he had known no attraction from her. He supposed he had none for her. She was just a cypher, one of the women who was closest to him, but then the closeness had been professional. His tired mind told him it would be an enormous effort to break into a new relationship. Always behind his thinking was the conscience, and the fear. It had been bred into him by his parents. They were strongly moral. They would never have understood divorce.

LATER, when he looked back, it seemed strange that it was to Tom that he had gone. Damien would have had a streak of cynicism, had they talked. He would have been faintly amused, and their conversation would have been unreal. As for Sarah—he

really feared her. She would have been on her mother's side, not understanding his disaffection. She, too, watched soapsies.

What he had said to Tom was, 'What is it that makes your marriage so strong? How come you and Martha seem to make it so well?'

Tom said quietly, 'We started well. We knew what marriage was. We were taught.'

Tom's eyes told Tony that he—Tony—had not taught them. Again the pang of fear, the faint shrilling of an alarm. Even so, he returned Tom's stare.

'How do you start a marriage well?' he asked.

Tom seemed a trifle embarrassed. He laughed. 'You come virginally to marriage,' he said, 'and that is the proper start.'

His father could scarcely believe his own ears. 'Virginally!' he echoed.

Tom blushed faintly. 'That's it,' he said. 'That is the start of a proper marriage.'

Tony said, in an incredulous voice, 'How many marriages start properly, then?' He was, of course, thinking about his own. He was also thinking about the naïvete of his own son. Of course it would have been like Tom not to have women before marriage, not even Martha. When he thought about it, Martha would have been the same. Even so, he could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

Tom said calmly, 'I would say that few marriages get off the ground. Chastity is at a low premium today. Maybe it has always been like that.' He paused, and then went on, 'Chastity is the oxy in the welding. If the weld can't take on the honeymoon, then the union is never complete.' He paused again. 'Martha and I had a good welding.'

'I bet you did,' his father was saying to himself. 'I bet you both planned to have a proper marriage.' He had thought that he and Irene had planned to have a proper marriage. Yet neither of them had been virginal.

'There is an old saying,' Tom said, 'and it goes like this: "If you try to get *before* marriage what you can only get *in* marriage, then you get it neither before marriage nor in marriage."'

Tony let that sink in, and as it did he felt the pain and the fear in

the pit of his stomach. One part of him wondered where Tom had got his strange morality, and the other part was confronted by the saying he had just heard.

Tom was regarding him steadily. 'You and Mum never really made it, did you, Dad?' Without waiting for an answer he went on. 'I watched you both and vowed that I would either make sure I could have a good marriage, or I would remain single. So I did research into marriage, and I found out the greatest gift a man can give to a woman is chastity, and the greatest gift a woman can give to a man is chastity, and when these two gifts come together there can be a marriage that need never break apart.'

Tony stared at his son, as yet uncomprehending. His son gazed back at him. 'What you have never had you will not know you never had,' he said. 'Martha and I have what you and Mum lost—or forfeited.'

The guilt pain was back again, felt as a sharp stabbing. He remembered Irene and her chastity. He had only thought of it as a chance thing, even a foolish thing. Irene had not yet lived. He remembered the adoration she had had for him prior to that night. She had respected him, and they had been careless together. She seemed to worry about nothing—until that night. After the night she had looked at him differently. All through the years he had seen that difference.

He had never thought of it as a violation, but as the rich expression of their deep love. There had always been a silence between them on that one score. She had never mentioned it, but underneath it had lain like a silent beast, gathering strength. He remembered her words, 'It is finished! It is finished! It is finished!' He knew now she could not explain it to him—that they were finished with each other. Now he knew why, but perhaps even she didn't know why.

Tom was saying, 'Maybe, Dad, you'll never understand. It is only people like Martha and me who do, and we seem like idiots to others.' He shook his head. 'It is the clever ones who are the idiots, but they'll never believe it. Damien is clever, and Shirley and Sarah, but they are never really at ease.'

Tony remembered the family gatherings and the brittleness that had been in them. He was still worried about the chastity

business. He was pondering Irene, especially as she watched the soapies, dreaming of something she had never had, gathering the tatters of her old pride about her. No wonder she came to him via the adolescent romances, and Mills and Boon mentality. He had a temporary sight of millions of disappointed men and women finding vicarious satisfaction through the print-figures of the novels, or the screen-shadows of the love-imitators, and he felt the dull sickness in the pit of his stomach.

'When you think about it,' Tom was saying, '—all the disappointed and disillusioned ones, all over the world. Numberless they must be. Some living in isolation, and others trying to suck life out of others.'

A conversation came back to him that he and Tom had shared one night when he was wood-turning the round top of a stool. They had been talking about pornography and filthy language, and the current use of four-letter words.

Tom had smiled, but without humour. 'That sort of language is the language of anger. The people who give pet names to the genitalia, or fun names, or degrading names. They are frustrated, angry that their use of them has never yielded what was promised them. Funny, isn't it, how those parts of the body are the butt of humour; but it is angry humour. In the end the funny man or the funny woman is the one who comes off degraded.'

At the time the statement hadn't impressed him. He knew Tom to be a bit stuffy, and so he had thought it was typical. Now he knew he had been caught in the same thing. He had appreciated Irene because she was so full, so attractive, but she had never brought him satisfaction. He had pressed hard enough until she had become almost frigid. Now in the more relaxed years of her life she got it from soapies. The sickness grew within him.

WHEN he arrived home she was sitting watching her favourite programme. With one hand he pulled her gently from the lounge, and took her through the back door. They went up to his shed. Inside the shed he seated her on one of the high stools. He took the partly finished leg of the Jacobean stool, and turned on the lathe. She had never seen him working the machine before. The shed was his world, almost as much as the bedroom was hers.

So she wondered as she watched the shavings slip away from the matured wood.

'A bit of mahogany,' he said, 'and maybe a hundred years old. Out of a warehouse they pulled down. I have more of it.' His hand slipped around the curve of the hip. 'Look at this,' he said.

In spite of her anger at being pulled away from her tear-jerking soapie, and the surprise at being taken into the shed, she watched with a certain sense of satisfaction. She admired his handling of the timber against the blade of the lathe. Something latent stirred within her.

He kept his eyes from her, concentrating on the pressure and watching the shaving swirl away from the lathe. When the turning was finished he burnished the leg against a sanding machine, and the fine dust flew as he blew on it. Finally he folded his hand affectionately around its foot, its calf, its curved hip.

'Isn't that beautiful?' he asked.

She nodded, though mystified.

'Suppose I hadn't been careful?' he asked.

She wasn't quite sure of the answer he wanted. 'I guess it would be botched,' she said.

He obviously liked her word 'botched'. It was a man's word, not a woman's, but she had remembered it from some other time.

He asked, 'Would you like me to give you a stool with botched legs and a botched top?'

She thought of all the beautiful furniture he had given her—none of it botched. All perfect it had been. She shook her head.

He turned on his high stool until he was facing her, and they were looking directly at each other.

He said, 'I love making furniture. I spend time during work thinking what I can make and how it will turn out. At night when we are in bed I think more of the legs of a stool than your legs. I think of the perfection I like, more than your perfection.'

She could not remember him ever talking like that. He was animated, but steady with it. She knew now what he had been thinking about some of the nights, and that it hadn't been about her. She had known much of that, anyway. Long ago she had given away expectation.

It was years since he had taken her hands in his as he now did. He looked directly at her and said, 'I not only gave you a botched marriage. I botched it before it happened.'

She was puzzled, but something was giving her a faint hope. She had not heard this note in his voice—ever.

'Tom and Martha have a good marriage,' he said.

She brightened at that. She always brightened when the children were brought into the conversation. She nodded, still held by his eyes, still puzzled but vaguely hoping.

He told her everything—about the intense loneliness, his frustration, his anger, his disgust at her screen-watching, and her nauseous programmes. He talked about his inability to discipline the children, or handle authority in the house. He told her about his refuge in this garden shed, and the joy he had from a lathe and not from her. He even talked about his sanitised secretary, and his half-formed plans for infidelity. He talked about his mental pictures of the hundreds of thousands of failed wives and husbands, fathers and mothers, and the spawning of angry children, and the spoiling of the next generation. Last of all he talked about his ignorant violation of her. She noticed how he was trembling.

She heard with amazement, with shock and with gratitude. She had never thought he would understand, or sympathise with others. She had known his father, and that had helped to understand him, but then she had never really known him; not, anyway, as he was now revealing himself. At times his hands would strengthen their grip on hers, until she wanted to cry out with the pain.

When he told her the last part—about Tom and Martha and the nature of chastity in the welding of a marriage—she knew a key had dropped into her own lap. Suddenly she saw the source and cause of her anger, and she cried out.

He said nothing as she withdrew her hands and held them to her own head. He let her head drop on to her lap, and watched helplessly as her body shook in spasms. He thought, 'Men don't get into this sort of thing, but it is about time I did.' So he let her be a woman, and he tried to be a man.

When she had calmed down he said in an even voice, 'We

blew it. We both blew it, but I blew it more than you. I forced you.'

He looked at her, keenly, and said slowly, 'It all comes back to me. I read a book years ago about a fine woman whose husband was cruel and crude and unbearable. For years she put up with it, but then it became dangerous and she divorced him. When her friends came to congratulate her she protested. She hadn't wanted to be free. She had wanted the marriage to be healed.'

He shook his head, and continued. 'I really didn't understand at the time, but I do now. She said, "I have been in an abyss. A deep, dark abyss. I always believed a woman had something rich and beautiful to give, and I kept nothing back. It was not sex alone that I wanted, or security, but it was him. I know a woman keeps herself, and the gift of her femininity, preserving it for the great event—for the new life. This is what a woman is all about. I soon found that to him it was nothing. It was less, even, than a plaything. So I lost everything when I gave it, and now my friends are congratulating me. This must be because they don't understand what it is to be a woman, and even less what life is truly all about."'

His hands were calm again, and hers within his. He noticed that the beauty of her eyes was back again, or fuller than before.

'So you know,' he said, 'you know that I am sorry. And you know I love you.'

She sat on the high stool, living in a miracle. In a flash she saw the pathetic endeavour she had made to obtain love—not only with her banal soapies, and her novelettes, but in her empty approaches to him. The dark abyss of her spirit was dissolving, and a light was thrusting up within her, a light unbelievably beautiful. She might never contain the joy that was growing, and the serenity that was beginning to flood her.

I MURDERED HIM

THE blood came away thickly in his hand. He felt it—warm and sticky and moist.

He could not believe it, could not believe he had murdered a man. His whole being trembled with what he could only suppose was horror. But then, was it horror? Another kind of horror seized him, and it was that he was not really horrified that he had murdered. That meant that he was callous, that he had murdered in cold blood and that there was no remorse in him.

His gorge rose. Unconsciously—over the years—he must have dreaded the thought that one day he would murder a man.

Murder a man! Now he was shocked. Murder a man in cold blood! The horror came, and all his body trembled with a sickness unto death.

His mind was playing tricks on him. 'Cold blood! Sickness unto death!' A kind of a moan escaped from him. Or was it an hysterical laugh? He had never seen it before. You cannot kill a man in cold blood, because blood is soft and warm and sticky. Oh, yes! It is far from cold. And then, how can you have a sickness which is 'unto death'? The word 'death' floated into his mind, and he thought desperately, 'You are either sick or you are dead. You are alive or you are dead.'

He realised that some kind of mental fever had seized him. He was trembling with mixed excitement and terror, with emotional softness and mental hardness. His weakness and trembling enlarged as he felt the warm stickiness upon his hand. His fingers groped in the darkness for a place to sit—so weak he was with the trembling.

He found a place to sit. He thought it must be a sack of flour, and, as he felt it, the stickiness dried somewhat on the linen bag. Now genuine horror gripped him. He could visualise the outline of his killer-hand on the flour bag. Someone only had to come in

and switch on the light and he was a goner. There, etched for all to see, would be the murderous blood on the white sack.

Murderous hand! The little moan came again, escaping from between his clenched jaws, his tight lips. The thought of his murderous member turned the moan to a whimper, a long, silent wail of his spirit, trembling out into the dark cellar. Yet there was a trace of harsh humour in his thought. A purist in the English language, he wondered—almost in fantasy—how a man could have a murderous hand! You just couldn't blame your hand for being a murderer. You were a murderer! He sternly accused that part of him which blamed the murder on to a hand.

In a way the hand was innocent. It was just a hand, and it had done the deed, but then had not the mind cunningly engineered that it should do so? Was not the mind really responsible? The thought made him feel sicker than ever. His mind was a murderer's mind. It was one with ancient Cain.

For the moment his thinking was diverted. Not a religious man, he remembered seeing a sculpture of Cain, done by an Italian artist for the wife of a Russian Czar. He remembered it vividly now—the figure upright, yet crouched forward like the classic depiction of Neanderthal man, although Cain was no Neanderthal. Cain, he remembered, was an intense person, and the sculptor had given him pale blue eyes, which—though they were pale—lost nothing of intensity because of the paleness.

Now he could see those eyes staring at him. They were not accusing. They were merely triumphant. They were saying, 'Well, from now on you are one of us. You have joined the bloody band of murderers. No longer can you sit in the seat of judgement and condemn us with the old patronising pride—you former Pharisee! Didn't you know that in every man is the seed of murder, the thrust and power and drive of a killer? Now you will wander the earth, hiding your true and wretched self from the rest of humanity lest they turn and judge you and you be cast into prison and into Hades. The blood of the human race is on your hands.

'Ah yes, you have joined the long and ignoble line of murderers. So know that, for it will never be blotted from your memory.'

This time horror really seized him and he trembled with a cold

sweat and a bone-breaking ague. He longed to reverse what had happened in the moments before, to turn back the gripping of the neck of the wine bottle, the raising of it in a mad surge of hatred and panic, and the bringing down of it upon the head of the victim. He longed that time could first be arrested, then suspended, then slowly reversed until he was a man not coming down into the cellar, not walking stealthily down the steps, not seeing as though with the eyes of a cat at midnight, and not knowing that the other man was there.

The thought gripped him painfully and irreversibly that you cannot arrest time, suspend and reverse it. The deed had been done. A line or two came back to him from the *Macbeth* he had read at high school:

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep . . .'
Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!

Murder murders sleep. He could see Lady Macbeth, plagued with the dastardly act of murder, seeking to wash her hands of the blood which did 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine'. Nothing could wash away the crime. Nothing could end the guilt. He moaned and moaned.

Then his mind began to work cunningly. It began to tell him that the murder was not his fault. Murder is never the fault of the killer. It is perpetrated down in the labyrinthine depths of the mind, in the dark cellar of one's being. Evil roots itself there early in life, enslaves the imagination, sows its deadly seed, germinates a sickly garden of weed-imaginings, and sets the crime in the mind so that the human who kills is really the victim of other powers—helpless amid the wider conspiracy. Murder does not come directly from the will of the murderer.

'Then why,' he asked himself, 'is a murderer found guilty and punished for the act when he did not commit the crime from his heart of hearts?' He had enough sense to realise he was rationalising the matter, and his misery increased. One part of him stood as a judge against himself, and the other was his defendant, excusing him against the accuser.

He felt cold, and supposed it was the coldness that comes

from emotional exhaustion. He sat miserably on the flour sack and commiserated with himself. He felt tired, and knew that nothing drains a man of the power of life more than does a murder. Yet the very thought set up again the endless round of his thinking: murder, hot, sticky blood, irreversible happening, judgement, perpetual guilt, lonely wandering of the earth, knowing every man's hand against him, self-accusation and self-justification, the endless debate, the inner rotting of his spirit, the deep gloom of his mind, sick with the endless burden of it all.

Suddenly the book flashed into his mind, the book he had had to study in his first year at the University. It was Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It was a book which had intrigued him. He had followed the weird and tortuous routes of the mind of its chief character, Raskalnikov, and his strange reasons for murder. He shuddered when he thought of the psychology of retribution which had ultimately claimed the murderer.

He had the wild thought of switching on his flashlight, his long, black torch that he had held in the other hand when he raised the bottle. He would look directly into the face of the person he had killed. He shuddered again, thinking of the way in which the eyes would look at him. His imagination rioted. He felt the long barrel of the flashlight, still gripped firmly in one hand. There had been the thought that if the bottle did not do it, then the torch would still be there. He would batter and batter with both weapons.

'Weapons!'

The panic came back. How would he conceal the weapon? The bottle he knew to be smashed into smithereens. It not only had broken on the head of his victim but it had spread everywhere, tinkling as it fell. Again and again the waves of panic swept over him. They were just above him—his family and his former friends. They would come and catch him at the scene of the crime. If he emerged now they would be there, in different parts of the house. They would hear the sound of his movements, and be on to him.

He knew with dreadful certainty what they would think. There was his stern father, and his loving mother, his indifferent brothers and sisters, who would look at him silently, knowing

that this was the way he had always been. They had always known that—his quick, sudden tempers, his almost uncontrollable rages, his outbursts, shoutings and arguments. He would stand convicted before them all.

Again the cold loneliness seized him and he found himself in swirling darkness, hated by men and hating men, ostracised and condemned to eternal separation. How little they understood the misery. Tears started to his eyes, but he dared not raise his moist, sticky hands to his face. How horrible to add the blood to his tears.

Now his mind was weary and his body fatigued. Self-pity began to work upon him and he wanted to cry. He wanted to weep for the sadness of sin, and the horror of crime, and the implacable nature of a tyrannous conscience, the gloom of the nether world that was the eternal home of the men and women of blood. The emptiness of it all engulfed him, and he sat in numbness of his misery.

HE suddenly leapt to life. He could hear steps overhead, above the cellar. Alarm studded his mind with terrible thoughts. The steps came closer to the cellar, and he knew they were the steps of a woman. Unerringly, he knew it to be his mother. He moaned as the door creaked—the door he had opened before he descended the steps, before he had done the foul deed.

He wanted to cry out, 'Don't come down here, Mum! Just don't come down!' How then could he break the fearful news to her? He knew what it would do to her, to his father, and to the family. He knew the shock and heart-sickness that would come to his friends. Vividly his imagination worked and so clearly he saw the silent horror and rejection which would come to him from them all. Already they were his judges.

The voice came down to him. 'Joe, are you in the cellar again? Joe, is it you down there?' It was his mother.

His voice—when he mumbled an answer—was so small, the voice of a boy in his late teens, but it sounded almost meek. How could he be in his third year at Uni and sound so much like a child? Other times when he used that voice it was impressive, especially in the debates at Uni. His was the voice of a person with

a powerful imagination—one who seemed to live in fantasies of the most thrilling and chilling kind.

‘Joe!’ the voice said. ‘Joe, you turn on the light and come up, or I will come down.’

He had known it would come to this. She could turn on the light switch above, and the whole scene would be lit up, revealing his dastardly deed. If he could reach the cellar switch in time he could turn off the light before she saw all. Yet what was the point?

He sat there, thinking he would turn on his flashlight, view the scene himself, and then come up slowly, blood on his hands, cold fear in his heart, and doom in his spirit as deep and as sad as the doom of Cain, or maybe Lady Macbeth.

IT was as he had known it must be. There were his hands—sticky, but now cold. He had a whimsy of humour tremble through him before he came to reality.

His mother said, ‘You haven’t broken another bottle of that apricot jam, Joe, have you, now?’

He said miserably, ‘Yes, Mum.’ He feared the scolding tone, but somehow she was not scolding.

‘You haven’t been sitting there with that high-powered imagination of yours, working out another one of those special stories, have you?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ he said. ‘I have been, indeed.’

There was no one like Mother to put you down. She understood nothing about the reality one could find through fantasy.

This time he felt the love in her voice. ‘Come on up, you scamp you,’ she said ‘You’ll be the death of me one of these days.’

He didn’t dare think about that phrase—‘the death of me’. He knew it would set his vivid imagination ablaze again with a veritable bush fire of thoughts, a vast conflagration of ideas.

He grinned. Switching on the flashlight, he looked ruefully at the floor, the splattered jam, the broken glass, and then his sticky fingermarks on the white flour.

His grin widened. ‘They could get great fingerprints from all

that,’ he thought.

He knew it was all over. The fantasy was finished. Next time it would be another, and after that time yet another. He had often thought of reigning in the wild colts and fillies of his thoughts, but the effort really wasn’t worth it. They just came and mobbed his mind—willy-nilly filly!

He knew—in his late adolescent writer’s mind—that one day the fantasies would turn into stories, real stories, stories which would be acclaimed as worthy of men’s reading because of the reality they portrayed. For the moment he found English grammar a bore, essays and literary appreciation a burden, and putting his thoughts on to paper most demanding. Now, when he had finished University—! He thought of the great pile of novels, plays, short stories and scripts ahead of him.

He trudged up the steps, careful that his sticky fingers should not be imprinted on the whitewash of the walls.

His mother smiled at him faintly. She said, ‘Wash your hands before you come to breakfast. We don’t want that apricot jam all over the furniture.’

She looked a little closer and snorted. ‘It’s not apricot. It’s strawberry, isn’t it?’ She paused a moment. ‘Looks like blood,’ she said.

He knew he would do that—wash his hands—and, yes, strawberry jam did look like blood. The faint relief at not actually being a murderer brought a mild sense of pleasure to him. Even so, he thought how horrified they would have been, had they had to live through what he had just lived through.

He wondered about the corpse in the cellar. He knew they would not believe it, even if he were to tell them. So unsure of it all was he that he decided he would not tell them.

PASSING VISITATION

As they left Lismore he felt the tightening of the muscles on his wrists. There was a slight racing of the pulses, but he ignored it and concentrated on the road. The day was glowing a bit, and it was warm in the old model Valiant. Behind them the trailer held firmly to the road. Doug—his companion—had constructed the trailer well. At the moment it was filled with the tools they had used to build the addition to his—Geoff's—boy's home, away up there in the semi-tropical North Coast country. He could see it all in his mind's eye, especially the curious hill formations that stood out like Eastern temples against the pure blue of the skies. He remembered the surprising plantations of macadamia nut trees that covered the lower hills with their intense green. He had not expected macadamias to be so intensely rich in their colour. The drier and harsher green of the Mallee in his native South Australia was flora of another world. He marvelled a bit at the rain forests through which they were travelling.

He knew he was thinking rapidly to counteract the rising of his pulses, the slight hammering of his heart which always came to him on this lush North Coast of New South Wales. There was a reason for the edge of delight that visited him as they crossed the powerful rivers that flowed from the Dividing Range to the sea. He liked the rich stands of sugar cane, maize and sorghum, with their varied greens. He felt at home with the old weatherboard farmhouses—some of them neat and painted, and others near to disintegration. He smiled a little grimly when he saw the large herds being driven to their milking stands, or the gleaming stainless steel tankers that were taking away the milk of the night

before—to quench the thirst of the millions living on the Coast as far down as Sydney, and maybe beyond.

He had lived in this scenario before; indeed, time and again. He had travelled two thousand kilometres from the Adelaide Hills—cool as they were—across the back of the wheat and sheep country, and through the New England country to Casino, and then on up to Nimbin. He had travelled sometimes with his wife—Laurel—until her heart condition made travelling a bit dicey. His grim, small smile played on his lips. He knew she was thinking about his travelling, even now.

Another marvel about this North Coast was the rising commerce of it all. Not only was farming smarter and more informed in this high-tech age, but so was the advertising of every hill and hamlet that led to the Pacific Ocean. Years ago there had been little or none of that. Now great display hoardings announced the pleasure places—the innumerable coves and beaches designed to catch the tourists by unbelievable promises of summer joy. He remembered the old days when he had worked for an old cow-cocky in Dungog, milking in the early mornings and late evenings to escape the intensity of the humid heat, but digging potatoes in the hot midday, down on the steaming flats alongside the lush lucerne whose roots went deep into the alluvial deposits of basaltic soil.

Now the memories were coming quickly and thickly, and some of them were bringing a touch of bitter-sweet pain. To divert them he asked Doug to stop, and they did this while they were still in the banana country. Standing at the back of the trailer, they drank sweet brown tea whilst the massive traffic rushed down the wide Pacific Highway and roared intermittently in their ears. Sometimes they had to shout to be heard by each other. He wondered where his old North Coast had gone. He smiled wryly as he knew it had gone for ever.

That night in the motel they talked about the work they had done back at Nimbin. They chatted about his son, his son's wife, and their three children. It was all so close in time and experience, and he knew it would mellow through the months, mature like wine that gets time to come into its own. The two men were tired and slept soundly until the early morning, when they woke

and showered and ate their improvised breakfast. The dawn they drove into was as quiet as in the old days. Long semitrailers slept in parking bays or slumbered beside the diesel pumps of gas stations.

In the river areas a soft mist was static across the water or in the mangrove marshes. Cool air flushed against them as they travelled south. The bridges that spanned the deep rivers were new and wide and proud—not like the old sleeper tracks which had set up a roar and a rattle when the traffic rumbled north and south, each stream narrowly missing the other. High commerce was in the air, and you could smell it even in this early morning. He listened to Doug's continual flow of comment. This was country he had not seen before, and each bend and curve brought its new sights and insights—all fascinating to his companion.

The sun was high in the cloudless sky when they reached Macksville. It was here the memories really came beating in, and somewhat painfully, like blood that was flowing afresh in the arteries after some ligature had been released. It was not that he felt hurt—for the memories were good—but there was pain at the back of them. They had been the years after return from the war and from prison camp, and the sudden kaleidoscope of love and courtship and marriage—new impressions flooding in and old experiences vying for a viewing. He knew they had been too intense, too demanding. He himself had been overly intense.

Once, in those days, he had been rushed to hospital at Macksville, his body aching with a visitation of malaria. Memories had suddenly flooded into him of attap-palm huts, long rows of gaunt fellow-prisoners, the constant nocturnal visits to the 'rose-bowls' to relieve the fluid of edematous bodies, or back on the hard bed, shivering and shaking with the unbidden dengue fever when bones seemed about to burst. With a grin he remembered the alarm of the doctor at the Macksville General Hospital who thought his malaria was undoubtedly malignant. Laurel had thought it that way too, even though she had been a nursing sister during the war. He smiled wryly as they passed the hospital, now large and looking efficient, and not at all like it had been over forty years ago.

The faint smile gave way to an internal anxiety as they sped

towards Kempsey. The country was less lush. The soft green of the banana country and the rain forests gave way to a harder sort of green. His heart almost missed a beat as they came across a rare grove of tallow-woods. Blackbutts, box and spotted gums all flashed by them, but it was the tallow-woods that gripped him, and he realised—with an ache—that they were all but gone. He hoped that somewhere the afforestation people were setting up new plantations of the timber he loved.

They had called their place 'Tallow-wood Farm', and years later he had written a novel about it, calling it 'Tall Grow the Tallow-woods'. He had developed a special affection for this oily hardwood, giving it a personality that he gave to no other tree—except, perhaps, to the old red cedars that were now so rare. He had memories of the bullock teams as they wormed their way into the high hills and snigged out the precious old forest giants—tallow-woods and cedars that the timber mills welcomed with glee and with greed.

Then they came to the Creek village. The new highway had virtually cut it off, leaving it in an island of its own, but Doug stopped the Valiant, and he fed on memories. Many of them, he knew, were enshrined in dozens of short stories he had written, some from facts and some from embellished imagination. The small Post Office was there—unchanged. He had the queer feeling that if he alighted and walked up to it that he would find the same alert and dapper postmaster, Soutar—who had been there forty years ago—and that he would be smiling as he gathered the sparse mail from the appropriate pigeonhole. He would hear him say, 'Another cheque for you from the *Bulletin*,' and he knew his heart would pound near to bursting, as it had done in those other days, for he had never lost the thrill of acceptance of his stories. The folk of the village, too, would search the *Bulletin* to see whether he had written another story about one or more of them.

Now he just stared at the Post Office, waving away the impossible memory. Instead he looked across at the house where old Aaron and his wife had reared their family of eighteen children, and almost all of it on Family Endowment from the Government of the day, which increased the allowance with every child

that was born. In those days there had been no talk of zero population growth!

They left the village and its memories and coasted past the Reserve. Its recreation oval was the same as ever, and memories came again with the sight of it, but he pressed them back, for they were almost on the site of Tallow-wood Farm. His heart was pounding now, and he did not try to choke back the feelings. He was surprised that he felt so strongly, for he had trained himself over the years in regard to feeling. Feelings were like high and heady horses which needed a steadying rein before they could be useful, but now—unashamedly—he let them have their heads and his own spirit raced as they turned the bend and were suddenly at his old haunt.

It was not merely a sentimental journey over old paths. He and Laurel had revisited the place some years ago. They had stopped and walked tentatively towards the old garden grove which had all but hidden their first home. They had looked at each other like shy children, and wondered whether they could stand the pain that was beginning to be with them. They had seen the new, neat house that had been built some thirty feet away from the small original homestead, and a tinge of regret had come into their spirits.

What had surprised them was the big man who had come blundering across from the new house. His arms were waving, and he was motioning them away from the property. 'Private property!' he was shouting. 'Can't you read notices?'

They had scarcely seen the notice—so full they were of memory. Now, as the man came towards them, they recognised the accent: Southern American. He—Geoff—had gone ahead of Laurel, putting out his hand. 'Sorry,' he had said to the antagonised American, 'but my wife and I are doing a bit of a sentimental journey.'

The present owner of the farm was stopped in his tracks. 'Sentimental journey?' he had echoed, with a trifle of suspicion in his voice.

Geoff had smiled and said, 'This was our old home.' He had motioned with his right arm towards the old building. We lived

there just after the war.'

The change in the man had been remarkable. 'You the writer fellow?' he had asked, and Geoff had nodded.

'That's right,' he had agreed, surprised that he had been remembered.

The man had motioned them towards the old house. 'Stay as long as you like,' he had said, 'and look as much as you care to. When you've finished, come across to the house and we'll have coffee together.'

They had nodded thankfully and made their way to the house. In a moment they had forgotten the American and had been swallowed up in memory and deliberate recall of their past.

That had been ten years ago—some thirty years since they had left the farm—and they had been surprised at their feelings and their memories. The original house had been a building on 'stumps', as they called them on the North Coast; 'wooden piles', as they called them elsewhere. The floor had been of hand-sawn tallow-wood, and also the walls of slabs, which had been adzed by hand. The roof had been unceiled corrugated iron; a bit ugly, but serviceable. Because all the timber had been cut and erected green, the slabs had shrunk, needing cover strips to keep out the North Coast frosts, which were severe on the hills. The tallow-wood had shrunk only a little, but he remembered the cold that had come up through the cracks. He also remembered Laurel sweeping the floor dust through the cracks. How easy life had been—how uncomplicated!

The old slab building had been kitchen, living room and bedroom to the first pioneer couple. Afterwards they, or others, had added the modest four-roomed front cottage with its protective verandah on two sides. It had all been unceiled and the walls had been unlined. He and Laurel had ceiled and lined it. They had carpeted their bedroom so that the winter had been more tolerable. Before their son was born he—Geoff—had built a wardrobe with shelves and hanging space. This wardrobe—the same colour and shape—was still there. The roof was off the boy's bedroom, but the wardrobe had persisted. They had both marvelled at that.

They had marvelled at many things as the memories had come unbidden, and they had both laughed and cried until Laurel had said, 'Let us have that cup of coffee.'

In the house the owner had explained his anger at trespassers. 'We couldn't live in the old place,' he said, 'but we wanted to preserve it. Hippies got in and messed it up. Some people started taking bits of the house so we put up the notice about trespassing.' He had looked towards his Australian wife. 'They even abused her,' he said, 'as though they owned the place, and not us.'

They had found him a remarkable man—an engineer and a business man. 'I came out here to build up the canning industry—you know, asparagus and peas and that sort of thing.' He had looked pleased. 'We're doing quite well over at the Coast with our canning works. It's a big industry now.'

After a time they had left him and his Australian wife. At the car Geoff had given him a copy of his first volume of short stories. The man had been delighted. It was noticeable that he loved the old farm.

They had travelled on with mixed feelings, making their way south-west to their present home, in the Adelaide Hills.

NOW—these ten years later—as he and Doug walked towards the old garden grove, he saw that the house was gone, utterly gone. The house that had been new on their last visit was now fenced off from the original plot by efficient posts and taut barbed wire. A woman looked at them with disinterest, and he knew it was not the wife of the American. Obviously the owners had changed. Staring only for a moment, she went inside and left them to their own whims. The 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED' notice was gone. They felt free as they wormed through the barbed wire strands and made their way to where the house had been.

He stared at where the house had been. With a sense of shock he realised he was mentally and emotionally disoriented. He knew this had nothing to do with a deterioration of his brain, for that was still agile and sound. Senility had not yet begun, if ever it would do so. Back of his mind the house had always been there, even if the memory of disrepair remained. He had simply expected it to be more of a shambles, but it was no shambles. It was gone.

He felt bewildered, but fought his feelings. He tried to work out

the original position of the old dwelling. Then he caught sight of a derelict water tank—half covered with undergrowth and scrubby trees—leaning groggily, shot through with rust and holes, but still a landmark for his memory. He was grateful and began surmising the location of the house.

'This was where the back section was,' he told Doug. 'It was built of slabs and cover strips. The tank was on the south-western corner.' He could visualise the old slab building, his wife carrying a bundle of firewood up the wooden steps, his son trailing after her, and their blue heeler—Remus—following after their toddling boy. It all seemed so far away. He had just visited his son—long-bearded, intense, forty years of age and a father, a husband, and working his way through the matter of life. The intense toddler had given way to the contemplative adult. He shook his head.

Doug was kneeling on the turf, pulling back a thick tuft of kikuyu grass. 'Here's where an old stump was,' he said. 'You must be right about the old building. It was just here.' Being a builder, his instinct told him where things must have been.

For some reason or other it seemed urgent to Geoff that he should know where the building once was. One had to tuck things back into the mind in accordance with memory. He and Doug set about reforming that past—at least in imagination. They traced where the building must have been. He had always known their front garden was a pocket handkerchief one, but now excitement grew when he saw the old front picket-fence had been preserved by the ancient wisteria. It had thickened, holding the fence within its grasp as though it would never let it go. Fence and vine supported each other. Old azalea bushes had survived under all the growth. The brick path was gone, but oleanders had refused to die. Even the passionfruit vines had perpetuated themselves, seeding and reseeding, and they were as he had seen them forty years before.

Some of his agitation ceased. They had restructured the house, seen where it had been, given it life again. He felt pleased. When they left that part of the site, his memory heightened and he thought of the old dairy—the bails and the cream-house. No trace of the old milking shed was left. He had to theorise as to where it

may have been, but the floor of the cream-house was there, set in the tough kikuyu which had not been able to smother it. The floor was broken and crumbling, but the picture of the cream-house which he had made his study rose clearly before him.

It was then he realised how powerful a thing is memory—and how necessary. It seemed necessary—even urgent—to him that the past be not blotted out. For the first time he understood the fascination archaeologists have in restoring the past. He became an archaeologist in a moment, but the restoration was more in the mind than in the physical digging. Doug was on his knees again, inspecting this and that, but his own mind was dredging, resurrecting rare memories, finding hidden treasures.

He was there in the cream-house—fully established again—seated between the western wall and the cream separator. When he used it to separate the cream from the milk it would start with a tentative hum, rise to a whirring whine, build up to a crescendo and almost wail as the thin stream of yellow cream poured into the can below. He would take the skim milk to the poddy calves, calling them with the ancient cry, ‘Sookie! Sookie! Sookie!’ and he did not have to wait long. They would come bounding to him, ready to knock him off his feet, sucking and guzzling greedily until their bellies were full and they were licking their lips with long, questing, red tongues.

It was not the separating or feeding the poddy calves which mattered. It was what he had written in that small building that rose before him now. The stimulation and the excitement came back to him now—the mysterious gestation within him—the pain, the fury, the incredible joy and then the amazement which humbled him when the story was born. It would flow from his typewriter, trickling out of the metal letters, pouring out on the paper in dancing symbols to the music of its own crisp clattering.

Even now his eyes darted about. There—miracle of miracles! —was one of the old pear trees over which Mr Hickin’s rheumy gaze had roved, and young Pat Hickey’s eyes had lingered in cunning delight. The Emperor mandarins had long ago died out or been banished to some unseen arbour, but to his eyes they were still there, as on the night when straight from their honeymoon he and Laurel—with her sister and brother-in-law—had driven in

through the gates with blazing headlights to see the glowing response of the great juicy fruit—another miracle in colour.

Filled with memory, his sight took in where the old vegetable garden had been and where he had grown lettuce such as this world had not previously seen. The locals—suspicious of newcomers—vented grudging admiration to his prowess as a vegetable grower. It was his tiny toddling son who had ripped out the heart of his prized lettuce and fed them—secretly—to the admiring White Leghorns. This was the son who had fed precious eggs to Remus, the devoted blue heeler.

The floods of memory left him a little breathless, perhaps because of the inflooding of adrenalin, like creeks that fill silently in back inlets and quiet mangrove marshes of the unseen spirit. Old stories came tumbling back to be known afresh and to receive homage from him. Old characters rose from the misted years of memory and stood silently before him, until he could scarcely hold back the tears.

Doug was plotting out the stump holes of the northern verandah, and Geoff admired him, wondering at his ability to re-establish the past. His own vagrant mind was wandering into this and that picture or image of the past. He could see in his mind’s eye the long rows of carrots and peas—the fruit of a daring adventure of piped irrigation from the small dam he had made in the creek in a tree-shaded covert. He recalled the intense joy that had come to him when the pump engine first took the burden of the water as its pump sucked it from the dam. He could still see—and with no less joy—the silvery flowing of the water in the first light of the dawn.

He also remembered how he had chased his bride across the kikuyu turf and caught her in false protests, embracing her and proud of her as his woman, and she glad to be it. He remembered their first Christmas which threatened to be penniless until he saw—unbelievably—that he had won a third prize in a *Sydney Morning Herald* Short Story Competition. How they had laughed when the cheque came, and how they enjoyed buying their Christmas goods! She was not far off giving birth to their son in the Kempsey Hospital.

So his memory raced on, unbidden and unstoppable. For

some reason it suddenly seemed urgent that he should take back with him to his study in the Adelaide hills a memento of those years, a souvenir that would remind him of the hours, the fun, the sorrows and the delights of their early days of marriage. He looked around but saw nothing.

'Doug,' he said, 'I want to find something, just something I can take back to mark the years we had here.' He kept his voice controlled but it sounded unusually harsh.

The builder nodded. He could understand that. For the most part he was a matter-of-fact man, and he roved with Geoff, kicking at a mass of vines, peering into the tangled growth of azaleas, oleanders and wisteria. Geoff remembered—vagrantly—how his wife had loved wisteria. He even wondered whether he could get a cutting of this back to her and decided that was not possible, and for some unknown reason he felt deeply saddened.

He retraced his steps to the crumbling cement floor of the old cream-house. He kicked at it until a chunk of loose blue metal was exposed. He pulled it from its moorings and held it in his hand. It seemed to come to life in his palm as the fingers closed about it. He held it firmly, squeezing it. This would be a good memento. Then Doug was at his side with a sizeable piece of tough old red-gum, which he was holding up in front of him; proffering it, in fact.

Geoff was surprised. 'Where did it come from?' he asked.

Doug took him, almost conspiratorially, to a stump of the old house. Miraculously this stump which was level with the ground had not been excised. Doug had prodded and twisted and pulled, and a large sliver of it had come away. Geoff's eyes danced with delight. He took the blue metal in one hand and the red-gum in the other and rubbed them together, exulting via some kind of ritual known only to himself. He rubbed and he rubbed, smiling all the time, and Doug was smiling with him as though he understood.

At the last—before they went to the old Valiant with its trailer-load of tools—he stood staring at the old farm, thinking about the flood of memories which had come unbidden. There was something incredibly sweet about the evocation, and he felt a delightful delirium.

It came to him then that a human being is not a passive repository of memories, but that they—along with the dynamics of the present, and the hope of the future—are who and what he is, and that memories are powerfully present, whether conscious or unconscious. Evocation—especially if it comes of itself—is more than simple stimulation. It is revelation to a person of who and what he or she is. He realised how essential this knowledge is to a person, not only for stimulation but for motivation—for reaching forward to the fulfilment of one's destiny.

He philosophised for a moment—he who generally did not—but he noticed, as they walked through the old gateway which was now gateless, that the original tallow-woods were there, towering above him. In the car, seated in the passenger's side, he peered up with immense delight at the tall timbers, rearing into a peerless blue sky. He called blessings down upon their invulnerability—or was it their 'invincibility'? He knew they had captured the owners of the land who had followed him, and so he included them in his benediction.

Doug, empathic in his silence, was turning the ignition key. The old Valiant roared into life, and the vehicle just about leapt into action. He looked back at the site as they drew away from it until they rounded a bend and it was lost to him, although in one hand he held a large sliver of old red-gum and in the other a chunk of solid blue metal.

MR PELAGIUS'S PERPETUAL PROBLEM

MR Anthony Pelagius had a perpetual problem. He had always had this problem, although to look at him you would not have sized him up as being a man with a perennial difficulty. That would be because Mr Pelagius was a fine stamp of a man in his later years of life, no less than in his youth. He was tall. His hair, surprisingly enough, was dark, though mingled with grey. The reason you did not think him to be a man with a problem was because of his open face, his blue, smiling eyes, and his restful expression.

To tell the truth, Mr Pelagius's problem, though ancient and deep-seated, was not one which irritated or annoyed him. It was not insuperable. It had not caused any rift between him and his wife Lucia all the years of their marriage, until she had departed this life. It had caused no difficulty, either, with his four children: the three boys and the one girl. Their marriages had all been good—as marriages go—and the grandchildren were good grandchildren—as grandchildren go.

No: Mr Pelagius had had a rich enough life. In the early days he had had to battle a bit. His father was a fair Hollander who had shipped to Australia before his first son was born, and had always carried with him that typical accent of the migrant Dutchman; but young Anthony—always called 'Tony'—was generally mistaken at school for an Italian, or an 'Eyetic' as they were known in those days of ethnophobia. On numerous occasions he had tried to tell his young friends that his parents were not Italian but Dutch, but they seemed to think they knew better. Was not his name 'Tony'? In fact, they probably visualised it as 'Toni'. Was he not dark in hair and skin—given in his eyes were

deep blue—and was his name not Pelagius? Everyone knew this was an Italian name.

In fact, we have really come to the heart of Anthony Pelagius's problem. It was the problem of playing cricket. Indeed, he had no problem actually playing cricket. The truth is that he loved cricket beyond any other game, and almost beyond the game of life itself. You only had to go into his room in the days of his youth, which were the great days when Don Bradman was in his zenith, the days of Grimmet the great bowler, and Larwood the dark demon of Lords.

They were great days, and even now, in his seventies, Mr Pelagius could look back to the time when he had written a letter to his hero, Donald Bradman, and had received not only a letter in reply, but a large autographed photograph of the famous batsman. Every day he would assiduously open up the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the evening *Sun* newspaper and cut out every cricketing photograph. He had some of these pinned to the walls, some in albums, and some stuffed away in drawers for the day when he could properly file them.

At night he dreamed cricket. He loved the world of white—or cream—flannels. He loved the green of the oval, the place of the pitch, the white pickets of the fences, the calm concentration of both player and spectator, when matches were played in gentlemanly serenity. He understood 'a bumping pitch and a blinding light, an hour to play and the last man's in' of Eton and Harrow, but even the local oval was enough to give him delightful shivers down his spine, and never a Saturday afternoon did he miss in the cricket season. First class cricket, interstate cricket and international cricket—they were all the food of his perpetual diet. He played a fair game of soccer in the winter, but was really thinking in terms of cricket in spring, summer and a little of the autumn.

Cricket was Tony Pelagius's perpetual problem, because he was never given the chance to show his prowess, to demonstrate his skills, to surprise the locals—his fellow youths—and to captivate the selectors in the high school to which he went. At primary school he had shown a fair bat, and in bowling he was close to a demon, but that was primary school and not really authentic cricket. What you had been in primary school did not count in

secondary school. You had to make your way by fair means or foul.

He envied the boys who entered high school with aplomb. He had always been shy, though not seeing himself as inferior. He had inherited the Dutchman's trait of self-assurance, but he was not arrogant with it. He had been gratified by the acceptance of himself by his teachers. They had assessed him, discerned that he was bright—even to the point of brilliance—but they thought of him as an intelligent foreigner. He had no accent other than an Australian one, for he had been born and bred in Sydney—on its North Shore. Throughout high school he did well in his studies, and even reached dux in his last year, but to them all he was 'Tony the Italian'. They never gave him that name in fact, for he was Australian enough in his talk, his slang and his actions, but he was still Italian in their eyes.

The root of the matter is this: that few Australians of English, Irish or Scottish descent think that a person from the European continent can naturally play cricket. It would be unnatural for a Greek, Turk or an Italian to play cricket. That is about as unnatural for anyone born outside the USA to think he could play the game of baseball. Even Tony Pelagius believed that baseball was only for those born in the United States.

He was both puzzled and hurt by the unbelief of his fellow countrymen. They believed that South Africans and New Zealanders could play cricket. They were coming to believe that even West Indians could play the game—if not fully now, then eventually. The idea was coming into being that Indians could play cricket, and Tony knew for sure that back in the last century there had been a team of Aboriginal players who had toured England. He noted that they had been virtually smuggled out of Australia for that tour. Why, then, could not a man of Dutch descent play cricket? Why not—even—an Italian, if it had to come to that?

Our story would be unduly lengthened if we were to go back into Mr Pelagius's thought-life in regard to playing cricket, and—if you will—international cricket, for that was the deepest desire of his heart. He would gladly have given his success as a high school pupil in class for success on the cricket field. The thought of cream flannels, sweater, blazer and cap could make him almost

feel dizzy. The thought of a cricket bag packed tight with bat and pads, with hand-gloves, white cricket shoes—with sprigs—all made him as a creature of paradise.

But it never happened. Time and again he talked to teachers, to friends, and—in desperation—even to the headmaster. It was all to no avail. His friends did not literally pat him on the arm, but they did so figuratively. The teachers listened patiently enough, but their minds were never in danger of being changed. They were very gracious towards him, but they knew his Italian—or was it Dutch?—blood would never help him to be a cricketer. As for the headmaster, well, he was warmly sympathetic. He listened with earnest understanding, but he, too, did not budge. Neither ethnophobe nor ethnophile, he had an eye to the academic laurels and spoils of his famous high school.

'Tony,' he said warmly, 'I wouldn't worry about cricket if I were you. You are bright—even brilliant. You will only interrupt your study if you get caught in that cricket game.' He looked almost apologetic for what he had said. 'Not, mind you, that I don't think highly of cricket, but it is not for the likes of Tony Pelagius. He has a great thing to do for his school.' He paused for emphasis, and went on, 'We look to him to be first in the Leaving results this year.'

His look of triumph was designed to bring the light of ambition and gratitude into the eyes of Tony Pelagius, but the boy simply concealed his real feelings, thanked his headmaster politely, and left the study a baffled and deflated youth.

WELL, Anthony Pelagius did head the list of all secondary schools in New South Wales that year. He immediately landed a good job, with a promising salary and an even more promising career. Those were years when few boys thought of doing college or university courses. He went straight into business, and made rapid progress. There was a Dutch fraternity which kept close ties, and there were many advantages in belonging to it. Anthony made the most of his intelligence and his application to work.

When war broke out he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force. For years he had hidden his disappointment at not being

able to get into grade cricket. Since he had no cricket-history from high school, and since his name still led people to think of him as having foreign origin, he had to be content with success in business. However, being in the Air Force seemed to him to be a great opportunity to break into cricket.

Well, there was cricket in the RAAF, but they played a fairly desultory game. It was not long before he was Flying Officer, and in the mess they did not seem to rate cricket very highly. There were other things of greater importance, such as their machines, the entertainments, and the WAAFs—the female recruits in the Air Arm. In the first year he met Lucia, and they became engaged. When they married she was released from her unit, and they bought a house on the North Shore, where they had both been raised. Naturally they knew little of any other part of Sydney.

Overseas—training in Canada—he learned their first child was well on the way. His thoughts of cricket, though not erased, were temporarily subdued. When they went to England his first port of call on leave was to Lords. It was all he had dreamed it would be, and that weekend county cricket was being played. All his dreams came back to life. He determined to do something about the matter, if ever he reached demobilisation.

The next few years were busy with raids over Europe. They were very demanding years, and he thought little about cricket. When he was discharged in Sydney and returned to Lucia and their small daughter Celia, he knew he had to work hard to establish himself back in the business world. This he did without a great deal of effort, but by that time their first son, Roger, had been born. So the years passed—child after child, expansion after expansion in business—and still no cricket.

At times he laughed to himself about it, albeit his laugh was a little rueful. He was intelligent enough to know that he could not—that is, should not—play cricket through his three boys, but he was glad when Roger took it up and was selected in the first eleven of his college. The other boys preferred football and tennis, but Roger kept on with grade cricket when he went to University. The most he did was to play in Sheffield Shield cricket, and with that both he and his father were content.

Roger joined him in the business. The other boys went their own ways, and were reasonably successful. Celia married well. It seemed the old opprobrium of being a Pelagius, amidst a welter of English, Irish and Scottish names, had all but disappeared. The now older Tony regretted it had taken so long. Had this been the case in his youth—this new acceptance of Europeans—he might have made that Test team.

Of course there could have been no guarantee that he could have made it. He had given no proof that he could, but his heart told him confidently that he could have made it, both as a batsman and a bowler. Had he not read almost every book that had been published on the art of batting and of bowling? Had he not—in his mind—honed up his fielding until no ball could get past him? Had he not watched grade cricket, State cricket and international cricket until he knew all the modes and techniques of bowling, batting and fielding?

Like every other ardent lover of a sport or a hobby, he would have an occasional and delicious fantasy about the matter. He would actually see himself bowling out one of those confident members of the West Indies team. It took him little time to dispose of anyone on an Indian side, but although the New Zealanders and the Englishmen were a bit more tricky, he could toss them up a yorker or a wrong 'un that would quickly have them in difficulties, and pretty soon out!

He was not foolish enough to mistake a fantasy for reality, and even when he had reached the fine age of seventy-five years—five years after Lucia's passing on to the other world—he had enough sense to know that his dreams for great cricketing could never be fulfilled. Having been trained as a businessman, he was a realist. The problem remained with him, but it was not insuperable. A sigh or two would compensate him for a dream that had not been enabled to come true. His natural sense of life, of fun, and of sociality helped him to get over his inner whim.

That was why it seemed so strange that summer night when he had turned off the television broadcast from Nottingham, where the Australian team were playing their third Test. He had greatly helped them along the way, had bowled for them in his mind, batted for them in his imagination, and time and again had caught

impossible catches from the wily Poms. Many a time he had disagreed violently with the commentators, whom he virtually despised. He could not stand their wearying reminiscences, their arrogant 'I think I would have done this . . .' and similar nonsenses.

Mr Pelagius did not go to bed flushed with vicarious success, with surrogate batsmanship and good bowling by proxy. He went to bed with his problem—his perpetual and perennial problem. He went to bed sad. He went to bed disappointed. He was a strong and healthy man, and it would seem there were yet many years before him, but with an irrational uprush of feeling he wondered whether it was worth living those years without being able to fulfil his cricketing dream. Any detached observer could feel a touch of sympathy for him, but might denigrate the dream of the man of seventy-five years, might think him sentimental, petulant, pettish, or merely doddering, none of which would be true. Only those who have not had a similar and equally magnificent dream will deny him his natural sorrow and his normal desire, without scorning it, putting it on the level of maudlin stupidity.

Mr Pelagius—after donning his usual red and white striped pyjamas—went to bed with the images of the Test match still in mind. He clicked off the bed lamp over his bedhead, and lay in the darkness, ruminating sorrowfully over the one great dream which had never been fulfilled. So many good dreams had been fulfilled, but what to a boy is the greatest had not.

He was in that restless land—between staying awake and going to sleep—when the mysterious figure beckoned him. He knew immediately that it was a dream, and yet he knew he was still awake. He settled for the thought that it must be a vision, since he was not asleep and could not be dreaming.

He followed the figure through the house, out through the back door and across the lawn to the cricket field. He was surprised at the cricket field being there, as that was not its usual place. He was also surprised at the strong sunlight across the field, and the players who were just emerging into it from the pavilion. When he looked around he saw the vast crowd that was collecting in the stands, pavilions, and the 'hill' which he knew to be part of all Australian cricket grounds.

When the person who had beckoned him turned, Anthony Pelagius had quite a shock. At first he thought it was the captain they had had in fifth year at his high school. Then he thought—in turn—that it was one or other of many Test captains he had known so well; but, although it was all of them, it was none of them in particular.

He said to the white figure, 'You aren't an angel, are you?' for it was the only explanation he could give for such a miracle. The captain of the World Series team said that he didn't believe many people thought him to be an angel, but he seemed to like the comment.

He said, 'Tony Pelagius, we think it is time you helped us out against this very difficult side. The selectors asked me to go to you and solicit your help.'

At first Tony Pelagius was puzzled. 'You are looking for our firm to sponsor you?'

The cricketer didn't seem to understand this. 'You jolly well know this World Series has already been sponsored,' he said, and smiled as though he thought his new—though old in age—friend was joking. 'No,' he added, 'it isn't financial help we need. It is cricketing help we need.'

Anthony Pelagius was quite delighted—and excited. They were coming to him for advice, for some help in the know-how of playing cricket. He looked a little modest. 'Such as what?' he asked.

The captain was looking at his team coming on to the field. 'Such as bowling and fielding, and later batting,' he said absently. He raised his hand to show them he was coming.

The older man was a bit stunned. 'You want me to advise you on these things, just as you are about to play?'

The captain laughed. 'Come on,' he said, 'you know what we want. You know your name was selected for the World Series side. We want you to bowl and field and bat. We need your expertise. Our team has been going down for years.'

Mr Pelagius wanted to laugh. He wanted to stand there on the field, legs apart, arms akimbo, and really laugh. Then a thought struck him. 'This is just a dream, isn't it, eh? It's just a dream.'

The captain looked patient, but serious with it. 'Now come on,'

he said, 'we're going on to the field.' He looked around, into the brilliant sunlight. 'Does this seem much like a dream?' he asked. His patience seemed to be draining away. 'Now, Tony, what is it to be? You play or you don't play. What is it?'

Tony said loudly, 'I'll play.' He looked down at his red-striped pyjama trousers. 'But I can't play in these things,' he said.

The captain snorted. 'They wear almost anything these days,' he said. 'Don't worry.' He gestured across to the players, and said, 'Come on, fellows. We have to get into place.'

Anthony Pelagius knew he was seventy-five years, and, although right and sound in all quarters, that he was not a young man.

The other players greeted him warmly enough, a few shaking hands with him, and—he noticed—with great respect. 'Great to have you, Tony,' they said.

WELL, it was great—great to stand, legs apart, rub your hands, feel the breeze blow through your garments, feel the springy turf under you, and to do a little warming-up dance on it. It was great to throw the ball back to the present bowler, have it bowled at you, and return it again, until all were ready, beautifully tensed, crouching forward a little, eager for all things.

Mr Pelagius knew he would never forget this day. It was the first day of the mighty match. He would never forget the great roar that went up from the thousands in the audience when he caught out the first batsman off the fastest of the side's bowlers. He flushed with intense pleasure. He was motivated to run fast when he fielded, to throw straight back to the wicket, and even at the wicket. He was pleased that he had learned—and practised—all these techniques over the years. The practice had been mostly in his mind, but then it had been there. Not for nothing had he read all those books, watched all those matches and thought about all those moves.

Everyone called the captain 'Fred,' and although he knew no captain of an Australian side called 'Fred,' he was pleased to call him that. Very quickly he picked up the other players' names, and even the names of the English batsmen, although he was

puzzled as to how a match could be going on here, in Sydney, when the Test side was in Nottingham. In his delight at playing, he set aside this puzzle and concentrated on the game.

His mind knew no bounds to his joy—and his terror—when Fred told him he was on next with the bowling.

He deliberately kept himself calm as he walked the long trek back to begin a fast ball. In his mind he recalled everything he had learned. He was surprised at how easily it all returned to him. He began the long run, building up pace, springing high into the air, and coming down with deliberate force. What he had not even dreamed might happen actually happened. On Tony's very first ball the stumps of the batsman flew into the air, and the man was out!

Great roars came from the pavilion. He dreaded the other players coming across to congratulate him, but they did that, and it all seemed so natural. They all knew him and—it seemed—admired him. The next batsman seemed shocked when the bowler did not take the long walk back to bowl a fast one, but took just a few paces and sent down a sizzler. He—Mr Pelagius—felt it a bit in his shoulders, but it had happened. The new batsman seemed to know little of what had happened, and he narrowly missed being given out.

Far from feeling himself drained by the bowling and fielding, he felt like a young teenager. He was put on time and again to bowl, and time and again he took wickets. Each time Fred would nod to him with quiet delight and encouragement. It was amazing to see how wickets toppled; not that he proved the best bowler, but he was certainly valuable to his side.

The strange thing was that he hadn't felt awkward in his pyjama suit, hilarious as it must have appeared to some. He had the distinct impression that they did not notice the pyjamas. 'Maybe,' he thought to himself, 'this is a dream, and they don't think I am wearing a red and white striped sleeping suit.'

He had come to realise this was a one-day match, that it had commenced at 2.00 p.m., and that they would play the Australian innings after tea under the great arc lights. He was surprised at the number of runs the Englishmen had been able to tot up, but Fred seemed confident they could pass that score.

Under the lights Tony—for some reason—felt more at home. Perhaps it was because he might not look so old. He did not quite know, but he had a serene feeling, one of security. He also had the wonderful feeling he had wanted all his life—just to be a member of the Australian side.

Things were not turning out as the Aussies had thought they would. The great crowd went as silent as a brooding dinosaur. Only occasionally, as one or other of the batsman hit a boundary or a six, would they come to life. He could feel their anxiety. He also had an anxiety for himself, for he saw they had put him fifth on the batting order. Part of him was disappointed, and part of him relieved. He felt he could easily go in at first wicket down, but he accepted their assessment of his ability.

It was not long before he had to go in. The English bowlers were having a field day, demolishing the Australian wickets. First with demonic fastness, and then with leisurely spin-bowling, they rung the changes, bewildering the batsmen, and tricking them on numerous occasions. Almost before he could believe it, he was padded up, helmeted and striding towards the batting crease.

With his heart in his mouth he took block. He faced the furious ball that was pitched down to him at a sizzling pace. He prayed for all knowledge that he had accumulated to come to him in a flash, and that was exactly what happened. He heard the crack of the ball on the bat, and the next moment it seemed to hit the boundary fence. A great roar went up. He waited and cut the next ball through cover, but gained no single. The third ball he snicked on the leg side past the alert fieldsman, and his total began to grow.

A few overs later a great anxiety overtook him. Two wickets had fallen since he came to the crease, and it looked as though the Poms really had their eye in. He batted carefully, but also forcefully, and saw his total mount rapidly, but there were now seven wickets down, and they had eighty runs to get to overhaul the English side. It looked most dangerous.

When it was all over he did not know how he had done it. Wickets kept falling. He kept scoring. Overs were running out. The last man in was obviously a rabbit and tried to give him

the strike so that he would do all the batting, protecting himself if it was near the end of an over, or making a quick, slick single if it was early in an over. He watched the illuminated score-board, his heart almost bursting with pride, but when the last over came he felt a sickening pain within his heart. They needed twelve off the over, and he knew that was rarely done. Also the other batsman was taking the strike. The vast crowd, both teams and he were in fearful tension.

A miracle happened and the man scored a single. Tony lifted himself to his full height of six feet and two inches, and whacked the next ball into the crowd on the hill—a six! The vast audience went wild with excitement. They needed six more to win the game. The next ball he pushed through the gap and scraped home for two. He faced another, but it was almost wide, and he could do nothing with it for fear of being caught in slips. He knew it would be a miracle if he could score a boundary off the last ball. He knew that up there in the pavilion they would be wild with the adrenalin that was being pumped into them, as it was into him.

He stood facing the last ball, hoping it would not be a yorker, that it would not be up in the blockhole, so that he would not fail.

In that moment the problem of the years seemed about to be dissolved, or—perhaps—to be with him for ever and for ever. An incredible excitement raced through his arteries, caused his legs to tremble and his arms to quiver, and he decided with an intuition born of years that he would advance down the wicket. He even knew he was not risking anything, that he would not—could not—fail. With a mighty swing he caught the ball square on the blade of the bat, and swung it high above the field, aloft as though it were a golf ball going out of sight, and even he could not believe it when he heard the amazed shout, 'It's over the pavilion!'

The crowd went wild, dancing and leaping. The team went crazy, too, rushing towards him to congratulate him. For himself he felt the most thrilling fulfilment of his years of much dreaming, and he raised his bat—arm high—to acknowledge the plaudits and the joy, and the amazing fulfilment of his lifelong dream.

The pain in his chest suddenly came in like a full floodtide,

searing and consuming him like some gigantic holocaust. He desperately desired that no tragedy should happen in the crease at this the height of his dream's fulfilment, but he could not prevent the great white mist that came rushing towards him, and which reached him even before the joy-crazed team or the pounding spectators. The white stream of mist flowed over him, quenching the fire and the pain, and bringing a great coolness and a wonderful peace, as he was cradled in a gentle blanket of oblivion.

ROGER was the first one to find him, next morning, as he called in to chat over some business matters. Seeing his father, he quickly rang his sister. Celia had come quickly enough, but the others were not in town, and the two of them—along with the family doctor—looked at the inert figure in the bed.

'It must have been a massive attack,' the doctor said. 'Look at the bed clothes thrown everywhere.'

Roger felt some of the pain by empathy, and Celia gave little choking cries.

Roger went closer, looking down into his father's face. 'He looks so peaceful,' he said, 'as though he didn't feel much pain.' He looked again. 'He actually looks as though he has seen something wonderful.' To himself he thought, 'That's about how I would look if I hit the winning ball of a match.' It seemed to him a strange thought to have as he looked down at his father.

He knew the thought was foolish, but it persisted. When Celia and the doctor had gone, he went back to have a last memorable look.

The gentle smile was still there, and he marvelled that the dead can send such a legacy back to the living. When he slipped out, as the undertaker folk arrived from the funeral parlour, he marvelled again. Somehow he knew it was the way his father would have wanted to go. Even with that bright understanding he did not really know how right he was—how very, very right he was.

OH, MAISIE! DEAR MAISIE!

I REMEMBER the first time I saw dear Maisie. It was on one of our nights at the Thurgyson Institute Hall, which—as everyone in Adelaide knows—is in Halifax Street. Of course the whole building is given over to the Thurgyson Foundation, and it, in its turn, is the backbone of the Heritage Trust people. How fortunate is this jewel city of the South to have such a Foundation. How loyal it is to our enviable history. We have no need to be ashamed of our city of churches and squares, our gracious green parklands, and the historic absence of convict forbears.

You sense all this when you attend any meeting at the Institute Hall. Built of a combination of tough bluestone and the soft but durable Mount Gambier stone, you know you are as secure as if you lived in any century-old Adelaidian villa or mansion. That is why our quiet, conservative Society for the Promotion of Truth has a continuing contract to use the building on Monday nights. You may smile at the name of our group, but folk seem to like gathering with us, and we have many who are grateful for what they hear. From time to time I make a modest contribution to the lecture programme. Mind you, you have to have a little courage in order to visit us if you are a stranger—a chance visitor—for the Thurgyson Hall is on the first level above the ground floor. You have to take the stairs to reach it, and then you find yourself a bit lost in the vast vestibule. However, you can hear the cheerful singing, and I am sure no one would feel strange once he or she were in the Hall.

IT was on one of those Monday nights that I first saw Maisie. I happened to be lecturing on that occasion, and this person of later middle age, white-haired, with eyes of intense blue that were calm yet piercing, looked up at me from the front row. I could

feel a slight thrill go through me. The word 'noble' came into my mind, only to be replaced with 'regal'. Yes, she was regal. Well-featured in every way, she had what today they call 'presence'. I imagined I must be about her age, and so could easily visualise her as having been a most beautiful woman in her young age. She yet retained a certain beauty, and one also took it that she was an intelligent person.

At supper-time I engaged her in conversation. Something about her intrigued me, and she responded graciously. We talked about things of mutual interest. I wondered how she came to attend our meeting.

'The noticeboard outside,' she said. 'It seemed quite inviting.'

She had simply walked in—just like that! I was doubly intrigued.

'Oh!' she said, 'I often do that. I like to meet folk of different kinds.'

WE saw plenty of Maisie after that. Occasionally she would be there early—when we opened up the building. She would wander around on the ground floor, looking at the paintings of past members of the Thurgyson family, and at the portraits of the various presidents of the Thurgyson Society. Mementoes of British Royalty and Aristocracy adorned the walls or were in glass cases, and these gave out a great sense of history. They certainly interested dear Maisie; she would wander from one exhibit to another, touching them lightly, and voicing her appreciation of them. Some years before, a number of these relics (I suppose you could call them relics) disappeared. Whilst a few of them were intrinsically valuable, most of their value lay in their historic association with the Thurgyson family. Fortunately the mementoes were recovered, but from that time onwards it was our responsibility—on Monday nights—to keep our eyes on these valuables. The trouble was that it meant posting a guard over them, below on the ground floor, whilst the rest of us held our meeting above. No one wanted to miss out on our gatherings, but we were at a loss as to what to do, until a Thurgyson came up with the idea that we could place a mirror on a chair on the first landing of the stairway, which would reflect the ground

floor to a person seated in the doorway of the Hall. With this happy arrangement the watcher could keep an eye on the ground floor, the Thurgyson antiques and paraphernalia, and at the same time could enjoy the meeting.

Maisie was intrigued by the mirror itself. 'Why,' she said one Monday night, 'it is very valuable!' Well, it was valuable. Although less than a metre in height, its beautiful lacquered frame was encrusted with jewels, which I had always taken to be paste and valueless. In fact, I had thought it to be a bit gaudy, on the whole, assessing it to be a late Victorian creation, or perhaps early Edwardian. Not so Maisie: the dear lady admired it. I had thought she might be a bit critical, but this was not so.

I certainly missed Maisie on the nights when she was absent. She seemed to add something to the meeting. Strangely enough she never discussed the themes of our lectures. She just attended. Sometimes she would turn up in the midst of a study. The guardian at the door would see her drift in to the ground floor, do a quiet round or two of the Thurgyson memorabilia, and then ascend the stairs with a curious glance at the mirror. Always she would give her calm and beautiful smile to the speaker as she seated herself.

NO one was more distressed than I when we heard of the theft of some of the Thurgyson pieces. Since the place was locked up nightly, and was fixed with a security system, we were puzzled by the removal of the valuable memorabilia. The police assured the Society Trust members that it had to be an inside job, but they protested against this, as those who worked in the Foundation office were all trusted members of the family itself. That surely could not be the explanation. The trustees wondered politely whether the removal of the pieces could have taken place during meetings. We—for our part—assured them that we kept a watchful eye, and it certainly could not happen on Monday nights. Possibly it happened on other nights. Those groups who used the Hall on other nights were also certain it could not happen during their meetings. For a Monday night or two we posted a person on the ground floor for conscience's sake. Further mementoes were removed.

Dear Maisie—more than most—showed her distress. She had great regard for history and for things which were associated with it. My wife and I met her from time to time at functions—ballet, musicals, operas and Heritage Trust meetings—and we would chat about things artistic and historical. It was always a pleasure to talk with her. She was not merely a good conversationalist: she had a depth of mind which was unusual. She was charming without being merely social in the conventional manner. We felt she was a person of truth in an unusual way and in unusual depth. I think it was about that time we began to call her ‘Dear Maisie,’—and why not? We felt privileged to know her, and she liked that address—‘Dear Maisie.’

THE crisis came about when the Thurgyson Foundation trustees informed us sadly that they were closing their Hall to all groups.

This meant that after years of association with them, our Society would have to seek for other premises. Something about it all went against the grain. We told our members what was happening. That night Maisie happened to be present, and I doubt she had ever expressed herself so strongly. Her intensely blue eyes shone with a fervour I had not noticed previously. She was all for us posting extra guards; for assuring the Foundation that we could protect their valuable treasures, and—what is more—that we would seek to recover some of the things which had been stolen. I admit she fired me up. I had not thought in her terms at all. I agreed with her, as did most others, and we planned to see the President of the Foundation and put the matter to him.

Unfortunately for me, Maisie slipped out that Monday before supper ended. I was anxious to have her help in meeting the President, and in discussing the whole matter with him. I felt sure she would be able to persuade that great man even more than I could. I rushed out on to Halifax Street in a mild panic, hoping to reach her. I was sure it was her figure I saw walking hurriedly in the distance. As you know, Adelaide is a city of trees—jacaranda, eucalypts, oak, plane and other varieties—and so leafy and shaded are our streets because of these trees that at night it can even be dangerous. Whilst the jewel city of the South is not

a

place of wild revellings, muggings, stabbings and the like, it has always had its dangers because of the many trees. I was thinking of this as I hastened after dear Maisie. I was hoping I would not unduly surprise her, or in any way frighten her.

I suppose I did not actually frighten her, but she certainly was surprised. Carrying the bulky object as she was, wrapped in some tablecloth or curtain material, it was not easy for her to walk. In fact she almost staggered, and when she saw me she actually stumbled.

I helped her to be upright, and when I did there was enough light from a street flare lamp for me to see her eyes. Even in the orange flare they were intensely blue. I rather marvelled at that. When the wrapping fell away of its own volition and disclosed our late Victorian—or was it early Edwardian?—mirror, encrusted with quite valuable jewels even though they still seemed to me to be somewhat gaudy, I was quite startled.

The strange thing about her was that she did not seem at all disturbed or one whit ashamed. She kept her regal assurance about her as she said, ‘It was the last thing of any great value.’

For all my knowledge of truth I scarcely knew what to say. To be frank, I felt quite embarrassed. The whole thing of this woman was only slowly dawning on me. In a foolish moment my vagrant mind was wondering whether the Thurgyson Foundation was the only historic place she had visited and robbed. I marvelled at this cool and calculating woman. I admit to a pang of genuine sorrow which went through me.

It probably sounded as foolish to her as it did to me, when I said, mind aghast, ‘Dear Maisie!’

Her gaze on me never wavered. I said it again—this time with a long, sad sigh, and with a sort of sorrowful finality,

‘Oh, Maisie! Dear Maisie!’

THE BOY IN THE VALLEY

HE had been born in the Valley, like the great carpet snake which lived above their ceiling, like the bandicoots which came in during the night and scampered over the floor, like the rock wallabies which bounded up the creek bed, and like the leeches which clung to you in the wet season. He and they were all creatures of the Valley.

The Valley was part forest, part pasture. It was North Coast farmland whose hills had been mainly cleared for dairying, but the more difficult terrain had been left alone, so it remained as rain forest. It flourished in the sub-tropical storms, the deluges that nourished the giant eucalypts, sassafras and cedars, and which flooded the upper country so that the water poured over the Fall, rushing down to flood the flats, and give life to the hills and the rich alluvial pastures.

In this the boy lived. He never asked himself whether he loved it or not. He liked it well enough. It was his home, his habitat, the only place he had known. He had been born at home—in the small plastic dome that was their first house. His parents had wanted the Boyer method of birth, and so he had come into life with his mother trying to bring him out into the world without tension and strain. His father's arms had been about his mother, and the wise old midwife was understanding and gentle. No sooner was he born than they had placed him in a tub of water which was at body warmth. There had been little light in the dome, just a mild lamp flickering amidst the shadows of its single room. Entrance into the world had been quiet—almost uneventful. Who knew whether it should have been tempestuous to fit a similar temperament, or sudden and realistic to break open the

truth of the violent humanity that the child would meet one day?

He had been born with fair hair—hair that remained intensely blond as he grew. He called his parents by their first given names as they had taught him, never saying 'Mum' and 'Dad', but just 'Harry' and 'Liz.' They called him 'Roj,' which was short for 'Roger.' They were proud of his body, knowing he would grow into adulthood as a strong, large male. They had principles of bringing up children, although they were parents for the first time. They would take him down to the creek during the day—even when he was a newborn baby—teaching him to swim in the crisp-cold mountain water. In the summer he would run about naked, and he came to like the sun as it soaked into his body. If he learned to walk and run early, yet he only came slowly to speaking. They wondered whether he had been born dumb, so silent he was. They worried a bit because of the absent look in his eyes. Perhaps his mental powers were retarded. Yet he seemed bright enough, quick to understand them and their ways. He watched them always at a distance. When they came near, he was absent in his looks, as though he were keeping himself from them.

Sometimes they heard him giggling, and his giggle would grow to gurgles of laughter. On the first occasion they discovered him in a grove, and he was watching a platypus at its games, its divings and cavortings. His gurgling sounds relieved them of the fear they had had that he might be dumb. They had known he was not deaf, for he responded reflexively to their speech. If they quarrelled—as often they did—he would shrink back from them or toddle off into the sunlight. When they called him for a meal he would—often as not—come at their bidding. Yet there were times when he was within earshot, but still did not come. He seemed to be too busy with his thoughts to pay attention, and they let him be. It was their own philosophy of life. Time meant nothing to them, so why should it have to signify to him?

They were soon assured that he was a normal boy—as fun-loving and mischievous as they had been in their childhood, and as hungry. He ate their food well—their specially selected food made from the herbs and vegetables they grew in the garden. He liked the home-grown fruit, as though he could never get enough.

In the early summer he would pick the macadamia nuts green, break open the—as yet—soft shells, and eat out the creamy hearts. In these ways he was normal enough.

They were not worried about him when he wandered the hills. There were other people living in the various groves of the co-operative farm. People lived like that—in little groups—although each family had its dwelling, primitive as that might be. If they worried at all it was about their visitors, who were numerous and who wandered where they chose, coming into one's dwelling at any time, expecting to be fed, though often sitting for long periods without conversation. Many of them were dull with drugs and would fall into sleep for hours. Yet there seemed to be no reason to worry about child-molestation, or that sort of thing.

FOR the most part he played carelessly. He would build a little dam in the stream-bed, and block the water until it grew into a long, silver sheet. Then in a fury of excitement he would pull away the stones and mud, fascinated to hear the roar of the water as it shot through his hands and legs, rushing on its unimpeded way. He would chuckle at the temporary power that had been his, and the new impatience of the released water.

Sometimes he would wander into inhabited groves and gravely watch the life and motions of his neighbours. Since he had nothing with which to compare these people he did not marvel at their silence, but for the most part they were quiet. They spoke little to each other, but to him they were vocal—quite vocal—and with it, companionable. They seemed almost eager to talk to him, and he would respond warmly. He could talk to them in a way that he could not converse with his own parents—not that he felt as an alien to them. It seemed that some of these folk in the groves looked for a chat, a talk about things, and since they knew his world he was glad enough to converse.

He knew he could eat their fruit as freely as in his own family garden. He liked the long, slender bananas that had ripened on the palms, the guavas that had matured to a soft, sweet fleshiness. He would chatter away until the inevitable silence fell between him and others. Conversations ran only for a certain time. He saw the typical tiring, the gradual but insistent withdrawal,

and then the lapse into quietness. No one sensed any responsibility towards another. Life was naturally existential. There was something almost wrong in building up substantial thought, or carefully planning action. The boy did not know this, but he learned the pattern and was content enough to play it according to the rules. For this reason he was not disappointed.

One game he did understand was the mumbling one. A person would not speak distinctly, but would mumble, almost incoherently, as though plain-speaking would commit him to ideas, and even to action. So thoughts strayed out from the speaker but were lost on the air. Not, however, to the toddling Roj. Far from being deaf, he was acute of hearing. He would pick up the undertone beneath the blurred and muffled enunciation, as though he could register on any sound frequency—be it high or low. It was as though he penetrated back into the mind of the utterer and—what is more—could perceive what the person would not utter. It was like insinuating oneself into the other person. In a subtle way he was learning to read people's thoughts by their gestures, their characteristic movements, and the things they left suspended in the air—unfinished things.

If he thought of remembering, then recalling his short past was a rare occupation. He had been taught to live in the moment, for the moment, not disciplining time or action. Nothing seemed to have a goal, or even a purpose. One just did things, and this was good enough for him. It allowed him to wander where he willed, think what he would, but committed him to nothing. He could eat when food was there, or refuse to eat—just as he willed. He learned this from his parents unconsciously.

His limbs grew strong and vigorous. He could scale a hill with ease, chase a rock wallaby with glee, climb a tree with curiosity, looking into nests without even touching the eggs or the pink babies, or the half-feathered fledglings. He rarely distinguished between natural ugliness and beauty, accepting everything as it came. He had no codes of appreciation or rejection, but he noticed his parents had certain acceptances and rejections. He would listen to their conversations—sometimes mumbled at each other—and picked it up that they disliked authority in all its forms. He often heard them talk about the Government, and he

wondered at this monster. He knew his parents collected money from the Government, but how or why he never troubled to know. He knew that 'out there', that is, beyond the Valley, unhappy and unfair people carried on their business of life.

It was natural that he should grow somewhat sectarian. His parents took him along to the tribal councils of the 'Co-op', as they called it. What he heard was what he took life to be. It flowed as they said it should, and he sensed that this was the only way—according to what the people said. They, themselves, would sit or lie around, seeming to show no great interest, but if special proposals were made they seemed not to like them. They wanted no organisation, no planning, no change to things, and certainly they disliked bright initiatives that were suggested. They wanted only enough agreement to preserve their lotus-eating existence. They believed in the total independence of each person within the agreed community.

Organisation and planning were suspect. These were the things they had known in their childhood, and had hated. They had disliked schools and teachers, the local society—its municipal officers, and its police force. They had chafed under the restrictions of rule at home and abroad, and been sullen when called to make their way in the world. They wanted no way—no planned path—but just an ease, a freedom from the constricted, useless kind of life their parents had lived. In a moment of rejection they had dismissed all that was adult rule, all that was repressive, and with it the whole of materialistic society. They believed it was their right as humans to enjoy the world into which they were born, and not to have life hedged about with frustrating restrictions, dominations by others, and the artificialities of crass materialism. Their assessment of what the older generations had done for humanity in history was unimpressive. Having made these wearying judgements, they ossified them, using them as the basis and justification for their future outlook. Their new culture—so determined—some called 'counterculture', but they called it 'alternate lifestyle'; nevertheless, they were glad if it did counter the culture they had come to hate.

None of this the boy understood. He knew the people about him were intelligent. Since he had no knowledge of the outside

world, he took what he saw to be the norm of life. If people lay in the sun naked, then that was how things were, and if they smoked the pungent 'grass', then that was what people did. However, he would often grow uneasy when he heard arguments, fierce accusations, and strong debate. 'Flower power' sometimes became 'fruit fight', and he sensed nothing gentle behind this. For the most part his own parents were gentle, though even they had their times of argument, when he felt the rising up of violence—if not in their actions, yet in their words. In the tribal meetings he knew the arguments were intended to prevent any so-called progress. He had not understood this when he was a toddler, but later he comprehended. The comments of his parents helped him to know it all. It seemed to him that his parents were even more intelligent than the other members of the tribal council.

HIS first school was in the Valley. The teachers themselves lived in the Valley community. The tribal council had agreed there should be a school, but that it should be staffed by locals. The Education Department folk had come, had looked at the house that was to be used as a school, and at those who would constitute the staff. There had been little difficulty from bureaucracy in agreeing to the arrangement.

Roj was one of the first pupils. He went to school naked and was amongst other such children, but he noticed that after some days he was the only one without clothes, and he asked his parents to let him wear clothes. They looked at each other, reluctantly agreed, and he felt happier. It was a small incident, almost unnoticed, but it left its impression upon him.

Whilst life at school was little regimented, he noticed that teachers changed when they were in the building. In their groves—in their own homes—they were relaxed, perhaps indolent. At school they seemed to have some sort of purpose, though this puzzled him. They did not give commands, but they tried to lead him and his friends into some kind of knowledge. Again, he understood that this was simply the way things were, and he did not chafe. However, if they ever crossed his will by a rare demand or command he let them know it, not by argument, but by ignoring them. They seemed to understand and avoided conflict.

He had unconsciously learned this pattern at home. His parents—for the most part—avoided conflict by leaving things alone that might cause arguments.

He came to see that making decisions was an almost unknown thing, whether in the tribal council, in his home, or in the school. Again he did not consciously come to see this. Perhaps he felt it. He knew decisions were to be avoided. For some reason they linked up with planned life. Because of this, meals were at any time—generally when they felt hungry. Often his parents would talk about buying something, but they seemed to leave the matter suspended. Perhaps on a sudden impulse they would do something—buy certain goods or refrain from buying them. At other times they would agree to do something but then never do it.

HE respected his parents without knowing what respect really meant. His father lived away in a world into which he could not enter. He would catch his father scribbling on paper, and for that moment his father was another person. Then he would stop, throw down his sheets of paper and wander off to have a smoke. Some days his male parent would have an easel out at the front of their small house and he would be painting. He would love to paint the Fall, always making a different kind of picture. Roj would look at these curiously, finding it hard to see the Fall just in that way.

His mother always seemed to be doing something, but then also to be doing nothing. She would wander about in the garden, but since she never pulled any weeds it always seemed to be the same. Once he asked her—in a rare question—why she did not pull the weeds, and she looked at him a bit aghast.

‘All plants have souls,’ she said, ‘and you mustn’t kill souls.’

When he asked his father, that man looked serious and said, ‘You might have been a weed in a former life, or might be in your next life, so how would you like to be pulled up?’ It made him wonder about weeds a lot. He even wondered why they were called ‘weeds’. Also he was not sure his father really believed the sort of thing he said about plants. Often when he talked like that there was a faint, curious smile about his lips.

He had always accepted the fact that his father never worked

for anyone but himself. It seemed he liked it that way, but one day he went off to work for a farmer. He came home tired but happy enough. Then he went off for many days, and the boy asked him why he did it. He just gave one of his secretive smiles but did not answer. Perhaps he knew that if he mumbled evasively his boy would understand it all.

The outcome of the work was that his father had some special money. He went off to the local town, Valleyton, and although school was still in session he took his son with him. They rode in the old bus, and Roj felt happy. He had only been in the town once or twice, and this was an adventure. The place was strange—exotic. It had different air, different smells, different sights, and different people—much different people. The place alarmed him slightly, but it also fascinated and drew him.

His father didn’t seem to care much for the town. He was about getting second-hand hardwood timber. He looked at it pretty closely, enquired about prices, wrote down and worked out costs, and then purchased the timber. He also looked at second-hand galvanised iron, turning it over to see whether it was rusty or not. He bought what he called ‘stumps’—stubby concrete blocks—for foundations. He also looked at a bit of softwood, but for some reason of his own would not have anything imported. At one place there were hundreds and hundreds of second-hand doors, and windows which were in frames, along with what they called fascia boards, rafters, and things like that.

He saw his father pay out money, and the men stack the materials on to a truck. When it was tied with ropes his father said to him, ‘Get in Roj, we are going home.’ The truck was fairly old, but it chugged and wheezed and groaned from Valleyton to their Valley, and made its way down the rocky road, and up the kikuyu-clad slopes until they reached the makeshift building they had always called ‘our house’. Once it had been a dome covered with plastic, but gradually they had changed it into a two-roomed shack. The boy had not thought to compare it with other homes in the groves. He had just accepted it as the place in which he lived.

It was quite an experience for him to see his father a bit purposive, for apart from planting vegetables and fruit trees, doing a

bit of scribbling and painting, he generally lay about, stretched out on the grass, or sometimes reclining against a tree if the sun was hot. Often he was just lying on his bed reading.

His mother lay about a lot also. Sometimes she would go up to the Co-op store to buy things, but when she came back his father was generally a bit angry at what she had purchased. This was regular and he did not think much about it. When they arrived back with the timber, galvanised iron, windows and doors, his mother became quite alert. Her eyes shone a bit, and she looked at his father with some respect.

All she could say was, 'Fancy that, eh?' as though she never suspected he could do it.

The men on the truck didn't want dandelion or herbal tea, so his mother brought out the coffee she used only when she was depressed, and gave them a cup, after which they went away in the truck, trundling over the kikuyu turf and up the mountain road.

His father came back in the late afternoon with one of their friends from a faraway grove on the Co-op farm. They measured an area of the grass near the house, and hammered pegs into the ground. They talked a lot. Roj had never seen his father so animated; nor his mother, for that matter. They rarely used a person's name to his or her face, but often said 'You.' However, on this occasion his mother kept calling her husband 'Harry,' and in his relaxed mood he—for his part—called her 'Liz.' Sometimes when she was angry she would call him 'Henry,' and he would retort with 'Elizabeth,' but there was none of that in this late afternoon.

His parents talked a long time about what they were going to do, and the boy became hungry and tired, but they ignored him. He looked around for something to eat, found it, and then went to bed. When his parents came into their bed he could hear them chattering on.

Usually he was up first in the mornings. Sometimes his parents slept until late in the morning, but today his father was up before him, and was digging holes in the turf. The holes were quite deep, and after a time he was setting the concrete stumps into them, and unrolling a large ball of string and making sure the stumps were all level on the tops. His father was also making

sure that the building-to-be was properly set out in accordance with the measurements they had made the day before. At midday his father's friend Joe from the faraway grove arrived with an old ute which was filled with tools of all kinds.

After a drink of 'natural' coffee they set about stamping around the holes with a crowbar, lining them up with a spirit level to be sure they were upright, and laying joists across them—temporarily—to be sure they were absolutely level.

In the days that followed he watched the miracle of a new house being built. It was nothing fancy—the boy knew that—but it was what it was doing to his father and mother that fascinated and mystified him. They were as two people who had come to life. He wondered whether this was temporary or not, but half hoped it would last. One part of him wanted to go back to the drifting kind of life they had lived, but another part had become excited. He had never thought about having a purpose before, but this was what it seemed like to him. He began to wonder whether his parents had once been like this and were now returning to it.

Sometimes the ute had to go to Valleyton to get things they had forgotten about, like nails, and strapping iron, and insulation; and in the middle of it Joe had to go off to work to get some money, and his father—Harry—thought he would go with him, as they had not been able to buy the flooring. So the shell of the building stood there, and sometimes the rain beat through it and it looked like a derelict thing, but the three of them were always thinking about it.

They were able to get some old hardwood flooring—tallow-wood, if you didn't mind! It was second-hand from an old church hall, and was dirt cheap. Joe marvelled at Harry's buying and they went off to cart it in, though it was a bit difficult, as they had to tie it over the roof of the ute, and let it hang over a fair bit at the back. Roj admired the red bits of cloth at both ends to warn the people of what was coming—or going!

When the house was finished, more people came. They had been coming in dribs and drabs, looking at the work, some admiring—though reluctantly—and some critical, and others just indifferent. It was at Harry and Liz that they looked, as though they had not suspected the couple would ever do anything like this.

One night they had a party with music and dancing, and special breads cooked by one of them in his new oven, and there were different kinds of foods—some of which Roj had not previously tasted. The dancing and eating and drinking went through the night, but Roj had gone to sleep in his bed in the old shack and did not hear a lot of it. He was a bit surprised in the early dawn to see many of them asleep on the turf, even though there had been a heavy dew. Some of the folk had not gone to sleep but looked weary in the early dawn. For the most part they were silent, as though they had worn themselves out with conversation. He could smell the pungency of their ‘joints’ as they smoked away.

THAT day was the very day they moved into the new house with its kitchen-living room, its laundry-bathroom, and its two modest bedrooms. The old shack was left standing for the father’s writing and painting work, and for storing the garden tools and other bits and pieces. His parents made sure it was not habitable for the vagrants who wandered through, looking for a toehold in this modern Shangri-la. For them to make such a decision was little short of radical. It did not go unnoticed, and was the subject of the next tribal meeting.

The next outstanding thing that happened was the small solar panel. No homes had electricity, and although here and there there were transistor radios, yet television was not only unused but it was hated and unwanted. Since solar power fitted their lifestyle, they permitted that form of power. A few of the homes had wind-driven or pedal-cycle-driven power, but it was mainly for light in the homes or sometimes for directly driving a washing machine. Most homes had petrol or kerosene lamps. A few used only candles.

The boy was intrigued by the white light their one fluorescent lamp brought to the house. Because he could now read a little he took out the slim books his grandparents had sent to him. He began to read avidly. His father and mother would also read. He noticed that since becoming busy about the house they smoked less, and that they were more alive—not so vague and distant as they had been. He noticed they occasionally used each other’s names and did not say ‘You’ so much.

HIS parents seemed more motivated to go to some of the protests that were a regular feature of the lives of the tribal people. One of the most unforgettable experiences of his life occurred when his parents, with hundreds of others, stood in the path—or, rather, the road—of a great bulldozer. It bore down upon them like an ancient dinosaur Roj had seen in picture books, and he cowered away in fear. He felt like screaming when it came on relentlessly, drawing near to his parents, who did not flinch. He could scarcely believe his eyes that his father and mother would do such a thing.

Beyond where they were standing, two men were biting into a thick trunk of a tall tree with their screaming, whining chainsaws, until the forest giant finally crashed to the ground. Immediately a group of protesters clambered over the stricken timber, lay on it, and shouted at the timbermen. Some wept bitterly. Roj saw a man with a TV camera focusing his lens on the tree-lovers, especially where a young woman was screaming and weeping.

A reporter said to her, ‘Why are you crying over a tree?’ He was astonished at the girl, but also most curious.

Her eyes flashed at him, and she screamed, ‘A tree has a soul, hasn’t it? Just like you and me, doesn’t it?’

The boy remembered his mother’s words about weeds having souls, and he wondered. He wondered what the tree had been in a former life. Trees had just been there before. Now they seemed to be significant. It puzzled him why this should be. He also wondered in what part of the tree the soul dwelt.

The giant bulldozer had ground to a halt. The frustrated driver was yelling abuse, but the bevy of protesters was going mad with joy and delight at their victory. Cameramen were flashing lights as they captured the scene, and video-men were zooming in and out, anxious not to miss the fuss. One Member of Parliament was declaiming in a loud voice against his own government for its lack of concern for the rain forests.

THE boy was puzzled. That day the questioning began in his mind. Prior to that day he had questioned nothing, content just to live in the way of his family, even accepting the fact of school and learning. Yet his few trips to Valleyton had set

thoughts going in his mind. He was trying to understand a world out there—the one other than that of the Valley. The simple addition of fluorescent light, and the almost new world of books, was causing him to wonder. In Valleyton there were people with long hair and beards, and women who wore the kind of dresses his mother did, but there were other kinds of haircuts and other sorts of women's dresses. He was not sure, yet, what he would like. He knew that when he talked to the people in Valleyton they seemed very warm-hearted, and what they said made sense. They also seemed quite sensible. He had a feeling that they lived pretty good lives—enjoying what they did. Not too many seemed to think everything over. Their ideas seemed quite fair to him.

One day, almost without thinking, he said to his parents, 'I want my hair cut.'

Because they occasionally trimmed the long, fair tresses, they were not surprised. His father said, 'Get me the scissors and I will snip a bit off.'

'No,' he said fiercely. 'I just don't want a bit off. I want it like they have it in the town—real short.'

His father and mother exchanged looks. Then they stared at him, and he felt uneasy. He wondered whether his father was angry, but when a faint smile appeared he knew things were all right. His mother didn't smile and kept looking at his father.

'You,' she said accusingly, 'you aren't going to cut it like that.'

'Yes, I am,' he said. 'I'm not going to repeat history and get angry like my father did, when I wouldn't let him cut it. He doesn't know why he wants it cut, but cut it we will.'

The boy felt the gentleness of his father as he snipped at the soft locks. He watched them fall to the floor like some kind of golden rosette about his feet. He didn't know why this should be significant, but he knew it was. He also felt an edge of excitement in himself, especially as he saw his mother frowning. He had made some kind of decision and that was like a new experience. It was new for him to feel power within himself.

His father said to him, 'You clean up that hair, Son.' The word 'Son' stuck in his mind. It was not a word his father had used before. It was as though his father was acknowledging a new and clear relationship.

He found himself saying slowly, 'Yes, Dad,' but not knowing why he was saying it. His mother looked faintly surprised, and his father just dropped his gaze as he always did when he wanted to hide his feelings.

THE next special event was the television set his father brought home from the second-hand shop in Valleyton. It was black and white and not colour, but Roj didn't mind that. His father said it was to get more political news, something about conservation, and about world peace. It seemed television was essential, no matter what others thought.

At first they could not get it to work, and his father thought it might be something to do with the voltage of the storage battery, but after a bit of flickering and strange geometric patterns on the screen a clear picture suddenly emerged. The boy's heart gave a leap. He knew nothing about stations and channels, and was stunned by the variety presented to him. He knew his picture books off by heart, every line and whorl and angle of them. But this was different—so much different!

In front of him was, to his eyes, a new world. It was not that he had not seen some of the things before, but here was such a variety that his mind couldn't absorb it all. He wondered about his parents, and how they would view all of this.

His mother didn't seem to like it much. Sometimes she would stand up, go to the set, and turn it off. His father's face would darken with anger. Then an argument would begin, in which he heard bits and pieces about himself.

'It would not be good for the boy.' 'It would be bad for the boy.' 'It is against everything we have ever believed.' 'We haven't told the tribal council about it. They won't approve.' 'We are free to do what we want to do. This isn't a fascist society.' 'It will kill his mind—make him a moron.' 'It will make him understand the world he lives in.' They said these and other things.

All he knew was that there was another world out there which he wanted to know. He didn't necessarily want to go into it, or be part of it, but he wanted to know about it, and even to understand it. He felt his father wanted this to happen, but his mother was afraid of the effects it would have on him.

Now he was seeing his father and mother in a different light. The change in his view of them had not begun with the new house, the solar panel, or the advent of the television. It had begun, curiously enough, with the visits of his grandparents. His mother's parents had come first, and he had thought them very wonderful. Having overheard critical comments by his own mother and father, he had been surprised at how warm and affectionate his grandparents were. He had thought they would be remote, somewhat grim, and even—perhaps—harsh. Far from being this, they had taken to him wonderfully. He saw also his mother's respect for them, in spite of all that she had said about them from time to time.

He was puzzled as much when his father's parents came. They, too, were busy people, occupied with business, but they had taken time out to travel the two thousand miles to see their grandson. He noticed how sensitive they were to the folk of the Farm, the members of the Co-op, but they made little of their problems. They too were warm and loving to Roj, as well as to his parents. They all went off in their station wagon to Valleyton, and there they bought things for the house. Grandfather purchased some strong second-hand guttering, and he and Roj's father nailed it to the rafters, and had a downpipe into the garden. His grandmother insisted on buying a second-hand lounge suite for the living room, although it barely fitted in. Roj rolled himself all over the lounge and the chairs with joy and abandon. On the Sunday they went across to see the Pacific Ocean and they played on the beach, gorging themselves on new kinds of food. He thought he had not had so much fun before.

When the grandparents were gone, his own parents argued as to whether they should go south to visit them in the Christmas period.

His father said, 'Roj will meet his cousins, his uncles and his aunts.'

His mother said, 'He will get caught up in it all.' She looked disgusted. 'He'll start eating that trash they all eat.'

His father was thoughtful at that, and went out into the garden. He always seemed to go into the garden when there was a problem. After his thinking there he came back and talked to Roj's mother.

'I think you're right,' he said. 'He'll get caught up in all that if we visit down there.' Perhaps he was thinking, too, of the cost.

The boy's mother said sharply, 'He can get caught up in all that just by looking at the TV.'

He noticed after that event that his looking at TV was strictly monitored.

He also noticed that when folk were coming to the house that his father would cover over the TV with a cloth, putting a vase with a dried flower arrangement over the cloth. The boy knew that no one was deceived. He, himself, thought this strange. Generally his parents did not care what anyone thought who lived outside their home.

IT was strange that they let him go to Valleyton Primary School. His father and mother had had an argument about him going to a non-Co-op place of education, but his father did not like one of the Co-op teachers. So each morning the boy would trudge to the bus and go off with the other children. Along the way they would pick up children from the farms and the villages. Some of them had long hair, but some didn't. At first he felt strange at the way he dressed, but then other children of the Co-op dressed that way, and they didn't seem to care. The better dressed children didn't seem to notice or discriminate. After a time he forgot about the differences.

The school, of course, was different. He was glad he had seen school classes on TV. He was glad he had learned about a lot of things from that screen. It was still strange to him—especially the food the children ate. He kept away from the school tuckshop and the delicatessen across the road. He found himself trembling when the children ate pies and he saw the meat dribbling from them. He felt almost ill in the stomach at the sight and smell of meat.

His parents had often spoken of the killing of animals. In their home they would have no meat or animal by-products. Wool they could accept, but not sheepskins. After some years they had accepted eggs for eating, but not chicken flesh. His mother said lolly jellies came from calves' hooves, and so he did not eat that sort of sweet.

Then there were the additives in food. He had been warned against them. They would be harmful. Once he had a vagrant thought, 'Well, what if they do a bit of harm? Surely anyone can recover,' but at the same time he knew his conscience would accuse him. That was the strange thing—his parents had slowly trained his conscience to eat only vegetables and fruit. He had not even been aware they were training him.

LIVING on the Co-op, he had not known he was good at sports. Both grandfathers had asked him whether he played cricket or not. They were both cricketers, and had been from boyhood. Looking at matches played on TV, he had sensed he could also play. At high school they included him in their side. He was not much of a bat, but he could bowl well, and was superb in fielding. In winter he opted for soccer because there was less contact encounter, and he could not remember ever striking a person. He had long been proud of his father as a man of peace, although he had often wondered why his father could get angry at so many things if he was wholly at peace.

The most dramatic of changes took place when the boys and girls went off on a high school camp. It was to be a teaching and coaching camp, but it was also to be good fun. They were to go north to Brisbane, and see that city, and visit its special places. When his maternal grandparents knew he was going to camp they sent him money, while his paternal grandparents sent him a camera and some rolls of film.

The vast city awed him. He felt small and frightened and unable to cope. Most of the children seemed to take it in their stride. He was glad there was another boy from the Co-op—Reg Smalley—and they bedded down next to each other. They also took time to share their strangeness. He had scarcely known Reg until they had gone to high school, and there they supported each other. Now, in Brisbane, they discussed their feelings, planned what they would do, and especially talked about their problems.

One of these was the meals. Nearly all the meals had meat as part of them. For breakfast there were eggs and bacon; for lunch, meat stews; and in the evening, cutlets and vegetables or salads with assorted sliced meat. Reg Smalley was indifferent. He

thought meat would not worry him, but his parents would be scandalised if ever they heard he had eaten meat. Roj knew his parents would be equally shocked. Somehow—and somewhere—it was a religious matter with them. The two boys went to the camp commandant and told him their problem. That officer saw no problem at all and ordered vegetarian meals for them. No one seemed to notice the difference. Roj and Reg were both good cricketers and that made up for any small differences in their practice of life.

IT was Crissie Holmes who proved to be the real problem. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, and both Reg and Roj were fascinated by her. Roj was more than simply fascinated—he was infatuated. He thought he had never seen anything or anyone so beautiful. It was not that he saw her at the Brisbane camp for the first time. He had seen her at high school, but kept his eyes averted. He would only steal looks, not daring to let her know that he thought of her, and cared for her. He felt he could never bear the embarrassment or humiliation if she should discover his infatuation. He would have died of shame if she had met this with humour, condescension or pity.

He did not know that all his years within the Co-op had been preparation for this first major event of his life. She was equally infatuated with him, but she also did not care to show it. Her father was a sergeant in the police force, and knew all about the Co-op. He knew that some of the inhabitants grew marijuana in flowerpots, and tucked it away in the thick forest if ever the police should visit the place. In fact her father often told the Co-op people that he and his colleagues were coming on an inspection visit.

The police had no special problems with the Farm, and were prepared to overlook a personal pot or two of 'pot'. What concerned them was the growing of that drug for commercial purposes, and for the most part they did not like the visitors who came into the district. They understood the moving troupe of vagrants, the drop-outs and the dole-clingers, but these did not much worry them. The force knew the mood of the tribal council, and sensed that common sense would win the day.

Crissie Holmes had a romantic view of the Co-op. Somewhere, deeply down within her, she thought it would be a good place to live, but she also knew she would never be allowed to do that. She had heard some of the hair-raising stories about the place, especially about the states of undress that had been there in earlier days. She was not sure she would like that sort of thing, but the romantic impression persisted.

Roj—to her—was the epitome and embodiment of all that was romantic. She had looked at him many times when he was unaware of her interest, and had decided he was for her, and she for him. She had even planned to get closer to him in the Brisbane camp. When they were to go off to an Expo together, Roj suddenly found her beside him. It all seemed to have happened by accident, and to him she seemed quite detached.

For himself there was a sudden inrush of feeling, a flood of acute embarrassment, and a strong, deep yearning to keep her with him. He even thought he was fairly subtle in the way he stage-managed it.

He said to her, 'I think I've seen you at Valleyton High School. Is that right?'

She nodded and said, 'I've seen you, too. I think you're from the Co-op.'

He blushed a bit at that, not knowing what kind of reception he should expect.

She went on, a bit breathlessly, 'I'd like to come out to the Farm one day. Lots of people want to see the Farm.'

'Oh!' he said vaguely. He was thinking about her seeing their small cottage. Suddenly it seemed to his mind that his parents were not quite the kind Crissie would appreciate. He thought of their kind of clothing, their long silences, their inadequate social manners. He felt a bit ashamed of them, and yet knew he really was proud of them. It was just that Crissie mightn't understand. He thought he had better keep vague about an invitation.

She said to him warmly and conspiratorially, 'Why don't we just keep together for the visit to the Expo? Why don't we look after each other? Brisbane's strange if you haven't been here often.'

He was amazed, delighted, stunned and confused. Strange

and acceptable feelings were running through his whole body. He had not thought in terms of girls before. Even his adoration of her was something in the mind, and not at all something of the body. Now that had changed.

He stammered a bit as he said, 'Yes, I'd like that, especially if you would like it.' He was scared, now, that he would have nothing to say, that he would be tongue-tied and that she would be bored with him.

To the contrary. They suddenly found they had lots of things in common. They watched the same programmes. They knew the same names. Her father was a good cricketer and she watched the Tests. He began to wonder what they didn't have in common. In the bus they sat together in a two-seater, and Roj was glad Reg Smalley had picked up with another high school girl.

The day passed as though it were an unbelievable dream. It was when time came to buy some tea that a kind of dread came to Roj. He was no longer a small boy. He was not only a large, strong boy in second year at high school, but he was hungry with it. She also was hungry. In his pocket he fingered the dollars Grandpa had given him. He knew he could afford the food they would have to buy. That did not trouble him. It was what they would buy which would trouble him.

To begin with, he would not be able to endure seeing his newfound goddess eating meat. The thought of this happening appalled him. He could not believe that slaughtered animal flesh could pass through those delicately shaped and beautiful lips. For her to munch part of an animal went beyond endurance. How could he persuade her to eat something vegetarian?

The other part of him did not want to lose her. He would go through fire and hell and other such light things just to retain her. This had been the happiest day of his life and he did not wish to destroy it. At 'The Chicken Place' they lined up together. He liked the closeness of her, and the intimacy of being together in that vast crowd of noisy, jostling young people.

She said to him, because she thought he was still a bit shy, 'What about chicken 'n chips?'

He said, 'I'd like chips but not chicken.'

She said, 'What about fish and chips?'

He remembered a story his father had told him about a time when—in his travels—he was starving and a fish had washed up on the beach, and in hunger his father had cooked and eaten it. Then the terrible pain had come, and his father knew it was vengeance, retribution for eating a fish, albeit it had been washed up on the beach.

‘Not fish and chips,’ he said, ‘just a burger.’

‘Ham?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said, ‘just egg or cheese or both.’

She nodded merrily. She felt proprietorial towards him. ‘An egg and cheese burger,’ she said to the order boy.

‘And for you?’ asked the order boy admiringly.

‘Oh!’ she said thoughtfully, a slim finger upon her delicate upper lip. ‘Now what will I have?’

He prayed, ‘Oh may she only have a cheese and egg burger.’

She looked at him. ‘What should I have?’ she asked him.

He said, ‘An egg and cheese with me.’ He could say no more.

She shot him a look and laughed. ‘No, I’ll have a steak with onions, lettuce and all the doings. In short, I will have a whopper burger.’

His stomach turned within him. He smiled wanly. He felt unhappy. He knew he just could not see her eat that.

It was misery whilst they waited for the orders to come.

When they did arrive he felt somewhat ill at the smell of hot-cooked steak. Of course the same smell was all around him, but her burger seemed to him to be an abomination. He knew he was rooted to the spot. He could not run away. Much depended on this moment.

His mind went back to the Valley he now knew he loved. A host of small incidents rushed up to him out of his memory. Even so, the most beautiful and amazing thing was this lovely young woman beside him, smiling as she stretched out to take the burger. He forced his hand to take the one on the right side of the throwaway plate.

He saw her delicate teeth press into the burger, and her mouth close around it to twist part of it off. His adrenalin was stimulated, his pulse was quickening, and his blood was flowing faster.

He looked away from the mouth he loved and pressed his own teeth into his burger.

He felt a new taste come into his mouth. As he bit he knew it must be the taste of meat. Something dreadful had happened. They had taken the wrong burgers.

Her eyes were laughing. Her face was merry. She chewed with delight.

‘I like cheese and egg,’ she said, ‘and I thought I never would.’

He tried to arrest his eating, but could not. Her eyes were on him.

‘What a marvellous mistake!’ she was crying.

If there was any compensation in her not eating meat, it was not enough to calm him. He could feel his gorge rising. Nausea seemed to flood over him. His chewing was suspended because—anyway—he was choking. He rushed out of the building to one of the rubbish bins, and tore off its lid. He felt the pain in his stomach and the dizziness in his head, and he began to retch.

Long, harsh, choking sobs came out of him, and the little he had swallowed came to the surface.

After a time he closed the bin and returned to the counter. She looked surprised.

‘A gastric attack?’ she asked, and he nodded. She said in a motherly way, ‘Don’t have any burgers then. Just have ice cream and a Coke. That’ll fix you.’

BACK in the Valley he tried to assess everything. Now he saw the Farm with new eyes. Whilst he was awakened critically, he was not hypercritical, censorious of all that he saw. He was simply puzzled. Matters like dress occupied his mind. In earlier days he has seen his mother naked and thought she was beautiful in form. Now she seemed stick-like under her shapeless dress. She also seemed aged, whilst people older in age seemed younger than her. His father’s heavy beard somehow seemed unreal. He often wished his father would shave like other men so that for once he could see the true features of his face.

Some days their house seemed to have shrunk, and become a tiny house for elves and fairies. Even the rain forest—perhaps

because it was seasonal—often seemed dry and transitory. Sometimes when the rain withheld itself, the Farm and the forest seemed to lose its substantial nature. The waterfall would dry to a trickle, and even the fruit trees seemed to be harsh and fruitless.

He could not understand the change in himself. It was as though his heart was lost to the environment. He was more interested in persons and relationships. Crissie had lost none of her attraction for him. He was realistic enough to know she was one girl amongst many others, but although others raised tremors of interest, none of them surpassed her. He liked the way she looked at him with an intimacy that made his blood run faster, and that sense of wellbeing spread through him. In a curious way he marked her out for the future, not wanting to develop a relationship too much with her in the present.

Subjects at the high school were beginning to interest him. He liked English literature. He also was glad to learn the Indonesian language. He began to read widely. He rummaged amongst his father's books, and was surprised to discover he had an uncle who was a writer. He began to shape his own writing on this relative. He read Australian literature widely, but wondered why European and North American writers seemed to have more greatness. He wondered whether his own country had really produced great writers. He knew that they were competent enough, but he saw little of greatness.

Once or twice he discovered stories his father had written, and he wondered why he had not published them. Perhaps they had been rejected. He did not know, but he felt an itch in his own hand to write. It was at that time that the unknown uncle had wandered in to see his bearded brother and his blond-haired nephew. He—Roj—wondered why he prickled with anger at the sight of his uncle, because he knew that in his heart he admired his writing, but there was something about him that was not admirable. Maybe it was the touch of cynicism in the voice, or an unspoken criticism of his father, or just an air of self-satisfaction which had come—perhaps from the success of his life.

When his uncle took up shares in the Co-op and began to build, the high school boy found his resentment growing. He was surprised at how deeply he felt about the new buildings

which were rising. He remembered that when he was a boy, a single mother had joined the Co-op and had lived on her own. No one had tried to help her build beyond her portable plastic dome. One day her father had appeared, and without saying a word to anyone had built her a fine A-Frame house. Having done this, he had saluted his daughter whom he loved, and left.

He remembered the furore in the tribal council. They had argued angrily that the house was an atrocity. It was an eyesore on the lovely landscape. They didn't want such unecological buildings—structures which did not melt into the landscape and become one with them.

He remembered wisps of conversation that his parents had had. They had been critical of the critics. Their human sympathy was with the single mother and the child. It was an almost unspoken knowledge that the real anger had been loosed at the parent who had come into the Farm to house his daughter and granddaughter. He represented all that some of them hated—interfering parenthood, paternalistic manipulation. The boy's parents had not seen it that way, but nothing they said could stem the tribal rage.

The young woman had moved off after that tribal council, vacating her house and leaving her address. They had pulled the house down within a few days, sold the materials, and sent her the money for it, along with the cash she had paid for shares in the Farm. Now, as the growing boy looked at the house his uncle was building, and at others which were being built, he remembered that the A-Frame had not been any more unecological than these new homes. He acknowledged that they were functional enough, and pleasant to look at, but the old days seemed to have departed.

Vegetarianism began to wane. Interest in Eastern religions dried up. Electricity was being laid on to house after house. The innovation of their solar panel seemed weak and insignificant. His father dreamed in terms of a computer, and they also needed electricity for that. At school he was exploring the mysteries of word processors, computers and printers, and his father was pleased enough to talk with him, and patient enough to learn from his own son.

His mother wanted a washing machine. They had had a copper for heating water in the laundry, and she had scrubbed clothes in the bath. Now that work seemed to tire her. He noticed that she sat increasingly in front of the TV screen and watched the soapies. But she still loved to move through her herb garden, drying out the leaves and stalks and bottling them when they were fully dehydrated. She also kept in touch with the group who called themselves 'The Seed Savers', and wrote away for seeds of old plants no longer available on the seed lists of the big horticultural firms.

His father worked for some weeks on a farm the other side of the mountain. He had always steadfastly refused to buy a motor vehicle, and it meant hitching a ride every morning or arriving late for work on a bus, in which case he would have to work into the late evening. When he arrived home he would be tired. His brother's house raised no envy in him, but he was worried by the change in the community. There were new faces and voices in the tribal gathering, and new ideas were abroad. Strong rules had been made to prevent vagrants wandering through the Farm, and planting themselves upon the families. The rules certainly governed the movement of these natural gypsies, but something of the old quiet spirit had gone.

Roj noticed that people spoke more clearly, more firmly. The characteristic mumbling had been replaced by the kind of talk that was businesslike. The home philosophers seemed to have died out. The part-superstitious religionists seemed to have become secularised. Even so, the soothers were still there with their massages, their healing balms, their therapies that were a strange mixture of East and West—a syncretism that appealed to the intellectual and mystical alike.

When they had their protest meetings, things were highly organised. Their gatherings were still like gypsy fairs—old style clothing, sales of home-grown organic vegetables and fruits, herbs, spices, nuts, dried food and the like. He liked to be with them, although now he saw their idiosyncrasies, and could find weaknesses in their arguments. He wondered at their set of moralisms when many of them were not altogether moral. He also questioned their drugs, for he remembered a time when his

parents had been vague and disoriented in their life and their thinking. At the time he had not understood them, but lately when he saw their freshness of mind and clearer actions of life he knew what inroads the drugs had made in those earlier years.

The alternate lifestyle people had grown to a life-sized lobby group. With the advent of the growing Greenpeace and similar conservationist movements, the old hippies did not seem so 'way out'. A new respectability had come to them. These older ones did not take kindly to the younger adventurers who had decided that the 1960s and 1970s represented the lifestyle they wanted, but that lifestyle as it had been in the beginning. The ability to be decisive seemed to have been attained by many of the older generation of hippies, whilst the younger generation was fighting hard to be existential. Although he did not understand the mechanics of the matter, he could detect the falsity of much of the later movement. At the same time Roj marvelled that his parents still—for the most part—seemed determinedly indeterminate.

He watched his father closely as he wrote away to leaders in the Government, as he went back to reading of former years, as he tried to recapture the thinking of those times, but he detected a loss of drive, a leaking out of the old anger, and an unbidden maturity making its way into the stance of the former guru. Folk who had lost respect for him during the years of drug-taking now called in—off the cuff, so to speak—to see whether they could suck a little of the old wisdom from the now older man.

What he also noticed was a restless drive in his father, something akin to what he had seen—from time to time—in both grandfathers, and for that matter in both grandmothers, who were tireless people. Doubtless they were of an old school—one which set high store by the very action of work, no matter what its goal may have been. Whereas his father had once spent much time in meditation, now he seemed happier when he was active. He liked to paint the buildings both inside and out. He tidied up the rooms where Roj's mother had been neglectful. He wrote letters, he worked at the garden. Even his mother caught some of this, and to his delight rooted out weeds without qualms. Weeds and even trees did not seem to have souls—not anyway as they had before.

Whilst these changes were taking place at home, changes were

also taking place as he came to his final year of high school. He and his parents were talking about what might happen in his next year—whether it should be university in Newcastle or the New England, in Sydney or even in Canberra. His grades were unusually good at school. His participation in sports had lifted him high in the regard of his class year. He himself was bewildered with the rapidly changing ideas within himself. He readily acknowledged that he was confused. He was a person who had grown up in the Co-op, absorbed its ideas, liked its culture, and held to its tenets. He still thought peace was the greatest attainment the world could achieve in this century, that the world owed much to nature, and ought to pay its debt in the renewal of rain forests, in the right care of the world's fauna as well as its flora. He also clung to his vegetarian ideas. The thought of killing still sickened him. He could not forget the incident of the night when he took the wrong burger at 'The Chicken Place' in Brisbane.

His confusion lay in the fact that all that he held to, in considered loyalty, still did not, nevertheless, reveal the purpose of life to him, and he could not bear to think that life was a mere coming and going upon the earth. All the things to which he was loyal were by no means the whole matter or the true matter. There must be much more. Somehow he had gained the idea that man mattered even more than the whole of nature, although he knew that nature, itself, included man. Somehow he had sensed there must be destiny, but he could find no clue to it except that it was essential to him for making sense of being on the planet.

HE tried to puzzle his way through his dilemma and predicament in the couple of months before he would leave the Farm. He had thoughts of talking with his father, but the miracle had happened and his father now had a computer and printer. Nothing seemed to be able to drag him away from it. At first he had been fascinated by the sheer mechanics of the programme, but then, when the machine had opened to him a quick world of writing, his spirit seemed to have been captured. There, in the Valley of the Fall, he seemed to be re-energised. The mass of thoughts which had been accumulating for years, the experiences he had had in his roamings around Australia before meeting Liz

in the Co-op, and the advent of Roj in his life seemed to be the materials he could now use in his writing. The fact that none of it would be lost on bits of paper and unfiled sheets of notes motivated him to begin what once he thought he had relinquished for ever—the outpouring of his mind, his view of humanity, his understanding of the anger which had embittered him and driven him into escape through drugs—all of these things began to rush up at him, and he knew he had to write, to paint, and so to communicate.

The grown boy understood this, and left his father alone. One thing happened, however, which was to colour his thinking. It was the visit of Sergeant Holmes to the Farm. This time he had not warned the community, but they seemed to have nothing to hide. He, anyway, was not looking or inspecting. He had brought his daughter Crissie with him, and the day was to be a holiday for her, a quiet investigation into the Farm itself.

Roj saw her alight from the police car, and come across the kikuyu turf. For a moment he felt ashamed of their little bush home, but his mind hardened against that kind of thinking and he went to greet her. Holmes was warm enough, and Roj called to his parents, who emerged and greeted their old friend. Crissie stood back a little until her father called her forward and introduced her to the boy's parents. Roj kept looking at her as though seeing her freshly, and liking this sighting better than former ones. His heart gave the old leap, skipping a beat or two, and setting up the old tremors in his flesh. He kept wondering about this woman and what she was, and why she could disturb him so much.

He liked showing Crissie around whilst the Sergeant stayed back with his parents and talked with them. He was surprised at his interpretations of the Co-op, the people who lived there, the things of the past and the new things of the present. For his sixteen years he felt himself to be quite old, and he sensed that in many ways Crissie was so much younger in her thinking, although not in her years.

They talked about the year to come. Crissie was going to learn nursing at a College of Advanced Education and move towards her degree. He still wasn't sure, but he would have to make up his mind. To begin with he would do Arts, and then widen out

when he had found his feet. However, it was not vocation which made them so much one. It was their unspoken conviction that their lives were to be in union one day. Neither expressed the thought openly, but it was implied in the way in which they talked. Nothing that he shared with her regarding the Farm seemed to worry her. He knew she now saw little romance in it all, but he also knew she wanted to understand it, perhaps in order to understand him better.

When she and her father were leaving she first hugged him. He felt the fullness and maturity of her, and longed for her. She sensed that and held him more tightly. Her father shook hands and opened the door to seat her. There were waves from all and she was gone. His father seemed about to say something, but suddenly remembered he had not saved the script on the computer and hastened away. His mother drifted off and stood looking up the Valley as though she had lost something and was trying to find it, though without much hope.

HIS mother seemed apprehensive at his departure. She rarely looked at the TV screen, nor for that matter did she inhabit the garden very much. She seemed as bewildered as he was. He found himself talking to her, but she seemed so full of regrets for the past that he could not get her to think in the present. He knew her world was changing since the things she had once rejected were becoming part of the new culture of the Co-op, so that she rarely attended the tribal council meetings. Like her husband, she had been caught up in a nameless anger in her youth, a restless desire to get back at the world which had tried to conform her to its images. Yet the images she had developed as a substitute did not seem to have satisfied her. This was part of her present confusion. She also found it difficult to understand her son—so far removed from her he now appeared to be, although for his part he ached for her.

Much as he would rather have called her, 'Mother,' he used the old pet name, 'Liz.'

He said, 'Liz, what about us going up through the bush to the Fall? What about us sitting up there as we used to do, looking down on the Farm, and having our old dreams.'

The steady walk and toil up the Fall brought back old memories. She was younger in her step. Some of her ideas kept floating back. She was surprised at her knowledge of the different trees, and was glad to be able to remind him of their names. He for his part was polite and affectionate. He helped her up some of the high rocks, but she was capable herself of climbing. Even so, she liked his strong arm on her elbow and let him assist.

When they finally arrived at the head of the Valley, they were glad to rest in their old place by the Fall. They looked down at the Farm, picking out the groves and the miniature houses, detecting the orchards and gardens. They even saw miniature figures walking about. The faint noise of cars coming down the mountain road came to their ears, but even that died away, and there was only silence.

Neither really wanted to speak. The silence was what they had come to love in the old days. In the silence you could think. Just to be in it seemed almost an end in itself.

For her the years were rolling back and she saw herself as a child. She knew that all around her had been security, if only she had accepted it. She knew that her parents had been genuine. Why then had she become so angry?

She turned her head sideways, looking at his strong profile. Her heart gave a leap. She had never thought about it before. Why, she had brought him into the world and shaped him. She had helped to make him what he now was. She knew that what he was was as yet unspoiled, and she had the sense that he would never be spoiled. A deep sense of satisfaction and of gratitude began to move through her being. She knew that Harry—for all his silences and all his self-preoccupation—had also helped to train the lad. The strange thing was that neither had tried. She knew that she and Harry were deeply proud of their son. He had kept the trust they had given him though they had not verbalised it. He had respected them although he had disagreed with many of their ideas. He had seen their foibles, their angers and arguments, and yet he had not altered in his love for them. As a child he had seemed to distance himself from them, but in these last days it was they who had distanced themselves from him.

Perhaps it was because she and Harry had let a gulf come between them—a gulf that had kept widening. In her misery she had not sought the union that a man and a woman can have. She felt the tears close to the surface, and then in a moment they flowed as a renewed fall sends its waters through a valley. She thought the gulf might dissolve, and they would know love again, or even as they had never known it.

He said nothing but he knew why they had journeyed up to the Fall. He made a movement, as though to leave, but instead he looked down into the Valley. Suddenly he saw the Valley did not matter. What his parents and the community had tried to make it did not matter either. The associations they had woven about it did not create a Valley of their fashioning. The Valley was itself, just as he was himself, and Crissie was her own person. The Co-op had used the Valley, but before they had come others had done the same. The old farmers—in their succession—had done just that, and at the end they had become tired and let the new people come and possess it. One did not have to regret the past—not in any way.

It was then he knew he would never possess anything, and that he did not have to take anything to himself. It was borne upon him swiftly and surely that Crissie would become his wife, yet not to be possessed, but to be loved. Any union he would have with another human being must be without possessing that one. So he could love this Valley for itself, and not for its associations with the Co-op. Such things would come, and then they would go, but destiny was greater than them. He began to see that men, in their tribes and nations, seek to shape their environment according to their own images of what they think is true and best, or convenient and profitable, but that the 'shape' may have little to do with what is the reality. It is the reality men should seek, and not the shapes of it which they devise.

He did not understand his own destiny but he was glad it was not ruled by fate. He had not come into this Valley by chance, through the Boyer birth, as a tiny infant running around naked, loving the water and the platypus, running his hand along the carpet snake, or giggling when the bandicoots ran over his half-sleeping body. The garden, the vegetables and herbs, the fruit

and the foliage were all part of the movement of his life. His gradual emergence from acts of living into conscious knowing, and his sight of the cavalcade of life—his father, his mother, his grandparents, his friends and Crissie—all these made sense now, although how he did not know.

Nor did he have to know. He could leave the Valley without regrets, and he could return without them also. It was not that nothing really mattered. All things mattered, of course, but one did not have to know why or how. A Sovereignty beyond him held the answer, and that Sovereignty was the source of all that had happened and would happen to him.

His mother's arm seemed cold in the later afternoon. She was still trembling a little but she seemed quite happy. He thought, 'If only Harry my father would come away from his computer and welcome us as we come home, that would mean a lot to my mother and to me.'

He thought about it as they tumbled and slipped and walked and travelled towards the small bush house with its half-surround of kikuyu turf and its other half-surround of the garden and the fruit trees. To his surprise and delight he saw his father emerge from the old shack and computer room, and look up in the direction of the Fall, as though he hoped they were returning.

When he caught a glimpse of them he raised his hand in recognition and salute, beckoning to them to come, and he found that his mother—as she had never done before—was running, running towards his father and crying, 'Harry! Oh Harry!' and he, himself, was running alongside her, although she seemed even more fleet of foot than he.

She kept running, and he, too, kept running, and both were running towards Harry, who—although he rarely ran—suddenly seemed to understand, and in a moment he was running towards them. So they kept at it, shouting and crying somewhat, and all the time running.

BEACH GIRL

‘WELL, I’m off, darling,’ she said. She drew herself up to kiss him. Mechanically, absentmindedly he returned the salute. ‘Off?’ he said, thinking she was not too well. Then he remembered. ‘Oh!’ he said with a faint laugh. ‘Off to the beach.’

‘That’s right,’ she said, ‘off to the beach.’

‘For your usual swim,’ he said.

She nodded brightly, ‘Yes, for my swim. My one-mile swim.’

‘I don’t know how you do it,’ he said lightly, and smiled. He gave her a friendly pat. ‘Off you go,’ he said. Then he called her back. ‘Don’t overdo it,’ he said, uncharacteristically.

She laughed at that, but said nothing.

Even when he was still in the carport and watched her back out skilfully, his mind was elsewhere—on things he had to do. He waved, and she nodded back, concentrating on backing and turning.

When she was gone he was still thinking about all the things he had to do. It seemed when you retired you had lots to do. Maybe you found things to do to fill in the time, but he didn’t think so. He gave a short, meditative laugh and went off to the garden shed. There was a lot to do there. He never even asked himself whether the things were of any importance.

In the garden shed he thought a lot about her. A remarkable woman she was. A bit younger than he, grey hair going to white, and yet she was still quite sprightly. Had put on a bit of weight, but not too much.

He thought of her spirit. ‘Very good,’ he told himself, nodding.

He thought about the one-mile swim. Wouldn’t get him in swimming in the Gulf water—not for worlds. It was always cold, even in summer.

She didn’t agree. ‘Just nice,’ she said. ‘Sometimes a bit fresh, but nice.’

She found it invigorating. She would ease herself out and swim to the end of the Brighton jetty, and then she would round it, making sure she got in her mile.

Some of the boys there called her ‘the white shark’. Well, her skin was pretty fair, and in a sense she was as well rounded out as any shark you might see. The boys admired her. Some of them called her an ‘oldie goldie’, or a ‘goldie oldie’. He wasn’t sure which. It was just a bit of rhyming nonsense.

The tools were a little exasperating. His close neighbours often borrowed them and didn’t always put them back in their accustomed place. He would have been irritated by it, but after all he rarely put them back himself. He would work up to a special day when he would do the lot, and the place would be neat and shipshape, and all that. Today, being a bit warm, he would not work in the shed. It always became hot in the shed, except in winter.

He knew he had some gardens to water—vegetable mainly. The flower gardens he left to her, although these days he was looking after some of the shrubs.

He chuckled as he remembered some friends in an outer suburb of Sydney. They had had glorious grounds, a massive number of special shrubs—natives of course. They had also had good lawns, and fair flower gardens, not to mention their fine vegetable patch.

He had often chortled over them. One day they stopped to think, after ten years of landscaping, gardening, manuring, planting, watering, pruning, etcetera, and they had asked themselves what they were about.

They came to the conclusion they were about gardening, and about nothing else, and it was about time they started to live in a certain amount of ease. They were darned if they were going to be the slaves of any garden! So, rather than watch the gardens and the lawns deteriorate before their now uncaring eyes, they sold the place and got a very good price, some of which they used to buy a more modest place with minimal lawns and garden, and the rest they spent on touring.

He chuckled again about that. 'Well,' he thought with a sigh, 'our garden is fairly minimal.'

Surprisingly the thought of his wife flashed across his mind again. He had always been aware of her, always fond of her, and grateful for all the things she did for him, including her constant care of the married children and the grandchildren. She gave him more time for the things he had to do. In a way, he had never questioned the value or purpose of the things that he did.

These days there wasn't all that much she needed to do for him, because his time was now his own. Business days were ended. His hobbies were few, but he was a computer buff. He was fascinated by computers, and the never-ending mysteries they held for him, but realised they were not an end in themselves.

Whilst he was a born ruminator, he never seemed to get very far in this thinking. His thinking itself seemed to be no end. Still, he would have been lost without it. He liked thinking—not speculating but thinking. He wanted to think in terms of realities.

Somewhere, as a boy, he had had very high ideals in regard to women, especially regarding the one who would be his woman, and he had thought that marriage might be about the only thing which could be an end in itself. At least in this life. He always became a bit uneasy if he began to think about the life beyond—assuming there is (will be) a life beyond.

He remembered how romantic he was as a boy. Romance was part of his upbringing: for example, the romantic poets such as Keats, the Brownings, Wordsworth and Byron. There was also a thing called chivalry. He remembered that, and it still stuck pretty closely to him—not that he did much about it. He had really believed in Arthur, the knights of the Round Table, the Grail, and Lancelot and Elaine. They had come together as quite a mixture in his mind.

He was always sure that the most beautiful person in the world was a blonde with long flaxen hair, or anyway, golden hair; and, of course, with blue eyes. That had been his ideal. He had worked a bit on the blonde matter, but not with much success.

He saw a hammer fall from its hook on the garden-shed wall,

and it broke his reverie. It also broke a ceramic pot he valued highly. He wondered how he could have gone back in time.

He remembered his two Adelaide rosellas. He passed the empty aviaries—once the scene of his greatest hobby—until he came to the occupied one. He twittered with his lips when he could see no bird. There was an answering twittering from the half-concealed shed, and an Adelaide hen flew out on to the wire netting in front of him. They twittered at each other for nearly ten minutes. He loved her affection. She was united to him by she knew not what. It was quite a thing. Still, she was a long way from the adolescent image of feminine beauty.

Her companion—a most glorious crimson Adelaide male—silently flew out of the nesting area. He sat on a large perch behind her, and watched quietly. He knew the strange union of the man and the hen. It did not seem to worry him. This season they had brought forth three young Adelaides, and these had been given to friends when they were fully fledged.

After a time the man turned away and went into the garden, but was a bit troubled by a thought which had come into his mind like a maggot. It was like a tiny maggot just out of its shell—a plaintive little creature.

The wriggling in his mind was the birth of a thought: 'Why does my wife go out for three or four hours every day? I thought that when we retired we would be at home together.'

His mind told him, 'Funny thinking, that! When you are there, you are not there. You are thinking something about software or hardware, and it is all computers. You don't give her much time.'

He picked up the maggot in his mind and pinched it between two mental fingers. 'Jolly good thing she goes out,' he said, 'or she might get bored. Never looks bored. Quite a remarkable woman.'

The squashed maggot died dead, hard dead, extinguished for ever.

She came home fresh from her swim. She always showered after a swim, to get the salt off her body. She looked around the study door at him. 'Back on the computer, eh?' she asked.

He nodded. Suddenly he did not want her to go away, so he said,

'Good swim? Good walk?' She knew he knew she swam and walked. She nodded.

He asked, 'The boys call you "the white shark" again today?'

'They were at school,' she reminded him. Of course—it was a school day. Funny; every day now seemed like a weekend day.

THE next day, when he was twittering to the Adelaide hen, he remembered his thoughts of the day before. He had killed the maggot then, but now another was in its place. 'How come?' he asked himself, 'how come I think such silly thoughts?'

He tried to be sensible. 'My wife Faye is in her late middle age. She is old, has some wrinkles, and who would be interested in her?'

He knew he was interested in her. He knew for sure that she would not be interested in another person. But then, what if one of them was interested in her? He did not see why another should not be interested in her. The more he thought about it, the more the idea grew. He suddenly realised it was a very fat maggot, so he trod on this one, put it underheel, and swivelled as he squashed it. So much for that maggot! He slapped his hands as though that made his mind clean and clear of it.

When his wife came home in the afternoon she looked radiant. A tiny pang went through him, but he remembered the squashed maggot. He smiled at her. 'Do the mile swimming and the few miles walking?' he asked. She nodded, still radiant. She was fresh from her shower.

'I might come down one afternoon,' he said. He looked at her closely. No dismay, only a faint suggestion of surprise. The maggot was surely dead.

She said, 'When will you come?' She seemed to be pressing him.

'Do you want me to come?' he countered, and she looked at him scornfully.

'Well, of course,' she said, 'why otherwise?'

He began to back off. He liked the beach, but not the crowds. He liked the sea, but not the all too earnest people who played cricket on the sand, drank copiously out of little stubbies, and

wiped their mouths with the back of their hands. Once he had gone and sat amongst them and felt like a fish out of water. Ha! Ha! A fish out of water! Come to think of it, he was no fish, in water or out of water.

His wife saw his smile and returned it. 'Think it over,' she said, 'and let me know.'

Somewhere a new tiny maggot wriggled into life. Why should he tell her? If he did she would know. Then he felt guilty, pinched the little grub until it died, and saw how natural was her statement. 'I'll let you know,' he said.

Why didn't he say outrightly, 'Tomorrow?' Any day was the same as, and good as, any other. Being cautious always, he thought he had better think it over!

He gave it no thought for a week because he was painting the front fence. It needed some repairs also, and—all-in-all—it took him the week to complete it. Each day he waved her off absently. She would come with stories of having spoken to oldish women. He knew she had a gift for encouraging those who were crushed by life. People seemed attracted to her.

The Monday of the next week found him at a loss for something to do. It was one of those days! Nothing seemed interesting, nothing attractive, and nothing purposeful. He checked out his seedlings for water, his two birds for seed, the garden for weeds, but there was no taste in anything. It seemed to him like a pure case of accidie—tasteless ennui.

Suddenly he thought, 'I'll take the other car. I'll go down to Brighton. I'll see her swimming, walking the beach, chatting with others.'

His blood froze a bit. Suppose she was not just talking to old women, but to a man, maybe about her own age. Maybe he would be in the water and both of them swimming. He knew there would be nothing in it, but when he came down the beach to greet her she might feel a bit self-conscious, and even—though falsely—guilty. She might also become suspicious about him and his ideas of her.

He froze the second time, though he had scarcely thawed from the first icy-cold tremor. It would be terrible if she even suspected a maggot in his mind. He spoke sternly to the maggot and

it seemed to diminish; but when he ruminated a little longer it grew to a mature grub.

He was impatient. He remembered there was the back of the garden shed which he had promised himself he would paint with Copper Olive paint for galvanised iron. He went and painted. When she came home he was relieved, but ashamed of his suspicions.

In his lifetime he had done much counselling, especially of couples whose marriages were disintegrating. They seemed to value his wisdom. Also he had been married over forty years, and that counted a lot. One man said, 'What an innings! Many go out for a duck these days, and very early—when they've hardly batted!'

He would talk to her much more now. During the day he would relive their months of courtship, their days of honeymoon, their years following the marriage. Little incidents would come back to him. How amorous he had been! It was not like that now—not, anyway, to the same degree.

His thinking sank into deeper mood—a mood he found delightful. It was occasioned by remembering the old days when he had returned from the war and when they went where they wished, did what they liked, and didn't think too much about the conventions. Not that they were wild or promiscuous. Oh, no, she would have had none of that, nor he for that matter, and certainly not their mothers. No, there were conventions then. They had both wanted that sort of thing, anyway. They had wanted a full-bodied marriage. None of your modern leasehold arrangements, with their 'get it before you are entitled to it' ideas. That never worked, anyway. No, it was just the hours they had kept in those courting days, the flood-time of emotion which seemed to be theirs until they became so tired that he would take her home or back to the hospital where she worked.

With a start he wondered what had happened in the in-between years—between then and now. Work of course, a bit of competition in business, some personnel counselling, an amount of socialising—that after the wedding, of course. The wedding had been something. So had the honeymoon. He went over it all again. How had that been so special, and now everything seemed to be pretty mediocre?

He wondered what they had lived for. When he wondered about that, he remembered hearing somewhere about everything being vanity—empty wind. He didn't like that thought, and frowned. No, he would not have that. He had liked the kids being around the place, growing up, rebelling, getting married, settling down, levelling out. He knew the ropes in regard to all that.

But why had it all been? 'Why?' was a question he had rarely asked himself. Now, asking it, he came near to doing a mild panic.

She might have decided he was dull, fuddy-duddy, boring, and that was why she went to the beach every day. Come to think of it, going to a beach every day—anyway, the five weekdays—was a bit unnatural. Little maggots began to wriggle—everywhere! They grew into big maggots. His mind itched with them. His soul wriggled with them.

He was convinced now that she thought him dull and tasteless. She was talking to men who had a dash of life in them. He felt near to tears but was brave. He wished the men well. He wished he had a dash of life himself. He was glad they gave her a bit of a lift. In a crazy fantasy he could see a whole bunch of them going down to the beach every day just to talk to her. After all, she was bright. She was even vivacious. He had liked her for that when she was young. 'Pert' he would have called her.

She found him in the midst of his ruminations and teased him. 'You are an old stay-at-home, aren't you?' she said, and he felt he had to laugh with her, though that was far from what he was feeling.

Suddenly serious, he asked her, 'What do you do down at the beach?'

She smiled at him—guileless as a skylark flitting upwards into the blue. She said, 'I try to keep well. I swim, I walk. I sit on the beach and stare out to sea. I talk to people—generally old, tired women who are widows, or who are grandmothers like me, or just people who seem lost. I just talk, and then I come home.'

'Ever think of me?' he asked, frowning.

She nodded lightly. 'Of course,' she said. 'I plan what we will have for meals, especially in the evening.'

He ventured timidly, but with some reserve, 'Ever think of the past—our early days?'

Her eyes rounded at that. 'Do you?' she countered, but she did not tell him. He felt a bit miffed. She chattered on about something that had happened at the supermarket. Then she grinned. 'I do a special thing when I walk along the beach,' she said.

He felt his heart growing cold. 'Yes?' he said, scarcely daring to hear.

She said, 'I collect tinnies, and plastic drink bottles. You can earn a few dollars a week.'

He could scarcely believe his ears.

The next day he was surprised at the anger in himself. Was he angry because she left him for so many hours? Was he jealous of her having so much free time—and enjoying it? Was he suspicious, deep down in himself? Why, too, so many maggots?

Then the thought struck him that he was really angry because to him his whole life seemed pointless. Hers didn't seem to be that. He felt guilty, worried and irritated. He would talk to her about it that very night; but he didn't. He felt to do that would be to admit to a whole pointlessness of life. He realised with a shock that he didn't have any philosophy of life.

For the next few weeks he busied himself with many things—painting the outside of the house, the inside of the kitchen, getting special software for his computer, trading in his old printer for a better one, and even buying a few new clothes. The latter was the most satisfying occupation. He found himself enjoying the purchases because she was with him—which was their custom. Also he liked looking a bit more colourful. It even made him feel younger; not that he thought much about age, anyway.

He noticed that she was noticing him. He liked that. He also noticed how casual she was. Come to think of it, she had always been like that—a bit carefree about life, even when the kids had played up. She seemed to think everything would iron out eventually. He had often thought her irresponsible.

Suddenly one day a thought struck him out of his old counselling days. Unfaithful spouses became critical of their own spouses, naggingly critical. It was a sign of their guilt. He had helped many a person to see that there was no true basis for the criticism by the other spouse. The thought cheered him no end. This was proof she was not guilty! Then he found himself

horrified to think he had even thought her guilty. Remorse set in, and self-criticism, and his mood grew dark. He also knew that if she had spoken to men, then that was fair enough—he said so little to her. She was entitled to a bit of sane conversation.

He began to take her out to dinners. She loved them, but looked at him curiously. She also liked being at home, in their own lounge room, sewing away or watching TV—especially her own Australian soaps—things he could scarcely bear to watch. She knew they could afford the dinners he took her to, but she wondered at the unnecessary expense.

Another day he wondered whether all men who retired thought and acted this way. A friend of his from war days—Dennis Frome—took him to a Retirement Village. He came away horrified. The village was all right, and the people were fine, but he could not bear the eyes of the older ones. They seemed to have died, or just relinquished the substance of life. For days he was in a sort of panic, and all the time she watched him with mild curiosity mixed with faint humour. He was not sure he liked that.

ONE day he opened up to her. He was surprised to hear himself talking, letting out the flood of his ideas, confessing his fears and his suspicions. He talked about having no philosophy, no great purpose. He talked about not wanting to go to the beach and yet wanting her to be near him and he near her. He talked about her talking to others, and his jealous thoughts.

Sometimes he saw faint humour in her eyes, and other times sympathy, but mostly it was surprise.

'Goodness!' she said, 'I never knew you thought like that. I thought you were sufficient in yourself. You have been a competent business man, a clever person in personal and social affairs. You know how to do everything. You have been a good husband and father—with a few exceptions—and now I find you are all over the ship!'

He suddenly felt relieved. 'All over the ship!' Yes, that was it! But having said so he didn't care much. He liked the sense of relief.

She mocked him. 'Jealous of me? Late middle-aged plump old me! For goodness sake!' Her laughter was high and silver. 'I

thought you were married to your computer—that I was a computer widow. For years I planned what I would like us to do, but then accepted the fact—when you retired—that we were just of a different temperament. So I set out to make my life useful. I like talking to tired old women, and some harassed young women. I like talking to intelligent men, but apart from you I find few.’

She looked at him archly, and he liked the look. She went on. ‘I always felt I would like to help people as you used to do, when you were working. How they used to come to you, like flies around a honey-pot! I used to wish I could do that.’

‘You’ve always done it,’ he said feelingly. ‘Your children and your grandchildren and your friends have always come to you for help and friendship.’

She looked at him wonderingly. ‘You don’t have to have a philosophy of life,’ she said. ‘You just have to accept the fact that you don’t run the world. It runs itself, or rather Someone Else runs it, and you just live.’

He sat for a long time thinking about that, and she went off to make coffee for them. He felt strangely at ease. He was not one given to metaphysical thinking. He was strong on morals but not on the reasons for them. He could never remember being proud of himself, especially for his acts in life. He had never thought much of them.

Gradually the memory of his work as personnel officer came back to him. People had been helped, though he had scarcely noted that. Often he had talked things out with his Faye, and she had given him some good insights. He had always related to people. Now he related to the house, the garden shed, and his computer. When the children and grandchildren came, he related to them, but never went out of his way to meet others. He liked the Adelaide hen and twittered with her. He grinned to himself at the thought that he rarely twittered to his wife.

He thought about the older folk in the Retirement Village, and how they still had many years on him. Perhaps he could get some working philosophy of life and visit them and hand out a bit. He didn’t know. Perhaps he did have a good idea about life after all.

He thought back with heavy blushing upon his groundless fears and suspicions about his Faye, and suddenly it all seemed

so childish and foolish, and he wondered how he had gotten to that place, and then he saw himself as a ridiculously stupid person. When he should have cried, he laughed—laughing at himself. The tears were running down his face.

When she came back with the coffee she was a trifle alarmed. She put down the coffee and came over to him. Her presence made him laugh more, until he was nearly hysterical.

‘I really don’t think you are funny,’ he said, going off into new peals of joy. ‘It is just that I feel like a person who has had a weight on him all his life and suddenly it’s lifted. A whole burden has gone.’

He wasn’t smiling any more. He was serious, but he was light-headed, like a man who has taken drugs. He wondered how he could have lived so unthinkingly for so long, yet behind it all he had really thought and thought, and now the matter had become clear to him.

In fact he didn’t know how or why it was clear to him—but yet it was clear.

He looked open-eyed into her clear eyes, and she remembered—with a pang—their careless courting, and their early years, and she felt the tears gather a little in her, and she wanted to weep. She decided she had better not—for the moment. She knew it was his hour and she was glad. She did have fleeting dreams of him coming to the beach, and of them both going elsewhere, and yet enjoying their home—the evenings together—and all that.

He for his part kept wondering about the new world that was opening up to him, although there was nothing new in it that he could see. Maybe he was just seeing it newly. He didn’t really know, but he held her to himself, and loved the tears which fell upon his hands, warm and soft and gentle.

RANKIN SPRINGS

IT is a long trip from Sydney to West Wyalong, and more so when you take into account the road repair gangs with their STOP and GO SLOW signs as they try to rehabilitate the road surfaces broken with the recent record floods. The two hundred and fifty kilometres from West Wyalong to Hay seem interminable, and travelling is a time for sleeping. Except, of course, for John. He likes to drive from Sydney to Adelaide unaided.

It was a relief to get to Rankin Springs—that growing resort which is a desert haven for travellers during the hot summers. Everything was green from the floods, including us, as we sought to feed our four hungry mouths. Grant was the silent one. Kay reckoned the modest eating house with the roadrunner signs was probably the best for price, so we agreed to give it a go. It advertised ‘Fish and Chips’ and smelt like them before we got inside. Kay had a dreamy look in her eyes.

There was one diner sitting at a table eating a pie with tomato sauce piled on it. He was reading the local paper. Nothing dreamy about him. He was eyeing his pie with an unfriendly eye. No unfriendly eye in the lady at the counter. She was homely, motherly, honest and busy, trying to serve an equally homely mother who was ordering Chiko rolls, chips and pies. When the chips went into the fryer we thought the hot oil was about to combust. As it was, we lost sight of one another in the thick blue smoke.

‘Trust me!’ the harassed lady told us when the chips roared in the erupting smoke of the overheated fryer. The four of us peered through the swirling blue cloud, not wishing to lose one another.

The tourist lady was ordering canned drinks with difficulty. Also she was worried about the chips. ‘They’ll be burned,’ she

told me helplessly. ‘The rolls are frozen, and they won’t cook at the centre.’

Through the roar of bubbling oil the counter lady heard her and agreed. ‘I know nothing about any of these things. She shot off last night and left me to do it all. Don’t know where anything is, neither.’

The tourist lady saddened further. Her eyes appealed to me. I nodded sympathetically, thinking of the hungry kids in the car, and tempers shortened by the long drive. Two drivers had stopped their heavy transports outside the door, but the engines were still running. Difficult things to drive—heavy transports. They dashed into the shop as though time was everything to them. They made their way into the smoke, saw the five customers in the fog, had a glance at the neutral pie-eater and dashed out, saying something that was not suitable for the ears of ladies. You sensed they were quick judges of cooking–eating situations.

Whilst frozen food burned gently on the outside, the serving lady totted up the cost, and was paid in anticipation of some success. Her customer was caught in a fit of trembling, probably from fear and despair. She might even have been a bit angry. The homely cook kept telling everyone she knew nothing about anything, least of all cooking fast food. When we started to order she kept nodding as though there were no problem. Fish and chips for two? No worries: they could be done. Two hamburgers for the two men with everything on them? No problems.

She was not too sure there were enough hamburger buns, and she worried about the scarcity of eggs, but found some, and the hamburger meat. Then she thought the hotplate was too hot. Heck! What did it matter, anyway. On to the hotplate with the meat, and then the eggs. Only one slice of pineapple. She would take a bit off the price for that. Chips? Only enough for one: no, not enough for one. She would go searching.

She searched: no success. Anyway, there were *some* chips. Take something off the price. The hamburger steak fattened out with tomato slices, lettuce and beetroot, the eggs curdled up, the chips smoked, the buns were a bit charred. No worries, but a pity Edith hadn’t told her where everything was. Just shot off, she did. Emergency, of course.

She took it for granted that we would not worry. We caught her carelessness, shrugged our shoulders, felt sympathetic. It wasn't her fault. Suddenly nothing mattered in life, not even mistakes. The pie-eater went, having told her the cost of it, since she was a bit muddled about prices. Grant and John fiddled with the local paper which talked about the break-up of the Shire roads. Inside the eating house the smoke was beginning to clear. The roadrunner posters grinned with surprise and idiocy which seemed like a smirk at our situation.

Now you could see the eggs with runnels of black oil, the dehydrated hamburger meat, the still moist pineapple slice. Tomato slices, lettuce and beetroot waited patiently to join the pile-up. The two men passed the time by sharing the newsless local paper. Kay had opted for a pie, sad at the shortage of chips. Plenty of fish, but fish without chips is nothing. Did they have potato pies? No, the pie-eater had scoffed the last one. Meat pie? No problems! Into the microwave with it. Keep looking at it and it heats more quickly. Kay looked around for the tomato sauce, and had to work hard on the plastic container to get enough to smother the pie. She shuddered to think of the pie without sauce.

The lady was quite apologetic: that was why she cut the prices here and there. She forgot to add in the cost of the canned drinks, so we helped her. She gave us the change and the midday rush was over. She could catch her breath. That was when the children walked in wanting ice-cream, fish and chips. She smiled bravely at us and we waved sympathetically. She was obviously thinking about Edith and wishing that person had not shot off so quickly. We would have done the same if we had been Edith. The paper roadrunner grinned inanely at us from the table mats and the posters on the footpath as we retreated to the park.

Rest at last! Quietness. No blue smoke. No anxiety about the state of food. The men thought the hamburgers were OK. Kay thought the pie was all right. I marvelled at the large piece of fish, and I knew my aged stomach could only take a portion of the chips. My new dentures worked industriously on the french fries until I thought generosity was the best way out of that dilemma. John, whose chompers are as good as the day they matured, eyed

the golden chips out of the corner of one eye. Kay shared them with him and Grant. I went into retirement, sucking mildly on my Fanta.

The day was quiet. There was peace in Rankin Springs. So sleepy a place it is that all the flies in the West gather there for conferences. They ignore waving hands and smacking palms. They best like resting in the inner corners of the eyes. Even humans give up after a time in the spring heat. They capitulate to the drowsy day.

Then the quietness was broken by the man with the South Australian numberplate. He saw ours was also from South Aussie. He was gifted with enormous energy, both in talking and being pally. He thought all South Australians would appreciate meeting in this far-off place of Rankin Springs. It was like meeting in a foreign country, and a great time to talk about things in the home State. He also had a deep love for his own vitality. After all, he was well into his seventies and this was his second wife, and they had only recently been married—nudge! nudge! wink! wink! They were like two young marrieds. We felt tired and wanted to retire, but they both went on and on. We had only been away from South Australia for less than a week, but they told us of the things that happened there—great and unusual things. They had been to Mildura and had struck a difficult motel. Then they had some relatives who had been wary about their marriage—their second marriage, of course. We were given the impression that they had been childhood sweethearts. They seemed to be making up for lost time. We listened, feeling somewhat helpless as they droned on, beating the Rankin Springs conference of flies. Occasionally a semitrailer came lumbering through, dimming the one-sided conversation.

'Hungry?' we asked, hopefully.

'Are we hungry?' they replied. 'Yes, we are hungry, very hungry.'

Grant's eyes gleamed. 'You need some good food,' he said. 'Best fast food in Rankin Springs.'

They were all attention. 'Where?' they asked. 'Which place do you get it?'

Grant pointed to the roadrunner posters. John nodded

supportively. Kay thought about the silence which would come when they were gone.

‘Good pies,’ she said, ‘especially with tomato sauce.’

John said sleepily, ‘Great hamburgers.’

The man asked, ‘Pineapple slices and all that?’

‘You never know,’ John said, ‘until you ask.’

‘He’s good at asking,’ she volunteered.

We watched them walk briskly across the highway, towards the roadrunner posters. Grant put his head down on the picnic table. John leaned back. Kay watched them opening the door of the fast-food place. We both saw a cloud of blue smoke escape through the opened door. Then there was no smoke.

Kay dozed, sitting up. I didn’t even take the flies out of the corner of my eyes. My lids were close together. We all slept in the warm spring silence of Rankin Springs. Time enough later to cover the long stretch to Hay. From where we were you couldn’t hear what must have been a lively three-cornered conversation in the shop with the roadrunner signs.

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

HE heard the train clattering into the station and his heart gave a slight leap. It had been like this some fifty or more years ago. The stations hadn’t changed much. They looked a bit threadbare now, but even in those times they had been nothing special. Up the line a bit they had been better—with neat and tidy gardens—but for the moment he wasn’t worried. He looked at the train as it shouldered its way along the platform, swaying like a slightly drunken man, but sure of what it was about. It stopped almost abruptly and the automatic doors slid open. He entered with the others. They usually rushed in, trying to find a vacant seat. The memory of it all drifted in.

As he sat, memories crowded around him: how, as a boy, he had liked the window seat; how he had become one with the privatisation of the self. No one looked at another. Each stared ahead or out of the window. He grinned—he had always stared at the girls; especially the schoolgirls, and more especially the Abbotsleigh schoolgirls. They were a special bunch. They would not stare back, but they took side-glances at him, or if he lifted his eyes suddenly from his books, they would be regarding him curiously. He had liked that.

He thought, ‘Whilst everything has changed, nothing has changed.’ For the past couple of days he had been walking through the city, looking at the buildings which had grown up over the few decades he had been away. It was difficult to grasp—the Opera House completed, the Darling Harbour project, and the monorail. They were realities, impinging on him, but in a way he liked them. The North Shore had crowded itself with high-rise buildings—glass and steel structures that towered, dwarfing the Colossus of Rhodes, dwarfing everything.

The train clattered on, gathering its steel loins purposefully about it and barely waiting at the stations, as though it was going to get him to his destination and be done with him. He sprawled out with the rest of the commuters. The first tinge of evening was about them as they walked separately to the barrier, and then up the steps. Again that little miss to the heartbeat, that fine thrill of memory, that intimation of nostalgia. Well, this was how he had wanted it. Unashamed he was of this sentimental journey. Why not? He had often dreamed of doing it.

The first thing he saw was the palm. The shock ran through him. Last time he had seen it, it was about fifteen feet in height. Now it seemed liked fifty. It rose high in the sky, like a tall feather duster. He gazed at it with awe and joy. Its trunk was shiny smooth. Tears pricked at his eyes. 'Damned fool!' he thought.

When he reached the platform of the bridge he thought for a moment he saw them again—those chattering, giggling Abbotsleigh schoolgirls, clustered together, talking gossip, and eyeing the boys, though with scarcely an open look. He thought for a moment that he saw her, and blushed with the memory. Even when he had seen her in the old days he had scarcely dared look at her directly. He was too shy. She had always been open-eyed, without guile. It had been too much for him—always hiding his thoughts. With something of the old defiance he walked along the bridge and then down the ramp.

He prepared himself for the reality. Of course Mussetts wasn't there any more—that shop of shops, with newspapers, journals, milk bar and confectionery, and about everything else. It had always awed him, as indeed did old Mr Mussett, with his competent understanding of all things, and his sons, who had grown up steadily and taken over from him eventually. He had always thought there was no wiser man than the old patriarch. Now they were all gone. A café of sorts had taken their place, but all the Mussetts had done was now spaced out in new and shining shops. He felt a bit sad about that.

He had decided not to do it by taxi but by foot. He wanted to savour every inch of the roads to his own home. When he rounded the first corner he half expected to see the old fruit shop

with Father Perryman stacking his vegies high in the window and peering at the coming buyers, but it was gone. A dull concrete car park had supplanted the old shop, and then next to it, where sometimes a sheep or two, a cow and horse used to graze, there was a vast car park, and on the southern side supermarkets and specialty shops. He regarded them with a touch of scorn and crossed to the northern side of the road.

The old avenue of trees was still there, and quite grown. He thought with satisfaction, 'Same leaves. Same rubbish on the footpath. Ha! At least something of the old remains.'

He liked it underfoot. He tried to ignore the large residentials they had built behind the trees, but he had to admit they were conservative. He trudged on, hoping to beat the coming dusk, to reach the old home site before darkness covered it.

When he reached the highway he held back his dismay. He had partially prepared himself for it all. Straight ahead was the Girls' School. He remembered when they, the College, had taken over the Adamson's place. The Adamson's place! Memories came crowding around him of the family who—always late for church—generally clattered in when the congregation was singing 'the Venite', Father Adamson wiping his perpetually shiny high brow, and Mother Adamson fussing along with her beautiful girls, tucking them in—here and there—by which time the Old Testament lesson was being read. Everyone sighed with relief when the Adamsons had settled in. Without them it did not quite seem to be Sunday Morning at St Paul's.

His legs seemed to respond to hidden resources of adrenalin as his memories flowed. He remembered the vacant lot next to his home, and the lovely little cob that grazed and cantered with such freedom. He had fed and watered it when Sally had forgotten to do so. She always forgot, and it would have been dead but for him. His reward? He could ride on it bareback when no one was around. Father Adamson had found him one day putting feed into the feed trough and water into the half drum. He had asked the red-faced boy what he was doing and why Sally was not doing it, and—in fact—when did Sally do it, and he had told him reluctantly. Old Adamson was a big executive in the city and he had a way of evoking responses to his questions.

He shivered when he remembered the day Father Adamson had called him to their home and had lectured Sally and given him the cob, and all the girls had gathered around Sally and wept, and he had cried out that he didn't want the cob—although there was nothing more in the world that he wanted, really. Old Adamson had insisted that it was his and he had had to take it, but the next day he brought it back and said it was really Sally's, and Father Adamson had relented and wanted Sally to have it without himself losing face, and there had been lots of tears and promises and he had left it with the old man. The girls had hugged him and he was the proudest boy in the suburb, and Sally had rarely forgotten to feed and water it after that, and had given him intimate smiles which had helped to make him one of the happiest boys in the district.

The Girls' College had bought the old home with its grand stable behind it, and all the old things from the first days of Sydney, and he had felt sick at the thought of it. The cob went too, but by that time he wasn't thinking much about horses. Even in those days he had realised that things had to change.

As he turned into the highway he saw it had six lanes, and traffic was madly rushing along it, and his hearing-aid shuddered with the swishing of tyres and the roaring of fast-moving vehicles, but he would not turn it off—no, not for worlds. The rushing traffic was telling him something which he could not yet understand but surely would—soon. So he trudged along, looking at people ahead of him or a few passing him. The man ahead was bent and aged, and he smiled as he realised the fellow was about his own age, but then not quite so healthy. He was bent, was using a walking stick, and was looking down at the pavement. When he passed the other man, he stared at him. 'Might have been a boy with me,' he thought with wonderment. He smiled at the old fellow, who was a bit bewildered but drew breath in order to nod.

A young woman was coming towards him and she smiled as though she knew him. She was well groomed, and again he felt the little thrill. He loathed the scruffy dress-manners of the new generation of young people—their worship of the unlovely, their cult of the ugly. This young woman took his mind back five

decades in a flash, and he loved her for it. He returned her warm smile with one of his own, and felt lighter in step.

When they came to the high water-tower he paused and looked up. It was certainly of a great height, though how many feet or metres he did not know. Each Sunday afternoon he and some of the fellows would rush to the top of it, looking across the country, and he had never felt fear. (Only later—in another world where bombs dropped and his shattered leg had shuddered on a surgical platform-splint—had he learned to fear heights.) Down in the bush he would scramble up lofty eucalypts to collect the coveted birds' eggs, putting them in his mouth so they would not break, and descending fairly carelessly. He grinned at that memory.

There was another tank, a ground reservoir of water, on his right. It had not been there in his day, but built later—after he had left the district. It was fine, like some Eastern fortress, covered with a veneer of red brick. He did not dislike it, but he remembered that where it now stood there had been an old two-storey house, derelict, with a creaking lift that still worked by hand. How often—knowing for certain that it was haunted—they had visited it, sure that murder and all that had been committed within its walls. So went the story, but he was sure they could never disentangle fantasy from fact and they had liked it that way.

Now he was passing the maids' quarters of the Girls' College, and he remembered the upper floor where the maids used to partly undress and look at themselves in a long mirror. He had been adolescent, with all the dismaying passions and feelings of one who was a boy yet who was sensing his manhood, and he had been embarrassed by his own feelings. In those days he would rush past so that his mind was not caught in a whirl of mystifying emotions, all the time resenting the conflict that the school servants had imposed upon him. Now the building seemed unused and unneeded, and he smiled slightly at his going through such conflicts. It all seemed slight, in retrospect, but had not been a light matter to him, then.

As he walked, a strange thought was coming up from beneath the surface of his mind. It seemed to him that his walk had disturbed layers of memories which had lain quiescent over many

decades. Of course, he had remembered various incidents from time to time, but now the impression was becoming distinct that no man can forget his past, and that it is dynamically present with him every moment of his life. No man lives a moment in a present which can be severed from his past. It is not that a man is the victim of his past, but that he is the possessor of it. Of course, it also possesses him, not as a master possesses a slave, but as a lover or intimate companion holds one closely to him—or her.

The thought intrigued him as he walked on. He marvelled that he could walk so well, without weariness, and without pain. His new shoes rubbed somewhat, but even that seemed trifling. He had seen the new houses where once there had been large uninhabited grounds and tree-grown groves, but the new homes were quiet and fitting. They had come modestly and fitted in quickly, he presumed. They were part of the new world, but had scarcely disturbed the old.

ON the other side of the highway there was the home he had often admired. He remembered the two boys who had lived there, and their Knox College uniforms, especially their straw boaters that his brothers had decimated—on the boys' heads!—with a peashooter rifle, much to the indignation of the two boys. They threatened to come back with catapults but his brothers had been very, very masculine, and quite aggressive, so the Knox boys had kept to their side of the highway.

He remembered the two boys had later joined the AIF. In fact this was at the time he had enlisted, and in a short period they were officers, and they had acquitted themselves honourably in the same war and the same prison camp in which he had been. A warm glow of admiration flooded him as he gazed at the house. Doubtless they did not live there now. Probably by this time they had become successful business executives and were now retired. He sighed at the sweetness of memory.

SUDDENLY he had arrived at the old home site. Well, it was no surprise to him to see two large high-rise apartment buildings where once had been his home. A few times—on previous occasions—he had passed in a car but had not wished to stop. Now

he stood and reasoned out the location, and deliberately let the past within rise up and possess his present moments. The old dark-brick home with its leadlight windows, its solid foundations and its capacious rooms, was gone for ever. He sensed that hundreds now lived where once eleven of them had constituted one family, and had fought out the battle of their life together.

His father had been a remarkable man, somewhat taciturn, proud of his vocation as a dentist, fertile in mind, but to a great degree suspicious of the world he did not really know. He had been one of a family of twelve children, and a brother who had died of drowning—a happening he had never been able to forget. He himself would never go near water, and he disliked his children swimming. He too had had a strong and dominant father whom he could never forget, and he sought to bring up his children in the shadow of that father.

His dream had been of a farm, and finally he had taken the remainder of his children on to one near Windsor and had given himself to his new vocation, but the pride of building the old house—now decimated—had never died. It was one of his sons who now stared and remembered. He remembered the thousand incidents that had constituted life—some of them intensely sad, and others redolent of joy and rich happiness.

He remembered the night they had pulled up the dining-room blind and seen the house next door engulfed in flames. There had been a crowd of people standing in their drive and watching, and fire-brigades were working with hoses. How they had not heard the noise was amazing, but they rushed out to help. The next day his father walked amongst the ashes, and decided to buy the land, and buy it he had, and built a beautiful croquet lawn, and a fountain and pond for exotic Japanese fish which he always fed in the late shadows of the day.

He dared not let all the memories crowd in on him. Reluctantly he shook them off, knowing they would return shortly and grip him. Dusk was coming from the west, where the sun was sinking beneath soft winter clouds. Unbidden, the first poem he had written came bursting into his mind:

*I saw it break, tonight, the sunset.
Its pulsing flame leapt quivering to the sky,*

Filling the dull edged clouds with glory—
 A glory red of heaven, then . . .
 Soft, soft, it faded like the last sigh of summer,
 Its clouds grew grey with withdrawn light,
 Phoebus—wearing with beauty—
 Sank 'neath the mountain,
 Yet his wondrous beauty still tears at my heart.

He marvelled at the memory. How many hundreds of poems he had written and now all of them somehow lost. He had filled books with them, along with the short stories that he had composed. Where they were now he did not know, and for that matter did not care. The writing of them had been rich and satisfying. He had written them out under the great pittosporum tree that long ago had been cut down to make way for these new apartments. He had written them in trains when travelling to school. He had written them in the tropics, and even in the heat of war—moments quickly and fiercely snatched when facing possible death. Perhaps it were better they were lost. Somewhere, deeply down in him, they were unlost. The best remained.

The little shop on the corner had also been burned down in his day, and he remembered they had searched amongst the ashes, trying to find old sovereigns. Perhaps they had. He could not recall. Sally Adamson's little cob had been quartered on that vacant block of land when the grass had grown over the ashes. The house that now stood there had been built in his day. It was the one thing that remained. He felt deeply for it, or with it.

He passed on, crossing the road during a rare break in the fast flowing traffic. He marvelled that the corner block where they had played cricket was still uninhabited. The tall gums they had tried to avoid with their batting were now heaven-high. It was another marvel he could not comprehend. How glorious and straight were these old giants!

He turned into the avenue that led to Fox Valley Road, and now he could not cope with all the memories. They rushed up from within. They seemed to flood over him from outside. It was as though they could come out at dusk, like ghosts forbidden the brightness of day. They seeped into his mind, sat on his shoulders, clung in the caverns of his mind. They had not only

played cricket here, but had cycled. From here they had fulfilled their plans for hiking and cycling. Fifty yards down the road they had blown up letterboxes with basket bombs, and received the due reward for their sins.

'Tiger' John's old home still remained, but doubtless old Grandpa was dead these many years. Grandpa, who had not liked him much, was a man who had seemed taciturn and uptight. He had not liked the boys plucking the passionfruit from the vines and making endless drinks on the hot days. 'Does your father let you do that at your place?' he had demanded fiercely, and the boy that he had been admitted this was not the case. Still, there were compensations: log-and-branch huts in the bush nearby, orchards to raid near the old sanitarium, and endless picnics with sausages sizzling in the pan, and spuds in the hot ashes. Once they had come upon a prehistoric freshwater crayfish of such enormous proportions that they had been scared to take him.

Something surprised him. At first he was not sure what it could be, then he knew. Along the footpath, and growing high into the evening sky, were some conifers. They reminded him of tightly branched cypresses he had seen in other countries. They were not indigenous to this country, so far as he could tell. What was most unusual—like an eighth wonder of the world—was the mass of lorikeets that was settling for the night. They seemed to number thousands. Even in the late evening he could catch something of their brilliant metallic beauty. But it was the shrill, whistling calls that entranced him. They brought memories of other rain forests he had visited, but he had never expected to find such a gathering in a suburban street. They shrieked and fought and tussled for resting places, and their shrill cries were like music to him. His memory searched for parrot calls in the past, but he could recall none. He could not remember these birds being present in his day. A new phenomenon had manifested itself in his old suburb.

He wandered on. He knew the sentimental journey was almost at an end. His feet were aching and his two heels were rubbed by the new shoes. 'Blisters tomorrow, most likely,' he thought, but he did not want to end the joyous orgy of memory. He wondered how he would make it back to the station, but pressed on. Of

course, the old houses were gone except where their spacious grounds had been sold and others built near them in subdivisions. His glorious bush had been occupied, and yet—he doubted not—the old flights of Sydney Waxbills ('Redheads' they had called them, as they had trapped them in dozens) were still around. Long ago the beautiful Diamond sparrows must have disappeared, and with them numerous other species. Doubtless they had gone with the old tramps who had inhabited the bush and heaped up their bottles for sale to the 'bottle-ohs'. All of that was gone.

His spirit felt gentle and mellow as he turned towards the other side of the road, and other bush where once he would travel for miles in search of rare insects, the eggs of rare birds, and where he would often sit in the kangaroo grass and write his poems on bits of paper he had brought with him. He remembered—unbidden—the great bushfire that had invaded that area one day, and the men who had gathered to stem it. They drank tea to revive their dehydrated bodies, and he who had never liked tea gulped the stuff which was just about at the boil, and was thoroughly grateful. It tasted like nectar to his parched body.

NOW the night had come, and he would have to turn back. He leaned against a tree whilst he unloosed his shoe and straightened out the rumpled sock. He rubbed the bole of the great eucalypt, thinking it might have been a sapling when he was twelve, and now that he was seventy it was sixty years older. He rather liked that thought—he and the tree growing older together. He remembered the tall palm at the railway station garden, and nodded thoughtfully.

Perhaps some of them noted him as he limped back to the Avenue. It may have been that they noticed him as they passed him in their beautiful limousines, but he did not mind. He knew he had a treasure within that Croesus could never have accumulated. He was a billionaire of memory, and wondered vaguely why it was. 'Is it because—for the most part—I have kept integrity?' he asked himself. The question was wholly without pride. He knew somewhere in his mind that grace alone can preserve the past in sweetness.

The journey back was different, but the memories had not faded. They kept coming to him in ever richer measure. Past incidents would flash into his mind and he was immensely grateful for them, even though some of them were tinged with pain.

Regaining the highway, he crossed during a rare lull in the traffic. He smiled at the six lanes and remembered when there were scarcely two lanes, and no line down the centre. Milk carts, bakers' carts, and fruiterers' carts had clattered along that road. He had gathered manure for their gardens from its surface. On Sunday afternoons they had sat on their brick fence at the front of the house and had written down the numbers of the cars—so comparatively few they were. Tramps walked by with their blueys humped on their backs, and bottle-ohs shouted, 'Any bottles, bones or bags for sale?', whilst the clothes-props man cried, 'Clothes pra-a-arps for sale!'

These old ghosts remained silent as he walked towards the station. With satisfaction he watched the walkers from the station press past him towards their homes, the warmth and the food. He liked the cut of the young people, the dignity of the older ones, and the joy of the younger children as they scudded past him. He remembered, with a grin, how on nights when he had had to go to Mussetts or Perrymans for purchases he would hide his eyes under his hands to shield them from the brightness of the street lights so that his travel would be only in the dark! It was better to be in darkness than have light and then darkness! He smiled with tired amusement at the memory. He could not bear the contrast between light and darkness!

BEFORE he reached the station the rich insight came to him. Perhaps it was more an understanding than an insight. He suddenly knew that a human being is himself because of his past, his present and his future. If his past is bitter and dark then he must flee into the future and miss the present, but if his past is rich and strong he lives well in his present and in hope of his future. He does not so fear his future that he must retreat into his past. The man whose past is grim and unredeemed must live with it, for ever grateful that he has a past, albeit it is not a happy one. To have a past—even a sad one—is to live on this earth. He

could well remember the tears and agonies of his own past, but even those things had generally tended towards something good and wonderful.

It struck him that his life was the good aggregation of its accomplished actions. His own treasury yielded more than he could handle. He could cope with the present because of this past. The past was his as much as his present, and it was constraining him to the good future. He wondered how all that worked out across the entire human race—indeed, across the many ages of that same race.

THE train drew away from the station with a slight jerk, sliding into a smoother pattern, making a rhythm of sorts on the welded rails. Tomorrow—and the next day—he would see and meet men and women out of his own past, and the thought made him happy and contented. He leaned back, glancing around at the privatised travellers as each withdrew into his own personal world. This they had done sixty years ago, and he doubted not would continue to so do for many decades yet to come, but he did not bother about it. His tired feet rested against the foot-rail, and a delicious ease from the pain of walking crept through him.

He did not much mind his age at that moment. He felt so young—crowded as he was with the memories of his youth—and he was reluctant to let the past slip away from him. As he reclined in unbidden joy, he knew that in some way his past was with him for ever.

ORDINARY DAYS: ORDINARY PEOPLE

HE saw the red rim of the morning, over and above the tall stringy-barks, and knew it was going to be a hot day. He liked the last cool slivers of the night as they anticipated the heat that would pour into the day, though gently and steadily, until there was a kind of dry, persistent throb. That was the way it was bound to be: he knew that.

He looked at the sloping lawns and the 'stringies'—stringy-barks to the uninitiated—and remembered when it had all been dry bush, and silent for all that. The birds were absent when they first came into the large white besser-brick house, and they had stayed away until Edna had planted bottlebrushes and grevilleas, and other honey-shrubs, and then birds had begun to come; and now in the morning he could hear the sippets of song of the wrens and the tits, and with them the long calls of birds whose names he did not yet know—like the heavy brown ones which hung on the tall stem of the yakka, with its myriad tiny flowers.

Every morning it was like this, so bewilderingly alive, so busy about its own things, that his thoughts scattered themselves in his brain and he was alert to another day which would be filled with 'thises and thats'. Across the lawn swooped magpies George and Mildred, with their two new children who carked and complained until their crops were heavy with the takings. One day George had flogged a mouse on the garden path until it was softened to edibility.

He never ceased to be amazed by it all. It had ever been like this—new things happening, new events running one into the other until time had been like a loomed carpet spreading out before him, with ever-changing designs and new features. Whilst he felt the cool dawn melting about him, and the glow coming over all things, he knew she was sleeping. She used sleep like a

thing to be coveted, and waking like an intrusion. He had never envied her that—whatever else may have been his covetings. He used his nights to learn or imagine new things, and to plan for the life that kept meeting him in the pregnant dawns.

Long ago—long, long ago, it seemed to him—the children had gone. Not fled: they had slipped away, finding wives or husbands and moving on to children—his grandchildren. He remembered each one in this dawn, children and their children, and soon their children's children's children around the corner. He was impatient for this as he emptied kitchen gleanings into the fenced rubbish tip. This was the moment for which George and Mildred waited. Without a glance at him they swooped from above and worked hard at the house scraps. He left them for the vegetable garden.

His pride and joy it was. He easily remembered the first attempts some fifteen years ago. Driving the pick into the hard soil, clearing the stones—tonnes of them—and eking out a small patch of raw earth. Been like this for millenniums, it had. Now he had to teach it how to become true soil—free of stones, built into dark chocolate by the constant application of humus and the organic manures. He always chuckled with his conquest of the resistant earth.

It stretched out before him—nearly an acre of plants in rows. Just like the platoons of his old army unit. They stood in their rows in the still morning, like green sentinels awaiting the summons of the day—routine orders issued by their white-haired unit officer. He marvelled every day at the way seeds turned into green spikes or shoots and then shaped themselves out into their varieties—vines, brassicas, spiky maize standing still to attention and even presenting arms, potato tops feathering out like small waves of green, and green onions leaning and looping across the hoed rows. This was the time when tomato stakes were like a whole company awaiting the sar-major. He saw their creamy yellow flowers and the small pale-green buttons of the fruiting tomatoes. He moved in and out of the rows, pulling at a vagrant thistle and at deadly nightshade plants disguising themselves as tomato seedlings. When he had a barrow-load he trundled them to the compost enclosure, up-ending the lot on the new heap.

He waved to the Mini-Skip fellow who brought rough filling down to the teaching centre. They had not spoken a word to each other in all the years this had been happening, but they were good friends—quietly. Each wondered what the other thought, but they seemed to know, anyway. They both liked the early part of the day when others were not about in it. There was always time for contemplation.

His mind teemed with ideas in the early mornings. He would select the best—the most practical—and for the rest he would enjoy the dreaming that came to him. He seemed to remember it was in school when he first dreamed, and teachers would often rap him out of his mind-ramblings and bring him back to the reality of the maths he disliked and the history he loved. He revelled in his thoughts which came tumbling one over the other, but he wondered whether he would have enough lifespan to cover all the plans he had and the goals which presented themselves.

What worried him a bit was her cough. He hadn't liked that. Perhaps he had better hurry with the watering and get back to her. He set the misty sprays going, remembering the irrigation he had installed in their early days on the North Coast of another State. It had been chocolate soil there, too, but alluvial from a long time back. He could still hear the 'chitter-chatter' of the butterfly sprays and still marvel at the wonder of water.

She was asleep when he crept in. He closed the bedroom door and began silently preparing the breakfast. He had developed a speedy routine. He had his tray: she hers. If ever he set them in another order he would become confused, putting the grapefruit on his tray and his peeled-and-quartered orange on hers. She had a cup and saucer, and he had a morning mug the grandchildren had given him on his sixtieth birthday. He would ponder the confusion and reset the trays, jealous for the time it took. He would rather use his time for the things of life than fritter it on inconsequential.

He set the radio at the lowest volume, and listened to the devotional session. For the past few days it had been Buddhism, but then not the kind he had once studied. Western thought had been injected into it, and he marvelled at the hotch-potch that it now was. He always recognised the clever way in which they

sought to impregnate their listeners with their views. Long ago he had formed his own, and although they grew and developed he never went back on them. Tried and trusty friends were these stalwarts of the faith. He was too secure in them to have to force them on others.

He set it out—the cereal, the toast, the grapefruit and the honey-coloured unsweetened tea. Silently he pulled up the blind. Her eyes looked at him from away back in her world of sleep. He grinned briefly and put a shawl around her back, and built up the pillows. The light kept dawning into her eyes, and the faint smile came. She welcomed the tray with quiet gratitude. The first bars of the national news session broke the silence, and they listened to the world coming into their room, and telling its present section of human history. They both thought worldwide. They had travelled to many places, and tried to keep tabs on the changing face of the nations. Long ago they had given away their cultural cringe. Citizens of the world they were, even amongst the lawns and shrubs, the vegies and the stringies.

After a time she became articulate. He knew she would rather have slept on. He used to think she might do that for ever, as though it were an experience she longed for, and one day would consummate. He enjoyed her, and watched her thoughts rise, and new life begin to flow. That is, until she coughed. She worried quietly, and he worried without change of expression.

‘I think we had better get the doctor,’ he said.

Their son-in-law was her doctor, and affable and always ready to help.

‘I’ll give it a day and see how I go,’ she told him.

She picked up her embroidery and was stitching away whilst the sports commentator was talking cricket.

‘Have a day in bed,’ he said, and he was surprised when she agreed. He knew she must not be well. Getting her to bed was easy; getting her to sleep even more easy. Getting her to stay in bed was a hard task. So then, she wasn’t well!

In his study, in his writing, in his teaching he was an absorbed and fulfilled man. She had insisted in these days on driving him everywhere, as though he were not capable of doing that. He humoured her, letting her drive. Today she needed some

shopping done. He told her he could do that. At the back of his mind he was thinking of seedlings he needed to buy, and seeds, and a bit of organic fertiliser. Also there was a book he wanted.

He had trained his mind to be clear. So clear he was. Being a bit aged did not stop him being active. He could follow behind the rotary hoe for hours without stopping. Only when he had to refill the small petrol-tank did he stop. Or when someone called him to a phone, or stopped by to have a yarn. Once he would have regretted the intrusion on his valuable thought and time, but in these days he valued interchange with others even more than his thoughts. So he worked and talked and thought and remembered. He would let his mind go back to when she was a girl, and a bit pert at that, and he knew she had changed little. Maybe he, too, had changed little.

He would show her he could drive. He talked to David her doctor on the phone, and he wasn’t worried about the little bit of a cough. Later she would be examined. Now he had better drive to the shopping centre and get their goods. For his part there would be more people to observe, more insights into these ever-changing humans, and so more thought-fodder for his contemplation.

The vehicle felt good in his hands. He steadied it down the steep slope, and brought it triumphantly to the shopping centre. He parked rightfully in the zone for the handicapped, and limped to the supermarket. He had trained himself for the supermarket, steadily ignoring their seductive blandishments, their super-specials, and their cleverly placed goods. At least in this store they had given up soft and persuasive music. He made his purchases, cleverly steering his trolley past absent-minded shoppers, avoiding old ladies of his own age whose stares were vacant and whose steering was infamous. Unthinkingly he made his way to the ‘six-only articles’ checkout, and was gently reprimanded because he had more goods than six in his trolley.

The checkout girl decided he was a nice old man. Deceived by his silvery hair and gentle stare, she let him through. Next to him in the handicapped parking lot was a car of the unhandicapped. He felt the intrusion and was inclined to stay in order to chide the errant driver. She was a helpless young wife and looked as

though she had had a tragedy this very morning, so he let her off. He added her to his store of character memories. He knew she would come out one day when he wrote a story.

When he entered the bedroom she tried to check up on everything. She fancied she knew just about all his thoughts. She always understood his actions. She swiftly discovered he had left the meat at the checkout counter. He marvelled at his own stupidity.

'I'll go back,' he said. When he went back they had listed his goods and put them back in the show counter. The gentle girl refunded his money and he wandered off to buy the meat afresh. On the way he met Glenda—an old friend—and they chatted about this and that. He was gleaning away at what he could get, smiling at her and selecting the best. He never ceased to thrill at intelligent people. When he met someone who was not especially intelligent but highly intuitive, he also thrilled at them. He loved evoking thoughts and ideas, and he egged people on until they disclosed their best wares, and he would farewell them with much inward chuckling, and sometimes with high glee. He knew they also liked surprising themselves.

When Doctor David came in the late evening, he discovered bronchitis deep and heavy in his mother-in-law—down to the bottom of her lungs—and prescribed bed for some days and suitable medication. She retired with a sigh and settled down to some justified and licit rest. He thought in terms of cooking meals, car travel and shopping, interruptions to his gardening, writing and teaching preparation.

At the shopping centre and the handicapped parking spot he thought he saw another illicit parker. In his mild agitation he locked the car without taking the key from the ignition slot. He discovered the other car belonged to a handicapped person. He rang the teaching centre for somebody to bring him another key. Then he shopped. Someone brought the key and he drove back, happy this time that all was well. That is, until he found the money wallet was missing.

She thought it was very funny. 'It was an old wallet,' she said, 'and only five dollars in it, so what is so bad?' She teased him in front of their pastor who was visiting them. 'If you keep doing this,' she said, 'we'll run out of money.'

The pastor was on his side—being a man as well. 'Hey,' he asked, 'what was the fine you had for speeding? How much was that?'

She escaped by coughing and spluttering. She wouldn't tell.

He asked, 'Which fine are we talking about—the latest or the earlier one?'

The pastor confessed great shock. 'What a wild woman!' he said.

They talked about many things with deep interest. Her voice kept fading into hoarseness and her laughter left her breathless. When the pastor went, he turned on the evening sprays in the garden. The first strawberries of the season gleamed red. He gathered them—plump and shiny—to put with her yoghurt. How he hated yoghurt, but the strawberries would look good in the fermented stuff. He noticed the early sweet corn was beginning to tassel and spike with tiny cobs. He looked down the long rows with the vast variety of greens, and felt most contented. Some Adelaide rosellas were fighting for the creamy stringy-bark flowers. Above them in a few pines black cockatoos cried incessantly and cracked the pine cones in their strong beaks, seeking out the delicious nuts. A kookaburra stared down from a branch at the goldfish pond. He seemed intrigued by the first water-lily of the season.

'It is all ordinary,' he said to himself, but he knew it wasn't. The red rim had come back into the sky, but this time it was in the west. 'Hot day tomorrow,' he said, thinking of the plants which loved the heat. He lay down on the thick turf of the green lawn, and let himself enjoy it all.

Inside she would be waiting for the tea he had cooked. She would like the attention, savouring the moment they relaxed together. They would watch this and that on the TV, flicking off the things distasteful and empty and seeking out great drama if it were available, but settling for 'cops and robbers' otherwise. Finally they would talk over the day.

She would say, 'I wonder who has the wallet,' and he would ignore the discussion. 'You are really absent-minded,' she would giggle, but he would have none of that. Being sensibly serious, he would tell her he had a very good mind and it was not absent,

but filled up with all sorts of good things which made wallet losses irrelevant. He would then remind her that speeding over the limit would not help their finances, and what was five dollars against maybe nearly two hundred? He would ruminare over all the books he could have bought with that amazing amount of money.

She would be undisturbed, unimpressed. She would tell him she had gone out to the Holden Hill Police Station, and looked at their video of the event, and she had triumphantly shown them that when you drive down Shepherd's Hill Road, unless you keep the brake on all the way down, you have to do over sixty kilometres per hour

He would say, 'Yes, but you are bound to do that by law, even if you wear out your brakes and have to get new linings, since it is the law.'

Neither of them would win, of course. They were both sturdy but gentle egotists. He visualised some friend coming in to visit her in her sickness and describing him—himself—whistling his merry way through the supermarket, buying this and that, and how she—the visiting friend—was deeply impressed by his buyer's innocence and eagerness, and how leaving an almost worthless wallet in the bottom of the trolley was no great crime, but showed his humanity. She—his once ailing but now healing wife—would be moved by sudden admiration for him, whilst he for ever would forget about unfortunate traffic fines.

After all this they would talk about their children—some of whom lived in remote parts of this great continent. They would talk over the grandchildren, and fondly imagine them as being settled and contented in life, despite the vagaries of this present time. Finally they would hold hands as they drifted off to sleep.

What he did not know was that tomorrow he would find the wallet in the boot of the car, and that she would never again—repeat: never again—drive over the speed limit, and he would be able to buy one or two of those books he believed he needed, and she would be able to get another hanging pot or two for her conservatory, and there would still be something moderately substantial for the hungry ones overseas.

NIMBLE MINDS

'LOOK!' said the man. He was sitting at the edge of his desk, facing his computer. 'Look!' he repeated. 'Look at what I can do!'

The boy standing beside him, staring at the screen, seemed irritated. He could never stand anyone saying, 'Look what I can do!'

'Don't be a skite,' he said.

Whenever anyone said, 'Look at what I can do,' it was like kids always trying to get attention, or even Galahs hanging upside down on a gum tree, holding on by one claw, showing off.

'No,' said the man, 'you aren't looking. I can do something special.'

The boy allowed himself to look at the computer screen.

The man was typing something. Then he hit a key and the word exploded into bits and disappeared.

'See!' said the man. 'See! Isn't that strange?'

The boy pouted with scorn. 'I could do better any day.'

'Don't you skite, either,' said the man with mock severity. He was building up another word. Then he clicked his mouse, hit a code key, scrolled the lot, hit another key and strange figures came on to the screen in place of the paragraph.

'Same words,' said the man laughing, 'but in the form of symbols, different symbols.' He smiled. 'All letters are symbols, and all words are symbols. Letters make words, make symbols. Symbols make words.'

The boy decided not to be angry, and smiled. Then he said with half admiration, 'Very funny!' This was when the symbols suddenly changed back to words, and he read them.

They said, 'We are symbols. We are words. Look at us, and think. Do you recognise us?'

In his mind something strange was happening. Words were turning to symbols, symbols to words, yet he had no mouse in his hand, and his fingers were not on the keys. He thought it remarkable, and a trifle frightening. What would his mind do next?

He decided he must escape from the word-symbol fix.

'Can you play computer games?' he asked.

At first the man did not hear him, so he repeated the question. It was like having a number or words on the new phone and hitting 'redial'. The question was there a second time, and a third time, and so on—for ever.

The man shook his head. He was making justified type suddenly change all down the middle of the page because he had centred it with a code key. It looked asymmetrically symmetrical, and rather beautiful.

He shook his head. 'Never play computer games,' he said.

'Why not?' retorted the boy.

'Because,' said the man, 'they get you in. They run your life. They make you try to win something, and you don't have to win everything you do in life.' He chuckled. 'Never have to win if you don't want to. You can have more fun not winning.'

'How come,' said the boy, 'having more fun if you do not win?'

'People hate you winning,' the man said, 'and they love you not winning. Better to be loved. Better not to make people sad.'

'You sound as though you don't have any guts,' said the boy. 'Frightened to win, eh?'

'Watch a football field,' said the man, 'especially if they play in Europe or South America—Britons, Latins of all kinds. Cold temperature countries. They get electrified when they play, and if they lose they fight. Especially the soccer fans.'

The boy said, 'You wouldn't be real if you didn't want to win.'

The man brought the subject back to the computer. 'Computer games make your mind always want to win.'

'But I do always want to win,' said the boy.

'Right!' agreed the man heartily, 'but winning was there before you started to play.'

'So the computer is not to blame,' said the boy, 'so why don't you play computer games?'

'Because,' said the man, 'I don't want my wishing to win to grow, to build up, to become an enlarged habit, a swollen desire. Desire will run you in the end.'

He looked at the computer, making words whirl away.

'Look at places where the grandstands are weak, and they collapse and people get killed.'

The boy thought about that. 'You just can't blame a computer,' he said.

'Can't blame a computer for anything,' agreed the man. 'They do what we want them to do—anyway, up to a point.'

The boy remembered seeing a video of a grandstand collapsing. He could still see people crushed and bleeding, and some dead.

'I don't think computer games could do all that,' he said.

'No,' said the man, 'you can't see computer games doing it. You can only see us doing it. Computers don't encourage grandstands to collapse, or people to fight one another to be killed.'

'If you did it all on a computer,' the boy said, 'then you would never do it on a football field.'

'Wrong!' shouted the man without venom and without delight. 'Caught you there, didn't I? You do those things yourself. You only do them in life when you have played them out—time and again—on a computer.'

'Lots of people who do those things never play computers,' said the boy. 'They only play sport or watch sport.'

The man nodded. He was doing rather tricky things with keys and codes, and yet he was listening to the boy.

'Look!' he said to the boy, 'have you done that before?'

The man was doing graphics with special software, but the boy wasn't into graphics—not making them, anyway.

'I bet,' said the boy, 'I can show you a thing or two if you let me get at the keyboard.'

The man jumped up and moved aside. 'Go ahead. Go ahead any time. Show me anything. Show me everything, but just don't boast.'

The boy said angrily, 'But you have been boasting. You have been trying to impress me.'

The man laughed happily. 'No boasting,' he said, 'no impressing. Just doing. Go on, do. Do lots.'

The boy had not tried this kind of word processor before. It had different codes, different commands. But he was astute. He was easily the best in his class. No one could catch him.

Hardly hesitating, he began experimenting.

The man was delighted. 'Good for you,' he kept saying, as though someone else was saying, 'Bad for you,' and he was countering this.

He was rubbing his hands gleefully. 'Better than I thought, than ever I thought.'

The boy too was delighted. His fingers curled up above the keyboard, like insect antennae that move in quick orientation.

He knew the man was not asking him to be clever or immediately successful and it went like wine to his head—quite heady. Ha!

The man crowed like a rooster. 'Get that!' he said. 'Just look at it. The boy is remarkable. He's a genius. He is good. He is the best.'

He paused, and then said, 'Don't have to be the best, but if you are, then don't think about it. Just do well.'

The boy heard his words, and liked them, but wanted to debate. 'Why shouldn't I be the best?'

'That's easy,' said the man. 'You'll think you are. You'll be a rooster on a dunghill, a monument in the park, always wanting to die so that you can be famous for ever.'

'Who wants to be famous?' asked the boy.

'You,' said the man, 'if you're not careful.'

'Back to winning, eh?' said the boy, and he began quick lettering, quick wording. Out of his brain they came—the words, the sentences, the ideas, the paragraphs, the little story.

'There was a man,' said the computer, 'who never wanted to win. He thought that by not winning he would win. Did he then lose or did he win? Did he lose by not winning, or win by losing, so that others might win and not lose? But then they would lose because the man had not won, but had won them by not winning, which was what the man wanted to do; so he won.'

The screen brightened at a touch. The letters went whirling together, became a solid block, battered their way in to the boy's memory for ever, and started the adult male in him thinking.

The man was saying slowly, 'Very good. But then, there is a weakness.'

'Look out,' said the boy, 'you will win if you beat me with an idea.'

'No,' said the man, 'you will win if I don't beat you, so that I am not beating you in order to win but to stop you winning, so that you don't lose by winning.'

The boy was thinking of the soccer fans in Belgium and all the dead around the place.

He was writing on the screen, appealing to the older man. 'Please help me,' he was saying. Apart from working through a computer he would never appeal to another person for help. He was a clever, independent boy.

He had always wanted to win.

In his family he tried to win. To win over his mother was no problem, but not over his father.

'Help me,' he was appealing, 'help me to know how not to win.'

'Easy,' said the man. 'Just be yourself and don't try to win.'

'Being myself is why I try to win,' the boy signalled, 'so how can I get out of it?'

'Try erase,' said the man.

The boy erased his own words.

Quickly he wrote again. 'Erase is negative. I can't just erase all the time.'

'Write properly,' said the man. 'Write without winning. Write for writing's sake. Write well.'

'If I write well I will be a bit proud,' said the boy. 'Then I will want to go on to doing more, and doing it very well. I will think of winning against others.'

'Try losing against others for their sakes,' said the man, 'and only win if it is for their sakes, in which case you will not really win, but yet you will win.'

The boy said, 'I am not funning. You have disturbed me. I can see the soccer fans fighting one another. I can hear the grandstand breaking, cracking.' He underlined the word 'cracking', made it stand out in bold figurement, and then set it flashing.

‘I can hear too,’ said the man soberly. ‘I can see the seating crashing about their heads. I can see blood everywhere. I can see the wild looks in people’s eyes. I can hear the screaming. I can see the unbelief—unbelief in what human beings can do in a crisis. What they do do in crises.’

‘How can you do that?’ asked the boy. It was being communicated right into the inside of his head, and making his adrenalin flow.

The boy wanted to cry.

He repeated the question on the screen. ‘How do you know it like that?’ he asked.

The man said, ‘Because I was there. Because I always wanted to win.’ He paused, then said again, ‘I was there. I was in the war.’

‘What war?’ asked the boy.

‘The war of sport,’ the man said. ‘It is all war, whether it is a team war or a tribal war or a one-man war.’ He stopped a moment, then added, ‘Or a one-woman war.’

The boy felt sick. ‘I wish we could get back to plain computer stuff,’ he said. He stood up. ‘You sit down and start it all over again. Make it fresh and happy.’

The man sat on the computer chair at his computer desk. He tapped keys, made his screen clear, and began afresh.

The boy watched him.

The man was typing away with what the boy knew to be ‘idiot typing.’ The typing didn’t stop for punctuation of any kind. It just kept going on and on and there were many mistakes. He looked at them.

In the story he was writing, the man said, ‘Don’t worry about punctuation or mistakes. You can always come back later and tidy it up. Let nothing impede the flow.’

‘Let nothing impede the flow.’ *Let nothing impede the flow.* The sentence came into italics in his mind. The man scrolled the sentence and put it into italics.

‘*Don’t impede the flow,*’ he had written. He saved the sentence, hit a key and into the story kept coming the sentence, ‘*Don’t impede the flow.*’

The boy knew he would never forget it.

‘Anger impedes the flow,’ the man had now written. ‘Anger makes our mind dart everywhere.’

‘We get different ideas quickly,’ said the man, ‘but they are not good ideas. The angry person will want to win again and again.’

He was writing, ‘We get angry if we don’t win, and getting angry is a preventative against winning; but we’ll win—oh yes, we’ll win. So anger is always with us.’

‘Anger is always with us,’ thought the boy. He kept seeing the spectators. They were angry at the referee; they were angry at the players. They were not just angry at the opposition players but the home players. They were bitter about not winning.

The boy could feel the anger. ‘When they lost, we lost,’ he said.

The man was writing as though his life depended on it.

The keys were moving rhythmically as though a power had taken over the computer man.

‘It is not good enough not to win,’ he was writing, ‘and not good enough just to lose. It is better to not care about winning or losing, but to care about others.’

The boy said, ‘The world would be crazy in that case.’

‘The world is crazy already,’ the man tapped out. He put it all in upper case, in old English, in old German, as though English and German people were crazy. He could have put it in Greek upper case because he had the fonts for that, too.

‘If we were what we really were,’ said the man, ‘then we would just love.’

Now the boy became afraid of the man, or the power that was dictating ideas through him.

‘You have a preacher in the computer,’ he said, and for some reason he laughed.

The man ignored this, and wrote, ‘If all love, then we can play properly. Playing is for learning. Learning is true fun, true delight.’

He wrote a question. It was, ‘Why not love?’

The boy was full of scorn. ‘Loving is clever,’ he said, ‘when others want to get at you.’

‘Get to you,’ the man wrote.

'At you,' the boy insisted, 'to you, to get at you. They want what they want.'

'They want reciprocal love,' the man said, not stopping to look at the dictionary. That would come later.

'You mean two-way,' said the boy, who knew a word or two.

The computer agreed. It went on with a brilliant story.

The boy had to admit it was brilliant. He liked it. He felt tears coming to his eyes.

Suddenly he did not want to win, or lose, or win and lose, or win, win, win, and lose, lose, lose. He just wanted to live.

The man clicked his mouse, hit a key, clicked the mouse again, and everything had gone.

The boy cried out with dismay. 'I want that story. Can you get it back?'

'Yes,' said the man, 'but I won't.'

'Why not?' the boy cried. He longed to tear the man away and sit down and bring it back. He had beaten 'Erase' before.

'No need,' said the man solemnly, and then joyously. 'It is all there.'

'Where?' said the boy.

'In your mind,' said the man. 'I tapped it into your mind.'

'You did?' He was astonished. 'You tapped it into my mind?'

'Into your mind,' the man said, and he swivelled in his chair.

For the first time their eyes met face to face, their faces met eye to eye.

'It's great,' said the man. 'It is all there in the mind.'

The boy marvelled. 'It's in the heart,' he said.

The man nodded. 'In the heart.'

The boy said, 'Were you really there? Were you there? Did you see it all?'

'I have always been there, and there, and there,' said the man.

The boy went cold. 'Are you God?' he asked.

The man said 'No, I'm not God. I'm a man.'

'Then how do you know?' asked the boy.

The man smiled gently. 'Just know,' he said. He looked at the boy. 'You know that I know, and I know that you know that I know, but then I don't matter, anyway.'

That was a long sentence for the boy, a sentence not on the

computer. On the computer, sentences seemed short enough and understandable.

'I don't think I want to win,' said the boy.

The man had tears in his eyes. 'I wish I had always wished that,' he said.

The computer screen went black but both knew that was not the end.

One touch of a key and it would be brilliant again. 'Fancy that,' thought the boy, 'one touch of a key and everything becomes brilliant!'

He was thinking about the mind and the heart, the inner computer.

He knew that nothing good had been erased. The other didn't matter.

REGENERATION

HE was a non-professional. That is, he was a non-tradesperson. He envied the professionals with whom he worked. Julie—the one with deft fingers, the brilliant copper head of hair, the wide-open green eyes, and the scorn for all other people in the world—she was one he envied. Ralph—the one who knew more about architecture than them all put together—was another one that he envied. He would have liked to have known more about architectural art than Ralph. That would have made him feel good, feel competent—at home with the restoration work. Sam was a very quiet person, so that he—Lonergan—was always open to seasons of disquiet when Sam worked for hours without saying a word. At the same time Sam was a therapeutic person. Working alongside him, Lonergan could feel healing in his silences. After a time the disquiet would go, and he wanted only to be as silent as Sam. He could even bear with the thin, lip-curling acidity of Julie, the scornful cleverness of Ralph, and the boisterous extroversion of Joe, whose ability at scaffold-building helped to put them on the map as a team.

They ate, drank, talked, dreamed and schemed restoration. It was not as though the Restoration and Maintenance Trust overpaid them. Often they were on the rocks financially, but somehow they managed. He never talked to them about his own finances, and they never troubled him. They joked about their salaries as though they were the troubles which they had to endure. He knew they all had their own troubles of different kinds. Julie had gone through two marriages, Ralph was disappointed with the smallness of his professional position, and Joe was always dreaming of great scaffolding contracts he had never brought off.

Even so—given in all this—they enjoyed the work they did, and were proud of what they achieved. Not that they ever said

anything in self-praise. Not that they ever congratulated one another. They were silent about all that. Only when the new work and jobs came would they show any excitement or feeling. Seeing the old buildings in states of disrepair and visualising their restoration was what kept them together. It was like a rare glue—an uncanny and unseen adhesive which made them one. They would set about the renewal with an offhanded delight. In fact it seemed about the only genuine delight they had. Their cynicism, which covered just about everything else in life, was not part of this obsession with restoration.

Sometimes he wondered about that. He had learned that most social workers were people with social problems themselves. They took up the profession in order to heal themselves—not that they would ever admit to this compulsion. He knew that all his companions had a transient interior restoration when they worked on regenerating buildings. Himself—he knew no restoration. He had simply learned to be skilled with mortars, cements, and shades of building paints.

He knew the team secretly admired him for his non-professional skill with a trowel and mortar. Had he not been able to do this he would never have been permitted to work with them. They would have frozen him out with their scorn. They had a strong, fine irony which often became acerbic sarcasm, and which could even score his own spirit. That is why he hated their competency, and worked hard at honing his own self-taught ability. He had to do this to keep up with them, and somehow boost his own ego. He knew he was lame in life, hobbling where others walked, limping where they ran.

Even so, he was comfortable with them. The team of four was really composed of brilliant failures who kept demanding success of one another and handing out cynicism as a stimulant to further action. After a time he found he could live with this way of life, although his contribution was almost *non est*.

THEY had picked him up one day when they had been working on the old home 'Carrickduv'. It was an historic Sydney home in the early Georgian fashion. The Hawkesbury sandstone was discoloured, and crude attempts to refurbish the old mortar had

left it with a pickled effect. He had watched them trying to match the mortar, and had laughed at them. At first they had ignored him, despising his criticism, but he knew them to be amateurs when it came to colours. He did not laugh at their trowelling—they were all able with it.

It was the trowelling which got him in with them. He had returned the next day with his trowels, with his bags of special mixed mortars, and his different sands, along with his colours for shadings. They had watched him drive his battered utility into the yard, and had shown contempt as he had mixed his mortars. They offered no objections when he scraped away decayed mortar and filled up with new mortar. His restoration of crumbled sandstone was greeted with offhanded scorn, but nevertheless they let him do it. After a time they ignored him and he had driven

off a bit miffed, thinking they ought to have made some comment.

He drove in three days later. He had given time for the mortar to dry—time for it to be inspected. They had said little, but he knew they admired his work. Rather, they coveted his aid. So he had joined them. There had been no talk of a permanent job, but he had been grateful for being taken on. He had been a little surprised when asked to sign a document. Later—when he was paid—he knew they really wanted him to work with them.

Julie and Ralph worked together on joinery. They would visit the old second-hand yards and try to discover door and window frames, architraves and skirtings which were original, and which saved them having to manufacture imitations of the old. Joe was a professional plumber who despised modern plumbing. He knew how to produce the equivalents of old water-piping, ornamental guttering and downpipes. He had an instinct for knowing where the original piping was laid, and for sensing where tree roots had blocked old drainage. His scaffolding allowed them to work in comfort on the bare faces of walls, tall chimneys, and high garrets.

In the early days they had watched him mix his shades of mortar, and he had caught rare glints in their eyes as he had used special shell limes to match the convicts' original mortars. Ralph and Julie would go with him as he found old sandstock bricks in battered derelict houses or rare moss-covered stacks in old lumber

yards. They silently liked his cleansing and refurbishing of the bricks. They thought him a bit of a marvel in his matchings. Beyond these few indications they said nothing. He liked their silence.

Sam was good with trowels, but not as good as he was. Sam had a certain pride in only using the regular medium of straight trowels. He looked on Lonergan's homemade tools with a bit of wonder. In any case, Sam's work was straight. He had been a brickie by trade but had studied and become a teacher in a Technical College. Lonergan knew that was quite a step up for Sam. It did not account for Sam's leaving the College to do restoration work. Lonergan suspected it was something to do with a failed relationship. Maybe it had come from a divorce—as in the cases of Ralph and Julie. No one enquired about anything personal. They just arrived at work every day, or, when they were in the country, lived together impersonally. They worked without intimacy.

HE could not remember what it was that had triggered off his own reconstruction. In a vague way he knew he was doing what social workers were unconsciously attempting—their own rehabilitation as humans, as persons. When he had broken off with his family he had done it silently. One day he was with them, and then the next he was gone, unbelievably vanished from their sight. Mortars and restoration had been his hobby, not his work. He had worked in finance successfully enough, but the nagging emptiness of life had irritated him. His inability to relate to people as persons had troubled him, but the pointlessness of everything had gotten to him. He worried about the emptiness of family, the distance his wife Jenny seemed to keep from him. His son's foray into drugs sent him into personal despair. His daughters seemed silly—part of their senseless vacuity. Because he could not do anything about anything, he had given up. He had escaped under a dreary cloud of mindless guilt. He had needed the relief, even though it had never been substantial. He lived with it, in a vague sense of freedom. He had simply merged into the restoration team.

One day it had begun. Curiously enough, this was when he was trowelling. He knew Sam was looking at him sidelong,

slightly superior because his—Sam's—trowel was straight. Sam despised Lonergan's rounded trowels—handmade but clever. Lonergan sensed that Sam would have liked similar tools but would not admit it. It was when he was doing his rounded trowelling on an old gargoyle that it struck him how old and broken things could become as new. He hid his burgeoning delight from Sam, as though it were a bit indecent. Sam would not go for that kind of stuff.

As he worked he thought about Sam, Julie, Joe, and Ralph. He knew they liked the thing they were doing, but it did not explain why they did it, and why they kept at it. He knew it went beyond filling in time. Gradually the thought came to him that they could only cope with one thing—restoration—or, as some called it, maintenance. Why should they want to restore and maintain old buildings? What was it about the old that was so fascinating? Was there something of substance in the past that was not as strong in the present? He remembered wryly that as a boy he had had distaste for the past. Maybe it was because he could not accept the lifestyle of his parents and other older people. Everything they did seemed to have been learned by rote—a useless repetition of human acts without much point. Why—for him—did everything have to have point and purpose? When he looked back on his own life it seemed there had been no special point or purpose.

At times he had been visited with accidie—an inner torpor or lethargy which told him all things were tasteless. He had been fascinated by Jenny, had courted her, and had tried to know her on their honeymoon, but nothing seemed to come of that. The births of the children had been rather vague events. He remembered how relieved he had been to build a garden shed, and to develop his hobby of mixing mortars. He had started on their own house and restored it so that even Jenny was impressed, and the neighbours somewhat envious. They had sold that place and deliberately bought another that was old and cheap. He had set about restoring this. After a time Jenny became tired of the renewal and of him. The children seemed to be one with her. At first he felt the alienation, had tried to restore communication, and then—after failure—had ceased caring.

He had begun watching others, trying to understand why the men liked gathering in pubs, in clubs and at sports rather than just living at home. He wondered why so many worked at hobbies and skills, why some were musicians, artists and writers. Men secreted themselves into backyard sheds, and wives into sewing rooms or studios. He also wondered vaguely about the vast entertainment industry—a system which produced nothing of lasting nature, so ephemeral it was. He wondered, also, about his own hobby. Most of all he wondered why he found communication with Jenny and the children to be so difficult. He knew it was not just his own family. He found intercourse with others a difficult matter. He could not shrug off his problem. It had moved him to leave home, but leaving home had achieved little other than a vague relief from not being confronted directly by his family and others. He knew he had been grateful for the restoration team, although he was—at the same time—mystified by them. It was not that they accepted him or he them, or even one accepted the others. They were reasonably contented to work together as a matter of convenience.

It had been a surprise to him, then, when he and Sam had been working on restoring some sandstone gargoyles. Gargoyles had always fascinated him, being—as they were—the expressions of whimsical artists, sculptors who were intrigued by the rare, the bizarre, the ludicrous, and the ugly. He suddenly found a thrill running through his hands as he trowelled grotesque shapes back into their original life. A statement came to him somewhere from the back of his mind: 'Stir up the gift that is within you.'

At that point he wanted to laugh strange laughter. He felt it in him, but let Sam know nothing about it. He realised why men and women painted, and wrote, and brought things into being which had not previously had the shapes they were now given. The gargoyle under his hand was round and substantial. Its unmoving eyes looked up at him without blinking. It called him to know what its sculptor's fingers had felt, its sculptor's mind had thought. It defied him to break out of his own little cell of life. Whilst he smiled at that, he felt the excitement of being one with the original sculptor. He was carrying on or perpetuating what the artist had sculpted. In that moment he knew he was useful,

and he was not dismayed by the thought. He began to see sense in restoration, and began to understand his fellow workers. Some memory came vaguely to him of man losing true life when—by force of this and that—he was alienated from the work of his hands.

He looked at his own hands and marvelled. If he was not artist enough to carve the original gargoyles, or effect brilliant architectural structures, yet he could renew them. He felt a glee inside himself—glee he had not previously known.

Something else was coming to him—a strange and powerful thought. As he renewed, so he was being renewed! As he restored, so he was being restored. Another picture came to him—a memory of travel in the country with a cynical, bitter man he had known. It was one of the few cases in his life of befriending another person. They had travelled into the beautiful spring green of the country, revelling in its softness and freshness. He remembered that the eucalypts which had been dry and harsh in the summer had become soft with pale red tips. The sky had been clear of clouds, and there was a gentleness in the air.

They had paused on a hill and were looking down at an old house. Inside he had itched to rebuild the house, to restore the window and door frames, to build a new roof, to make it secure with doors and windows, and to seal off the weather so that folk could live in the place, prune and restore the ancient fruit trees that gave occasional comfort to the apple-eating rosellas or the almond-stripping black cockatoos. As they had looked, his friend had suddenly pointed and said, 'That's me; just like that old house—a derelict.'

He had felt a shudder at those words, an involuntary shudder, and with it a bit of pain. His friend had stripped himself bare—had disclosed the erosion which had taken place in his being. At the time Lonergan had been as close to despair as ever in his life. The both of them had looked down on the old house, in one way pathetic in its shambles, and in another noble. The old lines of grandeur, of true domesticity were there—despite the ravages of time. It had been a queer feeling. Now, as he and Sam were strengthening the things that remained, he had the queer feeling that he was, himself, a derelict, a house coming back into being. He stared at the shaded cement as it moulded into the weatherworn

cracks and crevices of the old gargoyle. With each smooth and deft movement something inside him was being renewed. He felt himself to be growing towards, and into, reality.

A quick memory of Jenny came to him, and his heart contracted: her admiration of him when he was restoring their first old home. He knew now that she had admired him. The children had often paused in their playing to look up as he replaced old guttering, and their comments had been good. Queer, small convulsions were taking place in his heart. He wondered whether Ralph and Sam and Julie knew why they were doing what they were doing. He thought, 'Perhaps they don't need to know. Perhaps it is just happening to them, as it is, now, to me.' He wondered at that and stole glances from one to the other. As usual they were silent, and he could not know their thoughts.

He increased his delight as he patched holes in the sandstone walls, tucked the bonding of newly matched mortar, and smoothed the faces and balding heads of the grotesque gargoyles. He knew men had thoughts like the faces and features of gargoyles.

A THOUGHT was invading his heart, and it was a strange one. He found himself uttering it to himself, although not aloud, for his teammates were too close. He was saying to himself, 'We have a history—all of us, all the race. The history goes through from generation to generation, and given there is no genocide or no crazy lemming parade, then there is an unbroken continuity. What we are comes out in what we make, and how we make it, and this heritage asserts its own continuum. We who restore are keeping the lines of it clear. In a way we are keepers of history. We are telling the future clearly what the past is, and what it is about, and we are urging them to recognise this and take no crazy departure from it. We are trusting the past to some reasonable degree, and reminding the future that this would be good for them, too.'

HE knew now that he would have to go back to the cool old Adelaide villa he had once renovated, but wasn't sure how Jenny would take his return. The children—by this time—could have outgrown him, and would be on their way in life. They

and Jenny might not even accept him. There would be little he could do about that. He would try and try, and if he did not succeed at least he could communicate the truth of himself—that he was not faceless, and life was not pointless. As he meditated he felt the silent lifting of his ancient accidie. It went, as a dark bird leaves in the night when it knows its territorial claims have been negated.

Sam, watching, saw Lonergan's hands tremble, and prior to this those hands had never trembled. He look at Lonergan's face, and saw a smile which made him wonder. Lonergan was like his gargoyles, new and rehabilitated, and even jubilant. The thought made him wonder, and look at Lonergan again. Julie, for some reason, had stopped in the midst of trowelling, and Ralph—below them—was looking up, as though he sensed this was one of those rare moments humans know in their lifetimes.

Lonergan himself was silent; poised and still, apart from the slight trembling of his hands. The dark bird had gone, and the silent night was speeding towards its dawn, and he was thinking that he liked that, liked it very much.

THE TRANSMOGRIFIED GENIUS

IN all my sixty years of writing stories and articles I can not remember ever feeling as uneasy as I do at this moment—about to begin a yarn which will set many ears tingling but leave others scornful with unbelief. My uneasiness lies in the fact that I do not possess the original manuscript of the story which long ago burned itself into my brain—so much so that I was afraid to write it down, even after my most puritanical aunt burned it with a haughty holocaust that ended hundreds of my poems, some of my stories, and many of my other scribblings.

We need not pause to mourn that fire, so much as to read the explanation which now I give. My grandfather came from Ireland to Sydney after having the father of a row with my great-grandfather on my mother's side. He brought with him some precious documents that must have made Great-Grandfather boil with rage ('chagrin' they called it in those days) when he discovered his most artistic son had taken the manuscript concerning 'The Transmogrified Painter', a man long since famous in Ireland, land where something of the supernatural seems often to be the order of the natural day.

Many years ago, when my grandfather returned to Ireland to replace my deceased grandmother with the remembered sweetheart of his youth, he left the key to his attic with my father.

'No one,' he told my father, 'ought ever to enter the attic.'

My father, who was English to the core from a generation or two back, calmly agreed. 'No one shall,' he assured white-haired, florid-faced, much-moustached Grandpa.

That assurance—among other things—was to carry our grandfather to Ireland and back, but when he returned he was so

occupied with our step-grandmother that he never even looked into the attic. Lucky for me, that, because I had the manuscript written about the ‘Transmogrified Painter’.

Part of my uneasiness lies in the fact that the original manuscript deliberately did not mention the true names of painters and others—all of whom were personally known to Grandpa. Nor did it mention genuine times and places. The fear of the strange painter was no small dread in a land drenched with superstition—the Irish people being all for situations in which the adrenalin flows freely. Superstition and fear of the unknown is deliciously stimulating. I can assure you that what I write is the honest truth, given in, of course, my own Irish proclivity to embellish somewhat. I confess that when I have written a story I cannot, myself, tell fact from fiction. Even so, no one can convince me that what I have written did not happen—not fully after that fashion, anyway.

The title ‘Transmogrified Painter’ was one that did not fit him in his early days—the days prior to his transmogrification. He was, to be sure, an artist before he was transmogrified.* He was extremely gifted as a painter of rural scenes and extraordinarily competent as a painter of portraits. Just about to name some of those famous portraits, I remember that to do so is to identify this man, and that I dare not do: not even after all these years—the years when he gave up painting rural scenes and portraits of famous men and women. Even the precious manuscript does not tell those names: it was my thorough investigations—later—which revealed the famous subjects of his skill.

His desire and ambition in the early years of artistic success was to be an art critic; and an art critic, as Winthrop Frye has assured us in his noble work *Anatomy of Criticism*, is indeed a high calling. In no time the painter became a highly acclaimed art critic. For some years—the manuscript informed us—he

* For those who are strangers to the word ‘transmogrified’—as I was until I read the script—the verb means ‘To alter or change in form or appearance; to transform (utterly grotesquely, or strangely)’. This is its description in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Metamorphosis is generally a transformation from one form to a more beautiful one, e.g. a caterpillar to a butterfly. Alas, reader, this story speaks not of transformation but of transmogrification.

decamped from Belfast to London. Although, long ago, the manuscript was destroyed by my aunt, I remember that delightful word ‘decamped’ because it was often used by the writer. He described not only the fame of the painter as one rendering brilliant critiques in the journals of his day, but as one who dared to address himself personally to the artists he was reviewing. He believed it was part of his vocation to conduct virtual ‘masters’ classes’ via the medium of his critiques.

Personally, he was a man of genuine integrity and of high moral standing. I say ‘moral’, and not ‘religious’, for he regarded all religion as superstition. Perhaps it would be best to describe him as ‘ethically artistic’ or ‘artistically ethical’—according to where you place the emphasis. If he felt a painter or a sculptor cheated in his art work, he would tell him so. It was, of course, the day of the impressionist, cubist, the Dadaist and other surrealistic schools. He did not see these schools as abominations, yet he himself was bound to no school. He recognised the particular approach of every school, and his reviews were always on the basis of the general criteria of artistic criticism. It goes without saying that he had no time for clever, cynical, or esoteric art. He did not object to sophistication, but his idea was that sophistication ought to be sincere and in depth.

Looking back on what I read about the man, I would say he saw art as being essentially *prophetic*; that is, it was saying something right from the source of all truth, saying it clearly, and saying it without seeking to curry favour. Art always has to be that way and never merely decorative or photographic—as such. Although he never used the word ‘resonate’, I imagine this word described his view of art. Each creation ought to be of the kind that would evoke a resonance within the viewer, or—in the case of music or literature—within the hearer.

His intention to keep artists to their true game, by pointing out their faults and failings in their painting, did not earn him a great deal of affection. Some, of course, sought to pander to him as the critic of the moment who could make or break them, but he had no time for the flatterer, the insincere or the sycophant. He did not greatly care whether he healed or wounded an artist. It was art in which he was interested, and to him both the form and the

substance mattered much. He was passionate in regard to the integrity of the painter or sculptor.

I confess that as a boy in my late teens, already smitten with a passion to write well, I learned a lot from the stolen manuscript written about the Painter-Critic. I spent hours pondering the whole matter, and often I trembled as I read the illicit material. Much of it I have absorbed into my own art of writing, but what amazed me was the fact that the art critic followed up the advice he had given, in order to see whether the artist had received it and done something about it—such as correcting the deficiencies of the work he had executed. When a person did not do this the Painter-Critic was finished with him: never again did he write a critique for that unfortunate—or was it fortunate?—artist.

He was not without his own critics, and this was where his own troubles began. He could speak from his throne as a critic—as it were *ex cathedra*—but could not accept others questioning his right or competency to do so. He was called such names as ‘moralist’, ‘legalist’, and ‘overbearing busybody’. He could well afford to ignore such criticisms, but the fact is that they began to irritate him. Irritation eventually gave way to aggravation as certain artists banded together to vilify his purist approach, his puritanical strictures on their untrammelled work. Of course, I am not here speaking of morals or ethics, but of his standards for works of art and modes of painting and sculpting.

It is at this point I find myself in difficulties. Much better than I can do it, the manuscript described the build-up of anger in the Painter-Critic. Being a genius he knew he was right, and so became rightfully furious at the mindless charges made against him. Not for some time did folk notice the change of mood and mind in the man, the change which eventually caused him abruptly to relinquish his post as an art critic and—after a brief period—to resume painting, and eventually to display his works of art in personal and general exhibitions.

His new works were highly admired—as his previous art had been admired—but critics of the former critic began to notice a change in the substance or—if you like—the message of his paintings. The original beauty of his work was there but there was a subtle difference. Something dark (you would not call it

evil, exactly) had insinuated itself into his presentations—presentations which he would once have called prophetic. Work which had once been all light, beauty, and perfect form—impressive in their brilliance and execution—now became harsh, grim, and to some degree even menacing. Yes, ‘menacing’ was the word to describe his creations. It was as though his work was reversing itself from its former modes—as though a kind of transmogrification was taking place. True to his principle of communication, his work was, as ever, prophetic, but what troubled those who cared to think about the matter was whether the communication was appropriate, whether the evocation was wholesome. Some critics were saying he had lost the innocence of his early work and was displaying an uncharacteristic cynicism.

His anger at painters and journalists who had dared to judge his work as an art critic now turned to an irrational rage, as some—though by no means all—criticised his paintings. As abruptly as he had dropped painting to become an art critic, so now he abandoned his second round of painting when his fame was at an all-time high. No one had questioned the *genius* of the man—for that was so evident—but they did question what his work was saying, its impact, and its effects. Some even admitted they feared it. It infused a strange kind of dread into them. Other viewers said they felt affected for many days after studying even a single work of his.

Perhaps most were relieved when his exhibitions ceased. That he was by now a rich man no one doubted. All wondered what might be his next move, for he was a man driven by passion—whatever mode that passion might take. Now the form it took is the incredible part of the tale I am writing. I know you will not believe me, but what I now describe certainly does not arise out of my imagination. I think it would be ‘a mind diseased’ which could conjure up this which I now tell you. I also need to say that it happened over quite a long period of transition, and by the time it was detected it was too late for anything to be done, either for the strange Painter-Critic or the works by which he made his unusual impressions.

The unbelievable happened something after this manner. We saw in the first period of his painting that the painter showed all

the signs of genius, since all his works were well produced along the lines of personal discipline and artistic perfection. As a flawless critic he had adhered to these principles in his critiques and advice to other artists. Then, however—in the latter stages of being a critic and the renewed stage of being an artist—not only had the substance of his work changed from that which was creditable to what the manuscript called ‘evil’, but his ego still insisted that all artists ought to see it his way and so go his way.

A famous artist—mentioned in the manuscript but not by his true name—came to his studio one morning to find that five of his own paintings had been changed. At first it seemed impossible—even by minute examination—to detect what the changes were and how they had taken place. He called in a fellow artist, who immediately recognised the source of the difference in style. He named the man we have been speaking about—the Painter-Critic. They both stood back and marvelled at the brilliant technique, the altered colours, the fine blending of them into the picture—a brilliant editing, so to speak—but with the injection of something quite cynical, bitter and evil, which induced a sense of shock, and then of dread, in the viewers.

This same thing happened to others, and generally to those who had reached a high degree of acceptance as masters of painting and sculpting—not only in London but also in Belfast. Try as the offended artists did, it seemed almost impossible to bring their pieces back to their former form and communications. In later days computer buffs and hackers would talk of a virus contaminating healthy machines and systems, but ‘virus’ seems to be the correct term to be employed in this kind of happening.

Painters now locked their studios, and as a result nothing further happened. The man—it seemed—was no expert in picking locks, or gaining entrance by other methods. The works of art were secured, but then something of an unbelievable nature began to happen. Artists began to be visited openly by the transmogrified painter himself. Sometimes for hours on end he would gaze at their works, and then depart, having said nothing. As I have said, the thing which happened will not be thought possible or credible by any reader of this story. I too, possessing the manuscript, thought it impossible, but the manuscript was so

filled with testimonies by so many artists—both those in London when he was there, and those in Ireland at the time of his trips to Belfast—that I had to believe it.

We do not rightly know what genius is, and what it can accomplish. No one in his right mind would say that just by staring at a work of art—painting or sculpture—the one who gazed could *alter the substance of the work of art*. All the testimonies in the manuscript assert and insist that just by his presence, and by his long contemplation of their paintings, this man had injected his evil—born of anger and bitterness—into them. Without touching a brush he could—so to speak—alter a painting by the brush and colours of his mind.

I was deeply affected—as a young man—by that manuscript. Often I would take it out of the hiding place I had made for it, and read the last section. I would ponder it time and again. I would examine the testimonies to see whether they were faulty, but could detect nothing false about them. I was forced to believe the evidence was correct. I had heard of ‘the evil eye’ but had thought that just as, on the one hand, it is said, ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, so also, on the other hand, it can be said, ‘Evil is in the eye of the evil-beholder.’

What I could not fathom was the power of that evil eye to make its object turn evil. Generally an evil eye sees evil where there is none, since ‘To the pure in heart all things are pure’. To *see* evil in an object or person is one thing: to *inject* it into the object viewed is entirely another. I suppose in the realm of human relationships something like this can happen, but not with physical objects. I began to wonder whether the story was not an historical happening, but simply an allegory or a fanciful parable. I dared not ask Grandpa or I would have betrayed my entry into his locked attic. I had to know whether or not the tale was true, so I began investigations.

Since all this happened at the turn of the last century, I was sure the trail would long have been cold. How wrong I was! If one searches them out there are materials enough to verify Grandpa’s attic manuscript. One day—if I should feel the time has arrived to do so—I will share the fully written materials I have accumulated—documents and evidence far beyond even that

written in that strange manuscript. My puritanical aunt never burned these papers, these testimonies, for she never saw them. They—unlike the precious manuscript—were locked away in a safe vault in the bank, where, indeed, I ought to have locked the manuscript and my other articles, stories, and poems. What I have discovered—through the manuscript and other related writings—has made me look sharply at all artists and sculptors and even my fellow writers. I wonder a lot about men and women and the incidence of transmogrification. I have the uncanny feeling that artistic viruses have always been around the place. Perhaps that is one of the reasons for having art critics, since ‘The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets’. Sometimes I think I detect traces of the influence of that strange artist in the art of others. I even think, at times, that I see elements of his unenviable genius in writers of my own ilk.

As I said at the beginning, I had never been so uneasy as I was before writing this story. Now, having written the story, I am still uneasy. Even as I was writing this strange yarn I was wondering whether I was playing into the hands of that evil genius, though how that could be so, I am not sure. I think I begin to understand why my aunt threw not only the manuscript concerning the transmogrified genius but all my other writings into that holy holocaust. Now I begin afresh to wonder about literary viruses—which shows the present state of my mind.

Come to think of it, the old lady—my aunt, and the daughter of Irish Grandpa—if I remember correctly was mainly and quite innocently occupied in the business of human transformation. I strongly doubt, however, that she had anything to with artists and writers, perhaps with the notable exception of her nephew.

EIGHT DEAD MEN IN A BED

I FOUND Charlie Feinberg in a quiet mood, sitting on his expansive front lawn at ‘Lamond’, his Adelaide Hills home. He was relaxed into a house chair and his head was drooped over his walking stick, but he wasn’t asleep. He was contemplating something and scarcely looked up when I said, ‘Hullo Chicker.’ I knew he disliked this nickname, but I sensed he needed some stimulation. He gave a weak smile.

‘Hullo, yourself,’ he said slowly. He shifted about a bit on his chair, as though not quite comfortable. It was his right leg of course—the gammy one. He had had a knee replacement some weeks before, but some wound pain was there. He stood for a moment, took a few steps, then turned and sat down again.

‘And how is the Padre?’ he said, with a weak grin. He knew I didn’t like ‘Padre’ any more than he liked ‘Chicker’, but it was our usual teasing interchange. After that, we would generally become more personal, even intimate.

I nodded, and drew an iron garden seat up to his. ‘You look a bit contemplative today,’ I told him.

He stretched his right leg to get it a bit more comfortable. Then he looked at me. ‘How good are you on dreams?’ he asked.

That baffled me for a moment. ‘Prophetic or past?’ I asked him.

He raised his eyebrows. ‘What does all that mean?’

Charles Feinberg is not only a fine barrister. He is a Queen’s Counsel into the bargain. You have to speak clearly with him.

‘Bit of theology,’ I told him. ‘Past dreams have to be interpreted—they have happened. Prophetic dreams God gave to prophets to tell what He was doing or about to do.’

‘I guess mine is in the past category,’ he said. He fiddled with

his gold-topped walking cane. Then he looked me in the eye. 'How would you interpret eight dead men in a bed?'

'I wouldn't know how,' I said. 'I'm no admirer of Freud or Jung or any of that group. I never did understand them, much less believe them.'

'Eight dead men in a bed,' he said. 'My bed.'

I looked around his lovely garden, blazing with blooms, the best that late autumn can give. The roses were still in full colour. The annuals were brilliant. No less brilliant was the blue above—the utterly clear sky. Charles' words seemed so weird. I felt they were unreal.

'Maybe you've been a bit heavy on the drugs—on the pain-killers.'

He nodded briefly. 'Maybe I have been. I've needed pain-killers over the years. But I haven't been taking more than usual. In fact, I have been taking less than usual.'

He had a spasm of pain as he shifted his leg. After a time it eased, and he seemed more at peace. He laughed. 'So much for eight dead men in a bed,' he said. 'Must have been something I had eaten.' He shook his head. 'Have hardly eaten anything in weeks.'

I could see that. He had lost weight through the operation, but he looked the better for it.

He grinned. 'Drugs do funny things for you, and to you. Especially anaesthetics and post-operative analgesics. I can't believe how much I talked to the sisters and nurses in the Recovery Ward. I opened up and talked about things I haven't mentioned in years. Some of them were things I have never told anyone—not even my Padre.'

We both grinned. The two of us are pretty close: we have no secrets. We have mutual knowledge of things we share with one another.

'Those drugs loosen your tongue and your memory,' he said. 'I kept remembering things that I had long forgotten.' He smiled gently. 'I kept thinking back to past operations, and past happenings with this leg of mine. But I never expected it would happen—those eight dead men in my bed.'

When I gestured to interrupt him, he waved me off. 'Everything

was orthodox and right in the ward,' he said, 'in the single room. You know that. You visited me. You talked with me.'

'Could hardly see you for the flowers and the stacks of chocolates and things,' I said. 'Your friends look after you.'

'So did the sisters and the nurses,' he conceded. 'They were very warm and friendly to an old man.'

Charles liked calling himself an old man, even though he was still practising and the Government might call on him at any time for a Governmental Judicial Enquiry or a Royal Commission. What he was really doing was telling me he was five years older than I. He considered that gave him the edge on me.

'Honestly,' he said, 'I had a great time in the hospital. Couldn't eat much—I was filled up with so many pills—but I could lie back and think, and that is great therapy. Also I could read. I could even read difficult books—professional stuff. In fact I was able to read some war books, and you know that I rarely do that.'

He leaned over his walking stick and stared at the lush kikuyu lawn. 'I kept the pain away for the most part with the pain-killers they gave me. And I never had any funny dreams.'

'I'm waiting,' I told him, 'to hear the story.'

He waved me away from the dream. 'Goes back a long way,' he said. 'It goes back to when I was wounded in that infantry charge.'

'Brigade Intelligence officers,' I told him, 'are not supposed to participate in infantry charges.'

'Pah!' he said. 'You know we would have perished if we hadn't. We were on our last legs. The Japanese had us surrounded. We just had to break through.'

'And so we did,' I said. 'So we did.' I had been there too, but had escaped injury. Charles had received a burst in his right thigh. We all veered off from him, chasing the Japanese in their short retreat. Charles' Tommy-gun had decimated the machine-gun nest. After a time we had returned to see if Charles was still living. We had held little hope for that.

'This damned leg still pains,' he said, 'and I admit I took a pain-killer last night, but not before the dream I had about the eight men. The dream happened first.'

He looked at me tiredly. 'I went to bed trying to get relief by

lying one way or the other. Lie on your back and you sleep for a time, but when you wake you need a new position. Try to lie on your right with a leg like this, and you may get a bit of ease, but then when you have to lie on the left side it is almost impossible. In the Prisoner of War Camp I lay on my back for nearly four months with the leg in splints and extension. That's where I learned to lie on my back, but I like lying on one side even more. When you find no position gives comfort, then you get into a terrible state of mind. You wonder whether you will ever sleep. You become a bit desperate.'

CAROLINE came with a silver tray. It had coffee and cakes and a drink of pure orange juice. He was grateful enough for the orange juice but waved away the rest. I was glad of the percolated coffee. Its fragrance had preceded Caroline. I marvelled at her freshness, her young looks, and her gentle gaze at Charles.

'He has been mild as a lamb,' she said. 'He always get like this when he is not well. Get him strong again, and the mildness goes.'

She looked at me intimately. We were old friends. In fact, we were both of the same age. We both admired Charles together. I think we also had admiration for each other. With my wife Gwendoline we often made a loyal foursome.

'Charles is feeling this operation very much,' she said. 'He is far from his true self. Listen to his voice: it has weakened. Look at him: he has lost weight. Now he is a bit moody.'

'No wonder!' I said. 'Eight dead men in a bed.'

Charles looked at her and gave a faint grin. 'I had a dream about that last night. I dreamed I was in a bed and there were eight dead men with me in it.'

'What bed?' she asked sharply.

'Our bed,' he said, and his grin widened.

'Oh!' she said fiercely. 'It's those blessed drugs of yours.'

He winked at me. 'Padre thinks the dream might be prophetic. He says some dreams are historic—they have happened—and they require interpretation. Other dreams are prophetic. God is saying something through them. Maybe He is warning us—or something.'

Caroline gathered up the silver tray. Charles had drunk his orange juice. I had finished my coffee and was lazily chewing on a hard biscuit. She gave us a hard look and shot off towards the house.

Charles looked after her with a slight sadness. 'Quite on edge these days,' he said, 'because I worry her. She is tender at heart. A bit too soft, I think.'

'Best not to tell her about dead men,' I suggested. 'Not when they are in your bed, and you are both in it along with them.'

His sadness deepened. 'Honestly Joe, I am really worried about that dream. I know it may have been in a half-drugged state that I sensed those eight dead men. I kept shifting around in pain, and I thought the pain would never end. I thought I was going to have pain for ever. I felt in that muddled state that I would never sleep quietly on my left or right side, or even whilst lying on my back.'

'Things get distorted in such times,' I suggested. 'The new day makes everything different.'

'That's the trouble,' he said. 'Nothing has changed. It has persisted with me—that dream. It hangs over me like a pall.'

'I have an invariable rule, Charles,' I said. 'When I have strange dreams I dismiss them when I wake. I don't try to interpret them. I just lay them aside. Then I get on with life.'

'What about the interpretative and prophetic bits?' he asked.

I felt uneasy at that question. 'Guess I'm neither interpreter nor prophet. Guess I'm just a down-to-earth padre.'

'Then you had better get a bit up-to-heaven,' he said suddenly and sharply. 'I need your help, man. You're my rector and you had better help me.'

I had never heard him speak like this. I was a bit shocked, and inwardly dismayed. I always am when people call on what is spiritual, and maybe what isn't spiritual. So I was at a loss.

He scarcely saw my dismay. 'Joe,' he said urgently, 'I know who the eight dead men were.' When I said nothing he said quickly, 'They were Terry and Tim and Morgan and Donny. They were Thommo and Jerry and Bloggsy and Tod.'

I couldn't believe him. 'But they are dead,' I said, 'long dead.'

‘That’s what I told you: eight dead men in my bed.’

‘It really must have been the drugs,’ I said. ‘It couldn’t have been anything else.’

‘Couldn’t it?’ he asked, and he was very calm, almost icily calm. He began his story.

‘That night when we charged the machine-gun nest they were all with me. Behind me. Then I was wounded. They went on ahead, and after a time there was no one there, and I lay with my blood flowing profusely. All the pain was with me. Mortars were still bursting and shells screaming or whistling overhead, and I lay, not daring to move because of the snipers.

‘I thought everybody had left me for ever. No one would come back. I guess I felt that deeply, but knew it was war, so I just tried to live with it. But it was lonely, hellishly lonely in spite of all the battle noises and the far distant cries of the infantry. I guess no one has ever been more lonely.’

I could think of at least one special occasion in history, but didn’t feel I should mention it. ‘We kept driving them back,’ I said. ‘We kept firing and the mortars behind were supporting us. I suppose we thought the Field Ambulance fellows were doing their job and had picked you up.’

‘They came back,’ he said, and his voice was pretty hoarse with emotion. ‘I saw them all—Terry and Tim, and Morgan and Donny, and Thommo and Jerry, and Bloggsy and Tod. They came back to get me. They were shouting to me not to worry, that everything was going to be fine. That is when they got theirs. That is when the snipers opened up on them, and a couple of mortars came from our left wing, and they fell there and then, and they were beyond anyone’s help.

‘I think the enemy did a pretty clean job. I heard a bit of moaning, and then it died. I think they were dead quickly, but I wasn’t. I was wishing I was with them, and yet I was wishing I might be saved so that their efforts would not be entirely wasted.’

I was glad Caroline wasn’t there. I guess I hardly wanted to be there myself, so much pain there was in Charles’ face. I knew he had never forgotten. The memory had been there over all the years—of the eight men. I am sure now that memory is always

with us. There is really no danger of forgetting. There is only—perhaps—the danger of remembering with despair.

He was flicking his cane up and down, and there was a bit of a wild look in his eyes. ‘Joe,’ he was saying, ‘I’ve never gotten them out of my mind. I have always felt some blame for their death—for being there for their return.’

I think that was when I began to scramble on to solid ground. I sensed I could say something sensible and real.

‘They wanted to save you,’ I said, ‘and that is why they returned. They couldn’t do it. We had to do it later, but what they did was magnificent. It cost them a lot, but it wasn’t futile.’

His stare towards me was half bitter. ‘What do you mean “not futile”?’ His pain was deep.

‘You are the man of law,’ I said. ‘You know all about crime and costs and expiation.’ We had talked interminably on these things, and were yet likely to do so. We had made a lot of sense of our prison days, because we knew about law and conscience and expiation.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, and some of the anger was still there.

‘I doubt whether I know fully,’ I said, ‘but I guess that just for a moment they knew they were doing what they were doing for you. They hadn’t planned that, but at least they had risked it. Suddenly they had done it, and that was that.’

He sat in shocked silence, his cane still and his gaze on the lawn. I saw a Golden Wanderer butterfly pass by us with gentle majesty. I saw the red roses and the blue delphiniums, and the butterfly was making his way to them, sedately.

‘Expiation is us paying for our crimes, but propitiation is someone giving the greatest for us, and that is the greatest moment in all history.’

I imagine we both thought in that moment of the crucified One who gathered the evil and sorrow of all mankind in the loneliest moment in all history.

‘Charles,’ I said gently, ‘stop the expiation. Be glad of the propitiation.’

‘Why were they in the bed with me?’ he asked fiercely.

‘I guess that was to stop the expiation,’ I said, ‘to tell you to

quit working out your guilt, and leave all that to them. Not to despise what they had done in a flash-moment of involuntary love.'

Charles stared at me as though he was seeing me for the first time, and seeing something else also.

'You reckon they were trying to add something to what they had done?' he asked. 'That they wanted me to be out of pain and into some kind of ease?'

'I don't know,' I said calmly. 'I am neither an interpreter nor a prophet. One thing I do know. They will never be with you in bed again—those eight dead men who are not dead.'

For a moment he mused. 'Caroline didn't know they were there, and they didn't know she was there. How strange it all was!' Then he looked at me with clear eyes. 'Interpreter or prophet or not,' he said strongly, 'you are a good padre.'

I wasn't too sure about that, so I just watched him stand up with the aid of his stick, and then I saw him begin to walk towards the house and—I guess—towards Caroline. He was walking as though he were a man without pain. As he walked, the Golden Wanderer left the white blossom on the Valencia orange tree, and it seemed to follow old warrior. A Golden Wanderer doesn't follow a QC every day of its life. Nor do I, but I picked up the house chair and made my way quietly to Charles and Caroline, but not too quickly, since they both needed time.

THE CREEPING CARPET

GRANDPA always had the Jason rocker that was placed immediately in front of the Kentile slow combustion wood stove. That was because Grandpa liked to look at the heat-resistant glass panel, and revert to his childhood fantasies which sprang from the glowing Mallee roots as they burned their way silently into fine white-ash oblivion. You could scarcely say that Grandpa was in his dotage, that he was on the way to senility. Far from it. The old fellow still had all his marbles, even if they rattled a bit from time to time. He knew what he was thinking all the time, even if others didn't.

White-haired Grandma would often look up at him, peering at her man and imagining him as he had been as a young man or—for that matter—as a boy. He had always been impatient of people and of the pace of life. He would snort at what he thought was incompetence, senseless emptiness, and slow decision-making. He was into everything—boots and all! That was why they had had a rip-snorter of a life, always on the go! That was why they had an excellent wheat-and-sheep station with stud Merinos and good cereal crops, and plenty of experiments with harvests of oil-seed that were snapped up by the margarine people.

There had been travels too. Grandma remembered them with great pleasure. You would have thought Jeremy Wakely had been cut out to be a traveller even before he was born. Come to think of it, he was scarcely born than he was crawling, scarcely crawling and he was walking, and scarcely walking and he was running, running over the old Wakely farm, and getting into every nook and cranny and plenty of mischief too. Grandpa Wakely had told her endless stories about his exploits. She wished now she had written them down in a book.

How come, then, that this Grandpa Wakely had come to the

place in life when he could only sit in front of the Kentile and stare? She knew why, and she felt sorry for him. The old chap had run out of puff. He was weak in his old age and he had never thought this would be the case. If he had known this was what would happen he might have tipped a tractor over himself, or something. As it was, he would sit there in his weak body, with his fine, strong mind still working as though he were a young man. That was the hell of it: he had a young and energetic mind trapped in an old and helpless body. All he could do was stare through the glass panel of the stove, and remember, and maybe dream. That was especially when he drifted off into the past, dozing and dreaming. When he awoke and somehow was a little refreshed, he would tell Grandma one of the tales she loved to hear—exploits he had hidden deep down within himself, stories he had told to no one.

Some of them had to do with the Second World War, the war he had been in. He had been in it, all right! She was amazed at the events and episodes he would recount now. She had never dreamed so much could have happened within a few years of war action, but happened it had. His silver voice would come through clearly as the memories flooded him. Having told the story he would lapse into interminable silence, almost ashamed of having let an old cat out of a bag. She felt sorry for him—sitting there, trapped within his weakness. Once or twice she had tried to get him to talk, thinking this would help him, but he resisted silently. He would not believe her when she said he had come out with such-and-such a story. In his quiet way he loved her, but he would come close to glaring if ever she tried this kind of probing. He would say fiercely that he had never told her *that* yarn.

She was always busy with making patchwork quilts or doing tapestry or working difficult patterns in her embroidery. It kept the arthritis from her fingers, the boredom from her mind, and built up a family legend of Grandma's Christmas gifts. Grandpa might never be forgotten for his energetic life and wild doing, but she would always be remembered by the tapestries on the walls, the beautiful bed quilts, and the treasured pieces of embroidery.

There was only one thing she had made which Grandpa had not praised. It was the creeping carpet. It had become such a

thing in Grandpa's life that he thought of it in upper case—the Creeping Carpet. It had become an irritant, and a thing of puzzlement to him. Forced to look at it daily, he had built up an animosity of vast proportions. The Creeping Carpet, for its part, seemed quite amused by Grandpa Wakely. Not of course that it could do anything, since it was only a carpet. Even so, there was a kind of affinity between the Carpet and the old man. Of course you would say that the thing was all a fantasy, but then you would do best not to jump to a conclusion too quickly. Something must have happened or I wouldn't be writing this story.

The first thing that had irritated Grandpa was the way Grandma had made the carpet. He knew proper humans made carpets out of wool. In fact he had raised some New Zealand sheep, with rougher, thicker, straighter fleeces than his prized Merinos, for the carpet people. He had made sure the two flocks never got together, but he had done well with the carpet sheep. That was why he was scandalised when Grandma—much younger then, of course—had cut up pantyhose to mix with the wool. Grandma had let it be known, far and wide, that she was making a carpet to put in front of the great open fireplace. In those days they were on the farm, and they would have massive red-gum logs roaring on the open grate, and sparks would fly out a bit from time to time, and the woollen rug was to absorb them and save the more expensive wall-to-wall carpet.

When they had retired and given the farm over to young Jerry and Pat, they had bought the town house with its smaller garden, and its prize roses and native shrubs, and the Kentile stove was part of the purchase. In those days Jeremy Wakely would not sit in front of the fire. He turned the backyard into gardens and enjoyed providing vegetables for the farm and his neighbours. In those days they had hired a caravan from time to time and would travel to different parts of Australia—out-of-the-way places—and they had enjoyed themselves.

That is, until the weakness had visited him. Suddenly there he was: weak, and pretty bewildered. His fine mind had struggled with the unnameable disease. He and Grandma just had to settle down to a quiet life, and in the winter to mallee-root fires in the Kentile. Even in the summer when he was not dozing outside in

an iron garden chair, he would be sitting in front of the wood stove, staring down at the Creeping Carpet, wondering drily about it. He would remember the atrocious way his Emmy had made the darned thing and he would snort inwardly.

Pantyhose! He just could not get over it. It was not as though the woman didn't have enough cash to buy skeins of the best rough wool. She must give it out like a pauper that she had no wool, much less pantyhose. He had always been a bit mystified about femininity, and pantyhose stood for a feminine mystique that was beyond his probing and certainly beyond his patience. People had come to the front door with brown paper bags of wool long forgotten, wool which had been stored away, and when they heard of Emmy's need they had come with these bags. He was astonished at the piles of wool which were eaten up by the carpet. As for the pantyhose—well, they had brought bags of these too, plastic bags that would otherwise have threatened a fragile environment.

He would watch her cut up the wretched hose, but occasionally he would permit himself a wry imagination as to the legs which they had contained: long, slim legs; skinny legs; short, fat legs; legs tall and short, stubby, tubby, fat and thin, slim and bloated—hundreds of them, filling pantyhose as though they had nothing else to do. Once or twice Emmy had caught him at his secretive, sly smiling, and she had frowned. She never liked Jeremy hiding his thoughts from her. She would try to ferret them out, but in this case she had no success. His amused eyes would keep their secret. It was no secret, however, that he disliked mixing wool with nylon, but reluctantly he had to admire the creative pattern his wife was making. Over the years he was to ponder that pattern, in between his other thoughts.

WHEN they had first laid the carpet in front of the open fireplace on the farm they noticed a curious thing. Whilst the carpet did a sturdy job in quenching stray sparks, and whilst it was a thing of interest for all who saw it and a matter of marvel for the exclaiming women admirers, it had a strange trait. *It crept!*

It was a strange fact—that it crept. Stranger still, it crept towards the fireplace and never from it. They reversed it, hoping

it would creep from the fireplace. It still crept towards it. Some scientific minds said it had to do with the way the pile of the room carpet was oriented. If they reversed the wall-to-wall carpet then the new rug would stop its wanderings or at least creep from the fire. Jeremy had snorted. He was blowed if he was going to root up his well-laid carpet for a bit of shrivelled pantyhose mixed with wool leftovers! So the carpet was allowed to creep.

In their new home the creeping of the carpet remained a mystery. If anything, it crept a little faster than on the farm. It seemed to have developed its creeping technique. Grandpa decided he would ignore it. It was he who set the fire, he who would get up at night and go into the sitting room to put another log on the fire. He would ignore the creeping creature unless it had crept right up to the edge of the Kentile. Then he would drag it back, muttering, as though it were really a creature.

Lately he had developed a somewhat strange habit. He felt less tired when he lay on the carpet and warmed himself in front of the fire. He would fetch a couple of pillows from the bedroom and stretch out. He would go fast asleep. He had often slept in the Jason rocker, but never had he had daytime dreams. When he slept on the Creeping Carpet, however, he would dream incessantly. Strange dreams they were, but he could not remember their details when he awoke. The best thing he knew about them was that they were pleasant.

Grandma tolerated his lying inert in the prone position. She could look down at him with a certain fondness of possession. She also had sympathy. What she knew was that the cortisone tablets were the main cause of his remaining alive. The family doctor assured her that her husband was in no danger of a stroke or of a heart attack.

'He's plain healthy,' the medico had said, 'but he just lacks strength, and why we cannot tell.'

So silver-haired Grandpa began to enjoy his relaxation on the Creeping Carpet.

ONE day, when Grandma was out watering her ferns and other potted plants, he remembered he had forgotten to take his 10mls of Prednisolone—his cortisone medication. Knowing

the bit of strength he had depended on it, he struggled to his feet and lumbered towards the kitchen cabinet. Instead of taking them with water and a biscuit as often he did, he took the bottle of tablets back to the fireplace. He sat down, unscrewed the top, and shook out some tablets. Much to his dismay some of them fell from his hand, into the carpet. When he tried to recover them, then others in his hand slipped into the rug. He screwed the top on the bottle and began feeling in the pile of the rug. Explore as he might, he could not feel one tablet. He was irritated at the happening, cross with the concealing carpet. He struggled up again, lumbered to the kitchen, chewed a biscuit and swallowed his tablets with water. Cross with the Creeping Carpet, he sat on his Jason and glared down the offending rug.

He felt his eyes were betraying him. Two curious things were happening. One was that he could see the carpet creeping. Very, very slowly, of course, but nevertheless moving. The second thing was that short tufts were growing in the rug, and he assumed it was where the tablets were concealed. His bright brain assumed they were consuming the tablets, and the pantyhose and wool were growing!

He felt a bit unnerved: it must be that his dotage was now fully upon him. He lay back in the Jason, troubled. When Emmy came in, all bright and cheery from her watering therapy, he stared at the rug. She followed his eyes, mystified, but saw nothing. Oh well, he was always looking at her rug. She felt satisfied with that.

‘Never had tufts before!’ Grandpa grumbled.

‘Tufts?’ she asked, puzzled.

‘Have a look yourself,’ he said gruffly.

She looked and saw the tufts. ‘Must be wearing and leaving tufts,’ she said. She picked up her embroidery.

Grandpa settled back. He felt tired. He would have liked to have slipped down again on the rug, but now he felt strangely irritated with it, as though it were a tablet thief, a Prednisolone absorber. He slept without a single dream.

Next morning Grandma felt a bit of alarm for him. She thought he not only looked tired, but he also looked weak. ‘Maybe he’s not long for this world,’ she thought to herself. She watched

him with sympathy and a trifle of anxiety. Long ago she had accepted the fact that he might slip away. Death did not worry her. They had both lived life well and were grateful. If he went she would have the children and her embroidery and wonderful memories. So she stitched on. In the afternoon she went to her CWA meeting.

HE had always wished she would not leave him. Not that he complained. He knew she was an active woman—active as he had once been. So he lay on the carpet, feeling exceptionally weak and somehow strange. It was a feeling he had had all his life when some wonderful event was to take place. The amazing thing was that he thought the Creeping Carpet understood his thoughts. He also thought it was trying to communicate with him. He felt that it was telling him to give it some more cortisone tablets. He laughed shakily at that.

‘A carpet talking to a man!’ he jeered. Then he said aloud, ‘What would Emmy say if I told her that, hey?’ He gave a weak snigger. Even so, the pressure in his brain was mounting. He was being told to get the Prednisolone and get it quickly. Almost alarmed he staggered up, walked shakily to the kitchen, and then took down his bottle of medication. Another thought was skilfully being inserted into his brain, so he took down the second bottle and lumbered back to the carpet. He felt he was being ordered to open both bottles and empty the contents on the rug.

Knowing the whole thing to be crazy, he tremblingly obeyed the voice in his head. To his horror and shock, the tablets disappeared into the carpet. He began feeling for them, scrabbling with his hands. They were gone! He stared in amazement. Then he saw the tufts growing and the carpet under him began to move. It was moving with some speed. What was more it was taking him with it.

He felt like giggling. He had read stories of magic carpets. He had told them to his children, and doubtless they were telling them to their own children. He remembered now that some of those dreams he had had whilst lying on this very carpet were just as he was now imagining. The carpet was taking him to distant places. He felt relieved that it was not happening in real life.

Of course he was asleep. He was dreaming! He felt happier at that thought and settled down to enjoy the dream.

He wondered at the realism of the dream. It seemed his eyes were open and he was looking at the Kentile stove with its glowing coals of mallee root, and the room looked as ever it had. Emmy was not there, but at her CWA meeting, and he was alone with a Creeping Carpet tugging him across the floor to the door. He could swear he was commanded to open the door, leave it open and relax back on the carpet. All this he did with a trifle of hilarity. He was not even amazed when they passed through the door, lengthwise, and were soon out into the open. He even had the ridiculous idea that he had given enough of body-strengthening drug to the carpet so that it would carry him along. 'Drugs for rugs!' his foolish mind giggled, and he loved it all.

A foolish thought came into his mind. It was as though he were being asked, 'Where would you like to go?' and his immediate answer (which must have jumped out of his subconscious mind, and which must have been there near the surface for some time) was, 'The old farm, of course.' That was a desire he had had for a long time. They rarely took him to the farm these days, so busy they were. Also his trips were a reminder to him that those days were gone for ever. He had learned not to comment on the changes he did not like, and improvements he could suggest.

A rare thought came to him: 'I have given all my medication to the carpet and what will I do for myself?' He knew his strength came from those little bottles. As quickly as the thought came it disappeared, and in its place a glorious contentment, a simple serenity, and a gentle peace. His normally rationalistic mind did not ask, 'How can all this be?' He set himself to enjoy his dream.

And enjoy it he did—enormously.

He watched the town disappear beneath him. He saw the old road to the farm red and basaltic, and lately smoothed by a grader, but they were above it and travelling at a great speed. Then he saw the farm in the distance and it looked as he had once seen it from a helicopter: widespread, fertile in the spring, lush in its pastures, and the freshly shorn Merinos cream-white against its soft green pasture. His heart gave a leap. He wanted to be

down amongst it, strong again, virile as ever he had been, riding his horse, whistling to the Kelpies, rounding up the sheep, taking them to the shearing shed. He wanted to be on the great machinery, ploughing the land, looking back at the red soil curving away from the discs, or seeing the yellow harvest as the crop bowed beneath the beaters and poured its golden grain from the mighty harvester into storage tanks. It was as though the fever of life had taken him again.

His body felt genuinely strong, not just given an artificial boost by some medication. He felt strong enough to dismount from the carpet and get back to the work he had once known. Like every man or woman who knows life is for some purpose, he wanted to fulfil it in one great burst. He wanted to go back—or forwards—to where that could be accomplished. He felt almost impatient with the carpet as youthful strength surged through his body until he was trembling with its power.

'I want to go!' he was saying to the carpet. 'You must let me go!' and it was as though the carpet understood that it was not travelling fast enough—Prednisolone and all.

Of course he had not expected the carpet to actually talk, but it did, and he heard it wonderingly, as it slipped away from under him.

It was saying, 'It's over to you now!'

Well, he knew *that!* If he had never flown on a carpet before, he had surely never flown without one! Certainly it was over to him. What was so surprising was that his solo-flying was quite effortless. He was flying to the farm, and yet the ridiculous thought came to his mind that he was flying to an even better farm—one where his strength would never desert him and he would not have to live in the memory of past power and exploits, but where he would be doing great things. This greatly cheered him as he flew on, not tired.

He did have one brief thought for Emmy, returning from the CWA meeting and finding him missing, and the Creeping Carpet too. Then he thought the Carpet might have returned for Emmy's sake and would be—as ever—stretched out before the Kentile. This thought was a brief one, as he knew Emmy would understand. She understood all things.

He was delighted at the effortless, tireless flying which he had now accomplished. He was also pleased with the anticipation of arriving.

TOM AND THE MAGPIES

IT'S a short story, thank goodness, because I can't write anything that is long; but it is so funny and so true that I feel the need to tell it—this story about Tom and the magpies.

We used to live in an Adelaide suburb, and found it quite good, especially when the children were young. About the only strange happening I can recall was our young Mary who went to see the Doctor Doolittle films, and came home convinced she could talk to cats and dogs and that they would understand her and even talk back. What brings the incident back to me was that she was convinced the magpies knew what she was talking about.

In a way you could understand that. We had two magpies on our block—George and Mildred—and they owned the territorial rights of our land, 56 Angus Street, Knightsbridge. We couldn't do much about it, because they came with the place when we bought it. We soon learned to be obedient to them and feed them with what scraps Pongo our lazy Labrador wasn't given. I mean, we kept back part of the scraps for George and Mildred. At least twice in a year they had progeny from their nest in the high blue-gum that was at the end of our block, and we were expected to help feed them also. All of this went with the territory.

Tom worked out at Gepps Cross in the abattoirs, and his work was shift work, so often he didn't see George and Mildred, as he would be gone before they came with their breakfast demands. Most of their warbling—or do you call it chortling?—they used to do from the top of the blue-gum, and Tom rarely heard them. Of course, on moonlight nights they were a bit of a nuisance.

I noticed during our Mary's Doolittle phase that Tom was

quite interested in her conversations with Pongo, Cerise our tabby cat, and George and Mildred. Tom has always been a thoughtful but mostly silent man, so he never really commented on Mary's communications with the animals. Mary grew out of that phase, and with her sister Angeline and her brother Andrew grew into another phase, namely that of selecting a partner for life. The three of them did this very well, and we were caught up into their weddings—all three in the one year.

When that was over Tom said he thought we ought to get a quieter place for ourselves. He wasn't one for all this 'greenie' and 'conservationist' thing, but he had always wanted to live in the country. He said he could travel each day to Gepps Cross, so we bought a place a bit north of the abattoirs, and where the country was very green. In fact we had ten acres now to ourselves, and one of those old greystone houses which had once been the farmhouse.

We reckoned we were very lucky to get it—it being so cheap, and all that—but then Tom had to do some repairs, and this rather filled up his weekends; but he didn't mind that. In no time we had a good place going—fish ponds, an aviary of finches, some lawns, and even a corner which looked like part of a rain forest. It is remarkable what you can do if you follow the telly garden-and-home sessions. I knew Tom felt pretty proud of it all.

I am now coming to the interesting part—the part about the magpies. We knew something regarding them because of George and Mildred, but there was a difference between their species and the new species we met on our mini-farm. The territorial things was there all right, but in our former home George and Mildred, after they had trained their offspring to maturity, would chase them off the block. The younger birds had to find a new area for themselves, and they must have done that for they never returned for birthday celebrations or that kind of thing. Nor did they bring their offspring back to be looked at, as ours did.

No: our new maggies were altogether different. They worked on what you call the clan-and-saga basis. There must have been a few generations of them, and they all lived on the farm. Primarily it was their farm and we were allowed to stay there and provide food. Luckily there was a Deli near us that used to pass on the

bread that was stale, and out-of-date cake. So in that sense we were not eaten out of house and home.

Tom would go off to work early so I did the feeding. I learned quite a lot about maggies, namely that they have a pecking order. That idea was not new, but it helped me to reckon what were the first, second and third generations. The first generation had their fill, then the second, and finally, the third. They were the closest thing to conformists I had ever met, but occasionally there would be a rebel, and he—or she—would swoop in for a chance morsel. It was a bit of a laugh really, because not one of them ever made it. Immediately the older black and whites would swoop on the swooper and give him—or her—what for. They would peck, thrash him with their beaks, sometimes turn him over and ignore his terrified squawking until he learned his—or her—lesson. The magpies certainly did it better than we had done it.

Pongo had gone off with Mary, Cerise with Angeline, and Andrew had bought a Rottweiler. We kept strictly to our Japanese fantail fish and our semi-silent finches. So for the most part our little farm was a haven of rest, and that was the way Tom liked it. He had come out into the rural area for clean, fresh air, and quietness.

That is, until his shift changed to night-work. He worked and would arrive back by four in the morning. Just enough time to have a shower, a cup of tea and go off to sleep. The sun would wake him when it was reasonably high in its blue arch. At least that was the idea. How it actually worked out was different.

The maggies had a set hour for breakfast—they set the time. At five o'clock they would commence their warbling. I have never quite understood warbling. Do magpies warble because they are happy, because they are singing territorial songs to other magpies, or do they just sing for the heck of it? It once struck my suspicious mind that they did it to wake us up so we could all get on with breakfast. Whatever their reason for their dawn-time liquid gargling, it aroused rage in my Tom.

In the beginning he thought it was a bit funny, and accepted the fact that just as he was getting to sleep they were getting to wake up. You have to admit that there is something sweet about magpie warbling—no matter what the species. This must be the

case or not so many people would record them, and play the songs over and again on the radio. You probably know that they are also on CD. Of course, with CD you can turn on the music just when you like, and—better still—can turn it off when you wish.

After a few sleepless early mornings I saw my Tom was getting up a bit of rage. It was not a case of ‘maintaining the rage’. It just became more and more, until one morning he told them to shut up. There was a moment’s silence and no more. A few cocked their heads on one side at the noise, then their looks lightened again and the warbling began afresh. I think Tom came to believe they did not warble but that they chortled, and he could have been right. He thought they chortled because he had to stay awake, watch me distributing the bits of food, and had to hear all the bird goings-on with the occasional rebel rabble, and have to take in all the family squawking, squabbling and general bird gossip.

He wondered what he could do. Should he buy a gun, even when people were arguing about gun laws? Should he borrow Andrew’s newly imported Chinese self-loading weapon, or he should he go back to the old catapult which he used as a boy, and sling the whole three generations into oblivion. Even in his rage he knew he would never be successful.

To this day I don’t know what it was that ended the early morning maggie cacophony. I know it was what Tom did, but then I really don’t know what he did. I know he could stand it no more, that he stamped around the room in white-hot anger and used language that would send any self-respecting bird away in shock, but our maggies were a tough breed. They had to be, to survive generations of humans.

All I can do is to describe what I saw—and heard.

In the midst of their warbling, chortling and liquid throat-gargling, Tom stuck his head out of our bedroom window. I mean, he stuck it right out. All of his pyjamæd torso was thrust forward, and Tom began a warbling speech. At first they must have thought he was them, and they were themselves. So they kept warbling.

Then a strange thing happened. One by one they ceased their

vocal operations. One warble after another ceased. Bird-language faded away. It all died to one last gargling whimper, and the black and white creatures sat in their various places—on branches, fences, rocks and the fish-pool stones—and they listened. I don’t know what Tom had picked up from Mary or Doctor Doolittle, or just what primeval memory and ancient utterance broke through, but it was fascinating to see them become a captive audience and listen. Heads were on the side, eyes were peering and staring. Here and there a bird almost fell off its sitting point, but all listened.

Tom let them have the lot. I don’t even know what ‘the lot’ was, but it was evident that he was an excellent communicator. Fantastic in fact. For myself, I almost froze with fear and fascination. I felt his warbling go through me like a diesel engine through a tunnel. It was uncanny.

It was good. I won’t swear to it that the birds eventually bowed to him—dipped their heads and beaks, so to speak—but I watched them fly away as though a great wonder had happened. We saw little of them after that. Almost all of them had gone to find new territory. A few still hung around the perimeter of the ten acres, but their heart was not in it. It was a sort of burnt-out magpie belt: that is the only way I can describe it.

Weeks later a few brave ones flew in for the usual a.m. time, and a tentative warble or two began. When Tom threw up the window and extended his torso towards them and began his Doolittle—or Doolot—stuff, they literally fled.

All kinds of birds visit us now, but maybe that is because all the native shrubs we planted have begun their good work—honey flowers, more insects, and all that. I do not know. All I know is I have a different Tom. I don’t much like the mysterious smirk on his face, and the secret pride I sometimes see peeping out of his eyes, but maybe it is the extra sleep he gets which fosters that.

I don’t know. I can only tell you the story as it happened—as I saw and heard it. I’m afraid you’ll have to work the rest out for yourself.

THE KRANJI CLIQUE

IT is strange how memory works. I know that sounds like any other cliché, but to folk who are ageing it is no empty saying. Memory does wonderful as well as strange things. It is not that I had ever forgotten the bunch of us fellows at Kranji Prisoner of War Camp—the ones who used to get into the X-Ray unit at nights and talk and study, and share our lives. The X-Ray unit was so blacked out that you could use a light from one electric bulb and the passing guards would never see it. It was the days when there was an edict against prisoners gathering together, even in small meetings, and certainly, had they known we were meeting, we would have all been in trouble. The Imperial Japanese Army was extremely uneasy as the Allied forces crept closer to Japan, especially as the Flying Fortresses were bombing their cities from a safe altitude.

Memory brings things back so clearly, as clearly as the day they happened, and some ingredient in memory gives us a matured view of what once happened—so to speak—in the raw. They were certainly raw days in those last eighteen months of war imprisonment. We sometimes thought of the men incarcerated in Changi Gaol with a certain tinge of jealousy. True, they did not have the wide view that we had in the beauty of the Kranji Camp, attap huts hidden under the plantation rubber trees; and they saw no golden orioles flash through the branches and leaves, no miniature squirrels climb smooth trunks of the trees, and certainly they had no rubber nuts to convert into indifferent coffee, and they could not walk on plain earth as we did. Nor could they have the little vegetable gardens we made between the rows of huts, and the occasional papaya tree we could grow for a rare treat of the fruit—green as a vegetable, ripe as a fruit. They were shut up, but then we were not! Some in Changi Gaol dreaded being sent to Kranji because of those so-called wide

open spaces. Not a few suffered from agoraphobia—fear of open places.

At the same time, many of us liked the Camp. It was a Hospital Prison Camp. Many of us were convalescent as the result of war wounds, amputations, or were suffering the results of tropical diseases such as malaria, beriberi, dengue fever, and especially tropical ulcers, some of which had become diphtheritic. One ward was filled with men who had psychoses. Others were just weak and neurotic from their terrible treatment on the Burma–Thailand Railway.

Our little group (just for fun I have called it ‘the Clique’, but in fact it was far from being that) had somehow grown spontaneously. Amongst us were men who had had strange experiences which some might call ‘parasensory’. Others were persons who had become disillusioned with the church and Christianity. Some had read their way through many religions and were still dissatisfied. All were thoughtful; some, I think, were brilliant. I suppose we were men who were sick of the separation that individualism brings between persons and persons. We felt there must be something better. Some had become quite cynical of their fellow creatures, and the wonder was that so many of us cared to band together. Unconsciously we trusted one another.

I think it was the selfishness we found in ourselves which made us come together. We were battling that innate selfishness all human beings know. A reading of Ernest Gordon’s famous book *Miracle on the River Kwai* might help a reader of this present story to understand what was stirring in us. There, at the River Kwai, on the Burma–Thailand Railway, the men in those dire circumstances had felt the sterility and deadliness of the ‘every-man-for-himself’ syndrome. James Clavell’s book *King Rat*, written about life in Changi Prison Camp, must seem unbelievable to any reader who has not been in a prison camp, or who has not been a refugee battling for his—or her—life in the terrible situations so common in this twentieth century. Those who experience the human panic when a volcano bursts, an earth-quake devastates, or thousands are herded together in famine—dying daily—will know how quickly human beings can become brutalised when their life is threatened. This is the time when

fierce and cunning competition will keep them alive—even at the expense of their fellow creatures. Human spirits know terror when threatened with death, and many clamber over one another to keep alive. Rats fight each other for their existence, and Clavell was right to call his main character ‘King Rat’. It may sound like a terrible indictment to say that at heart every human creature can prove to be a ‘King Rat’.

Now it is not that every human being necessarily becomes that. Some have reserves of moral and ethical power, and they fight to retain their personal integrity. The cynic says that every man has his price, but that has not yet been proved in history. Unbelievably, in the most terrible crises some human beings—rare though they may be—appear to have a disregard for themselves, and they seek to help others. Some analysts who consider these matters from their armchairs have plausible explanations, but when you are bone thin, and death stares you in the face, and your gut is crying out for food, and when the body no longer has physical resources, decisions are different from those made in armchairs, or in academic analysis. Who can analyse the analyst?

ALf was an orderly in our hospital, and a fine one at that. He was of Asian-European origin. In those days we called them Eurasians, and knew them to be the most sensitive of persons. Alf was a fellow who often carried a large black Bible with him, and had the reputation of being a wowsler, but he was simply a person of integrity. He also had a good sense of fun. Somehow we came together. I thought him a bit of an obscurantist, because I was in my stage of disillusionment about Christians. Having been one myself, and having seen some fellow believers looking after themselves, being involved in the black market, and generally inconsistent ethically with their faith, I had become disgruntled. My own moral reserves were very quickly petering out. Even so, I had great affection for Alf.

Then there was Frank. He was a bright little Aussie who had been sent from Changi to Kranji. Indeed he was sent to me to see if I could help him, as it seemed he had certain homosexual leanings. Few had them in the prison camps, mainly because of physical debility and anxiety over life, and so little of the prisoners’

thinking tended to sexuality. Maybe the ones who fended well for themselves and were comparatively healthy had some sexual sense, but I doubt it. Frank became close friends with Gerry—another hospital orderly—and with us, but I knew Frank was far from being homosexual. I said the first woman he would see after our release from prison camp would convince him of that; and, in fact, that was what happened.

To begin with we were a foursome, and Alf suggested we should study the Bible together. I thought of all the dreary Bible studies I had gone through in my time, and nothing in that book seemed relevant to me or to our situation. I said that if we were to study the Bible then we would have to wash our brains of their previous presuppositions, a thing not easy to do, but we must try. We would try to let the text talk for itself. Alf was a bit shocked but he agreed to that criterion.

GERRY was fascinated by the preaching of a certain padre, and indeed the man was brilliant. Men flocked on Sunday nights to hear this fine preacher. This was the one time allowed by the Japanese authorities, and the prisoners—officers and men alike—loved the oratory of their chaplain. There were some chaplains whose lives were mixed with ethical skulduggery, but not this man. Even so, the preaching did not seem to explain the dilemma in which we lived, the ethical problems which faced us. I think—looking back—that the man was a humanist, and his reasoning fought the cynicism of the cynical realists—those who saw the self-saving tactics of their fellow men and had become bitter. Gerry seemed in a quandary as to which way to go—that of optimistic humanism, or the ethical way we were trying to battle.

One night Gerry could not get into the large hall, and had to stand beneath a window and listen. He could not see the preacher. He could hear the words, but they seemed empty to him. When he came back he said to me in a hoarse voice, ‘It’s got to be better than that!’ None of us said anything: we really did not know what was better.

That was the time when I had an experience of God which was the culmination of eighteen months of anger, bitterness, frustration, searching, thinking, and a critical examination of all

faiths—Christianity included. It was the time when I had felt my own moral reserves receding, and I was sure that I could not live with myself if I fell into the self-saving pattern that was everywhere about me. Alf was sure of his faith, but I noticed at times he had ethical blind spots: he thought and did things which I felt did not line up with biblical concepts as I had studied them. Because I had had some theological training I was on the horns of a dilemma. I either had to have love—that kind which laid down its life for others—or I would be bound to have self-love which would go all out for itself, and ‘Blow you, Jack, I’m all right’ would be its motto.

What I could not do was just be loyal to a faith and creed in which I had been raised. It had to relate to the lives we lived. It had to have answers for the problems that faced us. It had to be significant. Nothing necessarily certified it as authentic—not the best apologetics, human reasoning and church-declared dogma. I appreciated Alf’s stubborn loyalty to the Bible, and I even understood the droves who went to listen to the chaplain on Sunday evenings. After all, what special interesting entertainment was there on that night? Human beings love to gather together. I knew some who attended sincerely sought verification of their faith. Others just loved singing hymns and remembering church services at home, and the folk they had loved. Much of that was simply cultural, even if it were not—after all—a bad culture.

How, then, could I find reality? I was soon to find out. I knew all of us—not only Alf, Frank, Gerry and I—had tried to battle their way through to understanding what life was really about: I mean, what that kind of life was about which went beyond merely trying to survive. Somehow I knew it lay in a famous saying of the Nazarene preacher, ‘Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.’* I reasoned that the law was probably man-made, so that obedience to it was socially demanded. It was the law which was intended

* The following story is told at greater length in my book *Angel Wings* (New Creation, 1985) and in somewhat different manner in my novel *Tall Grow the Tallowwoods* (Historical Consultants, 1991). There is nothing in them about ‘The Kranji Clique’, although both stories are essentially true, and are very much connected.

for mutual security. The human conscience was trained to obey the law, and felt guilt when it did not. Serious breaches of the law—like murder, rape and theft—would be called ‘crime’ in society, whereas in a religious context other breaches would be called ‘sin’. For moralists the law was something in existence by nature of the case. It was not to be questioned, but just obeyed.

I reasoned that if laws sprang from a human basis then they did not *essentially* matter. Things such as eternal punishment were a figment of the mind. Nothing was *essentially* wrong with rape, murder or theft, since society demanded non-murder, non-rape and non-theft purely for its more convenient and secure way of life. So much for human law; but suppose it were divinely given! Then breaking that law was reprehensible, punishable. In that case conscience was dynamic, and could be excruciatingly cruel. I also knew that there was something fine in laying down one’s life for a friend. It was a kind of emergence from law as a legal thing into richer form of law: love! Laying down one’s life for another had happened in war-action. It had happened in history, but whether it could—or should—happen in our situation was another matter.

IN the prison camp when a number of rice-cakes were placed on our mess table—one only for each soldier—the cakes differed in size. I had always taken the smallest, on the basis that, in principle, to take the largest was selfish, and to take the smallest was—again, in principle—laying down one’s life for others. There was nothing heroic about this. I saw it was the way of love—as Christ had said—but now that I had virtually shunned the Christian faith my fine moral assets were rapidly dissipating. Biting hunger was accelerating that! Very soon I might be with those who took the biggest rice-cake, and every grain meant just that little bit more of precious life for another. The day came when I knew that if the law was not God-given, then it did not matter, and laying down one’s life for one’s friend was so much religious hogwash. Starving men don’t theorise or indulge in moral metaphysics. One part of me cried out for the extra food, and the other part found self-saving distasteful. I said bluntly and despairingly, ‘God, if You exist, give me the moral power to take

the smallest rice-cake, not out of a desire for praise of others, or fear of them, but because I want my brother to live.'

That was the beginning of the Kranji Clique. At the end of my personal moral extremity I felt a strong but gentle—and most personal—power helping me to take the smallest cake out of love. I knew God was there, and I knew law mattered, and that taking the largest was the self-preservation that was at the expense of others. Rightly understood it was a form of murder, though certainly neither conscious nor intentional murder. Now the law made sense, and love made sense, and I knew love was the most practical thing in all the world because it does not snatch, it does not preserve itself, but goes out to give to others, and save them—whatever. I suggest that readers might think that some of these ideas were the over-reactions of a mind caught in the strange introspection that comes to prisoners in their incarceration; but this would be a shallow analysis, since the same principles obtain in society everywhere. Rightly understood, selfishness seems to secure the person, and at the same time is a form of death-threat to all others.

I TOLD the story to Alf. He was mystified because he was so orthodox a believer. My language was different: he did not rightly understand it. Frank did. So did Gerry. Then Toby came along while we were talking, and his eyes lit up. That was when we talked about getting together, finding a Bible from somewhere and thoughtfully sharing its contents. A medical officer, whom I knew well, sympathised with us, and he let me have the key of the X-Ray rooms.

Night after night we talked. We talked until it was 'Lights Out', then we switched off the light, slipped out of the unit, and made our way to our huts. Some of us were lame and some very weak. We made sure each of us arrived safely at his place of sleeping.

We decided not to be a club, or a cult, or a sect. We said nothing about our studies to others but we began quiet ways of living for those others. Dramatic things did not happen as in that wonderful book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, but in essence there was no difference. We would seek out fellows who were sick

and cynical, despairing and looking for death, and we would try to bring comfort to them. Somehow the Sermon on the Mount began to be a living, vital thing in our midst. We found our fear of death was dissipating, and somehow—as though by osmosis—we communicated that to others.

At the same time a few more fellows were sent to our Camp from Changi. Someone there thought we would help guys who thought they were going homosexual. After a short time, one of them would quietly be invited to share in our evening chats. They seemed to find nothing strange, since all religious jargon was banned. One by one the new men began to believe they were normal. They were touched with our concern for them.

Some of us had kept personal articles as being reminders of home, or even as insurance against the future: maybe in some extremity we could cash them. None of us liked the black market, and none of us traded in it. We talked about somehow selling what we had. My treasured article was a portable typewriter that had miraculously been given to me. To give it to one who would sell it on the black market would mean I would get a tiny part of its value. That is what happened, but it bought us some food. The men in the 'Clique' quietly distributed this food they had cooked to men whose eyes lit up with unbelief and joy. Quietly the giving of life was taking place.

That sort of action cannot go on without love growing in the group. I fell ill at one time and was put in a sick-ward. I felt so weak that I thought I would peacefully pass to the God I had come to know as Love. The group told me later that they had taken turns to watch over me. Alf sat all night on the verandah outside the ward, with just the thin attapalm wall between me and him. He kept praying, quietly.

There were ways we could do things without giving material gifts. Happenings would come of themselves. It was all very down-to-earth, but also quite mysterious. We saw fear fade from eyes, and light come back into them. Our night group grew to thirty-six. I remember the numbers because Gerry's chaplain complained.

He said, 'I get twelve in my study group at the most. I heard you have thirty-six.'

‘I think it is different,’ I said. ‘We are trying to share life, and not just to learn theology.’

He told me bluntly that I wasn’t an official Army Chaplain. I had to agree with that. ‘I was a theological student,’ I said gently, ‘and was training for the ministry. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Not according to the King’s Rules and Regulations,’ he said, citing the Army Book of Regulations. He was an Englishman and a Regular Army man.

I refrained from saying *the* King’s rules and regulations, as in sacred Writ, were probably justification enough.

TIME was drawing to an end in the Kranji Camp, although we weren’t quite sure of that fact. The machine-guns trained on the camp from all corners might destroy us all, were Singapore Island to be invaded by the Allies.

We used to talk about what would happen when we returned home. I remember Toby saying to me, ‘You’ll marry for sure, and you will naturally love your wife more than us.’

I understood Toby. To love one another had no elements of homosexuality, but it was like a David–Jonathan relation extended to all, and mutual to all.

‘Love has no favourites,’ I said. ‘That is what we have been learning. Love of wife and children may be in different modes, but it is the same love.’

They all agreed with that. We all seemed genuinely happy about that understanding. It was not long after that event that Lord Mountbatten came into our camp. He had his wife with him, and some burly commandoes. Suddenly the camp was bare of Japanese guards, and in their place little Ghurkas who made sure no stray Nipponese person could do us harm.

I remember the beautiful Army women and the women of the Entertainment Unit and those working with the NAAFI, who came in with Western food and amenities and plenty of affection. I saw Frank gazing adoringly at one of them, who seemed to think he was handsome even in his staring bones and prison garb. Frank was looking at me, telling me he was normal, and so after a bit of shyness there were others of the group doing the same thing.

Mountbatten told us to get out of the Camp and enjoy ourselves, and a bunch of us in fresh white uniforms were driven to an Officers’ Camp by the women in the Amenities Unit truck. We saw the skinny English officers come running out, and they seemed almost frightened by the sight of the women.

One of them came to me, and asked me how things were at home. By ‘home’ he meant England.

‘Pretty good,’ I said. ‘Haven’t you heard the news?’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘some of it. But you are straight from there with Mountbatten’s chaps, aren’t you?’

I looked at him with astonishment. We had had some days of good eating, and had put on weight, but it was soft and watery. Doubtless in our white garb we looked a bit different. Even so, we could not have looked much different from what we had been.

‘Just a minute,’ I said gently. ‘I, like you, am a POW. I know no more than you.’

He shook his head vigorously and said in anger, ‘You are no POW. You don’t look like us.’

‘We were given these new outfits,’ I said gently, looking down at the new clothes with a kind of joy.

‘No!’ he said, even more angrily. ‘You don’t have the eyes.’

I knew what he meant, and felt a bit sad. I called over some of the fellows, and he looked at them and denied that they could be POWs. In despair I called to one of the women.

‘Margery,’ I asked her, ‘where are we from?’

She looked puzzled. ‘From Kranji Prison Camp, of course.’

The officer would not believe her. ‘These fellows are not POWs,’ he insisted.

‘Oh yes they are,’ she said, ‘but I know what you mean. They don’t look like the others. They look different in the eyes.’

I suppose that was when I knew that in some way our love—His love in us—was sealed. I saw the astonishment, and a little shame in the face of the officer. He was really a gentle fellow, and tears came into his eyes.

Tears came into our eyes, too, and rolled down our cheeks, and Margery was deeply moved. After a time she could not hold her own tears, but turned away to the amenities truck to hand out food.

The officer took some, and so did we, and we all ate in silence. I could not help thinking of the rice-cakes we nibbled so that they would last longer. I kept thinking about the nights in the X-Ray unit, and I am sure Toby and Alf and the others were also remembering. Frank was off somewhere with an Army sister, and I think Gerry was also. Soon we would all be scattered—some to England, Scotland and Wales, Alf to Singapore town, and the others back to Australia.

I just wondered where it would all end from this rich beginning. I kept looking at the POW officer and he looked at me, and we smiled gently, and that is about the last thing I remember of that rather powerful incident.

As I said at the beginning of this story, memory acts in strange ways. It is a bit like wine which takes time to mature, and after forty-six years of ripening it tastes sweet to my mouth—very, very sweet. It is the kind of vintage that sets the blood coursing afresh.

THE MAGIC AXE

I COULD have told this story years ago and, what is more, I wanted to do so. Many times I sat in front of my typewriter and was about to do it, and then I thought I really must be silly. No one would believe it, and editors were a bit fussy about the kind of story that they accepted. Me? I thought the yarn was pure gold, but my ideas of gold and those of an editor are different, so I would either put the typewriter away or invent a story that might please a newspaper or a commercial journal. I just invented stories and they would buy them, but a story about a magic axe! Everyone would know there are no such things, and so no editor would buy it.

There was another reason for not writing it in those days, for Ada was still around the place, and if ever anyone caught a whiff of the fact that the heroine of the piece was still around, then I would be in for it. That is why I let it go all these years.

All these years! I guess it is nigh on thirty years since it all happened. My wife and I went up the North Coast of New South Wales, when that strip of land was pretty quiet, when farms were farms, and not everyone thought of building a shack near the sea, and going in for a quiet, lazy life. Certainly there was nothing like the industry that goes on today up there—mainly the tourist one with land-developers and entrepreneurs and Japanese investors all running around. Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast, Paradise Coast and Bananaland—all being filled up with pleasure parks, marinelands and luxury houses and apartments. What a difference there is, now! I go back occasionally, but am glad to get out of all that congestion and confusion, and the quick making of a buck.

Of course, I guess you could say there are miracles happening

in that area, so that a magic axe might appear to be a little thing, even a poor sort of thing, but then the difference between their miracles and the miracle of the axe is that the first kind are over and done with in no time. Property is bought, houses are built, inflation comes, people go broke, others rush in for the pickings, and there is nothing intelligent or special and unusual about that sort of stuff.

Now, when it comes to a magic axe—I mean the Magic Axe—there is the universe of a difference. I'm not sitting in front of a jerky typewriter writing this story. I am in front of my special word processor, and I can write at a rapid rate, and no worrying about spelling and that sort of thing. I use software that corrects all my spelling automatically, puts in my indents, sets out my spacing and the lot. It is just a pleasant exercise to write about the Magic Axe, and in a jiffy or two it will be finished and the story will come out to the world, and since Ada has gone from the scene it won't matter. I have a feeling in my bones that this story will sell well.

Indeed, I think it will make a sensation. The papers will get hold of it, and then those fellows who have their nightly sessions on the commercial channels of TV and always talk to people at seven o'clock will grab it as a mystery, and they'll be swarming up the North Coast to the place called Wirril Creek, and they will be investigating what happened thirty years ago, and I tell you they are in for a bit of a shock. As a matter of fact, quite a lot of people may be in for a shock when the facts are revealed, and I'll be laughing all the way to the bank, because this could mint me quite a wad.

Of course, there is a possibility that people will call it a fantasy, and since people don't really believe fantasies, they will just read it, get a tingle up and down the spine, put it aside, ponder it thoughtfully, and then sigh with relief, and that will be that. They won't really believe there is a magic axe around the community, and that it is either to be feared or coveted. They will shrug it all off with a laugh, and I don't say I would blame them. I'll still be getting a good price for the yarn, and that will be enough to compensate me. Not that I haven't profited already from the special axe, in one way or another.

IT all happened this way. We lived up at the place called Wirril Creek, just after the Second World War. I had come back from war, fallen in love with a nursing sister in a Sydney hospital, got married to her, and was setting about life by being a freelance writer. I used to write an article or two, a story or three, and a poem or four, and for some reason editors took to my stuff, and so I became established as a writer.

There was enough material in the district, and north and south of us, to keep me going for years. We had a small acreage on which I did mixed farming, and helped to rear a modest family. I liked the great forests around us, and would spend time with the timbermen, and evoked folklore and folk stories from them—galore.

I also got to know the fishing folk along the coast, and they had plenty of tales to tell. Fishermen are pretty much rugged individualists. Also, of course, there were the dairymen themselves. Not always imaginative, but they were the backbone of the coast, and steady as you could wish citizens to be. They were no fools, and the fact that they had become councillors in the various districts, and that they reared some of the best Jersey, Guernsey, Illawarra Shorthorn and Friesian herds in Australia, meant that they were entitled to a lot of respect. So I managed, also, to get stories out of them.

You might say those days were my hey-days. These times one has to write different stories. They have to be clever, sophisticated, all about what people are thinking inside; all about how tough life is in these decades of unprecedented prosperity, how young people are suffering as never before, what with pollution attacking us on every side, rural folk having to live in the midst of poisonous insecticides, and what not. Especially difficult is it for people to have to face contemporary life with its unusual problems, such as the ecological situation, the matter of nuclear arms proliferation, and especially attacks on seals and dolphins, whales and rat-kangaroos. One has to go into these problems in depth, and devise stories about such existential suffering, such universal fear of human living, and the new silence about dying, even though now it is a tidy thing to shuffle off this mortal coil under an expansive and expensive undertaker, through whom

dying is almost a delight, an honour and a thing of privilege.

You can see that writing is not what it used to be. In the old days you hardly mentioned the sexual thing, although you did write about romance—palpitating hearts, the young man's adoration of the woman, male courtesy and womanly femininity and the like. As you know, that has changed. In and out of beds, rape and rage; marriage that is barely leasehold, kids that revolt at their parents' cavalier treatments of family; anger in the Family Court, a murder or two by enraged and estranged husband-fathers, and other little things like that. Mind you, it is almost impossible to get a new line on the sex thing so as to invent new prurience, and to devise a new pornographic angle.

When I think about it, we were pretty well off forty years ago, and even thirty years ago, when the magic axe thing happened. We never knew what was coming, or we may have got out of the game more quickly.

To come back to the axe story and to get going on it—it was like this:

JOSHUA Farley, a timberman of our Wirril Creek society, was in at Burtville, going through the second-hand store, when his eye alighted on an axe. This axe, although of an old shape—not like the contemporary Kelly axe—was quite shiny. In fact it was so shiny that Josh thought it must have been made of stainless steel. In those days no one had ever heard of a stainless steel axe, and Josh knew it was just a thought, so he took hold of the axe, felt its weight, turned it over, looked at its immaculate white hickory handle, and decided he would like it for himself.

He casually asked the shopkeeper the price of the axe. The proprietor looked a little uneasy. He knew Josh and liked him. 'I don't think I would buy that axe if I were you, Josh,' he said.

Josh thought this was a bit of sales pitch to intrigue him and get him to buy it, so he looked wary. 'Not buy it, Clem?' he asked. 'Now why shouldn't I buy it?'

Clem looked around to see if someone was close to them, and since there was no one in the shop, Josh wondered why he dropped his voice to a whisper, and said hoarsely, 'You see, Josh, it is a magic axe.'

Josh grinned. He liked a bit of humour at any time. 'Fancy that,' he said; 'a magic axe.' He grinned again. 'You don't see many of them around these days, do you?'

Clem looked pained. 'Don't say that, Josh,' he protested. 'I know you think I'm having you on, but the guy who brought it in here was pretty upset. When I offered him ten bob for it he looked disappointed, but he sold it without arguing.'

'I'll give you a quid for it,' Josh said immediately.

Clem looked even more pained. 'Look, Josh, you can have it if you want it. I'm not bargaining about it, seeing your life may depend upon it. You can either give me ten quid for it, or have it for nothing.'

'Ten quid!' Josh was scandalised.

Clem understood the scandal. 'Ten quid or take it for nothing. I need the ten quid to compensate for what will happen when somebody gets hold of that axe, but if I give it for nothing, then I won't have to feel responsible.'

Josh realised that Clem was fair dinkum about the matter, and stood staring at the gleaming tool. Josh was a timber worker and so he knew a good axe when he saw one. He knew it was a good axe, but, more than all that, he felt the thing to be alive in his hand, and that was enough for him. He knew he could buy a whole heifer for ten pounds, and that what he was doing was crazy, but he nodded, handed over his ten pounds, and started to walk out.

Clem stopped him. 'Josh,' he said earnestly, 'I tell you, that *is* a special axe. I have been sworn to secrecy, so all I can tell you is that it will be good in good hands, but not good in bad hands.'

Josh still half thought he was being conned by his old friend, but accepted that as a bit of fun, nodded, and walked out.

It was when he got home that the whole matter came to life.

SARAH, his young and beautiful wife, had a sharp tongue when it was needed. Josh, being a timber worker, was short on cutting wood for the combustion stove in the kitchen, and since that was the only stove they had, Sarah would get at him for supplies. Josh would gather up the big chips from knocking down forest giants, and would sometimes bring back bits of battered,

broken branches that would fit the firebox, but he was reluctant—like all woodchoppers—to cut up wood for the family fire.

The reason for this was that Josh—along with all his woodchopping mates—kept his own axes razor sharp. A woodsman could literally shave with his axe. Josh did it from time to time—for fun. But he was serious about his axe-heads. There was a reasonable sort of axe near the woodpile, but often it was the wives who chopped up wood for the fire. There was the old American song which those wives knew:

Poppa holds the lantern, while Momma chops the wood.

The only difference on the North Coast was that Poppa put the kerosene lamp on top of the fence post and left Momma to it!

Sarah refused to chop wood. This evening she was acerbic. Josh felt the edge of her tongue. He dearly loved Sarah but feared her biting words. The idea of trying out the new axe was in his mind, so he went out to the woodpile.

Within a matter of ten minutes he was bringing piles of chopped firewood into the kitchen, stacking it up in the old disused copper, and alongside the combustion stove.

Sarah stared at him in amazement. Josh was not even breathing hard. He kept coming back with armsful of cut timber. She looked at Joshua her husband with growing suspicion.

‘Did you buy a load already cut?’ she asked.

He shook his head. ‘S’welp me, Sair,’ he said, ‘I just cut it up.’ When she was still disbelieving he drew her outside. ‘Get a look at this,’ he told her.

She watched in amazement as he lifted the axe and it cut through the red-gum as though it were cheese. One stroke and a log was severed and split. Quickly the cut pieces piled up—no effort for Joshua, her burly husband.

‘Where did you get that axe?’ she asked.

Josh was secretive. He would not tell her. She felt a tinge of fear within her, but asked no more.

Before they called the children for tea he said to her, ‘Don’t you ever touch that axe, and don’t you ever use it.’

‘Nothing would ever get me to do that,’ she said. ‘Anyone can tell it is a magic axe.’

Josh just stared at her.

They all ate their meal in the kitchen that glowed with warmth. Even the firewood seemed to have new properties under the touch of the axe, but the strange thing was that they all ate the meal in silence. The usual humour, teasing and chacking were absent. Even so, Josh felt a glow within. He had become attached to his axe.

TELLING the rest of the story should be child’s play. You can even guess some of it—like Joshua Farley always winning the wood-chop. Joshua going from show to show. Joshua felling trees quicker with an axe than two men together on the cross-cut saw. Joshua becoming prosperous, and Sarah never having to use her tongue on him for supplies of firewood.

It wasn’t long before Joshua graduated from a bullock team and jinker to a hauling tractor and a large lorry. Tractors and jinkers, tractors and lorries were a bit *avant garde* in those days, but they were happening—like milking machines for the cow-cookies. But tractors and lorries soon grew into sawmills. Josh had one at Wirril Rail, and another at Burtville. He was a prosperous man.

One day he called in to see his friend Clem Stowes at the second-hand shop. Clem was glad enough to see him, but also a bit diffident in his manner.

Josh said heartily, ‘It was a great day when I bought that axe from you, Clem. Best bargain I ever made in my life.’

Clem seemed to understand. He nodded his head. Then he said softly, ‘Josh, always keep on the straight and narrow while you have that axe. If you start to go crooked, sell it.’ When Josh began to protest, Clem waved him off.

‘No,’ he said firmly, ‘that axe is good for those who are good but a terror to those who are not.’ Josh wondered at his old mate being so tight-lipped.

IT was a strange thing that Clem should have spoken like that. Josh was an honest man and one who was straight up and down—on the square, as they say. No backing or filling with Josh, but to his amazement, one day, he found himself critical of

Sarah. Sarah had done well with the financial improvement of the business. She dressed well, had good relationships in the district, was on various committees for the school, the Country Women's Association, the Brownies, Scouts and Guides, and the local Women's Guild at the church.

Almost imperceptibly Josh and she began to drift apart. He was always busy, she was out. They met generally at the evening meal, and then late at night when she returned from a committee meeting, and he came home from the mill. It was about that time that he began to notice how trim and neat was his office secretary, and how attentive she was to him. He had scarcely ever noticed other women—Sarah still kept him fascinated and satisfied. Occasionally, however, his wife would let him have the sharp side of her tongue. A tart word here and there would ruffle him, and when he looked with a slight interest at his office helper it seemed to him she was more gentle, more warm and friendly than his own Sarah. He thought a lot about that. He thought he saw a sharpening of Sarah's features, a tension which did not make for family warmth, a tendency to be more out of the home than in it. The children noticed this and commented on it. Josh had fuel for his own personal fire of resentment. Sarah was always tired when she returned, and if she did stay home she had so much to catch up with—like house-cleaning, washing, ironing and mending—that they rarely had the chat in bed before sleeping, a ritual that had always been part of their lives.

His disaffection began with little guilts, and these, of course, increased his criticism of Sarah. When the children complained a bit about their Mum he felt emboldened to more criticism. The outcome of it all was that one evening he put his arm around his secretary, and although she did not respond, she did not resist. He let it go at that, being a trifle ashamed of his feeling. At home he was sharp with Sarah, who was surprised because Josh had always adored her. She thought deeply about that, but did not drop even one committee.

A fortnight later it happened. Joshua felt the strong urge to receive affection from his secretary. When she did not resist his hug, he was emboldened. Suddenly he found himself kissing her. As quickly as he had begun he desisted, rushed out into the

accounts room, busied himself, and nodded indifferently when she passed him, bidding him goodnight.

Sarah was there when he came home, and by the kind of questions she asked him he sensed she was suspicious. That made him angry, and they turned away from each other in bed—a rare happening for them.

Next morning he was up early, ashamed of himself, feeling untidy. He dressed in his old workclothes, grabbed the axe and made his way into the timber country. He thought the best way to work out his guilt would be to have a good sweat, a back-tiring onslaught upon trees. He swung the axe.

It was as though the axe revolted in his hand. When he swung it towards a tree it twisted, and the next thing he was looking at his boot, the leather slashed and his foot opened wide, red blood spurting out profusely. All timbermen dread the sudden accident that comes, maybe only once in a lifetime, but when it comes it is deadly. Perhaps it is a falling tree that slews and catches the axeman. Sometimes it is an axe slipping out of the hand, making a lethal wound. It could be a head split open, a hand chopped horribly, a limb almost severed, or an artery whose flow cannot be staunched.

In a flash he ripped off his shirt, tore shreds from it, packed them into the wound, bound the foot sharply, and made his way back to the house. He grabbed up the axe, and it seemed to weigh a ton in his trembling hands.

Sarah was at the house. The children had left for school. She rang for the doctor, and he rushed around. He worked on the wound, applying a ligature, and binding the wound. The next step was to drive him to the Burtville General Hospital. There they took him into the operating room.

When he came to consciousness Sarah was bending over him, anxious but loving. 'Oh Josh!' she was saying, over and over, and he was being smothered in motherly and wifely kisses. He rather liked that. He felt ashamed of his event with the office secretary. Sarah was so different—warm and affectionate. The old love pulsed through him, but it hurt him a bit—he feeling guilty and all that.

Then he thought of the axe. He became tense.

‘What happened to the axe, Sarah?’ he asked.

She smiled faintly, ‘Oh, the magic axe?’ she asked.

He nodded, staring at her.

‘I put it out in the tool shed.’ Her eyes became thoughtful. ‘You know, Josh, there wasn’t a spot of blood on it. Not even a spot.’ She seemed puzzled.

His heart went cold, and he tried to remember what Clem Stowes had told him. Then it came to him, and fear came into him. The axe was OK if one went straight, otherwise not.

Sarah saw the fear in his eyes. ‘Come on, Josh, what’s happening? Tell me.’

He felt he couldn’t tell her. He knew she was disappointed but, even so, she gave him a long kiss—a kiss such as they hadn’t shared for a long time. It was still sweet on his lips as she left, but the fear kept coming back—about the magic axe. He lay there, thinking. He wondered whether it would still be after him, to do him harm. He shuddered. He could never use it again—that would be too dangerous. Perhaps he could throw it away into the forest, or bury it down a dunny-pit, but somehow he knew he couldn’t. Just to pick it up might be dangerous.

He woke a few times in the night, and the cold, flashing blade of the axe seemed to confront him. He tossed and turned, and when Sarah came the next day she was concerned for his weariness.

At last he told her. He saw disappointment in her eyes, but not surprise or shock. That puzzled him.

‘Part of it is my fault,’ she said. ‘I have been too busy. You kind of get caught up in things, and then can’t withdraw.’

Her features sharpened, and she said firmly, ‘I’m going to withdraw from most of it. It isn’t even that I enjoy it so much. It is just expected of me.’ Then she laid a hand on his arm. ‘Oh, Josh, we’ll have to get back to where we were.’

He liked that. ‘Then you aren’t angry with me?’ he asked.

‘Of course I am,’ she said fiercely. ‘But I’m also angry with myself. We’ve been fools.’

‘I’m scared of the axe,’ he said suddenly. ‘I don’t know what to do about it. Maybe we ought to get rid of it.’

She smiled first, and then laughed—some of her old laughter

had returned. ‘Oh, no!’ she said, ‘we won’t get rid of it. That is the best friend I have. It will always keep you in tow.’

The day he had to use the axe again she stayed with him. He saw her tense, and she watched anxiously. His was not merely anxiety. It was deadly fear, a cold dread that gripped his heart. He was going to cut wood for the combustion stove—their new, superior kitchen stove—and he dreaded lifting the axe.

His relief was immense when he lifted it high and brought it down upon a stick of timber. It cut through it like cheese. He lifted the axe again and brought it down. He kept lifting and chopping, lifting and chopping, and his heart was singing, as never before. He wanted to shout and cry with joy, he wanted to sweat and sweat, as though that would get the guilt out of him, but when he looked up he knew that was not necessary. Sarah was looking at him with deep love, and the axe was light and friendly.

That afternoon Sarah talked with his office secretary, who was a mild enough young lady. She hadn’t really welcomed Josh’s advance, but had not known what to do about it. She understood, stayed on, worked well, and within a few months was engaged to a fine young fellow, and in some more months was married and gone.

Josh kept the axe in his office at the mill, but under lock and key. Only he and Sarah had the key.

NOW if that is not a story, then I don’t know what is. An axe as a moral baby-minder might not seem fun to a reader, or, for that matter, to anyone; but there it was. If I had written that story years ago, claiming it to be fair dinkum, then who would have listened to it? In any case, Ada was only a young girl, though the eldest daughter of Josh and Sarah. To this point nothing had happened to her. She was no less warm in character than her Dad, and no less beautiful in features and form than her Mum. The axe was to play an important part in her life. Maybe this was the best part of the whole story.

FROM the day Josh set his eyes on the tall and long-haired Adrian Arthur he hated him. He knew his daughter was besotted with the villain. Her trouble was that she never saw

him as a villain. She had ideas about life that were different from those of her old-fashioned parents. To her any boy with a guitar was something, and anyone with a guitar and long hair was just about perfect, even if he looked thoroughly scruffy. Being thoroughly scruffy seemed to be part of the new deal. The fact that Adrian was no man's fool, and was a calculating young man aided by his economics course at the University of New South Wales, was what made him dangerous.

He became excessively interested in Josh's success as a timberman and a miller. He would spend hours talking to Ada about her father's history. Sarah was not as repulsed by him as was her husband, but she could barely tolerate the constant visitor. What she disliked most was his tireless questioning as though to worm something out of her, but she did not know what it was. Ada was more guileless, and a good target for him. So were James—the second eldest—and Cynthia—the youngest. The three children had transistor radios and were fascinated by the contemporary music. So when Adrian could reproduce much of it with his guitar and could sing, screech and stomp as good as any other who had ever wailed to such a self-accompaniment, they knew he was the one for them.

Sarah talked gently with Josh. 'Just don't oppose him outrightly,' she advised. 'Tolerate him. Ada will come to her senses one day, and it will be finished. She is just at that stage of life.'

Somehow Adrian Arthur discovered the fact of the magic axe. He spent hours with Clem Stowes, not talking about axes but about all the favourite antiques and second-hand furniture and tools that were the heart of Clem's life. It was very cunningly that he won the man over and discovered the story of the axe—a story which even Clem had not fully told Josh.

Adrian set his heart upon the axe. He was well into Eastern religions, into the occult, and believed in anything magical. Magic axes presented no problems: if there were such, then he could believe in them.

Adrian had not only set his heart on the axe. He had set it upon Ada, though not necessarily for life. He liked naïve and innocent young women. He was a master of the art of conquering such ladies—and any aged lady for that matter. He was a trifle

chagrined that Sarah did not buy his suave methods of lady-charming, but he was confident he would succeed. Marriage was furthest from his mind. For some reason he had come to dislike Josh intensely, and he looked forward to accomplishing two things: firstly, getting possession of the axe, and secondly, making a conquest of Ada. All the elements of an old-fashioned melodrama were present. He—Adrian Arthur—was the deep-dyed villain—albeit he was blond.

IT may have been that Sarah herself was a little disappointed in Joshua for not handling Adrian more firmly. She saw—with dismay—the encroachment of the young villain into her daughter's affection. Encroachment was not quite the word. He had gripped her in every part of her being, and she could not hide her passionate affection for him. To Joshua he was indeed the deep-dyed villain of the nineteenth century melodramas, and the father would not have trusted him as far as he could have kicked him—had he had the opportunity. Sarah was ever egging him on to do something. He was puzzled, however, as to how he could deal with the young man: that is, until the day he talked with Clem Stowes.

Josh had rarely used the axe, not because he feared it, but because his life had been good to him, and the axe was a great friend to him. It was now a memento of the good old days. He just happened to be talking to Clem about the axe and the good old days, when Clem opened up about Adrian's enquiries.

'He's mad keen to get your axe,' he said, 'absolutely mad keen.'

'How did he come to know about it?' Josh asked in puzzlement.

Clem Stowes told him the story. He was glad he was able to share the matter, because it had sometimes mystified him, and perpetually worried him. Lately he had lost some of his regard for the blond young man. Stories were circulating about this Don Juan, this nefarious Lothario, conqueror of young female hearts. To Clem they did not sound like good stories. He feared a bit for Joshua's Ada.

Next day, in the *Burtville Star*, Joshua Farley advertised an auction sale of tools and old timbermen's gear. The famous

bullock wagon and jinker was featured first, then a variety of cross-cut saws, of old farm implements and other rural equipment. Almost concealed, at the bottom of the advertisement, there was mention of 'special timbermen's axes'.

That set the tongues wagging in Burtville, Clybucca, Wirril Creek, Wirril Rail and other hamlets of the district. Friends asked Josh if he was leaving the business. His reply was that he was more than ever in business, but was just getting rid of old junk. Some of them didn't see it as junk, and intended to be present on the sale day. The surprising thing was that Josh had refused to use the local auctioneers. He told them it was not in order to save money, but that he was just doing it for pleasure. Since he put much business in their way, they accepted that as just one of the Farley eccentricities.

The great day came, and the people turned out in good numbers. The sale was held at Wirril Rail—at the timber mill—and the folk gathered from all quarters of the district. Some special buyers had come to acquire the old bullock wagon and jinker, as well as the harness and other accessories. Joshua put this prominent stuff up first, and it fetched a great price. So did most of the other gear, though much of it was antiquated. Clem had a field day, for he would scarcely bid for a thing when Josh would knock it down to him without trying for further bids.

Finally the pile of materials had dwindled until only cross-cut saws, heavy hammers, wedges and axes remained. Josh walked across to the pile and picked out the magic axe. He picked it up, regarded it, and took it personally to the table where he was auctioning, and laid it there. He then proceeded to sell the remaining materials. They went quickly. Then he picked up the axe and made his way towards the table which was near the fence of the bull-ring. It was laden with an urn for tea and coffee, and there were plates of scones, sandwiches and cakes for morning tea.

Someone called out, 'What about the old axe, Josh?'

Joshua paused, turned around, looked down at the axe, seemed to ruminate for a moment or two, and finally lifted it up, so that the sun glinted on its blade. He slowly surveyed it.

'I think I'll keep it,' he said. 'It will be better that way.'

Clem was nodding vociferously. 'I reckon that will be best,

Josh,' he said silently to himself, and he meant it.

Young Adrian wasn't having any of it. 'You're past the days of axes, Mister Farley,' he said. There was almost a sneer in his voice.

'The old melodrama,' thought Joshua. Even so, he had a harsh, cold enjoyment of the moment.

Sarah was standing back. She had watched the entire auction, puzzled. Josh had said nothing to her about the magic axe. Even so, she had a suspicion that what Joshua was about was not going to help Adrian. When she saw the covetous glint in the young man's eye she felt a sharp pang of fear. She looked at Adrian with intense dislike, and tried to catch Josh's eye in order to warn him. Lately she had been increasingly uneasy about Ada and Adrian. Something unhealthy was growing, and she was unable to do anything about it. In fact she had felt helpless, and it all made her angry.

When she saw Josh with the magic axe in his hand, she wondered why Adrian should be interested in it. It had not struck her that he would know its nature and its value, but now, looking at him, she was not so sure.

She watched the drama being played out.

Adrian was taunting Joshua Farley. He was saying spiteful, cutting things that did not befit a man who was seemingly courting the daughter of the timberman, but Joshua didn't seem to worry much. It was grist to his mill, fire to temper his steel. He was whirling the axe about, and in a sense—although Josh seemed not to know it—was tantalising the long-haired guitarist and scheming entrepreneur.

A few folk were egging Adrian on, but others simply stared at the young man, seeing him as distasteful. Others were turning away from the auction, making their way towards the food on the table.

As though a new thought had entered his mind, Joshua suddenly turned, held the axe high, and said quietly, 'Yes, I will put this up for auction.'

Some were surprised, but Adrian was obviously delighted.

Joshua asked, 'What am I bid?'

An old friend of Joshua called out, 'Five bob, Josh!' Some of the

axes had gone for that amount. There was a general laugh.

Adrian did not laugh. He said, 'Ten!'

The timberman said, 'A quid!'

Adrian said, 'Two quid!'

Those who had been moving away turned back and watched with interest, sensing some conflict.

The timberman had either taken a dislike to Adrian, or wanted the price to go up for his old friend's sake. Somehow the axe had become a special symbol of value to him.

There was a gasp when Adrian—having become impatient—shouted, 'Twenty quid!'

The timberman seemed angered. 'Thirty,' he said.

Somebody called out to the timberman, 'You're mad, Roger.' Roger did not even seem to hear.

'Forty,' said Adrian.

Clem, unable to keep his thoughts to himself, shouted, 'It's worth all that and more!'

The crowd drew near, around Adrian and the timberman, where the two were standing between Josh and the refreshment table.

Sarah also found herself drawn towards them. She was looking at Josh's face, and he wasn't smiling. The fear she had felt was still in her like a dull ache.

'Why!' she suddenly thought, 'Josh knows what he is doing. He is baiting Adrian.' Then a thought struck her. 'He's trying to get him to buy it.' She found herself trembling violently. She wondered whether Josh knew something about Ada and Adrian that she had missed. She could not contain the shaking.

'Fifty,' the timberman was saying. He knew it was ridiculous, but something in the fair-haired man's voice made him hate him intensely.

'Sixty,' Adrian said, and there was contempt in his voice.

'Seventy-five,' the timberman said firmly. He trembled when he thought it might be knocked down to him. It would be madness to pay a price like that, yet he sensed, somehow, that this was how Josh wanted it—that he keep bidding—and he, well, he was going to keep it up, even if only for Josh's sake.

'A hundred!' shouted Adrian. Now there was not only

contempt but venom in his voice, avarice on his face, and deep hatred in his heart. He was thinking how he would get back at the auctioneer, and the thought was not a sane one. It was what he had always intended, anyway. Somehow Josh stood for a morality he disliked and for a success which he greatly envied.

When the auction stopped at one hundred and fifty pounds, the timberman was trembling. He didn't dare go further. Adrian for his part was not merely satisfied. He was gloating.

As he handed over the cash to Josh there was a sigh from the crowd.

Adrian turned to face them. 'You think I'm a fool, don't you?' he asked. His fair skin was even whiter with anger.

He took the axe, swung it in a glittering arc, and said, 'Now I'll show you up for the fools you are. I'll teach you to laugh at me.' He looked angrily at the timberman. 'You did that on purpose,' he said. In that moment he had sealed his rejection by these North Coast men.

For a fragment of time he looked about him. Then he saw the tall tallow-wood tree—the giant timber that Joshua had so highly prized and jealously preserved. He rushed towards it, and lifted the axe. Sarah thought for a terrified moment that Josh might beat him into a pulp for attacking his prized tree.

Instead Joshua Farley did not move. He stood immobile, gazing at the young man with glittering eyes. 'No!' he said. 'Don't do it, Adrian.'

Adrian looked back at him with a sneer. 'Shut up, you old fool,' he said. 'This is my axe now, and I know what I can do.'

He lifted the axe. Sarah was looking at Joshua, her heart palpitating, but Joshua was looking sternly at Adrian.

Adrian swung at the tree. The axe flew out of his hand, swung into an arc and suddenly slashed at Adrian. He scarcely felt the blow—so filled with anger he was. He picked up the axe, aimed it at the tree and swung again. This time his arm swung around his own body and folk were horrified as they saw the great gash in his back, and the blood flowing out.

As though maddened, the young man ignored the pain. He lifted the axe and made another swing at the tree. It bounded back into his face, and the cut was deep. He fell to the ground,

stunned into unconsciousness, blood spurting from him, flowing across his face and down his body, as he lay senseless upon the dirt of the bull-ring. Someone cried, 'Get the doctor!' and a mill employee rushed into the office to phone the medico.

People were trying to staunch the flow. In those days an ambulance had to come from Burtville, and it would take a long time. That was why Doctor Bunney called for a utility truck to be made ready. He tied ligatures and bandages, and in a few moments they had the wounded man in the utility, and were speeding off to Burtville, the doctor still trying to staunch the flow of blood from the facial wound.

Before they left, Joshua stuffed the one hundred and fifty pounds into the pocket of Adrian's windcheater. He took back the axe and laid it on the table. He stood motionless whilst the truck drove off. Sarah came over to him and put an arm through one of his. He looked at her steadily.

All she said was, 'Oh, Josh!'

They both stood there and watched the utility disappear.

'I don't think he will die,' Josh said, 'but I know we'll never see him again.'

Sarah was thinking about Ada, but after a moment she gave that up. Ada would accommodate. She had a lot of Josh in her, and quite a bit of herself—Sarah—also. Josh was thinking about the same thing, and after a time he smiled. There was a mixture of joy and regret in his look. He was wondering, half-humorously, what might happen if he were to use the axe again. Would the axe agree with what he had done at the auction?

As I say, that happened many years ago, and no one would have believed it then, if we had tried to explain the axe incident. It just looked as though Adrian was no timber worker. Folk would have thought my explanation fantastic, and laughed at it. Well, I don't mind. As I say, that was many years ago, and I wonder whether folk would see it differently today.

If you want to know how it is that I know all about it, then I can tell you that since Ada married my oldest son Harry, and because Josh and I have been close to one another, it wasn't difficult for me to find out. I had the whole story, first-hand, from

Josh. Young Adrian disappeared off the North Coast. The surgeons in Sydney did good work in facial surgery, so I have heard. I doubt whether even a heavy scar would have hindered his singing career, but I have not heard his name mentioned since those days. Perhaps he gave himself a new name: I don't know.

More than that I cannot say. If you want to know where the axe is, I may be able to help you, but I doubt that I would. It would simply become a thing for those seven o'clock fellows on TV to talk about on their sessions, and if they did that, then thousands of letters would pour in, people would be making their way to our rather placid Wirril Creek and Wirril Rail, destroying its quiet way of life, and what difference would it make to the actual facts of the case? Even now, as you read this, you yourself may be quite sceptical, and I wouldn't blame you.

Ada and Harry have four children of their own, and they would laugh at you if you were to tell them the story. That is one of the main reasons I haven't to date, and if an editor does accept the story and you read it, you too may think it is fantasy, but, as I said before, if it is published then I'll be laughing all the way to the bank, and just that one cheque for first publications rights of the story should help the old mortgage no end.